

LAST FLIGHT TO THE NEW JERUSALEM

a novel

by **Esther Le Beau-Kerr**

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queries to Ronda Chervin - chervinronda@gmail.com | 860-759-4521

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Chapter 1

I am awakened by a sudden jolt. My head is aching dully. I feel as if I am in a dense fog. I hear what seems to be helicopter blades whirring round and round. I smell the leather of the seat in front of me. I have the sensation that I am in the air. I can sense others around me.

My eyes are adjusting. I look out the window. It's night time. There's a beam of light coming from the front of the helicopter and dark murky water is all around us.

Suddenly I see five lights in the distance. They look like five lit up domes arranged like dots on a dice, only the one in the middle is larger. They seem to be faceted, like a gem stone. As we are approaching closer, I realize that they geodesic domes.

I hear a crackling sound from the helicopter radio: "X-ray papa 6, you have permission to land!"

The pilot responds "Roger, coming in."

I see a beam of light near one of the smaller geodesic domes guiding the copter to the roof of a nearby building.

Other passengers are waking up and stirring about in the tiny cabin. I hear a child's voice saying, "Mommy, where are we?" It is like the way a child would ask at the end of a long vacation trip. I hear a female voice replying, "Honey, I don't know."

The voice of the pilot: "Roger – landing in 10 seconds."

Slowly the hatch opens and the blades are stopping.

Wind!

Several people are coming toward the hatch. One of the men asks, "Is this the last flight?"

The pilot says grimly, "We were the last ones to leave. There will be no others."

I see a man who seems to be in his late 30's with black curly hair, wearing army fatigues. He reaches out to help me off the helicopter. I notice, to my surprise, his striking blue eyes.

I say, "thank you. My name is Esther."

He replies, "Welcome, my name is Itzhak."

I feel strengthened by the confidence he exudes.

All of a sudden I don't know where I am. I seem to be back in the helicopter when it was first taking off. I see out the window an immense grey wall coming toward us. I've never seen anything like it before. Then everything goes dark.

"Esther! Esther!"

I awake to a woman's voice calling my name. I realize I am in a queen size bed with a soft blanket and two fluffy pillows.

"Esther, are you still asleep?" I sit in the bed and before me I see the smiling face of a grey-haired woman, short and dumpy, dressed in a long gauze white A-line dress with an unusual pendant hanging on a string from her neck. I do not recognize her.

"I'm Sara. I'm the Imma of our community."

I let out a deep sigh and she responds, “You were exhausted from the flight. We just took you right to bed.”

“What time is it?” I ask looking at my wrist and not seeing my watch.

“It’s about noon.”

I notice a bright shaft of sunlight going through the glass door made even taller by a large window at the top of the door. I wonder vaguely why anyone would have a window on the top of a door but, still drowsy from what I realize must have been more than a long, long sleep, I don’t have any energy to ask questions.

“If you’d like, you have time to take a shower,” the old woman offered in a kind concerned voice. “It’s just through the door to your right and anything you need is there. I have to leave now for the Angelus and mid-day prayer, but I’ll be back to show you the way to the refectory for lunch in about 20 minutes.”

She doesn’t realize I don’t understand what the word “angelus” means or “refectory.” But she said them as if everyone knew these words, I muse.

I notice that I was put to bed in my travel clothes, blue pin-stripe skirt, white blouse, my typical wardrobe as a traveling reporter for Channel 5 News in Boston. All except for my high heels. I find them neatly placed at the side of the bed.

After getting out of bed I notice surrounding my bed at the head and the foot and one side are wooden casings going up 12 feet. On the other side there is no casing. The room has 2 doors separated by a central aisle and a glass door at one and an ordinary one at the other end. Immediately across from the bed on the left I see another unit with the same dimensions as my bed, also encased in wood, but this time in the casing I see a desk with drawers.

Maybe my lap top is in one of those drawers, I think.

I get up gingerly. I notice that in the closet beside my jacket is hanging a large white terry-cloth bathrobe. I take off my rumpled blouse and skirt. The robe comes almost to my ankles. It is soft and comforting.

No lap-top in the closet or in the drawers I discover to my chagrin.

I go through the door into the area on the opposite wall where there is a bathtub with a shower. Next to that there is a toilet and a sink and what appears to be a sliding door on the side. I surmise this must be to maximize privacy. It's a bathroom to be shared by whoever is in the other unit.

When I test the shower to see if the water is warm enough I start to remember: the sound of water much louder rushing madly toward me. My body tenses with fear and I suddenly can't move my arms to reach the shampoo.

I hear a loud knock on the door of the bathroom and I am brought back to where I am. I hear the woman calling my name: "Esther! Esther!"

So I turn off the shower and then I hear her calling, "Are you all right?"

I reply, "I'm all right. I'll be out in just a minute or two."

When I leave the shower I glance at the mirror. "Not bad for a woman approaching thirty-seven," I mutter to my image. "That's all 5'9" of me."

On the table next to the sink I see my pocket book. I'm happy to see that my hairbrush is inside so I can get any knots out of my long blond hair. "I know it didn't help me get into Radcliffe, but it did help me get my first job," I continue talking to myself. "That sexist bastard," I add, thinking about that boss who was more interested in my legs than my brains.

There's a hair dryer on the sink counter waiting for me. I am grateful for this courtesy I presume was that of the old woman.

When I open the bathroom door there she is holding out to me a white gauze dress like her own but longer for me.

"Here, you can use this while we take care of the clothes you came in. I am sorry to see that in the flurry of the emergency we haven't been able to find the suitcases.

Emergency! What emergency? I'm asking myself. The reporter in me wants to ask a thousand questions but I am a little frightened because I don't know where I am or what I am doing here and I want to figure that out first. "You didn't find my lap top, did you? It's an Acer."

Sara says with a broad smile “It’s such a beautiful day. No, we didn’t find your lap top, but maybe you’ll enjoy not having it for a little while.”

She opens the glass door. I am blinded by the sunlight. As my eyes adjust I can smell the most beautiful perfumes; scents of roses and other flowers.

I see I am walking down a corridor. In the sunlight, it is like walking on pathways of pure gold. One side is a curious combination of pillars of a monastery cloister but with glass panels of a greenhouse curving outward between these pillars.

Sara explains: these are our all season gardens and contains all the plants and vegetables as well as flowers needed in the community. Almost everyone likes to spend several of their work hours tending these gardens.

We walk through an archway of white stone, looking like something between highly polished limestone or marble, the same stone of the pillars. We enter a large hall of about fifty feet long and thirty feet wide with tables forming a U shape, covered by white lace table clothes.

Sara is leading me to the head of the table in the middle of the U. I see about a hundred people, men, women and children. Many of the women are wearing the same kind of dress we are. Some have nun’s veils. A thought pops into my mind, “They almost look like brides.” Some of the men are wearing white robes with a monastic hood. Others are wearing white shirts and pants. Among these I recognize the good looking man who helped me off the helicopter yesterday. He looks even more attractive in the full light of the dining hall. He and the others dressed in white, I notice, are all wearing the same odd bronze pendant.

Roughly half the people, though, are wearing regular clothing of many colors and types. The children who aren’t wearing white seem unusually quiet, as if adjusting to a new environment.

“Esther, I want to introduce you to Abba Ibrahim, the founder of our community.” I see a distinguished looking man with white hair and white beard. He seems to have hazel eyes and a smiling, kind, gentle face. Of average build, he is wearing a monastic white robe.

He is rising from his chair to greet me and I see he is about 6 feet tall. As he extends both hands to me he says, "Welcome, Esther. We've been expecting you." He is waving me into a seat next to him. Sara, sitting next to me is smiling warmly. Next to Abba Ibrahim is that man, Itzhak. Sara introduces him to me as Abba Ibrahim's son.

"Son?" I whisper to Sara. "Isn't the Abba a monk? Do monks have sons these days?"

Sara explains, "Ibrahim and his wife were married in Jerusalem, around the time of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty brokered by Jimmy Carter. Shortly after that Itzhak was born in 1979.

I realize that I was right in calculating the man's age to be around 39.

"Both Ibrahim and his wife were called up for service." Sara lowers her voice, "she was killed by a bomb."

"How sad!" I softly reply.

Abba Ibrahim is looking at me with a steady gaze, "You must be hungry. You haven't eaten in a couple of days."

Immediately I think to myself, a couple of days! Why can't I remember? but as I feel my stomach growling I realize that he must be right.

I see huge ceramic platters overflowing with various meats. Other ones are filled with many colored vegetables, potatoes, corn, rice and some with bread, fruit and salad.

I start eating. Noticing how tasty the meat is I ask Abba Ibrahim what kind it is.

"Rabbit," he replies nonchalantly. All I can think of is the pet bunny I got when I was a little girl on Easter. My family was Jewish except for one French Catholic grandmother. I didn't go with her to services but she gave me little gifts at Easter. I am thinking of my bunny's soft white fur and remembering the sound of his little beating heart in my arms.

It is hard for me to swallow this portion of rabbit. I shove the meat under some lettuce leaves. The next time the meat platter comes by me I take another type. What's this?" I ask.

"Venison," Itzhak replies with a wink. "It tastes like steak but a little sweeter. Actually I hunted down this deer. I learned how to shoot as a sniper with the Mossad. So, when I came here it was a natural for me to train the men in hunting for the community.

Oh great, I think. First Thumper and now Bambi. I am afraid to take anything else but I am so hungry that when the next platter comes by I ask with dread, "Is this chicken?" thinking it might be something more exotic like pigeon or parakeet."

Sara smiles and says, "No, this is just chicken. When hens stop laying eggis they become our meal."

I think I am glad I am not a chicken since if stop laying eggs I could become someone's dinner one day in this place.

Imma Sara tells me with a proud smile, "Everything here is home grown. We don't use pesticides. The manure comes from our sheep and horses. The sheep give us excellent milk and from that we make our own cheese. It takes many months to have it ready to eat and for desert we'll have ice cream made right there. Everything is fresh and without additives people are healthier."

I see that many of the people's plates are almost empty. They must be waiting for the dessert. I see all their eyes are on me as they pass me pitchers of water, milk, juices and goblets of wine. The glasses are set up as at a wedding.

As soon as my glasses are full of water, juice and wine, Abba Ibrahim stands up, and rings a small silver bell. The top of the bell is shaped like the pendant.

"My brothers and sisters, I am sure many of you recognize Esther Le Beau-Kerr from Channel 5 News."

I am pleased he got the pronunciation right unlike most people. Maybe he's been to France and Germany, I think, so he would get it right, phonetically sounding like "ler-bow-care."

"She's here to interview many of you newcomers as well as members of the community who have been here from the beginning. She's had a very difficult time, in fact she was on the last flight to the New Jerusalem."

"Oh," I said to myself, "that's why I'm here. It's an assignment!"

"We don't want to overwhelm her so we'll be scheduling the interviews as we talked about at our morning meeting. We want to welcome her, make her feel at home and do everything so that her stay with us is a pleasant experience."

Everyone is clapping and smiling at me but I notice some of the faces have a strange expression I can't quite identify. Everyone is quiet as if expecting me to say something. I feel panicky, as if I were back at school giving an oral report on a book I hadn't read.

"Abba Ibrahim, Imma Sara, thank you very much for your warm welcome and kind hospitality. I am looking forward to meeting all of you, especially those of you who will be interviewed prior to being filmed when our TV crew gets here. Hopefully the "Special" will be aired in a month or so and you will be able to see yourselves on TV."

I notice furtive glances between several of the adults with concerned looks on their faces. I can't think what I said that would produce such a response, so, without missing a beat, I sit down and continue eating the ice cream: several scoops: cookies and cream, mint chocolate chip, and French silk with strawberries, blueberries and raspberries, just to make it "healthy." I would never eat like this normally, because every extra pound looks like two pounds in front of the camera.

At the end of the feast, I hear to my great surprise Jewish folk music and then, my God, out comes in a regular Klezmer band of three men dressed in black pants and vests with a white shirt and white skull caps and two women in corresponding skirts and blouse outfits with flowered kerchiefs on their heads. One man is playing an accordion, another a bass fiddle, another drums. The women are playing a clarinet and a violin.

Everybody dressed in white gets out of their chairs and forms a huge circle around the tables dancing to the words: “Hiney mah tov u ma na’im shevet achim gam yahad.”

Even though I was brought up in a non-observant agnostic Jewish home, I recognize the famous song which translates “How good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity...”

I am so amazed to see these people who don’t seem Jewish dancing this way that I just stare, resisting my impulse to leap up and dance with them. I notice how beautifully the dresses and habits of the women in white swirl as they dance, as if they were made for dancing.

Itzhak rises, walks over to me and offers his hand to lead me into the circle. I like the feel of his large hand around mine. It is fun to be doing this Jewish dancing with what appears to be a mixed group of Catholics and....what? Jewish Catholics? Names like Sara, Itzhak???

Those still in their seats, the ones dressed in regular clothing, are clapping. Abba Ibrahim raises his voice over the music to address them, “My brothers and sisters, we were not dancing to entertain you but to praise the Lord with Psalm 133, verse 1. Please join us.”

After fifteen minutes I am breathless. I sit down next to Imma Sara and Abba Ibrahim. “The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak,” he quips with a rueful look on his face, red and beaming like a Santa Claus.

I ask him, “Where did you learn Israeli folk-dancing? Ibrahim is an Arab name, isn’t it?”

