

The Stranger in Warsaw

or, Emilio's Story

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about 7,800 words

The road was mostly packed earth, though a few jagged pieces of the old asphalt still peaked out to meet the eyes of the attentive traveller, and they made it just rough enough that one had to proceed carefully lest one break a wheel or axle. For the old man who drove his one horse shay into a little Indiana town that one Saturday afternoon in June of 2156, such things required no thought; spend a lifetime on the roads, and it was all a reflex.

Plum trees began to line the road as the traveller approached the town; rice patties and algae patties appeared to either side. Countless laborers went about their work, drenched and weary, under the scorching sun. The rice patties were tended by free men and women, land-owners or share-croppers as the case might be, but the algae patties were mostly worked by *cherembos*: *chicos de reëmbolso* in the formal language of the law that held sway in these parts, whereby a man and his wife could be free of all their debts by signing over one of their sons to work six years as an indentured servant.

The boy had to be fourteen years old to qualify; younger children weren't wanted for that sort of work, and on a summer's day like this, after the morning chores were done, they were usually found in packs playing ball games or swimming in the lakes that were so plentiful in this part of Indiana. The traveller encountered just such a ball game right outside the town wall; most of the boys paid him no heed, though one curious lad left the others and ran after him to the gatehouse.

It was the traveller's luck to have arrived right behind a bus, whose passengers – twenty or so at ground level and another dozen clinging to the roof – all needed to be searched by the gatekeeper, leaving the boy with plenty of time to catch up to the traveller.

He was twelve years old, had black hair and skin the colour of light bronze, and wore nothing but baggy shorts and crude sandals. In fine, his appearance was as ordinary as could be, and quite the opposite of the traveller's, who had fair hair and white skin – both seldom seen except in the older generations – and was dressed in long pants and a long-sleeved, button-up plaid shirt, as if he had come from Canada.

"I'm Emilio Gill," said the boy, "son of Rafael and Sofi Gill. Welcome to Warsaw."

"And I'm Vance Caron, son of Jacques and Winona Caron," the old man said as he stepped down from his one horse shay and offered the boy his hand. Emilio took only a few seconds to decipher the gesture and return a handshake of his own.

"Have you any inns in Warsaw?" said Vance.

"No," said Emilio, "we're too small for that. But my father's house is as good as an inn. We've welcomed many a weary traveller under the shadow of our roof, and we will do the same for you."

"And you'll have your choice of repayment," said Vance, "in money or labour. Plants, animals, machines – I've worked with them all in my time, and my limbs aren't nearly so slack as my age might make you think."

"My father is a glass-blower," replied Emilio, "the best in the county, and unless you've worked in that trade before, I'm afraid there's little you could do in his shop. But we do have a small garden and a plum orchard; perhaps we'll find tasks enough for you there."

By then the gatekeeper had let the bus on through and it was Vance's turn to be searched; the man found many curious objects in his baggage, but none that looked like a weapon, so Vance was admitted, and Emilio clambered into the shay alongside him for the short ride down the flagstone streets toward his house.

Emilio did most of the talking on the way, pointing out Warsaw's principle buildings, and talking about his ancestors, and how he his grandfather Marco Gill was the first in their family to settle in Indiana. The boy told stories about Marco's exploits during the Wars of Migration, and how he had lost an eye during the Siege of Chicago, and afterwards got promoted to company commander and led his men through numerous battles, with not one of them lost to enemy fire.

Vance listened raptly to all this, never hinting of his scepticism: how 'not one lost to enemy fire' probably meant that many had succumbed to disease, or the fact that Emilio's people would never have invaded the Midwest in the first place if they hadn't been driven out of their previous home in Texas.

Emilio seemed like a bright enough boy; he would come to know all this is due time. For now? Well, kids needed stories to tell, and if these ones meant that Emilio would grow up to be as brave as his grandfather had been, then the stories had done their job.

When they reached the house, Emilio took Vance's horse to the stable to feed alongside his own family's burro. Rafael and Sofi Gill came out to greet the stranger, and proved faithful to their son's offer of room and board. Rafael even showed Vance around the glass-making shop that occupied most of the house's ground floor.

