



THE MATRIARCHS

The summer had been a scorcher even by Texas standards, but then in September the heat broke. With one last broil and a subtle turn of light the Hill Country slipped into autumn. The temperature only reached into the upper eighties now during the day and dipped to the sixties at night. But the spot where Jess was stretched out wouldn't cool that night. The ground beneath her cheek would heat to ninety-eight point six, wouldn't it?

She hadn't tried to get up yet, or even move. She knew she needed time to recover from the shock of the fall. It had all happened so quickly. She was giving her garden a final check for the day when she noticed something odd near the plum tree. A dark line crossed the path that led to it through the grass. The line hadn't been there earlier, so she went to investigate and found cut ants on the tree. They were stripping its leaves. Two lines of ants marked the gray trunk. One moved up and one moved down. The ants going down were taking bits of leaf to an underground nest, where they would be deposited to grow fungus. Or that's what Jess had read somewhere, that cut ants ate fungus grown from leaves.

Her vinegar and cinnamon insect repellent was by the back door, so she turned to go get it. And that's when she fell. She hooked a foot and lost her sunhat as she went down stiff as a plank. The grass alongside the path acted as something of a cushion, but when she hit the ground she heard a sharp snap. She was afraid she'd broken a rib.

She finally felt composed enough to try to rise. If she could get to her hands and knees she

could use the plum tree to pull herself up, so she placed both palms on the ground and pushed.

She was ready for the pain of the rib, but instead there was an explosion of fire across her pelvis. She gasped and lay unable to breathe until the blaze throbbled down to a stab in her left hip. The snap she'd heard when she fell was the sound of a hip breaking, not a rib.

A broken hip was one of those old people's injuries her son and daughter had started warning her about when she turned seventy. That was twenty years before. They wanted her to move into an apartment, where she would be around other people in case of an emergency. They assumed that people would be the solution to the emergency rather than the cause. "No," she told them whenever they brought up the subject, "I'll stay where I am." She couldn't imagine giving up the house and the peace and quiet of the country.

As if mocking her thoughts of quiet a man's voice yammered something from inside the house. She'd left the TV on but it had been silent for some time, so the sound might have come from one of the telemarketers that were constantly leaving messages on her phone's answering machine. Her proper phone, not her cell. She never carried the cell. Her daughter called her on it sometimes as a test and she always failed. In the inevitable follow-up call on the landline Annie would say, "You should carry the cell, mom. You never know when you'll need it." "I know," Jess would say, "but it takes me awhile to get used to new things." "Nine years," Annie said the last time Jess referred to the cell as new. "You've had the phone nine years, mom. It's not 'new.' In fact, we're going to have to upgrade you pretty soon because they're discontinuing that technology."

Jess felt something on the back of a hand and saw an ant crawling across it. It was a cut ant,

and it stopped, rose up and twitched its antennae, like it was checking her out. She flicked the hand and sent the ant flying.

Sound came from inside the house again, but this time she knew it was the TV, not the phone. Queen Elizabeth's funeral had been the day before and now they were running replays of it. She'd watched the procession through London twice already that day and planned to watch it once more before bed. Voices murmured. She couldn't make out the commentators' words, but she knew they were describing what the audience could expect to see before the procession began.

Jess thought of Dooley's funeral. She missed him so. They were married forty-eight years and he was dead now for more than twenty. His funeral had been attended by their children, grandchildren and a great-grandson. And Jess's might be attended by a great-great-grandchild, now that Marcy was pregnant.

The new birth would make it three generations since Dooley asked Jess if she wanted to see an old house he'd found for sale in his travels. He was a trucker and away a lot, but between trips one spring morning they drove north from San Antonio so he could show Jess his discovery. Little Trevor was in diapers and Anne was on the way, and Jess knew the moment she saw the house that her children would grow up in it. She'd packed a picnic lunch and she and Dooley spent the day picturing the place reroofed and freshly painted. In the back yard they'd have a garden and beyond that a neat-rowed orchard and grape arbors and maybe even a small dairy. The barn and the twenty acres of brush that were part of the property would allow room for all that and more.

But over time the dream shrank. They did the fix-up of the house and put in a garden, but instead of grapes and an orchard Jess just planted

a fruit tree here and there. And Dooley turned the barn into a garage where he could work on his trucks.