He replies, “I was born in Jerusalem in the Armenian quarter. Later I studied in the school of foreign service at Georgetown University here in the United States. I went home in the summers. Several Americans in my circle of friends at Georgetown spent time on a kibbutz in Israel learning how they integrate farming with community life. I would join them sometimes. I don’t think any researcher has investigated the benefits of folk dancing for forming community... something so common in traditional cultures.” No mention of his wife’s death, I notice.

I am becoming more and more fascinated to learn about this impressive founder of the community. I wonder what his views are about Israeli politics. Even though he might not be much of a TV news addict, I suppose that he knows I am of Jewish background.

As if reading my mind, he continues reminiscing, “When I was a Christian Arab youth in Jerusalem I used to throw stones at Israeli soldiers with my Palestinian Muslim friends. Then one day one of them proclaimed, “First we’ll get rid of the Jews and then we’ll get rid of the Christians. It took 150 years to get rid of the Crusaders and so now we have 100 years more to get rid of the Zionists.” That was the last stone I threw at any Israeli but...”

He is interrupted by a bell. All stop dancing. Everyone claps for the musicians, who quickly start filing out of the dining hall.

I feel tired but exhilarated. Sara puts an arm around my shoulders and says gently, “Please feel free to join us now for something a bit more contemplative.”

In the past I have always been skeptical of anything religious. I’ve done investigative reporting on how psychological counselors de-program former cult members like the Moonies. However, even though the uniformly white garments of the members are a red flag, something about the mood of these people seems friendly and strangely comfortable.

We are going down a hallway with the same pillars on both sides.

(insert a graphic)

Near the end of the hall we pass through six rows of wooden pews on both sides of a center aisle. Hanging from ceiling to floor to create circular partitions are several rows of diaphanous white curtains which are fluttering in a gentle breeze. Everything conveys a sense of mystery, a sense of the sacred.

Sara deftly parts the layers of curtains and beckons me inside. Suddenly I pass through to another world and I experience a deep sense of awe and wonder that I have never felt before.

I am in a large circular room spanned by a huge glass geodesic dome which makes it seem like we are inside an enormous multifaceted diamond. I can see the cloudless light blue dome of the sky outside radiant with the brilliant afternoon sun.

Members of the community dressed in white are lying prostrate on the floor, which appears to be something like a foot depth of highly polished acrylic forming an azure sea of glass, clear as crystal, like one surrounding a tropical island.

My eyes are slowly drawn upward to the focus of the reverence of the community members. At the top of a circular stairway of seven steps is a platform with a large square white altar which almost looks like a throne. Standing in the center of this altar-throne is what appears to be a lamb of gold with seven horns embracing a sun-burst of glittering metal. In the center of this sun-burst is a simple white disc, just over two inches in diameter, encased in gold. In front of the altar-throne is a menorah like gold candelabra with seven candles aflame.

Surrounding this altar-throne on each of its four sides are four solid gold partitions going up the steps like railing. Each looks like a strange creature that is hard to describe, something like sculptures on the temple walls of ancient Assyria or Babylon. Each has six wings that are covered on both sides with oblong pearls with onyx centers which oddly remind me of eyes. Each creature looks like it is bowing toward the lamb on the altar-throne.

The one to my far left, looks like a winged lion; vaguely like the one on top of the pillar outside St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice. The next one in the center looks like a bull or an ox. The one to my right looks like it has a human face and then, with the six wings, like an angel. I cannot see the fourth one clearly because it is on the other side of the altar-throne.

Surrounding the altar-throne but on the level of the sea of glass floor, I count six simple white thrones equally spaced in one quadrant of a circle, so I quickly estimate that there are twenty-four in all.

Then my ears pick up the almost imperceptible sounds of the strumming of many stringed instruments at the same time my nose detects the unmistakable sweet aroma of incense.

Suddenly the multi-layered curtains part. A solemn procession of youth in white vestments with gold sashes centers. The teen-aged girls are playing hand-held golden harps and their partners are expertly swinging simple gold bowls of burning

incense which white smoke wafts up into the dome gradually filling the sanctuary. They look like angels.

Heaven has come down to earth or earth has risen into heaven. I know not which, but both are in one embrace. Each pair alternates, boy-girl, girl-boy, so that each file has six harpists and six censers, for a total of twenty-four. When they come to the stairs each pair parts, one to the left, the other to the right, so that they gradually encircle the stairs. At the end of the procession, I recognize Abba Ibrahim, his white hooded robe covered now with a magnificent cape of gold brocade with deep red velvet accents. As a huge bell begins to toll, all kneel one cue. I look at my watch. It is three o'clock.

I see Abba Ibrahim kneeling in his robes directly in front of the "white disc" in the golden sunburst container upheld by the seven horns of the golden lamb.

Add Graphic

Everyone else kneels except for the youths swinging the incense or strumming the hand-held harps.

Abba Ibrahim says, "This is the 4th day of the Novena of Divine Mercy." Everyone opens a leaflet. Imma Sara gently places an open one on my lap. They join their Abba in a strange prayer:

"Most compassionate Jesus, You are the Light of the whole world. Receive into the abode of Your Most Compassionate Heart the souls of those who do not believe in God and of those who as yet do not know You."

I think, my God, are they praying for me?

"Let the rays of Your grace enlighten them that they, too, together with us, may extol Your wonderful mercy, and do not let them escape from the abode of Your Most Compassionate Heart."

I listen intently to each word. I flash back to the wall in my French Catholic grandmother, Meme (note to editor put in accents on the e's) Le Beau's, bedroom in the south of France. We are all at her deathbed. Married to a non-observant Jew, she is the only family member who was religious. I am only 10 years old at this time. There is a picture of a man with a beard with the heart encircled by thorns with flames coming from the top. Meme is calling out: "Jesu, Jesu," and then she

stretches out her arms suddenly. “O ciel, O ciel,” (O heaven, O heaven) and collapses back on her pillows.

“Draw them to the Gospel these souls who do not know what great happiness it is to love You. Grant that they, too, may extol the generosity of Your mercy for endless ages. Amen.”

Across from me I see a kneeling woman who reminds me oddly of my meme, sobbing quietly. I notice others are crying, too. Still others are responding by singing repetitive prayers. When Abba Ibrahim chants, “For the sake of His sorrowful passion...:” they sing, “Have mercy on us and on the whole world.”

I have a sense of my meme’s presence. Despite the aroma of incense I suddenly get a whiff of the expensive lavender perfume that Pepe would bring her from Paris.

I hear people not just mouthing these prayers but heaving them up out of the depth of their souls. I am carried away by the intensity of the experience. After about ten minutes of this, they all pray: “Eternal God, in whom mercy is endless, and the treasury of compassion inexhaustible, look kindly upon us, and increase Your mercy in us, that in difficult moments we might not despair, nor become despondent, but with great confidence, submit ourselves to Your holy will, which is Love and Mercy Itself. Amen.”

Over the tears Abba Ibrahim says in a loud voice: “My dear, dear children, the angels are collecting all your tears in vails and presenting them before the throne of God to cleanse the souls of all your loved ones whom He has taken as an offering to Himself. One day you will see them again in the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”

A light goes on in my head – is that why some are dressed in bridal white?

Itzhak, dressed in a ceremonial robe is reading, “From the book of Esther 10:6b: The people is Israel, who cried to God and was saved. The Lord saved his people and delivered us from all these evils. God worked signs and great wonders, such as have not occurred among the nations.”

Book of Esther? My name. Did they choose that reading just for me? I wonder. I glance at the fat book of prayers Imma Sara is using and the headline says Thursday Week III. Just a coincidence?

Between this strange numbness I feel since the flight and the astounding ceremonials I don't think to ask about my lap top before going to bed.

As I am putting my underwear in one of the drawers, my eye catches the title of an illustrated leaflet:

“The New Jerusalem: a Model for a Catholic Living Center”

Great, I thought. I might find good stuff here for the prologue of the TV series.

“Imagine: living in a place where everyone is excited to be living their Catholic faith as you are, a place where you could be truly Catholic.

Imagine: living in a place where the dignity of life is respected from the moment of conception to natural death, and you are lovingly cared for during all stages in between.

Imagine: Living in a community with other Catholics, single or married, men and women, home-schooling families, Sisters, Brothers, Deacons and Priests.

“Imagine: a beautiful 24 hour perpetual adoration chapel just down the hall from your room - not just when you go for a retreat - but where you live with other like-minded Catholics. All of you want to deepen your love relationship with Jesus in the Eucharist, to love Mary as your model and mother as you prepare for eternal life with the Trinity, the angels and the saints. You would be with others who want to live faithful to the teachings of the Church in a milieu of natural beauty and simple living.”

I dig out my pen from my tote bag and start marking key lines I could have as a voice over when the TV crew arrives.

“Imagine: a day centered around the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, Liturgy of the Hours, Rosary, Divine Mercy novena and chaplet, and other private devotions.

“Imagine: delicious and nutritious organic foods from the produce of the community farm such as fresh eggs, homemade bread, jellies and jams, vegetables from the garden, fruit from the orchard, poultry and fish and other entrees.

“Imagine: you have your privacy in retreat house-like rooms, but you never have to be alone because at any time you wish you can meet friends for common meals, prayers, classes at the academy for young and old, listening to music or playing an instrument, classes in the arts, discussions of philosophy or theology or outdoor activities such as hiking, fishing, hunting, boating, tennis, swimming and nearby cultural events.”

Pretty good PR style, I think. Swimming. In the moat? Maybe there is a pool somewhere I didn't see yet. I guess I could borrow a bathing suit from one of the community members or so called “visitors.” I guess that the community women wear those ugly full bathing suits I hate. I should check out the visitors for someone my size who might have a two piece one.

“Imagine: you live in a place where as you decline in strength you can remain among loving companions and where your hospital bed can be wheeled into a adoration chapel...”

I'll finish this in the morning, I decide, as my eyes are closing.

Chapter 2

I see out the window that the sun is shining. After brushing my teeth I get dressed in my regular travel outfit of a skirt and blouse now nicely laundered. I start longing for my first cup of coffee, but my eye is drawn to the leaflet I left half read the night before.

“An emerging community of diverse vocations called the New Jerusalem is developing such a model for a Catholic Living in Piedmont in the beautiful Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts.”

I realize this is probably an old leaflet from when they were first recruiting members.

“Here is a description of the bridal spirituality of the New Jerusalem Community.”

Hmmmm. Okay, this is coming together. Bridal – that’s why all the white garments. But bridal is feminine and here the men dress in white also. Maybe there’s more about that later in the leaflet.

“The community seeks to serve the Church. It has its roots in these passages from Scripture:

"Behold, the bridegroom is coming, go forth to meet Him!" [Mt. 25:6]

“After this I had a vision of a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue. They stood before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands. [Rev 7:9] Then I heard something like the sound of a great multitude or the sound of rushing water or mighty peals of thunder, as they said: "Alleluia! The Lord has established his reign, (our) God, the almighty. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory. For the wedding day of the Lamb has come, his bride has made herself ready. She was allowed to wear a bright, clean linen garment." (The linen represents the righteous deeds of the holy ones.) Then the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who have been called to the wedding feast of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These words are true; they come from God." [Rev 16:6-9]

“I also saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. [Rev 21:2] The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." [Rev 22:17]...

“When did the New Jerusalem Community start? The property that you are seeing on your visit was only bought in the year 2010. But the spirituality was conceived in Rome on March 25, 1984, during the celebration of the Annunciation of the Lord and the Consecration of the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary by Pope John Paul II and all the bishops in communion with him.

“Since our first retreat at the Carmelite Monastery in Williamstown, MA, for the Solemnity of the Annunciation, March 23-25, 1987, lay members of the Community have prayed the Divine Office together daily as well as sponsored pilgrimages, conferences and retreats in Massachusetts, Maine, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New Jersey.”

Oh, I see. This has a long history.

“Presently the community, which now includes, priests, sisters, brothers, as well as lay people is working on founding the New Jerusalem Catholic Center of Living.

“Some of the residents will be retired people. Others will be working on the property in exchange for room and board. Others could be working in the town.”

Oh, so it’s not just people volunteering here during the day but others as well. I want to interview some of those who go out to the neighboring cities.

I see a separate page with this title:

“OPTIONAL Activities for Your Typical Day

24 Hours of Exposition and Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament (except for Mass times).

Note that there are 4 different times for praying the rosary. Some could pray all 20 decades with others over the day or you could pray 5 decades at any of the times listed)

7 AM Early Mass

7:30 AM Office of Readings, Morning Prayer, and Rosary

8 AM Breakfast

Free Time and Activities or Work Period, such as classes, worships, sports and other games or assigned work on the property or volunteer work.

10:30 AM – Rosary and Mid-morning Prayer

11 AM Late Mass

Noon - Angelus and Mid-day Prayer

Lunch

1 PM – 3 PM Free Time or Activities as during the morning. 3 PM Mercy Novena and Chaplet, Mid-afternoon prayer, rosary

3 PM Novena and Chaplet of Divine Mercy, Mid-afternoon Prayer, Rosary

5 PM Evening Prayer

5:30 PM Dinner

7 PM Free Time, Activities or Work as during morning and afternoon periods.

8:30 PM Night Prayer – Rosary”

I decide to participate as much as possible in these activities within the next few days

After breakfast, Imma Sara leads me back to the library for the interview. We enter one of the meeting rooms which is larger than it is wide with two beautiful wooden tables end to end each surrounded by padded office chairs. Every one of the three walls is filled with bookshelves. The fourth wall is all glass panes overlooking the large library. The room has a projector and a white board attached to the ceiling so it can swing down for films to be viewed from the table. I comment to Imma Sara, “This seems to be a very hi-tech room.”

