The Trojan Horse Sisters (Part 2)

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07 April 2006

Part 2

(To read Part 1 of The Trojan Horse Sisters, go to

The Trojan Horse Sisters - an ecotopian tale)

The Council

The next day Zelda was much more relaxed, but avoided people in order to think clearly. Esmeralda was going off with Green on a picnic and asked Zelda if she wanted to come, but the answer was no.

Green and Esmeralda arrived at a sun-splotched clearing. "My favorite place," he said. After a lunch washed down by fresh kombucha, the conversation turned to the old days.

Green reminisced, "You could buy cold kombucha in some hip stores along the west coast, but most people made their own. Did you ever have it?"

"No, I don't know if I'd even heard of it. In our middle-of-the-road family we thought espresso was exotic enough. Turns out coffee was the most oil-intensive product we could consume. I miss it sometimes."

"I used to throw around statistics like 'Ten fossil fuel calories are used to generate one food calorie.' I was the kind of activist isolated enough to feel like I was usually tilting at windmills or yelling alone in the wilderness."

Whatever frustration he'd experienced, it was all moot now. Seeing her rapt attention unwavering, he allowed himself to reminisce aloud and let his past flow out into the clearing in the here and now:

"Eventually, my efforts and sacrifices felt like they weren't worth it. So I began to think of myself as a seeker and planner of survival strategies. I didn't see the point of trying to reform the system when hardly anyone was listening or changing their behavior as consumers," Green lamented. But he was not agitated. He twirled a sprig of mountain sorrel in his mouth and gazed up at the beautiful sky. "Spring days are earlier and warmer now, and today I don't mind."

Esmeralda saw there was something clear, sharp and strong about him, and about most of the people at New Eden, that contrasted with the conventional, slightly glazed-eyed expression of past consumers and the deprived, compromised citizens surviving in The Town. She exclaimed inside that this was real living, post-petroleum. No more institutions, bureaucracies, bosses, property, or unconscious ecocide. Green looked into her eyes and did not look away. Finally she had to look down, but she was smiling.

She felt closer to him than ever, and her only problem was how to tell her sister that this felt like home now, amongst this good tribe. She looked at Green and felt some sudden excitement she hadn't known for years, if ever. Then she thought of his being harmed or killed in the raid. She felt stuck, unable to move forward in this moment of life's intensity.

She was sadly unable to assert herself and tell Green she was ready to bond and see how the extended family might be realized, because she had not leveled with him about her and Zelda's mission. She wanted to renounce it. All she could say was, "You're a good man, Green. I think I need you. But I'm feeling a little uncertain about life. I hope I can talk about it more with you soon. Tell me, were you happy on the front lines of activism when you learned enough to start helping people anticipate petrocollapse? The Bay Area was a happening place, so weren't you in the thick of it in most ways? Did you have a partner?"

Green could tell she was interested in his romantic past, a sure sign of her rising interest in him. "Not really. I thought I was between partners but I never became deeply involved again with anyone. I was fussy and couldn't fit into a woman's expectations. I thought I was a cultural revolutionary or a spiritual warrior. But the way I appeared to most people, I was a poor, eccentric activist and artist."

"Knowing what we all know now," Esmeralda softly said, looking into his eyes with deep compassion, "you were right to try to warn people to change their behavior. No one can be found, even in The Town, who says they weren't aware and concerned in the old days, and tried to cut back on petroleum consumption. But activists they were not, at least from any evidence they can produce."

"It's like what happened with Vietnam and Nixon," Green reflected. "From the Carter years onward, after that murderous war was over and the discredited White House had been cleansed, nobody could be found who said he or she had been a supporter of the war or of Nixon. But about half of these people were lying about their useless past. Decades later the nation was just about to see the same pattern happen again with the Iraq War and the Bush Jr. White House. You noticed too that the supporters sort of dried up or clammed up, right? People still didn't learn. So it was inevitable that the Middle East would explode and the global economy would unravel so fast. So here we are, in a better way, and liberated from the old global economy."