"You won't find a better selection of glassware anywhere north of the Wabash," Rafael said.

"But don't take it that for a vain boast," he added after a pause. "To the Lord is due the credit. He has favoured my work, and the Church has blessed my enterprise from the beginning."

"Ah," said Vance. "I had always heard that the priests in these parts had a high opinion of glass-blowers. I remember the days before your trade was revived; most people made their windows and drinking cups from plastic."

"The Church will do anything to get rid of the accursed stuff," Rafael replied. "Sure, it's cheap to buy and hard to break, but throw it away, and it's still choking up the rivers a century later. Glass is different: it's made from sand, and when you're done with it, it turns back into sand."

That was about all that Vance and Rafael had time to say to one another before the latter's work pulled him away. Then Sofi sent Emilio to the upper story to ready a corner room for their guest, and the two were alone until supper time.

Emilio had gathered fairly easily that the stranger was from a distant country, likely north and east of here; the boy would hardly have abandoned a good ball game to chase after one of his own people. But even though old Vance Caron took all his questioning in good spirits, he couldn't seem to get him to tell much about his past, or how he ended up here in Warsaw.

"Some people are born with a great journey in them," Vance said. "Most often they fulfil it when they're young, but it wasn't so with me."

"During the first fifty-eight years of my life I never left Quebec. Then, after I had buried both my wives, and seen my surviving children married and set up with farmsteads of their own, and finding that after it all I still had a keen mind and four spry limbs, I resolved not to become a fixed plant to cumber the earth with my presence, when it would be so much better to wander to and fro, and learn a little about the world and its peoples."

Over the next few days, Emilio would think over those words a lot, wondering how many other 'peoples' Vance had 'learned about' before meeting coming to Warsaw, and how Emilio's people might compare to the others in the old man's mind. But he didn't have time to ask more in the moment, for no sooner had Vance said it than the two of them were called down to supper.

At supper, with Emilio's mother, father, and sisters questioning him, Vance was just as reticent as he had been before. He let on that he was from Quebec and had taken to roads at the same age, and in nearly the same circumstances, that many men were taking to the grave. But he also had less to say about where he had been than *how* he had travelled there, and was always turning the conversation to the virtues of travelling by one horse shay.

"Don't let the busses fool you," he said. "Ride a bus for the first time, and its speed might entice you. But come to rely on it...."

"And you'll find that the owner drops his schedule like a hot potato if it seems that too few people are showing up," Rafael replied. "It's the same here as everywhere, and you can't really blame the bus-owners for it. Algae oil just ain't cheap."

"And that is why," Vance continued, "I tell everybody that they should get themselves some good horses the moment they can afford them. It doesn't seem faster, but a horse will leave on your timing, not someone else's, and he doesn't pinch pennies."

"Also," he said wryly, "a one horse shay breaks down less often than a motorcar."

"We don't have a lot of motorcars in Warsaw," Emilio said with what seemed like pride in his voice. "The mayor has one, the sheriff has one, the priests have one – but they *only* use it when it's something *really* urgent. And there are some rich people with cars but I could count them on my fingers."

"In the old days," Vance replied, "everybody had a motorcar. And since driving one was thought to be the defining mark of civilization, the people would only listen to you if you said they would be able to keep their cars forever, even after the petroleum ran out."

"How did they think they could manage that?" asked one of Emilio's sisters.

"At first they said they could replace the gasoline with batteries," said Vance. "Then, after the stuff to make big batteries ran out even faster than the petroleum, it was algae oil. Eight million cars in Indiana burning seven litres of oil a week would need, oh, a thirty by forty kilometre or so rectangle of algae ponds."

"There aren't enough *cherembos* in the world to work a farm that size," said Emilio's mother Sofi.

"They were going to have robots do it," replied Vance.

"Well," said Sofi, "it's just like the priests tell us. Any job that a man or an animal or a plant did, they were going to make a robot that could do it better. They thought they were better engineers than God."