Imma replies, “I don’t know how to work these contraptions, but Abba Ibrahim insists that we all learn how to use the latest tech to be able to evangelize the tech savvy youth of today.”

“Oh, great!” I say. Later I can check out Channel 5 and my e-mail.” I notice that my fingers are almost trembling with eagerness.

Imma says, “I’d love to help you dear, but I don’t know the first thing about these machines.”

“Oh, did anyone find my lap top last night?”

“No. I’m sorry. Of course you would want to do the interviews using it.”

Somehow, in spite of her eager goodness I think she is lying or, at best, telling me a half truth. But I decide not to press my desire to check my e-mails. Later I could dig up Itzhak. I think, he's young enough to be high-tech for sure.

We sit across from each other. Sara takes a pad of yellow-lined paper out of the drawer underneath the top of the table. I fetch my pen from my tote bag to get started. I feel as if I was back 3 decades ago without my computer.

Me: "First tell me where you were born, grew up, where you went to school, about your family." I smile as if I were doing a live TV interview.

Imma Sara: "My parents were from Galicia, Poland, Chasidic Jews. My mother was pregnant with me. I was born September 8, 1939. My father was a rabbi." She gets a far-away look in her eyes.

Me: "Oh, that's it! I thought we had something in common. So, how did a nice Jewish girl become a Roman Catholic Imma?"

Imma Sara: "That's a long story. During the holocaust we were hidden by friends in a city in Yugoslavia. That's a whole other longer story. After the creation of the state of Israel in May, 1948 our family made aliyah to Jerusalem. We lived in Mea Shearim, the Chasidic Jewish neighborhood outside the walled city of Jerusalem. Already in my teens I started questioning the rigid following of the law. Especially I wanted to be like my father, not a rebbitzin like my mother."

Me: "I bet that went over well!"

Imma Sara: "When I was twenty-one the miracles started. One day there was a downpour. I dashed into the entry way of a building with the Hebrew inscription on the door "Salvation is from the Jews." A young man in a yarmulke suddenly opened the door and invited me in out of the storm."

Me: "Aha! A budding romance."

Imma Sara: (smiling) "Mordecai told me that the building was a small school. I was a little afraid because Chasidic young women don't talk to strangers. But he was so friendly and handsome that I agreed to sit down and have a cup of tea and a piece of raisin cake."

Me: "Fascinating!"

Imma Sara: “An hour passed quickly. Suddenly I realized that I ought to leave. Probably the rain was over and my family would be missing me. Before I left, Mordecai brought me into the prayer hall. I was surprised. The hall looked Jewish in some ways but in others more like images I had seen on TV of Christian Churches. There was a large print of a Chasidic Rabbi, but he was on a cross. There was an altar with a menorah on top of it, and pictures of Jews with haloes on their heads.”

Me: “Strange indeed!”

Imma Sara: “Well, you probably don’t want a whole book about my past, but more about how I came to be here. . . To make it short, Mordecai was a Jew who had become a Catholic but clung to Jewish customs. They call themselves Hebrew-Catholics. I became one of them. Eventually we got married and moved to the United States. Even though at first my family was outraged about my conversion when it came to moving to the United States they made up quickly. Many Jews in Israel like the idea of having family in America in case of another holocaust in Israel. My husband and I both taught at Boston College. He taught Scripture and I taught art. Mordecai died 10 years ago. We had four beautiful children who gave us many grandchildren.”

Me: “That sounds wonderful. I’m single. Haven’t found the right guy yet and pushing the time-clock on babies. . .” I grimace but quickly go back to professional mode: “So why aren’t you living with those grandchildren?”

Imma Sara: “Well, those children of ours took all our love and knowledge but gave up the best we had to give: our Christian faith. They’re still kind of seekers. I always hope they’ll come back.” she adds wistfully and then straightens up quickly and continues with her story.

“So I met Abba Ibrahim on the Feast of Pentecost in 1984 at a Charismatic Conference in Jerusalem. He told me about a group of people in the Boston area where he was a priest. As he spoke I realized they were not just an informal group, but his disciples. He explained that some years after his wife died in the war, he left his son with a sister who had no children and came to the United States to answer the call to become what is called a late-vocation priest. There’s a seminary in Connecticut that specializes in training such men.”

Me: “Well, that’s something I never heard of. In my circles we joke about the Church ‘robbing the cradle’ to get teen boys to agree to commit themselves for life with impossible to keep vows! Oops, I’m sorry, I hope I’m not offending you.”

Imma Sara (laughing): “No, not at all. Feel free to share your thoughts. We’re used to skepticism about our Church’s ways. Anyhow, to get back to how Abba Ibrahim found me. This group of American disciples of his agreed with his plan to work out a totally different lifestyle based on the original Christian community in the Acts of the Apostles but with all the heritage of 2000 years of Catholic history. It would be a community with monks, nuns, consecrated married couples and single people and, of course, widows like me.”

Me: “Sort of like a Catholic kibbutz?”

Imma Sara: “In a way, but also like the old medieval monasteries where there were a core of monks or nuns and, surrounding them, families, and old folk.”

Me: “How did you get to be Imma, that means mother, doesn’t it?”

Imma Sara: “Well, it’s a kind of pet name actually. Abba Ibrahim envisaged having an older woman, like myself, as his helper, to lead the women. He would be the head and this Imma would be under obedience to him.”

Me: (grinning) “I could imagine having younger women obey me, but I don’t know about *obeying* any man!”

Imma Sara: “Exactly! With my background of rebelling against the rabbi as authority over his wife, the children and the congregation...and Mordecai agreeing to an equal marriage, I didn’t really want to be under Abba Ibrahim, even though he is a saintly man. So, he just calls me Imma Sara, almost like a joke.”

I yawn. Imma Sara asks me if I am tired and would like a nap before dinner.

I reply, “Not really. Your story was so fascinating it revived me from my seeming unending jet-lag like experience from the flight.”

“How about a tour around the monastery?”

Okay!

“Before we start, let me show you this necklace the members of the New Jerusalem wear.” Imma Sara lifts up this brass pendant I had wondered about. Large brown eyes gleaming, she explains, “Basically the whole monastery is laid out like this Jerusalem Cross.”

Graphic

“See, it’s 5 crosses with a large one in the center and 4 smaller ones in each corner.”

I say, “I’m not familiar with this cross. Why is it called the Jerusalem cross?”

“It was worn by the crusaders to the Holy Land...”

I gulp. Of course, from my non-religious point of view crusaders aren’t exactly heroes.

“It is still a symbol for the Franciscans who have custody of the holy places,” Sara continues to explain.

“In the center of the large cross is Jerusalem where the church began and then spread to the 4 corners of the world, North, South, East and West. The 4 smaller crosses represent the 4 Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.”

We walk to the chapel area where I had witnessed the huge ceremony the day before. Imma Sara points to the partitions going up the stairs. “Look, each of these flat sculptures represents one of the writers of the 4 Gospels: the winged lion is St. Mark .”

I interrupt the narrative, obviously a spiel she has delivered many times to guests: “Oh, I was once at St. Mark’s in Venice. I remember the winged lions.”

“When the Muslims were attacking Egypt the Venetian Crusaders rescued the relics and brought them to their Cathedral which they named after St. Mark. The winged ox represents St. Luke. The winged angel with the human face is St. Matthew and the winged eagle on the other side is St. John.”

I am amazed that all these details, which I thought only illiterate peasants knew about in medieval times, were still talked about at this monastery as if they mattered!

My seasons “tour guide” continued, “And the 5 crosses also represent the 5 wounds of Christ. The large one the wound in his side and the 4 smaller ones the 4 wounds in his hands and feet. So our chapel here is in the direct center of the large cross that is the shape for all our buildings.”

Happily, Sara, exclaims, “You see, Abba Ibrahim built the whole monastery using the Jerusalem cross as the blue-print!” She rifles through a large tote bag and comes up with a white page with a drawing on it with many colored rectangles.

Graphic

She points to the central (color) portion:

“The chapel we are in now is in the center of the complex because prayer is the center of our lives and we pray 7 times a day as the priests did in the time of Solomon. When the warning bell rings everyone is within minutes of the chapel. ”

Again, I see the red flag go up. Cultish?

“You mean all of those resident here pray 7 times a day or only the members of the community,” I ask, wondering about those in regular clothing.

“Oh, the refugees...” Sara blushes and quickly added, “I mean the new guests, they only gradually get into those prayers. They drift in optionally, but usually they find them fascinating.

Refugees? I ask myself. Still, I decide to pretend that Imma Sara didn’t make some kind of slip.

“Your room, Esther, is in one of the smaller “crosses” which is a residence for single women.” She points to an orange colored block. “The residences for single men and families are in the other “crosses.” You were already in the refectory...”

Seeing my puzzled look, Imma Sara translates, “dining room with the kitchen.”

Now she grabs my arm and walks me through a corridor on our left to a large building with walls from floor to ceiling of bookcases. There are ladders to fetch books from the top shelves. All along one wall are meeting rooms – some look like media rooms.

I notice that the only windows of this library face the courtyard between sections of the complex. Usually I feel claustrophobic when I can't see out of a building, but here, because of the lovely trees and gardens and fountains in the courtyard, I feel calm enough.

“The fact that we can't go to the side buildings except through the chapel,” Sara explains, “encourages brief visits to the Blessed Sacrament during the day.” I wonder what the Blessed Sacrament is, but I don't want to delay seeing more by eliciting a long answer to my questions.

A group of children with an older man in white pants and shirt with a beard and glasses is walking toward the library. I am introduced to Brother Kevin. He invites me in to watch the mathematics class.

“Thank you. I smile at the children. I would love to come another time. Now I want to get a sense of the whole complex.”

Unlike public school children, these look at me with curiosity and interest. I am impressed.

The next side building we come to turns out to be the infirmary. Imma Sara just lets me peek in. I see about 20 rooms that look like intensive care units in a hospital with the I.V.'s and monitors. Many of the doors to the rooms are open and I can see people in beds. I suddenly flash back for the first time since my arrival to when my helicopter was about to land on the roof of the monastery. I saw EMT's with stretchers taking wounded from other helicopters. Refugees?

“Imma Sara, who are all these people? Are there many in your community so sick?”

“No, Esther, we're relatively healthy from good diets and plenty of exercise. Because of our doctors and nurses we are designated as an emergency shelter.”

I want to ask more to see if these could be the people in my flashback, but Imma Sara seems determined to move me quickly on to see the next building.

On our way I can hear the neighing of horses, cackling of hens and clanging of metal and noise of sawing. Sure enough it is a large combination barn and workshop. The building looks to be about 30' wide and more than 150' long. I

make a note to be sure to bring the TV crew here for animal shots. Viewers love animals it seems even more than people if you look at the ratings for shows Animal World.

“Yesterday, Imma, I was told all the cell phones were not working. Some storm took out the local tower. I hope they work soon since I have to make contact with Channel 5 to set up the filming.”

“I don’t know, Esther. I am sure you’ll love to see the art studio.”

We entered a large room divided in two. I was delighted to spy by the window a woman in a painter’s smock, working on a canvas on a large easel.

“Esther Le Beau-Kerr, meet Kathi Campitelli, our artist in residence.”

Kathi rubs her hands on a cloth not to dirty my hand when shaking it. She has long black hair, hazel eyes, heavy eye-lashes and a wide mouth with lipstick. I joke, “Well, Ms. Campitelli, I am delighted to see a little make-up. I was beginning to think that I must look like a prostitute in the Victorian ages.”

Sara and Kathi laugh loudly.

“I realize you are not on my list for today for interviews, but maybe you could tell me about your studio.”

Kathi: “Of course. I am very proud of it. You see, I came here 2 years ago to join the community. One of my provisos is that I could build an art room so I could make art and also teach children and any willing adults.”

As we walk around Kathi showed me the two studios really, divided by a screen. The first one has large worktables and chairs, shelves for drying ceramic pieces. Several bowls and pitchers were on the shelves. She points to a kiln on the outdoor patio. There are lockers for her things and those of the students.

The other studio is for painting and etching. There is a platform for human models. There are also screens, a Smartboard and an LCD projector.

“You’re so beautiful, Ms. Le Beau-Kerr,” Kathi says looking admiringly at my long blond hair. “Maybe you’d consent to be a model for us sometime... while you’re visiting?”

“You mean in the nude?” I ask sardonically.

Kathi blushes again. “We don’t do that here,” and then, to change the subject, “I love just as much my art appreciation classes, geared to Christian themes, of course.”

Imma Sara looks down at her watch and exclaims, “It’s 10:45 almost time for the later Mass. Have you ever been to a Catholic Mass before?”

“Yes, in the summer when I was a little girl we used to visit my French grandmother who was Catholic and she took me to Mass even during the week. I have vague recollections that there were no pews but there were these very straight-backed chairs with wicker seats low to the floor.”

Imma Sara asks if I would like to come with her to this Mass. I nod, eager to figure out shoots for the crew of the chapel during Mass.

As I walk in I see about seventy five people, mostly in white communal garments, the younger and middle-aged kneeling and the older ones seated. There is also a sprinkling of the visitors including some children who are sitting still awaiting the service.

I look around to see if Itzhak is there. Yes, there he is in a front pew to my right head lifted up looking at the crucifix.

A woman in white comes up to the podium and tells them the page for the opening hymn, #51, “Joyful, joyful, we adore You.”

When they start singing I recognize to my surprise that the melody of from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony and I think of when I was at Tanglewood with Arthur years ago and the dinner for two in the midst of a crowd of a thousand that we had on the lawn with a white table cloth.