"But what a price – the hardship and violence we had to get through. And now our vulnerability to technological mistakes of the past," Esmeralda almost cried out. Gathering herself, she realized she had heard his same historical analysis back in The Town, but she knew Green must have been way ahead of the pack.

She added, sure that it would be much like his thinking, "We drove like fools until the price at the pump shot past five bucks, then ten bucks a gallon. The hurricanes and melting ice caps and glaciers didn't yet affect us right away as consumers, but everybody was getting scared of the changes before our eyes. It was happening so quickly. With energy in such tight supply, we all found we couldn't do much of our old routines. No commuting, then no jobs, and finally trucks stopped coming to the stores. The people who thought alternative technologies were going to save them and the nation were pretty much as disrupted as Joe Sixpack was. Suddenly people found they could no longer, in effect, eat petroleum, even if they had some efficient energy systems and some gardening going on. We don't want to talk about what they ended up eating! The urban farms took too long to really start up to save many people… So, you actually worked on these issues and tried to promote solutions for the transportation and food systems?"

"Yeah, I did for years. Wow, you have a good rundown there on the history. Anyway, I'd see perfectly intelligent people in their front yards using a power mower on a small lawn, while next to them their new car sported a peace slogan on the bumper. After a while I saw I could do so little to help the cause of peace or the Earth, apparently, that I even gave up my computer – a lot harder to do than getting rid of my car. So I left the Bay Area to find this intentional community that we renamed New Eden.

"Right before I split, I couldn't hack any longer the extreme pavement-cars-noise environment, so I was glad to move on. There was so little community to hold me there. On one of my last walks down a busy road with redwood trees and too many parking lots, I had just gotten a huge whiff of some van's exhaust when I looked down and saw a small flier on the ground, soaked from the rain.. It was a forlorn attempt to wake up the society of sleepwalkers guzzling oil. It said,

'End your enslavement to the auto/oil routine.' – in big letters. On the left in smaller letters were the phrases 'global warming, pollution, insurance, gridlock, parking, asphalt, concrete, plastic, gasoline, three empty seats, boredom, sloth, greed' and on the right side it said 'global relocalization, local food security, organic permaculture, green urban planning, ecological solutions'.

"I thought I knew the activist who did this. After another block I found a similar flier on a telephone poll:

'Quit Asphalt Suffocation – Quit Gasoline Addiction. Auto Pollution is a form of chemical warfare. Postcarbon.org – Global relocalization' I left it there and wondered if it had any impact on anybody.

"I happened to see a copy shop a few minutes later, and I stopped in and made enlarged fliers of the first one, and I put some up on that walk that evening. I would have had to bet that no one on those streets cared what I did, as long as I kept out of the way of their cars. So that was one of my last acts in the big city. I have these fliers in my cabin if I can get you to visit!

Not receiving a reaction, Green droned on. "As sheep-like as the people were about their own corruption as consumers, trading in their freedom for more stuff to put in their houses, they still had the potential to be sincere followers. They wanted something better than their work-and-spend existence, not just a refuge from homelessness. They were ready for some kind of action that was contagious.

"As a pedestrian I used to always cross the intersections on the red light if no cars were coming. I would be the only one to step off the curb to cross. As soon as I did it, everyone else would follow suit on both sides. They knew it was stupid to stand there obeying a sign when no cars were coming. But if I hadn't done it, no one might have crossed and broken the dumb law. A cop could stop and ticket one person but not a herd. Hardly a political act, but it told me a little about human nature and leading and following. The trouble is, any real leaders of the people that emerged kept getting assassinated, from Martin Luther King, Jr. to John Lennon."

Esmeralda responded, "You'll probably think me silly if I admit that I had faith that our society was just a troubled but honest society, and that Democracy just had some kinks to work out. Now it's obvious to all of us survivors that real leadership was always suppressed for the sake of the bigwigs' profits. We had to be kept under control. It was all a

crock. Did you ever hear that old Genesis song that went, ‘The sheep remain inside their pens, though many times they’ve seen the way to leave"?’