They celebrated with a cookout the day he bought his first Freightliner. He was thrilled to finally be driving for himself. He hauled cargo all over the southwest for five years before he bought a second truck, and a year after that he got a third. Drivers came and went and they were always polite to Jess, who raised two children, gardened and kept the house clean. She helped Dooley do repairs to the house. He called it their castle and sometimes he'd ask if they should put in a drawbridge or a moat.

A jolt of pain made Jess suck air. She shifted position and cringed at the feel of bone grinding in her hip, but the pain eased once she resettled.

She'd had lots of free time while Dooley was on the road, then even more when the kids started school. She had friends she could visit with but not that many and she took to watching TV to fill her days. Talk shows were her favorite. Over the years she went from watching them on a small black and white TV, to a console with a 19-inch color tube, and then to a big flat-screen that looked like a chalkboard when it was turned off.

She especially liked when the talk shows devoted an episode to Queen Elizabeth and her family. She'd always followed Elizabeth closely. On the day they televised her coronation Jess felt absolutely intoxicated. She felt that she was with Elizabeth as she entered Westminster Abbey a queen in name and emerged a queen in fact.

Then she followed Elizabeth's growing family as her own family grew. Elizabeth gave birth to Charles and Margaret, and Jess had Trevor and Anne. She'd named Anne after Elizabeth's sister, as a tribute, and Dooley was too busy working to question or care. The important thing to him was

that the children were happy. He played with them when he was home and called them as often as he could when he was away.

A bead of sweat ran sideways down Jess's forehead and she was thankful the sun was settling toward the horizon. At least she wouldn't get burned too badly. And if she was there the next day. . . Well, she'd worry about that if and when.

She thought of Trevor and Anne again and remembered the sound of their little feet pattering through the house. The patter deepened to the clomping of shoes, and their baby squeals deepened to grown voices saying goodbye at the front door. You'd think the house where they grew up would be special to them, but it wasn't. They rarely returned to it while they were in college, and then they got married and started their own families far away. "We're in their rearview mirrors now," Dooley used to say.

He was still driving when the children left home, so Jess was suddenly alone for long stretches of time. She began having friends over for tea sometimes and that went on for years, but then the friends lost their mobility and their lives and the tea parties faded like the presence of the children had.

Dooley faded too. He died not long after he sold his trucks and retired. The kids and their families came to help bury him, then they returned to their cities and their once- or twice-yearly visits. The only relative she saw more often than that was Anne's granddaughter Deedee.

A distant screech pulled Jess awake. She'd been drifting but the bagpipes put an end to that. They wailed from the TV, and below them was the drumbeat of the procession. Seventy-five beats per minute she remembered one of the commentators saying, a heartbeat pace marking time for hundreds of marchers in full dress uniforms and the

most solemn of formal attire.

Jess thought how nice it was that the Queen's whole family was assembled for the funeral. She wondered if they'd cut down on visits to her over the years. Like with Jess, did her relatives come to see her only when protocol required? The press in Britain did what it could to give the royal family its privacy, by and large, so Jess wasn't sure how Elizabeth passed her final days. Could it be that in the end she was reduced to just one or two people who cared enough to chat with her regularly?

In Jess's life there was Prissy. They traded calls morning and evening. Priss was Jess's age but housebound, and she loved to talk on the phone. Sometimes their calls would last a couple of hours but cover nothing. They could spend a week talking about how canning seals had changed over the years.

Jess twisted her head so she could see the garden and the house beyond. She judged from the shadows that it was about six o'clock, about the time that Priss always rang. She liked to talk just after the news ended and before her prime time shows began. But Jess wouldn't be there to answer the phone this time. Priss would be surprised, and maybe worried enough to notify the sheriff.

"Hello!" Jess yelled, testing her voice. Was it loud enough to be heard if somebody stopped by to check on her? "Hello!" she called again. She sounded raspy but her voice was strong. Anyone standing near the back door should be able to hear it, even above the sound of the TV.