I sigh, one of those disappointing men!

I notice everyone is now sitting down. A young man in white goes to a different podium ornately decorated to the left of the altar.

“A reading from the book of Genesis... in the days of Noah...”

I flashback once more and I see a roof filled with people being swallowed up by a grey wall. I hear their screaming...”

I put my hands over my ears. Imma Sara whispers, “Are you all right, dear?”

“I’ll be all right in a minute.” I shake my head quickly and think it must have been a nightmare.

Everyone is standing. An older man dressed in white vestments carries a large gold covered book, very reverently to the podium and says, “The Lord be with you.”

Everyone responds, “And also with you.”

“A reading from the Holy Gospel according to Mark.”

The reading is about Jesus sleeping in the boat during the frightening storm.

The priest, who is not Abba Ibrahim, talks about how walls of water are not as powerful as they appear. “Sometimes we become frightened and forget that Jesus is in the boat and even the winds and the seas obey him... Why do they do that? Because He created us and holds us in the palm of His hand.

“He keeps His eye on the sparrow, how much more on us. Some tragedies we can never explain in this life but in the next we will know so much more clearly.”

I am remembering parts of the nightmare. I see all of these faces and they seem so real. I see the panic and I close my eyes because I can’t look any more.

I am brought back to the service by the sound of a bell. The priest is raising the white disc and suddenly I make the connection. That was the white disc in the golden container that was the focus of everyone’s devotion yesterday. What did he say first, “Body and Blood... ?”

Then I see him raise the gold chalice. “Do this in remembrance of Me.” Why can’t I remember what happened to me from when I got on the helicopter to when we got off it here. It all seems surreal, why can’t I remember?

Most people are getting up and forming a line but Sara gestures to me to remain in my seat. I watch them go up. They are singing “O Lord, I am not worthy, that

Thou shalt come to me, but speak Thy words of comfort and my spirit healed shall be.”

I wish I could believe the way they do.

As they turn around after receiving communion, I see tears running down some of their faces.

I remember my Meme’s face. After she received Holy Communion so looked so angelic, so peaceful, like someone in another world. I remember she told me that someday I would be dressed in white and make my first Holy Communion. But then I remember the big fight that occurred because my father refused to even consider it.

Without any announcement the people dressed in white start singing “Now from the heavens descending is seen a glorious light... the Bride of Christ in splendor arrayed in purest white...she is the holy city whose radiance is the grace of all the saints in glory from every time and place.”

Oh, I thought, the holy city of Jerusalem with the saints dressed in white! Now I get it. They’re trying to bring heaven down to earth.

After lunch Imma Sara tells me that Abba Ibrahim would like to meet with me in his office. He greets me with a hug and sits me down on a comfortable old couch.

Me: Imma Sara told me about how she met you and came to join your community. I pull out the leaflet. I read this quickly last night and this morning. But I still have lots of questions. For instance what is the rule of life?

Abba Ibrahim: “The rule for farm communities like the New Jerusalem is like the Rule of St. Benedict for monks, except adapted for all vocations.”

Me: Does everyone live on the farm?

Abba Ibrahim: Up until recently, of course, those who had skills that were needed for people beyond the community, for example, doctors and nurses, would be working in the hospitals but praying with us as

possible. That's why we have the early morning and later Masses and of course our priests were always helping out in the local parishes," Abba Ibrahim explained.

"In fact, we would all go to Sunday Mass together downtown in Adams."

I scratch my head and confess, "What I'm really asking is how does the rule allow for conflict management. I don't really believe that everything is as lovey-dovey as it seems on the surface. Or am I being cynical?"

Abba Ibrahim smiles and responds humbly, "We try to live the Gospel but there's always our fallen human nature. A lot of the conflicts that are in the world don't arise because all of our basic needs are taken care of."

I start walking around the small study. "Abba, I'm not trying to dig out dirt, exactly, I just want to know if the rule includes provision for mediation or it's just everyone goes to the Abba or the Imma and just obeys whatever you say."

"Of course, like all monastic communities we have the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience that our monks and nuns take and promises their own kind of poverty, chastity and obedience for the married couples..."

Me: "... and for singles who might want to marry some day?"

Abba Ibrahim: "Some of this language is probably new to you. A single Catholic lay person also needs to live simply, to withhold sexual activity until married, and, and in our community to obey a leader.

Getting back to governance, Abba Ibrahim gets up and goes to the file cabinet and takes out a document which he reads from: The community is governed jointly by the Board of Review, the Corporation Officers and Directors, and Community Council according to our Statutes. In

fact, we have a meeting this evening right before dinner if you'd like to join us. The meetings are placed right before meals so that the hungry members will want to keep things brief." He winks.

"Some matters are tabled until before dessert and dessert is not served until all business is concluded and it usually concludes very quickly." He winks again.

I laugh, but a red flag goes up. I think *this might be a cover-up for the cultish nature of this place that they do have these juridical entities in place but really it's just for show and the meetings are rigged so that the Abbot's will is done.*

The Board of Review is a judicial board comprised of 3 community members and exercises responsibility in matters of spiritual guidance, discernment, and spiritual discipline.

Me: That's pretty heavy language for an outside. Can you give an example of a type of issue that might come up?

Abba Ibrahim: For example on Memorial Day it was the Feast of the Visitation of Mary, a liturgical Feast that was in conflict with the secular celebration of Memorial Day. So after discussion, it was decided to follow the liturgical discipline of the Church and to add in prayers for the memory of the veterans in the intercession.

Me: And suppose there was disagreement with someone on the Board who was a veteran wanting the American flag to be draped over the altar, what would happen then?

Abba Ibrahim: Church law comes first.

Me: Oh, you mean you as the priest head of the community has the final say?

Abba Ibrahim: No, you don't understand. The Board of Review can't trump the Liturgical Law of the Church. It's not a power struggle between me and the Board but me, as priest obeying the Church in such a case.

Me: Okay, I think I get it. But what would be an example where the Board of Review could veto some decision of yours that was not governed by Church law?

Abba Ibrahim: Yes, they could.

Me: Getting back to the Board of Review, how are those members chosen?

Abba I: One member is elected every year for a 3 year term. One clergy member is elected by the clergy. One lay member is elected by the adult lay members including couples, singles, including nuns for they are considered lay in canon law. And the third by all the adults combined. In this way there is representation of all adult vocations.

Me: Is there anything more I need to know before I go to the meeting tonight?

Abba Ibrahim: Oh, of course, the meeting tonight is not the Board of Review but the Council and the whole community.

Me: What is the council?

Abba Ibrahim: This is the 7 elected representatives of the various vocations such as the widows and widowers, the couples, the priests, brothers, the sisters, the single men and single women.

Me: And what kind of questions do they decide on? Are they consultatory to you or can they veto something you would like?

Abba Ibrahim: They don't vote on matters concerning finances , health decisions, or construction, etc. since these are handled by managers whose names are given for appointment to the Board of Review. The Council votes on issues that concern the life of the community as a whole such as new ventures. For example, they decided we should add on a swimming pool.

The bell rang. Abba Ibrahim said it was for evening prayer and invited me to come.

I took a break and came to the refectory a half hour before dinner to check out the Community Meeting. The adults in the community all in white are sitting at the tables with the Council members at a head table with portable microphones. I was happy to see that even though there was no TV reception or net there was still electricity. Abba explained to me that even in storm conditions they had electricity due to generators.

A young woman raised her hand with the following issue, “Before I joined the community I was doing research on how caffeine is an addiction just like alcohol. I was surprised that you served coffee and tea here but I wanted to join so much I didn’t question it. I asked the kitchen manager but since she was drinking a cup of coffee while we were talking I didn’t think I would have much luck.”

Abba Ibrahim: “I used to be a real addict. Ten cups a day. But then I yielded to my doctor’s advice and dropped it in favor of the quick energy that comes from exercise.”

A coffee drinker myself, I was eager to see how such an issue would be resolved.

A woman with a veil, I presumed was a Sister, got up and suggested a compromise, “Suppose we say that everyone should work on drinking less caffeine beverages but that we don’t ban it suddenly.”

When it came to a vote, the Sister’s suggestion won over the protest of the healthy minded single woman.

I was happy to see it, since in the type of cults I had investigated as a reporter, if the leader gave an opinion discussion ended.

As usual, I sat between Imma Sara and Abba Ibrahim at dinner. Over the salad, Sara, in a low voice, mentioned that sometimes it was the Council that was stricter than the Abba. When they were first working on the widow and widower rules it was determined that widows and widowers could be free to visit their families for a month at any time during the year. A widow applied who wanted to spend 4 months a year with a part of her family because she was so close to them. Abba Ibrahim thought it would be okay but the Council thought it was two double-

mindful and could lead to so much time away, always extended by compelling reasons, that she could not be a full-time member of the New Jerusalem.

After dinner I am strolling back to my room when Itzhak waylays me with a surprising proposal: “Tomorrow morning early some of us go hunting. Want to come along?”

“You bet,” I respond. What time shall I be ready?”

“4 AM!”

“I haven’t gotten up that early since I did the morning show. I wish I had some pants to wear instead of this uncomfortable suit.”

“Not to worry, Imma will give you a camouflage hunting outfit.”

Chapter 3

My alarm clock goes off. (check if she has the clock yet) I was in the middle of a dream. All I could hear was screaming voices and the sound of rushing water. I feel groggy.

I jump out of bed on don the one piece jump suit of different colors of grey, green, and black as if I were imbedded in the army. I reach for my make-up and comb out my hair. In my mind’s eye I picture Itzhak looking at me approvingly.

I hear a knock on my door. I go to the door and it’s the same single young woman who was making a fuss about the caffeine issue. I don’t dare say I’d like a cup of coffee before we leave.

We walk silently down the hallway and turn to the right and go to the barn area where Itzhak and a young man are waiting. “This is Jesse. He knows all the mountains around here like the back of his hands. His grandfather always showed him the best place to find deer.”

I cringe. *Will I be expected to shoot down a beautiful deer?* I decide to cross that bridge when I come to it. They have rifles including the woman who Itzhak introduces as Clare. With the rifle under her arm she looks like a someone from the neo-Nazi vigilantes in Idaho I did a story on. I wonder whether she’s in love with Itzhak. I better stay out of her cross-hairs.

Very quietly we through the gates, guarded by two sentries with rifles. The gates are curved like inside a ping pong ball, and opens up going to the side as if we were on a space ship in a futuristic city. On the left and right are these embankments filled with boulders of various sizes with wild undergrowth that really go up most of the wall making it difficult for any trespasser to climb around.

One of the sentries lets down a drawbridge which could handle no more than one vehicle at a time. It occurs to me that I haven’t seen a garage or any cars on the tour. I ask and Itzhak says that for security they are all below ground in a subterranean garage.

Then we go over the moat. There’s a barbed wire fence. The sentries open the sliding gate.

“This seems like a high security facility.”

Itzhak says “With the complete economic collapse of the country, people have to take security into their own hands.”

\ I think I see something large splashing into the murky waters of the moat. I think of pirate movies. “What’s that?”

Jesse says it was a snapping turtle.

We then take a path through the woods.

It is starting to get light out. All of sudden Itzhak freezes and motions us to be quiet. Right ahead of us, we must be downwind from them, are three deer: two does, the smaller one that must have been a fawn this year, and a magnificent stag with at least 12 points. He really does look like Bambi's father!

Jesse takes aim. Instinctively I step back on a twig that breaks making just enough of a sound to alert the deer who dart off into the woods. I mouth "I'm sorry."

I whisper, "You should never take a city girl like me into the woods."

Itzhak doesn't look amused. He looks serious, as if our next meal depended on this hunt.

All of a sudden Clare stops dead in her tracks, aims her rifle. All I can see is this huge bird with a red head. At first I think it's a turkey, but it's too skinny. Before I can end my thought she pulls the trigger and down goes the bird.

"Magnificent shot" says Itzhak. I feel a twinge of jealousy. I guess I'll have to take up riflery to impress this man. It was a turkey, after all.

Jesse explains to me that in the wild they are thinner since they are not in cages forced fed with corn to make them fatter.

We return to the monastery and Jesse volunteers to bring the turkey over to the kitchen where they will prepare it for part of today's lunch.

It was great to get outside. I realize I was feeling a little bit claustrophobic.

I am sitting in the library waiting for my second major interview with a man they call the Chaplain.

I see the mustached middle-aged priest of yesterday's Mass now wearing a priest's collar and black shirt and pants.

Me: Hello, Chaplain Dan. Thanks for coming.

Chaplain Dan: I am honored to be interviewed by a TV celebrity.

Me: Thank you. Tell me how long have you been in the New Jerusalem?

Chaplain Dan: One month or so. I'm just beginning to get used to the idea of it.

Me: Why did you come here?

Chaplain Dan: I'm not entirely sure. I'm a chaplain in the Civil Air Patrol. I had an encampment coming up and I was looking for a non-traditional retreat as a way of relaxing before the encampment. Someone suggested the New Jerusalem.

Me: Have you found what you were looking for here?

Chaplain Dan: I think so. The jury is still out but I'm giving it some more time.

Me: Are all the cadets just sitting waiting for you to arrive at the camp?

(I notice an evasive look in his large blue eyes, as if he's hiding something from me.)

Chaplain Dan: If you asked me two weeks ago the answer would have been simpler.

Me: Oh, you mean you're thinking of joining this outfit instead?

Chaplain Dan: "I may have to. I missed the encampment," he chuckles.

Me: I always thought of your Church as being very disciplined. You mean a Catholic priest can just skip out at will?"