Green charged on, "The people making up New Eden saw it coming. Motorized lemmings were driving over the ecological cliff. No amount of dire climate-change news or oil-war developments could even nudge Joe Consumer to car-pool or get on his bicycle. When people were forced to do it due to gasoline shortage, it was too late to bring about any calm adjustment of our lifestyles. Not to say that transportation, oil and climate change were the only issues worth being active on – but some lively causes were probably only as meaningful as news-entertainment issues that catered to comfy middle class routines." Green was on his high horse by now. But Esmeralda managed to steer the conversation toward the here and now:

"You and your friend who did the fliers were dreamers, but people should have listened. Now we’ve all woken up from the illusion – those of us who survived the petro-famine. But you know there are still a lot of hungry people over in The Town. Do you think they’ll leave you all alone? Are you – are we all here on borrowed time?"

Green responded, "Don’t worry Esmeralda. We’ve made it half a decade, right? Now that things have calmed down some, we still want to show the Townspeople our ways, even though they can’t be just like us and live right here. We’ve been divided on how to do it. We should have some of them visit here. You’ve come here, but as a refugee."

"What if I could go back there and tell them about New Eden?"

Green’s reply sounded a bit possessive: "it would be dangerous. Your baby, your angry kin whom you abandoned, your loss of comfort and freedom if you went back there, their backward social system… There needs to be another way."

"We can bring it up at the Council again."

"Okay," Green said with a silly grin. It was as if his love for her was turned on and overflowed. He reached to hug her just as she started to stand up because the warmth of the afternoon was giving way to cloudy coolth. So they walked back to the village, and at her door she gave him the customary goodbye-hug. She did not give him her front, and said a little sorrowfully, "See you a little later."

As soon as she closed the door, her bottled-up stress spread through her body. Her head pounded with the deception of her and her sister’s scheme. She was at the point of forcing a confrontation and breaking with her sister for the sake of her baby and a future with Green in this new Eden. But there was one more chance to prevent the battle between The Town and New Eden, by bringing about a peaceful solution. With Zelda’s cooperation, the people back in The Town could try another way. But every option looked risky to Esmeralda at this point.

"Zelda," she called. She walked toward her sister’s room, and hearing her dressing inside, she blurted out, "We’ve got to do something at tonight’s Council!"

She walked in to find her sister with Iris as they were going over baby garments. Zelda looked at her sister with burning eyes. Iris looked quizzical.

"Oh! Hi Iris, hi Zelda. You know, umm… we really should mate and secure dads for our little tykes. I’m falling for Green for sure."

Iris clapped her old hands. "Oh Esmeralda! You’ve made the right choice. If I were your age, I’d look for him at the Fertility Night Rite. What about Zelda here? Hey, is it going to be Zach or Ryan? Or both of them? We could all be a clan here within the New Eden tribe!"

To date, Zelda had only shown Iris her good side, and had remained quiet and noncommittal on major issues. Iris didn’t suspect Zelda actually had harbored a cold resolve to bitterly oppose relaxing the conflict with The Town.

"Iris…" Zelda sighed and began to shake her head slowly, looking at the floor. Her lower lip was trembling. "I just don’t know," she cried, and sat down on the bed sobbing. Her sister sat down and took her hand, and Iris wheeled up to the bed and took Zelda’s other hand. Esmeralda could see the words about to spill out from her sister’s heart. Just the same, Esmeralda held her breath as the future might be determined here and now.

"Iris. Zach and Ryan are very nice, and I’m glad to see my sister happier than I’ve seen her in a long time. I’ve not allowed anyone to get close to me because I’m more connected to The Town than you can understand."

"Of course you are, my dear," said Iris.

"No, please understand that my heart is there, not here, even though I wish my people could live here too, in peace. You see, they know I’m here and expect that I’ll reunite with them somehow, somewhere."