She drifted again. The thump and keen of the music brought her thoughts back to Elizabeth. She'd gone through a fair amount of drama with her family, especially with her son Andrew. He was born a decade after Charles and Margaret, so nothing much was expected of him, and he managed to stay out of the headlines when he

was young. But then he met Koo Stark. She was a Hollywood actress who seemed really nice, but she'd done a nude shower scene in a movie. And Andrew had no business dating a woman that anyone in the world could watch taking a shower. Jess remembered one of the talk shows speculating on what brand of soap the couple used when they scrubbed each other's backs.

Andrew and Koo became an item the same year that Charles married Diana, tragic Diana fated to die in that horrible car wreck. She dutifully provided the throne with two male heirs, but the birth of the younger one, Harry, raised a lot of eyebrows. When she and Charles were going through a rough patch in their marriage she took to riding horses. For weeks she practically lived at their stables, and then Harry was born. With red hair like the stableman's. Of course the sleazy tabloids added the questionable parentage to their stew of royal scandal. They always kept a pot boiling, and they dished out stableboy stories until another redhead darkened the door at Buckingham Palace.

Fergie.

Jess felt her gut tighten. Sarah Ferguson married Andrew in 1986 after beguiling him in some strange way that always made Jess think of what happened to her Uncle Moosh. He was a bail bondsman who fell under the spell of one of his customers. They met when he sprang her from jail on a pickpocketing charge, and after a whirlwind courtship they ended up at a chapel in Las Vegas. She went to the Blushing Bride's Toilette but didn't come back, and Moosh found that he had no wallet and no way to pay for the Eternal Love Bouquet he'd grabbed on his way past the chapel's gift shop. He would have returned the flowers but couldn't because he'd already plucked their petals to scatter in front of the altar. The preacher

called the law and Moosh was arrested. And since he'd signed his house and car over to his fiancé he couldn't raise his own bail. He said later that his heart felt as empty as his earlobe. It was missing the stud with the three carat diamond that his beloved said she wanted to have mounted as a wedding ring. After Vegas he filled the hole in his ear with a gold-plated stud and spent a year pouring cheap whisky through the hole in his heart. He drank until the plating wore off the stud and his ear turned green.

So Jess remembered Uncle Moosh whenever she thought of Andrew and Fergie. They separated after having two daughters, and Fergie drifted through a series of flings that became a running joke in the gossip columns.

And then she got her toes sucked in France. That happened in private but paparazzi took telephoto pictures. Fergie lay stretched out topless on a chaise lounge by a pool while a bald man held her lifted foot to his mouth. Bryan was his name, may it live in infamy. What must the Queen have thought when she saw the front-page pictures of a hustling upstart sucking her daughter-in-law's toes? Andrew divorced Fergie soon after the incident and to Jess's way of thinking it was good riddance to bad rubbish.

The call of a hawk in the distance made Jess wonder what her crumpled form must look like from above. Probably like one of the misshapen figures stuck to her refrigerator's door. Every few weeks she received a crayon drawing done by one of the children in the family, and she would add it to the stacks beneath the magnets. Some of the drawings were supposed to be of her and some were no telling what. Her granddaughter Deedee had drawn an odd one once. It showed Jess with an expressionless face in pink and gray, but the face of her purple and black shadow bore a com-

plex twist of . . . something. She couldn't decide if it was a look of surprise or anger.

Deedee was an intense girl who'd been visiting every two or three weeks since she got her driver's license the year before. She would come down from Dallas, spend an afternoon talking, and then drive back. Jess knew she was using the trips as an excuse to get away from problems at home, but she didn't mind. She enjoyed the company.

On one of her visits she told Jess that she'd been studying monarchies. She was only seventeen and Jess wished she would show an interest in the usual teenage things like music and dating, but for some reason she was obsessed with government. She carried a smartphone and said she got all her news online. Jess didn't know much about the internet, but it seemed to deliver far more information than newspapers or TV did. Deedee would tell her about rebellions and coups and cabinet shakeups taking place all over the world, and quite often she'd end her stories by shaking her head and saying, "People get the government they deserve."

They hadn't talked about the Queen's death yet, but Jess knew that Deedee thought the British royals were corrupt. And their subjects wouldn't throw them off because they were afraid to upset the status quo. One time she said, "The British are like frogs in a pot of water, Meemaw. You know, a pot that's being brought to a slow boil on the stove. They don't realize how much trouble they're in yet. They think the Queen is some nice old lady who would never hurt them, but she has the power to crank up the flame anytime she wants. Like, did you know she can dissolve parliament? Just shut it down whenever she wants. She can dissolve it in Britain or in any of the nations that make up the British Commonwealth. That's nearly a quarter of the world's landmass."