Chaplain Dan: Not really. It's just that things have changed...enough that I have to start thinking outside the box.

Me: Would you recommend this way of life to others?

Chaplain Dan: Yes, as long as a person is prepared to live a simple and quiet life in community. Like you probably noticed, there are no operating TVs, radios, or computers here.

I smile ruefully thinking of how much even for one day I'm climbing the walls from withdrawal from my cell phone, face-book and my twitter addiction.

Me: Don't you ever get bored? What do you do for fun?

Chaplain Dan: Oh no, every other evening we have a period devoted to games like Risk, Monopoly, Bridge, Scrabble, or Chess. We're off schedule because of the big feast this week, but you can play one of these with us tonight if you like.

I suddenly hear the Church bells pealing constantly. Chaplain Dan jumps to his feet and yells, "That's a signal!"

I jump up, too, and ask, "Can I go with you?"

Chaplain Dan hesitates and then yells, "We'll go to Tower Jeremiah."

I ask, "Why are we going there?"

Chaplain Dan says, "Because the bells mean there is trouble at that tower."

We are taking the stairs from the library up to the 3rd floor. We go out the door to a roof which looks like a medieval castle with ramparts, towers and turrets. It is not the same one of the domes I saw when I came on the helicopter. I see men in the community with rifles at the redoubts.

I feel as if I am embedded with the US forces in Iraq during the second Persian Gulf War!

I follow Chaplain Dan up an interior circular staircase within a tower. As soon as we get to the top he grabs binoculars from the soldier standing guard. He asks the soldier, “What do you identify?”

“Coming out of nowhere there were at least a dozen armed marauders who scaled the first fence, got over the moat, then breached the second fence. When they got between the boulders I lost sight of them.”

I look out of slit in the tower wall and I see for the first time a view of the entire New Jerusalem monastery. I see the roof with the central dome over the chapel and the four smaller domes that connect the residential sections. I see wind turbines 50’ from the ground. The walls are embankments made of huge boulders.

I hear a bloodcurdling scream cut short. I hear what sounds like a growl. Chaplain Dan says, “That must be Ursula protecting her den.”

Me: “Her den?”

Chaplain Dan: “She considers all of us to be her cubs.”

Me: “Cubs? ...” This place is getting crazier and crazier, I think to myself.

Chaplain Dan: “When the community was looking to build defenses besides the boundaries, we wanted some of nature’s best defenses. Rather than Dobermans we wanted something even bigger and more ferocious.”

Me: “Bigger and more ferocious?” I asked as I peered over the turret expecting any minute to see either a corpse or a screaming marauder.

Chaplain Dan: “There was a zoo that was closing in Montreal and we were able to get a donation of a pair of polar bears and a pair of snow leopards that have since been “fruitful and multiplied.’ There is nothing more vicious than a mother bear protecting her cubs, especially when she weighs 1,800 pounds! Obviously the marauders didn’t quite believe the warning signs “Beware of polar bear” and “Beware of snow leopard.” We keep them in large cages most of the time and only let them out when there is danger.

I see about ten of what must be a gang of marauders fleeing through the moat. What must be one of the snow leopards is chasing them. As they try to run through the water of the moat all of a sudden I see a huge white mass emerge from the foaming water.

Chaplain Dan yells out “Way to go, Ursy baby.” He turns to me and says proudly, “We trained the leopards and the bears to work together.”

Me: “Aren’t they natural enemies?”

Chaplain Dan: “I wondered about that when I came. I was told that in the wild they don’t normally share the same habitat since each is the top predator in their respective food chains. They tried acclimating them with each other as babies like kittens and puppies.”

Me: “If any of the marauders was wounded, would they be left to die or be taken to your infirmary?”

Chaplain Dan: “If Ursula got him there wouldn’t be much left, especially with hungry cubs to feed.”

Noticing the gleam in Chaplain Dan’s eyes I think, “If this is supposed to be a community of saints they haven’t yet tamed the male sadists.”

Since the action seems over, I go down the stairs to the ground floor. I decide to check out the infirmary. I see nurses and technicians scurrying like rats running back and forth between three of the rooms. There is a central location with supplies.

I see a doctor in a room examining a man who appears to be unconscious. The doctor is joking with a nurse saying, “Ursy must not have been very hungry. She just nipped him in the butt.”

I walk over and ask, “Is that one lying in the bed one of the security forces for the monastery?”

“No, Esther, it’s one of the marauders.”

The nurse and doctor leave to visit an adjoining room. The man in the hospital bed is lying on his stomach. With his long greasy graying hair and the tattoos on his

shoulders and a Harley Davison logo on his back he strikes me as a middle-aged biker.

I turn around for just a moment. I hear a crash and before I can understand what is happening I feel a burly arm around me and something sharp up against my throat.

I scream.

The doctor and nurse come running back and my attacker snarls, “Back off or this bitch is dead!”

The doctor yells, “Don’t hurt her.”

“Lead me to the front gate of this place,” the brute says as he drags me out of the ward using me as a human shield. The doctor and nurse are walking backwards to lead the way out.

Thoughts are racing through my mind. I try to remember what I learned in a self-defense course I took in college...I draw a blank. What do I do now with the blade against my throat. I can hardly breathe.

I see the shocked faces of the hospital workers and patients.

We move to an exit and all of a sudden I am pushed forward. The blade and the burly arm are yanked away from me. I turn around quickly and see Itzhak who seems to have pounced like a leopard from an opening in the ceiling.

I see the marauder lying on the floor out cold on his stomach. Itzhak’s knee is on his back and he is wrapping his arms with a cord.

Itzhak grins at me and says, “Remember, I used to be an operative for the Mossad?”

“Thank God you came. You saved my life! What a dummy I am not to have guessed that he was faking unconsciousness.”

“You just gave me a chance to be a super-hero,” Itzhak replies.

“What other powers to do you have?” I ask with a seductive smile.

“How about x-ray vision?”

I blush.

After all the drama of the day, dinner is served buffet style. Abba Ibrahim announces to the buzzing group of members and guests that no one of us was hurt during the raid and that the last marauder has left the property. He doesn't tell them about the whole scene with the marauder trying to black-mail them by capturing me and Itzhak's valiant rescue. I wonder why. Maybe he is afraid of scaring them even more than they have been.

I wonder if Ursy dispatched my attacker on the other side of the moat.

I am about to go to sleep after this long day. I feel shaky but not as scared as I would think I would be. I wonder why not?

I wake up early in the morning of ... I look at the religious calendar on the wall and realize it is August 18. Hmm. I count back and realize I must have gotten here on August 14th. I'm still kind of numb and foggy in the mind.

There's a knock on the door. It's Imma Sara. With her usual warm smile she greets me, “Esther, my dear. You certainly need a lot of sleep with the flight and all the new things you are seeing and the interviews and then the awful day of the marauders and your trauma with that brute...”

I grin and give her a hug. “Thanks for getting me. I assume there's breakfast around even for late sleepers.”

“Of course. Actually the kitchen closes but I have access to the stoves at any time in my role as Jewish-Catholic Mother of the community!”

“Oh, my God, it's almost 10 o'clock,” I gasp. “I usually get up at 7 AM and get to the Station at 9 to check e-mails and prepare for my noon show.”

In the dining room I see two families sitting together at one of the long tables with trays of dirty dishes in front of them.

“Can I sit with them, if you don't mind fixing me whatever, Sara?”

“Of course. Sit down. A cup of coffee right away?”

I nod. I notice a couple of glass containers for sugar and substitutes on each table.

“Good morning dear friends,” I say in greeting as I sit down at the head of the table so I relate to both families at once.

The community members in white greet me first. “We’re the McCall family.” They call out their names in a sing-song as if they are used to sitting in designated seats: “Lisa, Jimmy, Martina, Zacko, and I’m Pat, the mother of this brood going from 5 years old up to 15. My husband, Tom, is out in the fields. Our group of families does home school in the library in the afternoon.”

Pat, a buxom blond woman, then introduces the visitor family. One of the boys giggles and points to me, “We know who you are. My mom watches you on TV every day!”

I smile and say “Heh, you guys, you can all be on my TV program next week if you want... Mrs. Cropsky, when did you come to the New Jerusalem?”

“Just a few days ago. When the warning came, we put as much as we could in the camper and road a mile a minute. We knew just how to get here because we came here sometimes for Sunday Mass and devotions. We already knew the McCall’s so they were assigned to orient us. Actually, they’ve been trying to recruit us for quite a time they love it so much here.

Before I could question her about the “warning,” Imma Sara came over with a plate of fried eggs and hash browns. “Eat up, Sara, your interview with Therese Reilly is in a few minutes.”

“Oh, right. You wouldn’t believe how punctual I usually am, but without a watch... Could you tell her I’ll be in the library in ten minutes?”

“There’s home school in the library right now. I’ll bring her here and you can move to one of the smaller more private tables over there,” Imma Sara pointed to a corner of the refectory.

I ask the families if I can catch them later and bring my tray to the small table to await Therese Reilly. I vaguely remember Imma Sara telling me that she is the counselor.

“Hello, Therese Reilly.” I see a fifty year old woman about 5’6”, medium build with auburn hair. She has a friendly if tired looking face and she is wearing light sun-tan and lipstick.

Sitting down, she says, “Call me Terri, everyone else does.”

Me (finishing my last bite of hash browns and gulping down the coffee): “Tell me a little bit about your life before you came to the New Jerusalem.”

Therese: “I was a professional marriage and family counselor but I found I wasn’t allowed to bring in enough of a spiritual dimension to meet the needs of people with certain pathologies and here these needs can be addressed.”

Me: “Where are you from?”

Therese: “I’m from the mountains in North New Mexico, South Colorado. I was a young widow working at a VA State Mental Health institution with a substance abuse program.”

Me: “I presume there’s no abuse program here!”

Therese: “No. I had enough of it in my family so I shy away from it, but I have a heart for people with that kind of addiction.”

I start to feel a liking for this woman who has obviously suffered a lot herself. I extend a hand and cover one of hers.

Me: “So what brought you here?”

Therese: “About 5 years ago my daughter, also a widow, heard about the community on EWTN....” Intuiting I don’t have a clue what EWTN is, she explains, “That’s a Catholic international TV program... Anyhow, my daughter was looking for a family environment for herself and her children away from what we consider to be our poisonous culture.” She pauses and apologizes, “Sorry, we are so like-minded here, I forget that of course you probably don’t think of it as a poisonous culture.”

I smile. “Well, there’s a lot of good out there, too, you know. I try to make sure every other interview on our newscast is about something uplifting.”

Relieved that I have not been offended, Therese continues her narrative, “So we decided to try it. We sold almost everything and she and the kids, 2 teens and a 10 year old, attached a U-Haul to my van and came to see.”

Me: “That’s pretty adventuresome! So, with very little prior contact you just picked up and came?”

Therese: “My daughter was into all of these prophecies about the end of the world, so when her husband died in a car accident she turned back to me for support. I went for a visit and I liked what I saw.”

Me: “How do they manage the behavior of such a diverse group in the community with all these people?”

Therese: “The leaders are fairly solid, but, of course, all such places attract some who are more broken. As a therapist I had been part of running groups in hospitals and homes for recovering addicts. I felt that although we addressed their psychological issues there was not enough family of origin support for the hurting people.”

Me: “Of course often the family is the cause of the problem!”

Therese: “The families are sometimes more wounded than the client for generations back of dysfunctionality.”

“Oh! Eureka. I got it,” I exclaim. The New Jerusalem is supposed to be a surrogate healthy family environment!”

Therese: “Exactly.” First of all it’s good for all people because of the monastic style structure with the definite hours of prayer and work and their basic needs being met for shelter, food and positive social life. The work is not overly demanding so there is not the kind of stress they had in the world. Most people here are basically sound, but we also are able to reach out to a limited number of those with more special needs.”

Me: “If it’s not too confidential, could you give me an example of how this has worked?”

Therese: “For instance, we have one member who came from a long history of bipolar and ADHD. These things were exacerbated as she was identified as the one person on whom all the family pathology fell. Whereas in her family setting she felt unsafe, here her symptoms diminished because she felt safe and affirmed and learned gradually that people care about her.”

Me: “Okay, you’re a professional, how many such people like your former clients do you find here?”

Therese: “Right now because of the huge influx of refugees our attention is on caring for their crisis needs like post traumatic stress.”

Me: “Refugees? (I notice Therese stops responding and looks thoughtfully out the window. I see children playing catch in the courtyard.)

Therese: “Let me put it this way. The New Jerusalem was designed to meet all kinds of needs. The normal population is 120 but the rooms were designed to accommodate 12 times that number. The four double bunk beds and the lofts in each room make them emergency refuges. The proportion of single people to families allows for taking care of many situations.”

I realize Therese is avoiding my question. But what is she hiding and why? What was the emergency that brought all of these people here? I will try to interview some of them and find out the truth.

Therese stands up and looks at her watch. “Excuse me, I have a group meeting in a few minutes. You can catch me later.”

I figure she’s making a get away.

On my way out of the library I bump into Itzhak who I had not seen since his rescue of me from the marauder. He is walking toward me in his white communal pants and shirt, arms wide open and blue eyes gleaming.

“Estherle, my dear, I see you’ve recovered!”

“Yes. Thanks again. I have a lot of questions.

Itzhak nods, but just then a young man in white garments runs in. “I’ve been looking for you everywhere. We just spotted what looks like a boat with 3 men in black in it.”

Itzhak turns and starts for the gate. I ask if I can come, too. “Sure.”