"But I thought…"

"Yes, Iris, I've not told you. I've wanted my people to come here. My real family. They won't wait forever. You see I'm a newcomer here, almost full term pregnant, staying put for now. It makes sense to stay here, but I can't picture it without my family. They will come and…" Zelda's voice tailed off. Esmeralda tried to read Iris's reaction to this revelation.

Iris was a little slow, with no suspicion of treachery or deceit on the part of the sisters. Iris thought Zelda feared only for her peace of mind and the security of her baby. So Iris said, "I have a secret to tell and it will make you feel better. No one can come and hurt you in New Eden."

The sisters were all ears now. Iris continued, "Our bowmen and the booby traps will allow almost all of us to easily reach the boats and shove off to safety."

"What boats?" Zelda's and Esmeralda's voices were like a chorus.

"Well, I'm not supposed to say until you're bonded, but seein' as you're needlessly upset and I believe we will be a clan soon in this big cozy house, here's what the contingency plan is: You know the spruce and cypress trees near the lagoon, where the sign warns of toxic contamination? Well, there's no contamination zone at all. Camouflaged in the trees are the planks and rigging. There's enough materials to lash together almost two dozen outriggers. They wouldn't be watertight, but the design is used in India by fishermen who assemble their boats each morning on the beach and come back and unlash them each evening. Our boats, if we ever had to use them, wouldn't keep people dry or take us very far, but we could make it up the coast to Ecotopia – if the weather were favorable enough to launch and make headway against the current."

"God. I mean Goddess," Esmeralda smiled nervously. Zelda kept silent, weighing this information. Esmeralda decided to push on for some resolution as long as her sister seemed more open than ever. "Okay. Can you come to the Council tonight, Iris? Zelda will take you. We'll lay it all out for everyone and give people a choice: The Townspeople are going to come eventually, maybe a thousand at once. So New Eden can take to the outriggers or make peace with the barbarians. I'll see you tonight!" Esmeralda walked out briskly and with heart pounding, and thought she'd catch the sunset on the beach before heading over to the Council meeting.

The Lodge had all the chairs and tables removed, with cushions placed along the walls. The elders who chose to be active for the tribe's affairs comprised the main membership of the eleven-person body. The members were not elected, but were chosen by acclamation based on consensus. They could be discharged and a new council formed, in theory, but the practice was that over the years some members left, one by one, and were replaced. More crucial was that any non-member at the council meetings could speak, although from outside the inner circle. Sometimes the council members talked only to each other, but loud enough for everyone in the room to hear. A talking stick was passed to each person wishing to speak, council member or not, which kept the tone and pace calm and rational most all the time.

After the welcoming joining of hands, some housekeeping and announcements were dispatched. Soon the discussion-item on population and families was taken up. A couple of speakers reminded the assemblage of the number of people at New Eden in each age category, the transitions of birth and death, and what the outlook was for sustainability. Then it was time for comments and suggestions.

One grandmother received the talking stick and observed, "Our biggest development of family is at Iris's and Violet's, it seems. I see two beautiful young women, our most kind Esmeralda and Zelda, about to give birth. I've heard they are about to bond with our men and make a clan there; that's what people seem to expect. I'm sure they are learning whatever they need to know to help us all live well at New Eden. But let us hear from them. I'm also glad to see Iris has made it to this council."

The talking stick went right over to Iris, and Esmeralda nearly broke into a sweat. What would Iris say? What else had Zelda told Iris? Esmeralda thought she could speak first, but she forgot that elders are always considered the wisest and are deferred to, at every council and in almost every other situation.

Iris began, "I have news for everyone. I was shocked at first, but everything may turn out very well for us all." So began the unraveling of the scheme to alert the Townspeople's scouts that the sisters had given birth. "A reflective cloth is to be shown from up in the giant cedar near the gate. The idea would be that when the naming ceremony and celebration were underway, the Townspeople would rush in and occupy all buildings and structures by force."

The sound of horrified cries and groans raised the volume level of the room, and was increasing in a babble of raised voices.