From there Deedee had led Jess through a

brief but bloody history of the British Empire—through wars and conquests and colonizations—then she mentioned The Green New Deal. “It’s just another of their wars, but a mental one, to colonize our minds.”

“I don’t understand,” Jess said. “The green stuff has to do with gasoline engines and electric cars, doesn’t it? How’s that connected to the royal family?”

“Because they’re behind the Green New Deal. Or their Anglo-American banking establishment is. The establishment controls the world’s flow of oil with the American petrodollar, but they know that can’t last. So they’re hurrying to put a new currency in place. One that will be based on carbon credits. That’s why they created the phony science of climatology, to try to convince us that the world is being poisoned by carbon dioxide from fossil fuels. But CO₂ is good for the earth, not bad. Plants need it to grow. More CO₂ in the air makes the world greener.”

“I see,” Jess said. She only half understood but tried to give a look of full understanding.

“And don’t get me started on carbon-based banking credits,” Deedee said, but since she was already started she told Jess that before long nobody would be able to buy or sell unless they had an acceptable carbon footprint. “Everything we do will be tracked, and we won’t be allowed to participate in society if we produce too much carbon dioxide. And then someday they’ll start killing us off because, well, we’re carbon-based life forms. You can see where it’s all going. Someday it’ll be like one of those science fiction movies where they get rid of you when you turn thirty.”

There was more to that conversation, a lot more as Deedee jumped from horror to horror. Jess nodded and took in what she could. Much of what Deedee said made sense, but Jess hated seeing

her get so worked up about the world around her at such a young age. When she finally ran out of steam Jess gave her milk and cookies and then sent her on her way with a kiss and a jar of tomato preserves.

Jess came to with a swelling of music. Had she fallen asleep? The music was Elizabeth's funeral march, with its heartbeat pulse. The sun was down and dusk was darkening to night. Some stars were already out.

The march used for the funeral procession had mesmerized her over the past couple of days. The music was a lugubrious repetition, as one of the commentators said, but each time around, the gloom would break for a moment with a flourish of horns. During that moment Jess often pictured a death shroud parting just enough to let a soul rise through it. Elizabeth's soul.

Jess felt a tingle, first on one of her arms, then along both arms and both legs. Was it a circulation problem? She'd been still for quite a while, so maybe she wasn't getting enough blood into her limbs. Then the tingling spread to her torso and head, or to the cheek that was resting on the ground at least. In fact all of the tingling she felt was around the parts of her body that touched the ground. Why was that? Whatever the reason, dark was coming on and she hoped that help would arrive soon. She hoped Prissy had called the sheriff before settling in for her evening of television.

The music continued to throb in the distance and its steady cadence lulled Jess into drowsing. She seemed to rise a bit in her half-sleep and then begin to move. It felt as if she were gliding. She angled away from the path, into the tall grass, and then she angled down. A constriction slid along her body like she was being swallowed by the earth. She roused enough to open her eyes, but they filled with grit so she shut them again and

fell back into half-sleep.

When she awoke later she blinked the grit away and saw that she was in some kind of chamber. She'd stopped moving and lay in a large shallow bowl of blue luminescence. Without moving her head she could see ants scurrying around on the blue, and she could also see that she was bloated. The hand resting nearest her face was swollen twice its normal size.

She looked beyond the hand to the wall of the chamber and saw whitish dots against black. She thought she might be hallucinating. If that was the case then she needed to call out before she slipped into a state where she couldn't think to call.

"H. . . hep. . ." Her tongue was thick, swollen like her hand. She tried again. "H. . . h. . . hep me!"

"That's why I've brought you here, dear, to help you."

It seemed to Jess that she wasn't hearing through her ears. The voice was inside her head.

"That's right, dear. That's how I communicate."

"Buh. . . buh. . ."

"Don't bother trying to speak. I can read your mind."

I don't believe this, Jess thought. This has got to be a hallucination.

"Partly," the voice said. "I told my workers to be careful transporting you, not to let too much of their defensive acid get into your system through rubbing against you, but some transference was unavoidable. It has made you numb. And yes, the acid can cause hallucinations."