We go through the main gate next to the refectory. Standing on a little hill on which the complex is perched we see off in the distance a small boat drifting aimlessly about 100 yards away from us. I am astounded to see that half way up our hill and all the way off into the distance there is flood water!

Itzhak takes off his sandals and runs into the water and then dives in and swims toward the boat. Meanwhile I reach down to the water’s edge. I touch the water and bring a few drops to my mouth. It tastes salty and I am amazed. But we are a hundred miles from the ocean. There is no salt water in the lakes and rivers of the Berkshires. I flash back to a man’s voice in the helicopter saying, “Welcome to the Berkshire Islands!”

In the distance I see Itzhak’s head in front of the bow of the boat and he is pulling it in with a rope. Again I am impressed like yesterday by his strength.

The young man who told Itzhak about the boat is running out the main gate with 6 more men who look like the paramedics I saw the day before in the hospital wing. They are carrying stretchers.

Two of them run toward the boat to help Itzhak drag it to the water’s edge near the gate where I am waiting. I see two men in drenched black suits with white shirts and black ties collapsed in the board. A third is in big grey robe with a Franciscan hood.

The paramedics start CPR immediately. One of the half drowned men is young with dark hair and skin, slim, about 6 feet. Hispanic? Another one looks oriental but with dark hair, a moustache and a thick beard. He is short and stocky, maybe 30? The man in the robe is bald but with a long scraggly grey beard.

As each of the men are resuscitated he is placed on a stretcher and carried into the compound. I assume they are going to the hospital wing. The younger is babbling

something...I distinguish the words: "Then would the waters have engulfed us, the torrent gone over us, over our heads would have swept the raging waters."

Why do those words seem familiar? Then it dawns on me that they are the words from some psalm the community has chanted at noon times.

I walk up to Itzhak and say, "Heh, not only are you Superman but also Aquaman!"

Itzhak smiles and then tells me that he used to be also in a sea defense group of the Mossad back in Israel. "We used to train in the deep water fishing area of Eilat."

"I love to swim! Is there a pool here?"

"We're in the process of building one. Meanwhile it's the lake." He is about to turn back to the main building.

I hope he hasn't forgotten that I wanted to have some time with him. I am about to remind him when he gets a serious expression on his handsome face and intones the Hebrew prayer of gratitude: Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheynu, meleck Ha Olam." - Blessed are you, O Lord...he translates for me.

I notice his muscles under his wet shirt.

"I still have those questions I'd like to ask you."

Itzhak replies, "Sorry, I've got to immediately report our new refugees to Abba and Imma. See you at evening prayer and supper."

"I'm surprised how much I've already gotten to like to way you all pray," I say in parting. "See you at evening prayer."

It turns out that right after dinner the chamber music group is having a concert. I sit next to Itzhak and hope to talk more personally to him afterwards. But he leaves immediately promising to find me tomorrow.

Chapter 4

At breakfast Itzhak comes over and makes a date with me for that evening.

My interview that morning is with Liz Gordon, the realtor who originally got the community this property. A slim blue eyed woman of about fifty five with high-lighted hair wearing the flowing community white dress. As I expected she knew me well from my TV anchor show. As always, that gave me a boost. I mean who wouldn't rather be recognized as a TV celebrity than as an aging middle-aged unmarried woman!

Me: "How did you first come in contact with the New Jerusalem?"

Liz: "When the family who owned the farm who were disciples of Abba Ibrahim wanted to transfer their property to the community. Someone recommended me since they would trust me as a Catholic of a nearby parish."

Me: "I bet a deal like that would be complicated and yield you a good commission."

Liz:(grinning in a way that showed her perfect small teeth) "I started with that in mind but then as I got to know the community more I decided even to join it, so I was eager to offer my services pro bono."

Me: "So how much land did this family have?"

Liz: "As you have seen, it was about 40 acres, farmland, wooded area, with a small stream that runs through on the corner of the property..."

I think, aha, another clue. She didn't mention the huge "lake" surrounding the dwellings. This storm much have been more like a major flood.

Me: "Oh, so the property was isolated even then?"

Liz: "Oh, no. There were lots of neighboring houses and farms within the small Berkshire hill town of Piedmont."

I thought, Oh, this could be a clue to this mystery. I wonder since I didn't see any neighboring houses in the distance. So I ask "Did those neighbors sell out to get away from the community?"

Liz: "That's a long story. Part of the housing bust."

Me: "So was the whole deal smooth since you were all in the same community?"

Liz: "The husband and wife were all for donating the property but the town wanted to take the place for a wind-farm because the "Greens" wanted to make a highly publicized statement."

Me: "Oh boy, what a can of worms!"

Liz: "Indeed it was. The whole community prayed up a storm and got the solution. A well connected political family on Cape Cod fought for years against having wind farms near them, but then when the last scion died, the Greens concentrated on doing the wind farm offshore on the Cape instead of on this property."

Me: "So everything went smoothly after that?"

Liz: "Not exactly, because somehow I had picked up that the family owned the farm outright, but actually there was a mortgage and a 2nd mortgage and a home equity loan, so that meant that the community needed to come up with cash."

Me: "So ballpark what were you talking about?"

Liz: "\$100,000."

Me: "As a Bostonian that doesn't sound to me like a lot of money for a group of so many!"

Liz: (with a triumphal grin) "I got the money selling the houses of people in the area who wanted to come to the New Jerusalem but had to sell their property elsewhere first."

Me: "What was the cost of building this huge complex?"

Liz: "Considering the way it was built ... people brought in their own money in exchange for perpetual living space and many helped with the construction and others donated building materials such as white stone from the quarries at the base

of the mountain, timber from the surrounding woodlands of white birch and maple trees, and time and expertise. Of course, it's all solar. And it all kept getting built up over several years. It's still in process. It's structured so that we can add as people join our community."

Esther: "So, at first you were an outsider helping them, not a members or resident, right?"

Liz: "That's correct. I lived in an outlying area, outside of Pittsfield, with my daughter and 3 grandsons."

Esther: "Are they here with you now?"

Liz: "That's another story, and a long one. Maybe now after the catastrophe they'll move in for good."

Esther: "The catastrophe?"

Liz: "Getting back to how I came to be part of the community ... that was gradual. I had an office on the property where I set up my real estate practice for people who visited and wanted to stay but couldn't do it until they had divested themselves of their former houses."

Esther: "So then, finally, you sold your own house and just moved in?"

Liz: "Before I came here I always thought of myself as a faithful Catholic, but then when I become involved I got to see the endless treasury of the faith, those beautiful liturgies and prayer throughout the day – I used to think that was only for monks and nuns, but here anyone can take part. So, to answer your question, I went through the same type of thing as the farmers who owned the property, wanting to be totally immersed but also feeling responsible for my daughter and grandsons after the divorce."

Esther: "Any regrets?"

Liz: "Not a one! You know what business out in the world is. I couldn't believe that people could get along so well as they do here."

Esther: "Why do you think that is?"

Liz: “We all get along because we have the same goal: eternity with God.”

I wanted to ask her whether she considered marrying again someone from the New Jerusalem, but I had a much more critical question for her.

Me: If it’s not too personal, I would like to know how finances of the members were worked out from the very beginning of the community. As you probably know, this is a huge issue with cults.

Liz: Before I even thought of joining I had the same question. Abba Ibrahim explained that the concept of the household was a very helpful tool in dealing with the issue over budgets and finances. The idea came from the Jesuits who even though they share a common spirituality, the Jesuits at Boston College and those at Sacred Heart have separate households. So, anyone who lives in a household, is expected to contribute their resources to that household.

Me: Sort of like a husband and wife having a join bank account?

Liz: The religious brothers and sisters were organized from the beginning along the religious model of community. The Sisters formed one large household, and the Brothers and Priests another. But with the widows and widowers each person remains in control of his or her own finances. They rent a cell and pay for it and for board out of savings or pensions or social security or money earned outside the community but contributes a portion to the New Jerusalem. For example a single mother and her child wanted to have a separate household where she worked outside the community and then paid for a nanny in the community. At one point she joined inside the household of a married couple and home-schooled her child.

Me: I don’t understand. You have salaried positions in the New Jerusalem also?

Liz: No. People who need money for outside things have to work outside the community in order to have them. But people with more basic needs earn their room and board in barter for different work they do here.

Me: Do they contribute their life savings and money from sale of assets to a communal fund when they come? What if they change their minds once they’re here?

Liz: In the beginning there was no financial arrangement. People came as guests and then, if they wanted to stay, they had to be approved by the head of their vocation and by the Council. At that point it was decided whether they wanted to work inside the community or outside and they joined households if they wished. A couple could live together in a suite if they wished.

Me: And this changed?

Liz: Over the years some people felt so much that the New Jerusalem was their true home on earth that they didn't want separate money and they donated it to the common fund, but there was no pressure to do this.

Me: But what if someone changed their minds, would those funds be given back.

Liz: Yes. We had a couple like that. Their only son lost his job in the recession and they decided they needed to go back to their home area, buy a house for the extended family to help out. So they left with no bad feelings and the money they had donated.

Me: That's wonderful. Wouldn't you have already spent that donated money?

Liz: Yes, but we always keep a kind of escrow fund for just such decisions so that the children of our older members don't feel that they are being abandoned. But usually it's the opposite. The middle-aged adults look to the New Jerusalem as their own future refuge and want to invest in their future by keeping Mom and Dad in this good place.

Me: You mean in the recession some people thought there's no security in society itself but more in close communities because they saw their private IRA accounts being taken over the government.

Liz: You didn't ask yet, but I am sure you are wondering what this work in the community really involves – an 8 hour day, 24/7? Not at all. I was amazed to find out that they are expected to earn 4 credit hours of work each day. The credit hours that are assigned to the work is dependent on the degree of difficulty or unpleasantness of the task.

Me: So, what's one of the worst ones?

Liz: Mucking out the horse stalls would give you 8 credit hours for the day even if it only took one hour! Working in the flower gardens, a much desired task, would require 8 hours of work.

Me: And so these credits add up to room and board. What about such “luxuries” as shampoo or shaving cream?

Liz: For members of the community basics like that are provided from the common fund. Others who work outside the community pay for their own.

Just then the bell rang for the Angelus and lunch.

During the afternoon I have an interview with the farm family that donated the land to the New Jerusalem. Their story fit perfectly with Liz Gordon’s. I realize I am looking for dirt because I can’t believe that this is as good as it looks.

In the afternoon I take a long “beauty nap” in the comfortable bed and then take a shower. I stare at myself in the mirror as I apply lipstick, base, eye-liner and the rest, grateful that my tote bag wasn’t lost with my suitcase. After the cosmetic improvements I decide I could pass for thirty.

Itzhak? Long shot? How funny we thirty plus women are. We want men to think that we are desirably seasoned by life, but when we meet a guy who hasn’t married, that much I got out of Imma Sara, we think maybe there’s something wrong with him. Well, he doesn’t look gay, but of course that can be deceiving. Could he be thinking of becoming a priest? Aren’t they usually in their 20’s? The seminarians who drifted up on the boat yesterday looked older?

I like the idea that his mother was Jewish. The Arab Catholic father, Abba Ibrahim, certainly doesn’t look like a terrorist with the benign, loving, look in his face.

At dinner Itzhak sat down next to me with Imma Sara on my right. They seemed to want me to be at the head table for the evening meal. He smelled as if he had doused himself with some herbal scent. For me?

“Wow, Esther, you look great. We are so glad, all of us, that you are recovering so well in our midst.”

“No smog in the Berkshire Islands,” I say, hoping that by calling them “islands” someone would say something revealing.

Everyone laughs.

After another sumptuous but healthy dinner with lots of veggies and salads and smaller portions than usual of meat, Itzhak suggests that we go to the library to talk.

“Itzhak,” I take the lead, “of course I plan to do a formal interview with you for the documentary, but I wanted to ask you some more personal questions first, if you are willing.”

Large white teeth gleaming, the man smiles in that charming Arabic way, and takes my hand. “Don’t you think, Esther, that a person with my background can tell who to trust?”

I find I am trembling inside. “Thanks. I’d really like to hear your story that I got only tiny bits of out of Imma Sara’s interview.”

“Do you mind if we start with a prayer even though I understand you don’t believe very much the way we do?”

“Sure. I don’t know what’s happening to me. Since coming here I seem to have moved a few inches from atheist toward agnostic.”

“Lord, I thank you, forever and ever, for saving me from the violence of my country. I thank you for preserving my faith even when I stopped following your commandments. May my story reveal a little of Your overwhelming love for each of us to my new friend, Esther.”

I wonder how anyone could be so sure of an invisible God of a universe so tragic.

“Let me start with my first memories in childhood. I was too young to understand the sound of bombs. What I heard was the lullabies of my mother and I felt the tight hold of my handsome father. And then, everything changed. My mother was killed. My father hired a servant to take care of me while he was teaching at the Christian University.”

“How sad, Itzhak. I had such a happy childhood.”

“Later I learned that my father reluctantly agreed to give me to my mother’s sister who couldn’t have children. On loan, of course. He came every weekend to be with us and took me to Mass. I found it kind of boring.

“In Israel we go to school at 5 years old. I loved school but even more I loved listening to stories of battles in the Old Testament and how battles were being fought now on the same ground by our brave sabra fighters.”

“How did the other children take it that your dad was an Arab?”

“I was a strong kid. Once someone mentioned it and I hit him so hard no one ever dared talk about it again. For me, it wasn’t an issue. I identified primarily with the Jewish side of my family, probably because I wanted so much to fit in with the other kids.”