"Quiet! I have the talking stick! Anyone can have the stick after me. We'll be here all night if we have to. I was not finished." Iris proceeded to tell the council of the sisters' change from strangers to community members. In particular,

Esmeralda was described as fully integrated, bonded or not. Then Iris turned around in her wheelchair and looked at Zelda, and Zelda nodded.

"Zelda is none other than the mother of the boy, and the sister-in-law of the man, who were killed near the gates on that dark winter day that you all remember. It was a wonder that our snipers allowed the bodies to be taken by the Townspeople for burial. If we had not guided them to avoid the booby traps, it would have been more carnage. But as we all know, the booby traps were reinforced, nothing changed, and now we come to this predictable crisis. These would-be Trojan Horse sisters are our payback for our clinging to an artificial situation. We always made the best decisions we thought we could, at every juncture. But what do we do now? I thought it was too late when Zelda told me what the whole plan was. I was saddened and felt betrayed. But I put myself in her place as a grieving mother. Also, I've just been able to learn of some of the deprivation still going on back in The Town. We've always been so separate here, and we thought we were doing so well. Great things have happened, that we have survived. But have we?"

Iris took a deep breath and looked over at Esmeralda. The Keeper of the Talking Stick, an alternating position among council members, gestured from Iris to Esmeralda. Iris finished by saying, "Now with the truth before us, I'm sure love can find a way." When Esmeralda gained the stick, she tried to smile away a tear. After a moment she composed herself and began:

"Everyone, I ask you to forgive us for our mission. We were only doing as you would, for our tribe. Now that we have learned to love you and New Eden, we don't want to see changes here or be the cause of any strife or bloodshed. I want only to bond here and help my new tribe. I want my sister to stay too, if she likes, and start a new life if that suits her. I came here tonight to tell you exactly what Iris has told you. And I have an idea for a peaceful resolution.

"Although the plan was to alert The Town to our births and allow the invasion – with a minimum of fighting if possible, we were assured…"

Hoots and jeers erupted, as many people felt that a bloodless takeover was an obvious lie or a false hope. Eventually some voices called out, "Let her finish!" Green stepped over to stand at her side.
Esmeralda let go in a shrill voice, "You must remember that beyond New Eden, the rest of the population probably still wants to think of this place as the public ecological preserve it was!"

A moment went by, as the tribe stared at the speaker with various emotional expressions. This could get out of control, Green thought, as he gave her arm a squeeze. But she quickly continued, in a calmer, lower voice:

"Although the reflective white material was to signal the births, there is an alternative that was spoken of only once, in the event the babies were stillborn or not allowed to live because they were deformed, or if one of us died in childbirth. And the idea then was to signal with a directional light at night." Esmeralda paused.

The council and the rest of the tribal members thought on this alternative scenario, but waited their turn to speak. So Esmeralda offered her solution:

"I propose that we use the light no matter what happens. This avoids invasion for the time being. The rest of the alternative plan was that twenty-four hours after the light signaled the scouts, Zelda and/or I would shoot a message-ladened arrow over to the scouts. Our message now would say that New Eden knows of the invasion possibility and is prepared to inflict massive devastation. I propose that we do this to mainly get across the offer that the fathers can come and take their babies away or stay here with us and integrate themselves into the tribe. I would give up my baby for peace and let my child be raised in the Town. Perhaps Zelda would do the same, or she could leave. But I would not go back under any circumstances, if you allow me to stay here with you. I believe that we can avoid the invasion and a war if we communicate openly with the Townspeople toward reconciliation. I know we can be generous with them to teach them what we know about food, health, crafts, science, and social relations. I would be a willing ambassador. I hope you can devise the best approach to save New Eden and avoid having to abandon it by sea."

Zelda was next to receive the talking stick. But all she said was "Yes. I prefer to stay with you all. I love my family in the Town, but I can't love anyone in such a way to be any part of violence anywhere. I will help anyway I can to aid peace." Many in the room let out their breaths and realized it would be a long time before anyone got to bed.

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