"Twas so, 'twas so," said Vance in reply, "even in Quebec."

After supper, the family and their guest retreated to the parlour, where Rafael poured a little liquor for each of them.

"Bring me my guitar," he said to his son. Emilio fetched the instrument from upstairs, and then Rafael, who was known around Warsaw for having a good voice and knowing the songs

of his people by heart, began to sing ballads. They were, for the most part, tales of the great migrations out of Mexico, and of the Spanish-speaker peoples' battles with the *gringos*, with each other, and with the climate, until at last most of them, weary of the parched soils and constant warfare of the West, settled in what used to be the midwestern United States, and began to grow rice.

One ballad stood out from the rest, its hero being brave enough, or its melody haunting enough, that Rafael and Emilio's people had picked it up as their own even though the hero was a *gringo*. It told of the valiant last stand of the lone survivor of the North Dakota National Guard who, armed only with a sniper rifle, a sharp knife, and an even sharper mind, kept a nuclear silo from falling into the hands of a great and terrible *narcodon*.

A younger Vance Caron would have picked the story apart: even if the *narcodon* could separate the warhead from the missile and rewire it the detonator to fire at his command – a big *if* – wouldn't everyone involved in the tale have known that any bomb that had sat abandoned in a silo for half a century would surely be a dud?

But the old Vance Caron just listened and enjoyed the ballad. Afterward they all went to bed, and even Emilio, normally as restless as any twelve-year-old boy, was tired enough to fall asleep immediately.

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The next day was Sunday; in the morning Emilio, his family, and their guest all dressed in their best clothes – for Emilio, as with any boy his age, Sundays were the only days in the summer that he wore anything but baggy shorts and crude sandals. Then they all walked the half mile to the stone church, which, perhaps apart from the walls, was the largest building in Warsaw that wasn't a ruin. As they approached, they heard the familiar half-song-half-chant that always heralded the morning service:

Memento, memento, que est super Petram,

Redemptoris nostril,

Que est Christus Filius Dei...

"I once heard," said Vance, "that the man who revived Latin singing in your Church, and who wrote that melody, was a heretic. He was born into an eccentric sect and forced to convert as a teenager, and even though he loved music enough to become a cantor, he held onto his original beliefs until the day he died."

"You must have spent too much time in Ohio," Rafael replied half-humorously. "Where we live, nobody invents silly stories to cast doubt on a man's loyalty to the Holy Faith."

When they reached the crowd outside the church, Vance got some stares, since white skin, and especially fair hair, weren't common in Indiana. Even so, the other congregants were polite towards the stranger, introducing themselves and offering a sincere welcome. Vance got the impression that Warsaw's priests had done a better-than-usual job of encouraging hospitality and stamping out racism among the flock.

The sermon was like many that Emilio and his family had heard before: the priest employed great superlatives to rouse up the congregation in fiery indignation against the former inhabitants of the land, who 'lived deliciously' in the midst of sins and abominations, and listened to false prophets who told them all was well even when the electricity was on for only a few hours a day, and heavy rains poured down out of season and rotted the corn that had

grown so well here before the climate changed, and even when the life expectancy had been cut nearly in half by drug overdoses and venereal disease.

“These lying prophets told them,” he said, “that they could have unlimited pleasures without wrecking the body, and unlimited wealth without wrecking the climate. They came to believe that the Earth had been made just for them: they neither remembered their fathers who brought them up in the faith, nor considered their children who would soon have to live in the future which they were building.

“And if they didn’t think of their ancestors and descendants, their own flesh and blood, how much less did they think of the other creatures with whom they shared the Earth! While they were letting the poor of their own species fall into the pit, their Father in Heaven was counting even the sparrows. Be not fooled, ye Christians! Even the fowls of the air at times know more of the Lord’s ways than you do.