“So,” I ask, “you became part of the Mossad after school was over?”

“Yes. I was overjoyed. I loved the military and God gave me the grace not to get killed in the skirmishes I fought in,” Itzhak explained his blue eyes with a hint of tears.

“By the way,” I ask, “how did you get the blue eyes? That’s not Jewish or Arabic.”

“My mother had blue eyes. You know there were plenty of let’s call them liaisons between European crusaders and native Jews throughout the centuries.”

“No girlfriends?” I look down so he doesn’t think I am prying for personal reasons.

“Oh, yes. Many. Even though I love children, somehow I never wanted to commit to marriage. I didn’t like condoms, but I also didn’t want to be a father yet. Then when dad went to the US to study for the priesthood I realized that I wanted a new life. I was tired of spying and bloodshed and awful news bulletins and the never-ending hatred of the Arabs for the Jews. So I migrated to help my father build this community.”

“But you weren’t very religious? When did that change?”

Itzhak stood up and started walking around yet talking to me at the same time.

“You probably wouldn’t understand. What do you know about the charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit?”

“Hmmm. Something about miracles of taming snakes and weird babbling?”

Itzhak laughed. “Not quite. In the sixties many Catholics started speaking in tongues and doing prophecy and healing. My father became a leader of this. So when I came to live with him at his apartment at the University where he was teaching Scripture, he would schlep me along to prayer meetings. I didn’t really get it at first, but I liked to look at the women in this yearning spiritual posture, arms extended upward, faces looking upward singing this beautiful strange music with words I’d never heard.”

“Oh, I think I heard that a little the first day I came at the big Sunday celebration.” Just for fun I raise my arms upward and gaze at the ceiling.

Itzhak laughs. “Be careful, it could be catching...” He sits down again. “So, one time my father gave this prophetic word. I will never forget it. “There is someone here who is a believer but full of doubt. He will never be at peace until He comes to Jesus and surrenders to Him with all his heart. If you are that person come forward to be prayed over.”

“I knew it was me. I stumbled forward toward my Father and the prayer team around him. Imma Sara was one of them. They laid hands on me and I felt this incredible joy go through me and strange words bubbling up in my throat...”

I find I have tears in my eyes. “I could use a little of that...How long ago did that happen? ”

“About 6 years ago, just before we started building the community here.”

“And, then, didn’t you want to marry one of those beautiful charismatic women?”

Itzhak frowned. “It’s kind of mysterious, Esther. You see, even though I didn’t want to marry any of those Jewish women in Israel, I liked their vibrancy and gutsiness. I find Christian women a little too sweet for me.”

Just then I see a man in white looking through the window of the library and signaling to Itzhak to come with him.

“I was happy to tell you all this, Esther. I hope we can talk more.”

“I hope so, too.” I reply in a sweeter voice than usual.

It takes me a long time to fall asleep. I have images of all the men I've slept with in my life – I guess they would call it sin. I think of how wonderful they seemed at first and then how disappointing they turned out to be. I wonder, could religion have anything to do with how much stronger, more trustworthy, and smarter Itzhak seemed?

At breakfast Imma Sara tells me, with her lovable grin, that I am in for a treat. “In that PR leaflet you read you probably don't remember there was a section on the nuptial, that is bridal, spirituality. Well, day after tomorrow visitors from the last six months, who wish to, will be entering the community. So, to crystallize what they have learned about spirituality, Abba Ibrahim and I devised this ceremony for giving oneself to Jesus as the Bridegroom of our hearts. We think that making it full of the bridal imagery we are familiar with from usual weddings helps make it real.”

“Wonderful. I wish I could have my TV crew here, but I guess when they come we can do some of it over.”

At 11 AM everyone drops their work details and assembles in the chapel. There is a sense of expectation in the air. I see pews set up for a wedding – the larger one for the bride and groom and the one to the right for the Best Man and the one to the left for the Maid of Honor. Down the aisle is a white runner and there are white satin bows on the pews.

I hear the organ playing music – I think it's Pachobelle – like I've heard a thousand times before weddings. But that always depresses me because I've been maid of honor many times but never a bride yet. Beautiful, tasteful flower arrangements of white roses, lilies and cyclamens are at the foot of the altar and at other places in the sanctuary. I can even smell the roses.

Itzhak, dressed in a white vestment, is carrying an icon of this raggedy prophet ... John the Baptist? ... He is leading in Abba Ibrahim who is carrying an icon of Jesus with His red heart showing. They stand waiting patiently for the procession that is forming in the back of the chapel.

First comes Imma Sara holding an icon of Mary with her heart pierced with a sword.

“That’s kind of a downer, ” I think.

Behind her are processing shortest to tallest a few dozen people, starting with older teen-agers going up to the tallest men. Some are processing side by side. They must be married couples. They are all wearing white – dresses for the women simple white pants and shirts for the men. I recognize some of them as visitors I have talked to.

Standing before the kneelers decked in white lace are four men holding the poles of, oh my gosh, it’s a chupa, the Jewish wedding canopy.

Once Imma arrives at the sanctuary she places the icon of Mary on the kneeler reserved for the maid of honor. That makes sense. Mary, I know, is a virgin that all Catholic honor. I find myself blushing. I see Itzhak with the icon of John the Baptist go to the kneeler reserved for the Best Man.

Abba Ibrahim takes the icon of Jesus and stands beneath the chupa behind the kneeler reserved for the bridegroom.

Somehow it is all so beautiful that I find my concern that the New Jerusalem is a cult fades into the background.

The congregation packed into the seats half way down the aisle are singing “Prepare ye the bride of the lamb,” to the melody of the well-known “Prepare ye the Way of the Lord” from Godspell.

Just for fun, I join in, swaying back and forth. Itzhak is too far in the front for me to even try to catch his eye. Having sexual feelings for handsome men is nothing new but it seems more intense than ever. Because of the ticking biological clock?

When the song ends Abba Ibrahim says “I would like to share with you these few words from St. Bernard’s commentary on the Song of Songs: add quote.

When the first young woman, who looks about eighteen, arrives at the kneeler reserved for the bride, she kneels down and Imma Sara takes a beautiful white diaphanous veil and covers her whole head including even her face like an old-fashioned bride, and places a princess crown of “diamonds” on top of the veil.

As Imma Sara lifts the veil off her face and places it over the back of her head, Abba Ibrahim proclaims “the veil will be lifted and you will gaze on the face of your beloved.”

He offer the icon of Jesus with the open heart to her and she kisses it. Then he says, “I, Jesus, take you, Lisa, to be my beloved spiritual spouse. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, for richer or poorer, in sickness and health, and even death will not part us.”

I think, that’s a twist. Even death will not part us. I guess they think that’s true.

She repeats after Abba Ibrahim, “I, Lisa, take you, Jesus to be my beloved spiritual spouse. I promise to be true to you...”

Abba Ibrahim then takes a ring off a small silver tray that Itzak is holding, “take this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

As she stands up, Imma Sara removes the veil and crown and gives her a candle, which the girl lights from a large wedding candle on the altar.

I am shocked. A girl of eighteen isn’t looking to become the bride of an invisible deity, she’s looking for Mr. Wonderful! How has she been brain-washed to think this is better? And then, I ask myself, are the men in this procession going to also be wearing a veil over their heads? I want to rush out of there and look at something natural like a horse or a lake.

However, I stay in my seat out of a reporter’s curiosity.

A young man approaches now. He kneels down and Itzhak takes a white and blue Jewish prayer shawl with long fringes on the corners and places it over his head and continues with the same ceremony.

With the couples Imma Sara places the veil over the wife who kneels in the place for the bride and Itzhak places the prayer-shawl over the husband’s head, who kneels in the place of the bridegroom.

I wait to see if Abba Ibrahim is going to say the same words just as if this couple never had their own real wedding. Reflecting the love you vowed to each other

when you were wed, now you take Christ the Bridegroom for His Church, the Bride as your spiritual spouse.

I am relieved he didn't just act as if human love of man and wife was only some kind of phantom.

As usual, I feel a pang of envy for the wife. As the others file up I start fantasizing about Itzhak. If all goes well, this could be me and him by next year under the real wedding canopy.

Then I catch myself. Come on, you don't think that a man as religious as he is would ever go for a bad woman like you.

Yet at the end of service, there he is asking me what I thought of it. For a second I imagine that he was also picturing me under the canopy.

I leave to take a walk. At the festive lunch Imma Sara tells me I missed how at the Mass everyone received Holy Communion kneeling in the bride's place under the canopy.

Chapter 5

As lunch was ending, I ask, who are that huge family group in white at the longest table near the windows?

Itzhak replies, “Oh, they are our prized members. Eighty-eight strong! James and Carol Muller with children, grandchildren and their spouses and the great grandchildren numbering eighty-six at this point. He and his wife convinced the entire clan to come to the New Jerusalem.”

I insist he bring me to their table so I can conduct an informal interview. James lifts a great grand child off his lap and hands her to his wife who makes room for me to sit between them.

Me: Tell me a little bit about how you and Carol first met.

James: It started in 1945 just before the end of World War II. I was a Marine at Guadalcanal who was fortunate to have survived. So many were killed that they were looking for volunteers to go to Field Artillery school in the States to become a field officer on the front line.

Carol shifts the toddler back to James and pipes in: “His father was working in Washington DC in the Navy and invited James to meet some of his fellow workers. Then his father and my father cooked up that we should meet on something like a blind date. I was a secretary to an Admiral. Neither of us liked the idea of a blind date but we went along. And we hit it off instantly.”

I could tell that they had this story down as if the lines were written in a play. It was heart-warming to see the joy in their eyes as they told it.

James: I went to the firing line and when I got back we started dating. We had so much in common. Both of us were very religious but she was Lutheran, from a strict Lutheran family and I was Catholic. As we got closer we realized we would have to figure out how to avoid the bad part we had both heard about what was then called “mixed marriages.” To my surprise we both agreed on contraception. This was because we both believed that the Bible was the Word of God. If God said that Adam and Eve should be fruitful and multiply then that was the end of the discussion. Especially we took heed of how God killed Onan in

Genesis for spilling his semen on the ground outside the womb of the woman God wanted him to have children with.

Me: Hmmmmm. Aren't there many Protestants and Catholics, too, that don't think contraception is wrong?

Carol: That started with the Church of England in the 1930's but all the way from the Old Testament until then all Christians agreed that contraception was terrible. So we agreed that when we got married we would be open to however many children God would send.

James: And, as you can see, we meant it and God honored our decision with these many blessings. But we did have conflict over Catholic vs. public school. I just assumed Carol would agree to Catholic school but she didn't. So when we had 4 children in 5 years and one on the way she said refused to think of them going to Catholic school. I prayed and prayed and a miracle happened.

Carol: I will never forget it, of course. It was a miracle. A friend asked me to go with her to a movie, Our Lady of Fatima. I thought it was a musical! During the movie when Mary appears to the children, she looked right at me and in my heart I heard her tell me to become a Catholic right away!

James: I was shocked. And she not only became a Catholic but was even more devout than I was! But then came a terrible trial. When I was watching the four kids and Carol was in the delivery room for the 5th, the doctor called me and told me that the placenta had come first and she was bleeding so hard that they doubted they could save the baby or the mother.

Carol: So James grabbed the kids and went to Church and prayed in front of Jesus in the tabernacle and shortly after the doctor called and said he couldn't explain it but it was fine and we had a 9 pound baby boy!

Me: How wonderful! And which one is he?

James pointed to a huge guy across the table.

Carol: And he and his wife have 8 kids! We had 9 in all ourselves.

Me: How could you support that many kids through college?

James: We were okay financially, because I was a manager at a good company but they knew they had to work their way through community college first. Five out the nine have college degrees and up until the recession they all had good jobs.

Me: So they all came here as soon as the New Jerusalem began?

Carol: Oh, no. We came first but then gradually more and more came. The mothers all home-school and some of the guys do construction, some do medical work, farming .. you know, there's lots to do here. Over there (she points) are the last ones who came just 2 weeks ago. They just had a sense they better get out while the going was good.

Me: And you and James?

Carol: I have plenty to do helping with the grand and great grandkiddies, and James is on the council that governs the community.

After dinner, Imma Sara comes over to my table with a concerned look on her usually calm face. "Esther dear, I'm sorry to have to ask this, but we are having a private meeting of the community tonight. Would you mind not coming?"

"Of course not," I reassure her. I have plenty to do preparing my notes for the documentary. I'm hoping against hope that the cell phone tower is working by tomorrow and I can call my crew to come for a shooting, maybe this weekend."

Back in the room I go through all my interviews and select questions I will ask again for the shoot. By 9:30 PM I crawl into bed but I can't sleep. I decide to go to the library and look for something in the fiction section. Something engrossing like a P.D. James detective story would do it. I vaguely remember seeing one shelf with fiction in it amidst the many shelves of theological and philosophical books.

I take off the bathrobe and put on my regular clothing. When I get to the library I see sitting on a long table so that they can be seen by the whole group, community and visitors, the men I remember later being called seminarians who were dragged from the boat the other day. Right, it must be them. Even though they are dressed in plain t-shirts and khaki pants I recognize the slim Hispanic looking guy, the stocky dark Asian and the tall man with a long, scraggly, beard.

I place an ear against the door. Not as hard to hear as I thought because they have microphones. Probably being taped, I surmise.

“We were in post-traumatic-syndrome when you rescued us,” the stocky Asian man is saying.

Post-traumatic syndrome? Could that be what I am coming out of, the numbness, the memory loss, the forgetfulness? I wonder why I forget about these men from the boat and never asked about how they were.