"Who are you?" Jess asked in her mind.

"I am called Formica Maxima, The Great Ant."

"So, you're the queen of a. . . I'm in an ant colony?"

"If that's how you choose to think of it. But to me it's the center of the world."

Jess assumed she was in the queen's chamber, if she was really in an ant colony, but she couldn't see the queen. There were some dark holes among the whitish dots. The holes may have been recesses in the chamber's wall, and the queen may have been in one of the recesses.

As Jess studied the wall one of the dots broke free of it and fell to the blue below. The dot wriggled and disappeared into the luminescence. That was an egg, Jess thought, or the larva that broke free of an egg and was now feeding. The blue glow was from the fungus that grew from the bits of leaves the ants carried underground.

Jess tried to speak but her tongue prevented her, so she thought, "Why did you bring me here?"

"Because you're dying," the queen answered.

"Dying? No, I just had a fall."

"A fall that was worse than you realize. You're swollen not just from the acid but from internal bleeding. I feel the tremors and vibrations in the earth around me, my million antennae registering the minutest changes, and I can feel the workings of your body. Since you fell, blood has been shifting out of its normal courses and pooling inside you. You won't last the night. But then neither will I, so I thought we might pass together. I'm hoping we can divert each other with conversation."

All Jess could think to say was, "But I don't want to die."

"Please don't distress yourself, dear. You're comfortable here, aren't you?"

Jess took a quick inventory of her aches and pains and found that at the moment the worst was a crick in her neck. A swarm of ants rushed to congregate beneath her head, lift it slightly and turn it until the pain was relieved.

"That's. . . that's better," she said. "How'd they know to do that?"

"Because my wish is their command."

“They’ll do whatever you say, or think?”

“Of course. They know no other way.”

Jess felt a quiver pass beneath her and the queen said it was music from the funeral.

“You can hear my TV from here?”

“Yes. And so could my predecessor, and hers, and the ones before, all of us listening and passing along the accumulated knowledge through our melded memory.”

“So what have you learned? From my TV I mean.”

“Among other things that you loved Queen Elizabeth. You followed her life through its highs and lows. From state visits to family deaths. From jubilees to . . . Fergie.”

Jess shuddered and thought the queen and all the other ants must have shuddered with her. The whole chamber shook. Dirt and eggs from overhead fell into the luminescent mulch.

“Poor Elizabeth,” the queen said. “We know something of how she must have felt when Fergie went rogue, don’t we? You and I both, as matriarchs of our families, have reigned over tragedy and joy. We’ve acted as custom demanded, the same as Elizabeth, but what is the customary reaction to a strange man sucking sand from your daughter-in-law’s toes?”

“I couldn’t say,” Jess answered. “And neither could my friends. We were all pretty upset when that happened.”

“I heard that too, the vibrations of all your conversations over the years. Your telephone conversations and the ones that took place in your house.”

“There haven’t been many talks in the house lately, except with my granddaughter, Deede.”

“Yes, I’ve heard the two of you, and I must say, she’s quite well informed for someone her age.”

“Is she? I usually get lost trying to follow what she says. And to be honest I have to doubt a lot of it.”

“Well, she’s right about the world being on the verge of a surveillance-based banking system. But she’s wrong that it’s just the Anglo-Americans behind it. The radio waves that snake through the ground carry more information than you receive in your government approved broadcasts, so I know that the proofs to Deedee’s claims are out there. And over time she’ll find them. She’ll learn about the United Nations and the World Economic Forum and the other groups that are attempting to enslave humans with a global government. The Council on Foreign Relations, the Committee of Three Hundred, and the hundreds of mafias and intelligence agencies. Those groups work together whenever it benefits them, and lately they’ve been working together a lot. I sense a quickening in the dark forces of tyranny.”

Jess felt pain and closed her eyes, and when she opened them again she saw a mass of ants moving to her side. They climbed one atop another until they were maybe a hundred high leaning against her hip. “They’ll massage your injury with acid,” the queen said. The ants began to move back and forth in unison. The queen said not to worry. “You may feel faint or even...” Her voice faded away in a dream of floating. Jess rose, hovered someplace beyond sensation for a while, then felt herself sinking. She settled back into consciousness and the pain in her hip was gone.