“Do you not suppose that while we human beings were offering up our vain oblations, drawing near to the Lord with our lips, while our hearts were far from him, the birds also roused each other’s spirits to look forward with joy to the Supper of the Great God? And not to the carefree dinner party which those lukewarm Christians imagined awaited them in heaven, where everyone would be happily reunited regardless of their works while in the flesh, but to the supper as it will *actually happen*, according to Holy Scripture, where – mark it! – the Angel standing in the Sun cries out to all the fowls that fly in the midst of heaven, saying:

“Come, and gather yourselves together unto the Supper of the Great God, that ye may eat the flesh of kings, and the flesh of captains, and the flesh of mighty men, and the flesh of horses, and of them that sit on them...”

It was a fiery sermon indeed, but to Emilio it was little to take note of. He had never used fossil fuels, fornicated, stolen anything, killed an animal for sport, or indulged himself with expensive food or expensive clothes, and he didn’t plan to ever do so. And as he already knew the decreed punishments well enough to rehearse them in his sleep, the priest’s long invectives didn’t even incite an academic curiosity.

Emilio often looked over at Vance, whose countenance showed the same boredom. This probably wasn’t the religion of his youth – the schoolteacher had said that the Quebecois were infidels – but Emilio knew that Vance must have been travelling in the Midwest for quite some time, and if you’ve heard one of these sermons, you’ve heard them all.

For Emilio, the events of that morning were easily forgotten. But what he saw that afternoon was quite the opposite. In Warsaw, nobody worked on Sunday afternoons: they all visited friends and family. And while Emilio’s parents were out chatting with Rafael’s sisters and their husbands, Vance Caron brought Emilio into his room to show him his most wondrous treasure.

“I perceive that you are the sort of child who can keep a secret,” he said to Emilio.

“I can,” said Emilio.

“Then perhaps I should show you my unique possession,” Vance replied. “The day I dug it out of the ruins of a library was one of the luckiest days of my life. I rarely let folks see it, since a lone traveller like me would likely have his throat slit by morning if word got out that he was carrying a Wikipedia.”

Emilio had heard that word before – sometimes, a very knowledgeable person was called a “walking Wikipedia.” Apparently, the word had meant something different in the old world, and he was about to find out what.

Vance handed Emilio a flat, grey object like a writing slate. Words and pictures flashed into existence on the front of it as soon as he touched it.

“A magical slate!” he whispered.

“Not magical,” Vance said. “Just electronic. It has a computer in it.”

Emilio had heard of computers in school, but the teacher said that none were to be found nearer than Indianapolis.

“It’s an encyclopaedia,” said Vance. “You can read about anything in the world. You scroll down by dragging your finger across the screen, and you go to another article by clicking a link, or typing its name into the search bar.”

Vance had to demonstrate all three actions; “scroll,” “click,” and “type” were words that had fallen out of the general vocabulary long ago.

Cracks ran across the screen, but most of the pixels still lit up, and reading it was easy enough, once you got the hang of it. And that’s what Emilio did for the remainder of the day; from half past noon until long after the sun had gone down nothing could draw him away from what seemed to be a wellspring of all knowledge.

“Wikipedia was originally part of the internet,” Vance said after Emilio finally returned the tablet to him. “In the old days, anybody could read it. Since it wasn’t generally believed that the internet would someday come to an end, only a few people had the foresight to copy the whole thing onto tablets like this. Now, one of them sells for the price of twenty good horses.”

Emilio understood why. Without a Wikipedia, you might search through a dozen books and find only a sentence or two on the subject you were interested in. With one, a few taps of the finger would bring you pages upon pages about any person, place, or event that you could name.

“They must have all been geniuses, back then, if everyone could read this,” Emilio said.

“Oh, but they weren’t,” said Vance. “Owning a book, even a very big one, doesn’t make you a knowledgeable man, any more than owning a guitar makes you a musician.”

“But if you can answer every question by just typing something into the search bar...”

“They *thought* it was teaching them the answer to every question,” said Vance, “but it was really just teaching them that every question had an easy answer. And once *that* concept gets into your subconscious mind, you’re in for a lifetime of trouble.

“I suppose,” he continued, “that you’ve seen pictures of the old cities, Washington and New York and Chicago, with all their beautiful buildings, the way they looked before the downfall of the United States.”