The Abbot has an arm around his neck and gently asks, “If it is not too painful, I believe we all need to know what you heard on the news at the seminary before you left in the boat.”

The Hispanic looking fellow broke in. “We have a TV monitor at the seminary in the cafeteria with news scrolling by on the screen. At about 3 PM that day, I think it was the 14th because we were preparing a special liturgy for the Feast of the Assumption, one of the seminarians ran into the chapel yelling, “everyone, come right to the cafeteria. Emergency. The Rector wants us all there.”

The tall, thin, bald, bearded man added, “On the monitor it was saying that there was a tidal wave due to hit the coast of New England within an hour and everyone should try to move as far West as possible by any means. The Rector said a quick prayer to Our Lady of Refuge and told us to jump into cars and get on the highway West. There were not enough cars, though. We three dragged this fishing boat out of a garage just as the floods started engulfing the town.”

“Was that the last TV report?” Abba Ibrahim pressed.

The Asian man dropped his head in his hands. The Hispanic said, “No. The last report before all communication systems died was that all of the East Coast was expected to be devastated. They expected nothing to survive.”

It seemed like a dagger entered my heart at these words. I walked slowly away from the library and went into the chapel. My mother and father in NYC, dead? My sister and brother? My nieces and nephews? Boston? Channel 5. Gut wrenching sobs heaved up out of my mouth.

I wanted to run into the library to be with the others but instead I staggered back to my room. They were the lucky ones. Their loved ones were here at the New Jerusalem. What could they say that would help me?

I lay on the bed letting the tears flow. After awhile my mind caught up to my heart and I realized that this was what the mystery was about. No one wanted to tell me that my world was gone. That's why there were no functioning lap tops, my TV, no radios. That's why they were staving off marauders and taking in refugees. But somehow they thought something like this was going to happen and that's why they built this place with room for so many!

I finally slept but woke up at 3 AM with the whole nightmare real to try to cope with. A little gleam of light entered my mind with an extraordinary thought. What if there really was a God and what if He wanted to save me by bringing me here on my TV assignment just on the day the tidal wave came! And, then, what if, what if, what if, this God planned that Itzhak would be waiting for a woman like me?

I jumped out of bed and ran to the bathroom. Then I threw on the bathrobe and peeked out the door. All was quiet. I realized I didn't know where Imma Sara's room was, though it was she I wanted most to hug me and maybe rock me like an old Yiddisher Mama.

Go to the chapel, was the word I seemed to hear in my heart. I padded my way to the dark but candle-lit sacred space. I looked up at the huge crucifix. This time I recognized what that pain might have been like since my own heart was so pierced by anguish.

A warm energy flowed through me. I am alive, I thought. Whoever and whatever is gone, I am still here. I saw an image of myself a few years older, fatter, and with a brood of adorable kiddies around me, looking as content as that woman, what was her name, McCall? Pat McCall.

A sly different voice seems to say, "What? Become an ordinary hausfrau with no exciting career goals? The highlight of your day scrubbing a toilet?"

I find myself laughing. I call out in the dark to whatever powers that be, "Not on your life! Itzhak's wife will tell the story of the community and it will be called, "Last Flight to the New Jerusalem!"

At the crack of dawn I wake up, dress hurriedly, grab some coffee and had to the early Mass. Happily Imma Sara is sitting alone and the ceremony has yet to start. I sit down next to her and grab one of her hands that she had folded with the other in prayer.

Tears running down my cheeks, I whisper, “Imma, Imma, Imma, it’s all gone. I overheard the seminarians! How can I stand probably never seeing anyone I ever knew of family and friends again?”

Imma Sara immediately grabs me in a huge bosomy embrace and strokes my hair.

“We tried not to shock you right away and let the truth come out slowly. I’m so, so, so, sorry. Many of us have had to face the same reality. I lost all my children and grandchildren. I cry myself to sleep every night, but then there is always...” she points to the huge crucifix. “I tell myself, one day I will see them all again in the heaven he promises us.”

“If only I could believe what you do,” I sigh. I listen to the words of the Mass more carefully than ever, hoping for clues about why a loving God would cause so much suffering.

Right after Mass, Imma makes me promise not to leave until she gets back. She goes behind the altar area and returns quickly. “Esther, dear, dear, Esther, get a little to eat and then go to Abba Ibrahim’s study. He needs to see you.”

Without sitting down with anyone, since I don’t see Itzhak around, I wolf down some toast and then make for Abba Ibrahim.

As soon as I get to his office, he closes the door, embraces me and lets me cry on his shoulder longer than most men would.

He sits me down on an old couch. “Dear Esther, I know you’ve had a terrible night. Take your time. I’m here for you all morning. Take a deep breath. I know this must be overwhelming for you.”

I sigh with relief. I somehow had imagined that he would want to quickly process my grief to get on with his day. But no, the look in his

eyes is the same as the look in that icon of Jesus that he held up in the wedding ceremony.

“Did you hear anything about people escaping, besides, of course, those who reached the New Jerusalem, like me?” I find myself twisting my hair nervously.

“We have very little information. All the communication systems are down. It was much worse than we expected. The asteroid didn’t miss us as the scientists projected. It was a direct hit that plunged into the North Atlantic creating a tsunami like the world has never seen before...”

I break in, “Oh, tsunami? That is the immense moving wall I keep seeing in my nightmares. But it’s not a nightmare. It’s a living nightmare. It really happened, the faces, the screams.” I start to sob. “I remember being on the helicopter. Channel 5 has a weather-copter on the top of the Prudential Building. That’s the tallest building in Boston.”

“The scientists had predicted that if there was a direct hit, everything below a thousand feet above sea-level would be destroyed.”

I gasp.

“That means very little would be left of New England just the mountain top of Appalachians. Moreover, after the tsunami, the sea level would rise a thousand feet because the immense heat generated by the asteroid’s impact would melt the polar ice-caps.”

“How come we didn’t know about this at Channel 5?” I asked suspiciously.

“Chaplain Dan who came shortly before the catastrophe for a retreat, explained this to us. He was working for the military intelligence and everything was kept top secret to prevent mass panic.”

I pressed him anxiously, “So there’s absolutely no chance that anyone is Boston or NYC would have escaped?”

“Only a miracle, like those seminarians Imma Sara told me you overheard last night.”

I say smiling ruefully, “so that’s why Berkshire Hills is now called Berkshire Islands!”

The white-haired abbot stood up and showed me a globe. He traced his finger down the east-coast of the United States and his hand also traces out most of Europe including Ireland, England, most of France, the coastland of Spain and Portugal and the Low Countries. “What wasn’t destroyed in the tsunami is now under water.”

“So, it’s not just the east coast?” I query. “You said this was just a prediction? How do you know all of this actually occurred?”

“Chaplain Dan says that judging by the levels of the sea water...”

“Oh, so it was salt water I tasted when the seminarians were drifting toward us. I couldn’t figure it out. And that there was no shore, I couldn’t figure out why there were so many trees in the water...”

The white-haired Abbot poured himself and me glasses of water.

I ask, “When did you first think such a disaster was possible and how did you know to prepare everything here at the New Jerusalem for survival.”

The white haired Abbot folded his hands in prayer and with eyes closed he began a story I was sure he had told many a time before, “In December of 1980 I had this experience that was more than a vision. In my mind’s eye I could see this mountain of fire plunging into the ocean off the coast of Ireland. I could see the waves coming. I was in Boston at

the time. I had gone to the top of the Prudential Building so I knew what I was seeing in my vision. The waters crashed over the city of Boston and rushed inland over Worcester. They swept down into the Connecticut Valley and then rippled up over the closer regions of the Berkshire Hills stopping at last in the hill towns like Piedmont.”

I gaze at his face in awe. Of course I have read many accounts of so-called visions, but I had never heard about one from someone I couldn't write-off.

Then I saw the waters go up the valleys, starting with the Hudson Valley going all the way up the Hoosac Valley flooding even the towns of Adams and North Adams. I knew the waters went up the other valleys like the Mississippi Valley. Basically the nation was cut in two...

I hastily think of people I love west of St. Louis to have something to hang on to.

“What has been developing over the last few years is a string of communities like the New Jerusalem which I see as the mother house of similar refuges. The New Jerusalem is the model for not only the physical construction of the monastery but also for its whole way of life centered on the Eucharist.”

Even as I shudder at the proof that this vision was true, the TV newscaster part of me exults, what a scoop! I look at Abbot Ibrahim's solemn face and I think, I could trust this man like a father, and is that because he trusts God the Father? I want to cling to him like I would cling to a life-raft. Timidly, I ask, “so will you let a pagan like me stay here?”

His eyes flood with love. “Of course, my dear, as long as you wish.”

“But I don't really believe what you all believe, about a God, I mean.”

“You can trust God because He has brought you here. Many people did not survive. God chose you to survive! Just as He has chosen us to survive. I came to believe from the beginning. And now you can come to believe from the end...”

“You mean the end of the world?” I ask sharply.

“The end of the world as we knew it, but the beginning of a new world which has already begun.” His eyes are radiant with hope.

I so desperately want to believe he is right.

“How does a person who wasn’t brought up religious at all, become a Catholic, by the way?” I ask with feigned casualness.

“Everyone’s faith is a journey and anyone can choose to walk with us on that journey without any pressure to commit as long as they like. I am sure Imma Sara or my son, Itzhak, will be happy to answer any questions you must have about the Catholic faith. You know Sara was a convert from the Jewish background, like you, and Itzhak spent many years as a skeptic.”

I feel curiously exhilarated at this response. Is it just because the doors have dramatically closed on my world? And I certainly haven’t had time to face all the implications of this unbearable truth yet. “By the way, why did you allow me to interview members of the community for a program that could never be?”

“Oh, dear Esther, we could see that you were in post-traumatic-stress when you arrived. Therese, our counselor, recommended that we try to let the news seep out gradually to you without the shock of the whole truth. We thought you would manage best if you did something you were very capable of doing and at the same time get closer to us.”

I yawn and realize how exhausted I am from these terrible days. Abba Ibrahim offers to lay his hand on my head in blessing and I agree readily.

“Now go to your room and try to sleep. If you need a pill, pass by the infirmary...”

I hate to leave him but I feel overwhelmed with exhaustion. As I turn to leave his study, Abba Ibrahim invites me to take part in a community Mass that evening for the Vigil of what is called the Queenship of Mary anticipating its day tomorrow on August 22nd. “It will also be a time of entrance into a year’s “novitiate” into the New Jerusalem community by any of the refugees or other candidates who had been around for enough time to think they want to belong.

I sleep for 5 hours straight. When I wake up I go to dinner. I still don’t see Itzhak. Imma Sara says that he was out hunting all day with the seminarians.

Before the Mass I find everyone is moving toward the barn and lining up behind a beautiful statue of Mary dressed all in white being carried on a bier by 4 young men. Imma Sara who by now took it upon herself to be my mentor tells me briefly the story of Our Lady of Fatima, who appeared in the beginning of the 20th century to small children in Portugal to warn of WWI and beg them to pray against the evils that would come from Russia.

They all sing a song that starts with Immaculate Mary, thy praises we sing... I love hearing the children’s voices... as my dream of one day having my own has gotten a little more likely.

Abba Ibrahim standing on a table in the barn is telling us “ever since the center was established in 2005 we have consecrated this land to Our

Blessed Mother on this feast day. We begin by going down to the little stream that runs on the edge of the property. We bless water and then bless every part of the monastery.

“Even Ursy and the snow leopards?” Jimmy McCall pipes up?

“Sure. They were led out to the big penned in field this morning, but we can go there later.” After blessing the domesticated animals we walk to the pavilion, the oldest part of the New Jerusalem... Abba tells the new people that the first time they did the procession, “we brought the statue of Our Lady of Fatima to the chapel before any of the rest of the buildings were here.”

We go in procession with the children carrying white flowers led by the incense-bearer and the cross-bearer with candles and all the others praying the rosary and stopping at the end of each decade and pray

Oh, my Jesus

We start at the barn, refectory, library, infirmary where the Abbot blesses the sick and then end up in the chapel where a little girl carries a crown on a pillow...and Imma tells me that I can place the crown on the head because I am the newest female visitor.

Itzhak suddenly turns up and sits next to me at Mass. From the tragic expression on his face I know he has heard that I know now the worst for my people. After communion he takes my hand.

At end of the Mass, each new member is given the Jerusalem Cross. They hold it in their hands and Abba blesses it with holy water with the prayer from the Book of Blessings.

While the rest joyfully move into the refectory for a special ice-cream and cake feast, Itzhak leads me toward a glassed in garden area I had not seen before.

We sit down on a bench. Itzhak puts an arm around my shoulder. “Dear Esther. I didn’t know you got the horrible news last night. I was out early with the seminarians hunting.”

I lean my head into his shoulder and let the tears flow.

“If only I could take the faith out of my soul and just put it in your heart.” Itzhak sighs.

“Would you be offended if I prayed over you?”

“No,” I say softly.

He turns me to face him and lays his long fingers on my head. Piercing blue eyes looking directly into mine he begins: “God of all joy and all suffering, it is you who have opened my heart to love this beautiful stranger...”

I smile through my tears.

“Can you find a way to come into her heart so that she may have hope for her family and friends? Can you make her see that it is you who saved her to be with us?”

As he embraces me I think... *All these years I secretly hoped to meet someone like Itzhak. Couldn't this also be a sign that there is a God of love?*

When the tall, handsome Israeli sabra leaves me at the door to what is now my only home, I wink as I say, “so, it really was the last flight to the New Jerusalem!”