“You were...you were saying something about dark forces,” she thought to the queen. “And something about a quickening.”

“Yes, the world’s elites are in a hurry now to get rid of self-governance. They want to eliminate the West’s democratic system of horizontal power distribution and replace it with the more natural

vertical model. Top-down authoritarianism, where the people at the bottom have no rights except those which the ones at the top allow them. My colony is like that. I could order one half of my workers to kill the other half, and the command would be carried out without a question as to why. You're in the process of developing that in America, with your stolen elections and governmental bureaucracy, but they've had the system in Britain for a thousand years now. The people there believe they live in a constitutional monarchy, but in truth the royals have absolute control. Your granddaughter was right about Queen Elizabeth being able to dissolve parliament whenever she wanted."

"You make it sound like she was a dictator."

"She was, technically, but a benevolent one. I expect her son Charles will be less so. He's a globalist, and they always have a low regard for their countries' welfare. Charles will rule with an iron fist if he has to."

Jess was about to ask a question when the queen said, "One moment. One moment."

It seemed to Jess that she felt something, maybe on her own or maybe conveyed through the queen, but she felt a faint vibration.

"Is that music from the funeral?" she asked.

The queen was slow to respond, then said, "I don't know. Perhaps you feel the music, but I feel something deeper. To the west, past your fence line. There's a . . . pushing. And some deaths. Five, no, ten. More. I'm not sure what's happening, but it could be an incursion. I'll have to pull workers from other areas. If it's another colony expanding then it needs to be dealt with."

Jess remained silent so the queen could focus on her task, and after a moment a low rumble rose up. It came from behind the walls of the chamber, surrounded the chamber, and then fell away to

one side. To the west, Jess assumed. No telling how many ants were on their way to meet the threat.

When peace returned to the chamber Jess said, "Tell me some more about the groups you mentioned. The ones that are working against us."

"Groups? Oh, yes...the humans. I don't know where to begin with the groups, really. There are so many. The Masons, the Club of Rome. What do you know about the Jesuits?"

"They're Catholic monks, aren't they?"

"Hardly monks. The Pope is a Jesuit. And he was in the news just a couple months ago when he visited Canada. The official story was that he was there to apologize for Church transgressions against indigenous peoples, but the real reason for the visit was so he could meet with the Chinese Communists in an out-of-the-way place. They're preparing to take out a loan from the Vatican bank, and they wanted the Pope's personal guarantee that the Church will be able to honor it. It's for nearly a trillion dollars, to be put toward China's continuing assault on America."

"But an assault on America would be an assault on its religions. Like Catholicism. The Pope wouldn't take part in something like that."

"He would for power. The word 'catholic' means 'all-encompassing,' and the Roman Catholic Church has been encompassing everything it can for two thousand years. It's one of the oldest and largest power structures in human history. And now it plans to absorb China."

"Through a banking deal?"

"Yes. After the Pope met with the Chinese he ordered the world's Catholic-controlled banks and institutions to transfer as much money as they could to the Vatican bank. He wants that done by September thirtieth, the end of this month. The move is intended to give the Chinese confidence in

the loan. They're wary because Catholic priests have been charged with sexual abuse in nearly every country on earth. The Church bureaucracy covers up the incidents, but that can't go on forever. It's just a matter of time until the Church is declared an international criminal enterprise. And when that happens, countries will start freezing bank accounts. So the Pope ordered the transfer of funds to the home bank. He also reorganized the Knights of Malta a couple weeks ago, to seize their assets. The Church is amassing as much wealth as it can in order to finance the next phase of Communist Chinese expansion in America."

"But I still don't see how the Catholic Church can benefit from that. If the Chinese conquer America, Catholics will suffer."

"The Vatican believes the Chinese will fail. Think of the loan as a wager, with China betting it can conquer America, and the Vatican betting it can't. And if China fails, it won't have the cash to pay off the loan. So it will pay in other ways. The Church will get its investment back tenfold in real estate, sex slaves, the suppression of rival religions, and so on."

Jess felt exhausted from trying to keep up with the ins and outs of international intrigue. She felt sluggish too and thought of blood pooling inside her body. For the first time since she fell she felt close to death. She could probably just let go and be done with things, but she wanted to finish her conversation.