“Yes,” Emilio said, “they have pictures of them in the school library.”

“Well,” said Vance, “the people who build those cities got their knowledge out of regular books, and did their calculations with slide rules. The people who let the cities fall had Wikipedia.”

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The whole town rose with the sun on Monday; “six days shalt thou labour,” the scripture said, and no one would get out of that any more easily than they would get out of resting on the seventh. Emilio let himself out of his attic bedroom by the rope ladder he had built the previous summer – it was quicker than walking down the stairs and through the parlour – and went

straight to work milking the goats, collecting the eggs, and feeding his family's burro and their guest's horse.

Then Vance met him to labour in the garden and orchard. The promise the old man had made outside the gate of Warsaw was verified – once he got down among the plants of the garden, his hands proved so skilled that one might easily forget his age. And he seemed to be on even more intimate terms with the trees in the orchard: he always knew what each one needed, be it pruning or digging or dunging, and he knew better than anyone which of the weak limbs could be strengthened in time, and which had best be cut without delay.

“You look like someone who's worked in an orchard before,” Emilio said.

“How could I hide it?” Vance replied. “Poplar and pine, apple and pear, peach and plum; I've tended to them all in my time.”

While Emilio, fascinated as he was by every new thing, had immediately taken a liking to such a curious stranger as Vance Caron, he had until then worried that his parents might grow weary of the man. But after seeing what the man could do with his hands, Emilio's worries were quite gone.

At noon, Sofi handed the two of them a dinner basket and sent them away to eat with Emilio's cousin Carlos, who worked as a *cherembo* on an algae patty outside the town wall. By law, *cherembos* were provided with full rations by their masters, but as they seldom included plum sauce or other such dainties, Emilio's mother had gotten into the habit of having someone in the family bring Carlos a tastier meal two or three times a week.

Vance and Emilio passed through many rice and algae patties on their way out. “That,” said Emilio as he pointed to a run-down shed, “is the spot where a pressure vessel exploded when they were purifying the oil four years ago. Three *cherembos* and an overseer were killed. Because the accident involved the misuse of technology, the priests launched an inquisition. The owner lost half his possessions, and the new law is that every vessel has to be replaced after two thousand pressure cycles.

“Some of the landowners complained about it, since pressure vessels are expensive, but here in Indiana, *nobody* disrespects the inquisition.”

Emilio's usual cheeriness faded as they approached the place where Carlos worked, and the three of them ate mostly in silence, though Carlos introduced himself to Vance, and talked a little about his work.

Vance listened for a while. “I did nearly the same when I was your age,” he then said. “Except that in the Canadas, the climate's no good for algae, so we got our fuel from poplars – miles and miles of them. For five years I went down the rows each day with a billhook, cutting down as many limbs as I could, leaving just enough for the tree to recover in two years, and loading what I did cut onto a horse cart to be piled up in vats and fermented into ethanol. I was a creature of the forest.”

“And I'm a creature of the pond,” said Carlos. “We work just as hard, but get no shade.

“Though come to think of it, I don't really need shade, as I've got darker skin than you. And I don't need a horse cart, or a billhook, or even shoes – not when we're down in the water. Just a pair of underwear and a slime rake. We *cherembos* don't come with accessories.”

After their meal was finished and Carlos had waded back into the algae, Vance and Emilio turned their feet towards Warsaw again.

“I suppose I know why you’re so glum when you go out here,” Vance said to Emilio. “You see your own future in the algae patties, and you don’t like it.”

“You suppose right,” said Emilio, “though it’s not like anyone’s trying to keep it a secret. I’m a firstborn son, and my parents owe money on that glass shop.”

“Well,” said Vance, “I don’t think you need to be afraid. Your cousin is quiet, but not because he’s miserable. And if you watch him closely, you’ll see that there’s an art and a beauty to the way he pulls and twists that rake through the water to get as much of the green stuff as possible.

“You seem to have an intellectual temperament, so perhaps you’re worried you’ll find no joy in a job without much thinking. But live as long as I do and you’ll realize that thinking can wear you down, too. Sometimes rest means working all day till your muscles are good and sore, and then falling asleep without a thought left in your mind.

“Anyway,” he concluded, “it will make you strong. And when you’re done with it, everyone will see you as a man and not a boy. And you won’t be invisible to the girls anymore.”

“You say all that,” Emilio replied, “but when you were young, you worked for wages. I won’t be a free man like you.”

“I got wages,” Vance replied, “but they didn’t make me rich. And when I finally left that poplar plantation, my parents still had their mortgage. Working for money isn’t all it’s made out to be.”

There was little work left in the garden after Vance and Emilio returned, so when Emilio heard that some of his friends had a game of football going, he ran to join them. Some protested at first, complaining about how quickly he had deserted them two days ago, but Emilio was swift to reply:

“Somebody had to welcome that man to Warsaw. It’s what we’ve been told to do to strangers every Sunday since we were too young to talk.”

So the boys had to admit that Emilio was right, and they even made him a goalkeeper. He didn’t do well, not at first, when he couldn’t get his mind off everything he and Vance had talked about. His opponents scored on him twice, but eventually he cleared his head and focused on the game, and made several good saves, and eventually saw his team win three to two.

Later Emilio heard that Vance Caron had also kept himself busy that afternoon: he had gone out among Rafael and Sofi’s neighbours, repaired solar water heaters for two of them, and examined a sickly peach tree for a third, pruning it and telling its owners exactly what they needed to do over the coming year to keep it alive.

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Tuesday was little different from Monday. Emilio did the morning chores, then he and Vance worked in the garden and orchard till dinner time. They saw an airplane fly overhead, made of spruce wood with a slender fuselage and long, thin wings. It was the only airplane that ever appeared in Warsaw, and neither Emilio nor anyone in his family had ever shelled out the money to fly on it.

“Ah,” said Vance, “a Rutanesque.”

“What’s that?” said Emilio.

“Almost every airplane you’ll see these days is a Rutanesque. They’re patterned after the planes built by a man named Rutan back in the 1980s. Long, thin wings, light construction, the most fuel-efficient planes on Earth. He even flew nonstop around the world in one of them.

“But petroleum was so cheap back then that nobody cared about Rutan’s designs. It wasn’t till nearly a century later that they saw much use. Now, they’re just about all that’s left in the sky.”

Later, Vance would let Emilio have his Wikipedia again to look at pictures of all the strange airplanes that flew back in the Twentieth Century: airplanes with tails in the back instead of canard wings, airplanes with no propellers, giant planes that could hold a hundred people, all-metal planes, and planes with short, stubby wings that couldn’t fly at all unless they were going *really* fast.

Each of them was optimized for *something*, Vance explained. But the Rutanesques were optimized to use the least fuel, and that’s the reason you could still see them and not the others.

After dinner Vance and Emilio again parted ways, Emilio to find his friends, and Vance to do more plumbing or tree work for anyone who had the need.

This time Emilio gathered up four other boys to go to the house of his friend Pepe, who lived on a farmstead outside the town wall, on the edge of the largest nearby lake. Emilio and Pepe had built a raft together at the beginning of the summer, and now the six boys went down to the thicket of trees by the lakeshore to retrieve it.

They left their shorts and sandals on the shore and clambered naked onto the raft, then rowed it out into the lake. It capsized twice, but both times they managed to right it. Eventually they reached their destination: a sunken movie theatre, which was now the best diving spot in Warsaw.

The boys spent the rest of the afternoon diving from twenty or thirty foot parapets into the cold water below, and swimming laps between the remnants of the structure’s two outermost walls. They even had a race, though Emilio only managed to come in third. Eventually the westerling sun convinced them of the need to return; they boarded the raft again, and reached Pepe’s house just as dusk fell.

When Emilio returned to his own house for supper, he was surprised to find how much of a stir Vance had created among the townsfolk.

“And what all do you talk to these people about, while you’re fixing their pipes and trees?” his father asked the man.

“Oh, history, science, politics, religion,” said Vance, “whatever strikes their fancy.”