"You . . . you said Charles is a globalist. Do you think Queen Elizabeth was too? I mean, did she work with the Chinese and the Catholics and those other groups?"

"She worked with them, but at the same time against them. She did what she could to maintain Anglo-American supremacy in the midst of

change. But she left the system teetering. To pay the empire's bills she had to sell it off bit by bit. Canada, Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand are now under the rule of the big banks, and the United States. . . .”

Jess drowsed. She drifted away, woke to pain in her hip, then drifted again. She came and went, and while she did she heard the queen talk about countries putting up water rights and mineral rights as collateral for loans. And slashing pension benefits to the elderly.

“. . . the trucking strike in Canada,” the queen said.

Jess felt settled for the moment.

“I remember that. The Freedom Convoy last winter. What about it?”

“Well, Prime Minister Trudeau used dictatorial powers to break up the strike, and then he froze the bank accounts of citizens who'd given money to it. That's where everything is headed for humanity, control of spending. The globalists' goal is to force electronic money on the world so that anyone who disrupts the system can be shut down.”

The queen talked on and Jess felt pain again, then numbness, and then she rose up to see the earth from high above. The whole surface of the planet was spread out flat below. And there was a bright light to mark New York City, and one to mark London. Then one blinked on in Beijing. “And Riyadh,” she heard the queen say, and a light appeared in Saudi Arabia. “Mumbai.” A light appeared in India. And then the lights in London and New York began to flicker. Jess felt a flush of panic.

“No,” she said. “What's happening?”

“Decay. It begins as soon as a thing stops growing. Things rise, thrive for a while, then return to their component parts. The lights in

London and New York will go out soon.”

“Don’t let them,” Jess begged. “Please.”

“I don’t have the power to stop the process. Nobody does. Decay’s a force of nature.”

“Is that it then, the ultimate force? We’re governed by nature?”

“So it would seem.”

Jess thought of Deedee saying people get the government they deserve. But a government by nature? Who deserved that? Not America. The country had overcome nature’s vertical power structure. Americans had turned the vertical to the horizontal.

“True,” the queen said. “Your country’s founders renounced Britain’s Divine Right of Kings and said that everybody has divine rights. The Bill of Rights says people are born with unlimited freedom granted by God. So the founders gave you self-determination, but you grew complacent and let it slip away. You let your free and open government be seized by people who operate in secret.”

A great sadness came over Jess. “So what now?” she asked. “What will happen to America?”

“I suppose it will break down into component parts. But that might not be the end of the country. The components of the United States are the individual states, and after a breakdown they might be able to reassemble. To be reborn as something stronger, if people like your granddaughter have a say in things.”

“Deedee. Yes, she’ll see what’s happening and work to fix things. And she’ll teach others. But what about you and me? What will happen to us?”

“We’ll break down as well. We’ve served our matriarchal function and now it’s time for others to replace us. But someday we’ll rise again. Through shadow or gene we’ll continue the push of life.”

Jess felt herself settle deeper into the blue bed of fungi. An ant ran up onto the back of a hand,

and as she watched, the skin beneath its feet pulled apart and it fell from view.

Her body spread out along the bowl of the chamber and fused with the soft glow. An ant fell from its hatching overhead and she felt it begin to chew into the mulch. She remembered her children suckling at her breast. She'd once considered the passing of sustenance from her body to theirs to be the ultimate act of motherhood, but now she thought in larger terms. The mother becomes the matriarch and the matriarch suckles the mother.

She felt the faint, cadenced thump of the funeral march pass through her dissolving bones, and she lamented Elizabeth's death. And her own. But she knew they weren't passing into oblivion. She was confident that it was like the queen ant had said—the breaking down would lead to a reformation and another rise. And when she rose again it would be into a freer world, one born from rediscovered principles seeded by Deedee and others like her.

With a final glance from her decomposing eyes Jess saw the egg-speckled dome of the chamber become a star-speckled sky. A peal of horns split the beat of the march and she felt her consciousness push through the momentary rent. The promise of a new beginning drew her on, past the shimmer of water on Koo Stark's breasts, past Uncle Moosh's diamond ear stud, and past the glittering sand on Fergie's toe-sucked foot.