“Well,” Rafael replied, “you’ve certainly let the rumours fly.”

“Rumours always fly around me,” said Vance. “I don’t try to pass as an ordinary fellow.”

“I wouldn’t be much worried,” replied Rafael, “except that one of those rumours is that you practice magic.”

“That’s strange to hear,” said Vance. “I figured that if people were going to accuse me of something, it would at least be a thing whose definition they could agree on.”

“What do you mean by that?” said Rafael.

“Magic,” Vance replied, “comes from the Greek work *mageia*, but nearly everyone who uses that word means a different thing. When some folks say that something is magical, they only

mean that it's neat. Like Ben Franklin's magic squares, the grids of numbers where every row and every column has the same sum.

"When other people talk about magic, they're just talking about technology they don't understand. The magnetic compass, for instance, was once called a magic spoon, because it always pointed north, but nobody really knew why.

"Then, there is magic as an illusion, like in a magic show."

"We don't allow those in Warsaw, or anywhere in Indiana, really," said Rafael.

"I'm sorry to hear it," Vance replied. "In Quebec, the magic show is a most useful institution. You see, if people are accustomed to seeing smoke and mirrors used as entertainment, they will be more alert to those who play similar tricks on the mind in politics and business.

"Also," he went on, "magic might just mean having philosophical or spiritual knowledge that other people don't. That is why in your Bibles, in the nativity story, the word *Magi* is translated as "wise men." The *Magi* knew what the Star of Bethlehem meant, even though most people didn't."

"Well," said Rafael, "what about the scriptures that say that sorcerers will inherit the lake of fire? That's the one I think everyone here is uneasy about."

"Ah," said Vance. "But the Greek word in those passages isn't *mageia* at all. It's *pharmakeia*."

"Like *pharmacy*?" asked Rafael incredulously.

"Yes," said Vance, "though I suppose you don't know the half of what people in the old days were doing with drugs. It wasn't just a matter of doctors treating illness, on the one hand, and addicts chasing pleasures, on the other. There was a very wide range of things that a pharmacist knew how to do, both to the body, and to the mind.

"You've heard how people in those days were encouraged to work inhumanely long hours, and separate themselves from their families, and go from state to state chasing higher wages and better jobs with no end in sight?"

"Yes, I've heard," said Rafael, "the priests talk about it from time to time, how it was a wicked and materialistic thing. It never seemed to make much sense to me."

"Well," said Rafael, "as you can expect, all that separation and loneliness made people rather melancholy, but rather than admit they were valuing the wrong things, they often just got doctors to diagnose them with an illness of the mind, and prescribe them pills so that lifestyle wouldn't make them sad."

"That sounds like a pretty nasty form of slavery," said Rafael.

"But that isn't even the worst of it," Vance said. "They also sent their children to crowded schools that made them sit still for seven or eight hours on end. But kids generally don't want to do that sort of thing, and would rather be out and about, wrestling or climbing trees or what have you. So some of them got restless, misbehaved, talked out of turn, and hardly seemed to learn anything."

"So did they beat them with sticks?" asked Rafael.

"No," said Vance. "They drugged them. Made them so they couldn't get bored no matter how long they sat. But it also dampened their desire to talk to their friends, or play outside, or climb trees."

“They could make it,” Emilio asked after a pause, “so kids didn’t want to climb trees?”

“Yes,” Vance said, “it was a bad time.”

“Well,” said Sofi, “if all that’s really true, then no doubt the wrath of God was upon those people.”

“Altering somebody’s mind like that,” said Rafael, “sure sounds like sorcery to me.”

At dinner they talked about lighter things, but afterwards Rafael again became worried.

“You’ve given a lot of people the impression,” he said to Vance, “that you’re a religious dissident. I doubt that’s what you meant to do, but it’s definitely something to worry about.

“In the eastern countries, there are people who say that we Christians are the dupes of a Church that takes advantage of us here on Earth by promising to land our souls in an imaginary heaven. Nobody here sees it that way.

“We trust our priests with our souls because he who has proven faithful over small things deserves to be entrusted with great things. Most of what has been done, since the petroleum ran dry, to better the lives of the common folk here in the Midwest has been done by the Holy Church.

“It was in my own lifetime, for instance, that our priests overturned the old understanding of the Torah. It used to be that people said, ‘The Old Testament is a lesser law, so we can ignore it.’ Now they say, ‘The Old Testament is a lesser law, so we must treat the poor *at least* as well as it demands.’

“The Torah allows for temporary servitude, but not perpetual debt. Therefore, anyone can get out of debt by sending his child into temporary servitude. And the Torah requires that employees’ wages be paid daily, therefore, everyone with hired employees must pay them *at least* daily.

“Even the folks who don’t much think about the salvation of their souls still see what has happened and give the Church and the priests the respect they deserve. If you do anything to make those people think they have to choose between you and the Holy Faith, they will choose the Faith, every time. So be careful.”

“I will be careful,” Vance replied. “And I assure you that everything you’ve heard is just a rumour. But I will be careful.”

“You had best be,” said Rafael. “The same statute that mandated daily payment for wage earners also revived the criminal penalties for heresy.”

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Wednesday passed much like Tuesday. Vance and Emilio carried dinner out to Carlos a second time. In the afternoon, Vance once more mingled among the townsfolk, helped them with their orchards, and repaired their plumbing. But that night the rumours got even worse: Vance Caron, it was said, was an accomplished sorcerer who was going from house to house in Warsaw preaching free love and the transmigration of souls.

“I think I might have figured out the sorcery thing,” Emilio said to Vance. “There was a sermon a few weeks ago about how, in the old days, too much time spent with machines made people clueless about how to work with living things. Which is why they were such poor farmers, when they finally had to go back to the land.

“Well, some people took the idea too far. They think it’s impossible for one person to be good at both mechanics and gardening. So they see that you have a good hand for both, and say it must be because of occult powers.

“I think it’s all stupid, and if being good with both trees and water heaters means you’re a wizard, then wizards are something that Warsaw needs a lot more of. But I would still be careful if I were you.”

Transmigration of souls got Rafael quite worked up when he heard about it.

“I wasn’t teaching it,” Vance protested. “I just talked about how the people in Maine believe in it.”

“You could have left that detail out when you talked about Maine,” said Rafael.

“But what good would it do a town to offer hospitality to strangers if they didn’t tell strange tales about strange people in strange lands?”

“And the free love?”

“Eh, I might have said something that was misunderstood.”

“Which was?”

“That the belief some people seem to hold around here, that sexual intercourse is inherently filthy, and that the reason you get married in a church, by a priest, is that his blessing will neutralize the filthiness of the act, deserves to be laughed at.”

“I never thought of it as filthy,” said Sofi, “only dangerous, if you don’t choose your partner wisely, and if you don’t wait till the right time. It’s just like why we have priests inspect and bless combustion engines, or any other technology we’ve held onto from the old days. It’s dangerous if it isn’t used wisely, so get a man of God on your side before you go ahead.”

“Exactly!” said Vance. “I said almost the same thing. All I objected to was the idea that it’s filthy. You don’t ask God to bless something if it’s filthy.

“And I also said that, where I come from, when people choose to get married in a church – since not everybody does – it’s because those two people want to start their new life together by worshipping God, and for no other reason.”

Now that really shocked Rafael and Sofi. It wasn’t because they disagreed with it – they couldn’t avoid seeing the beauty or wisdom in such an outlook – but they knew that a good lawyer would have no trouble finding some piece of the catechism that contradicted it, and then he would have a closed case for heresy. The penalty wasn’t death – such barbarities had long been done away with – but it could get a man a year in prison. And to think of a man like Vance Caron rotting away in a prison was a dreadful thing indeed.

Rafael and Sofi stood silent for a moment, and their eyes welled up with tears.

“I am going to miss your presence here,” said Rafael. “I am going to miss your voice, and your knowledge, and your storytelling, and your work in the garden, and in the orchard, and for our neighbours, and I’m going to miss your friendship with our son.

“But you are going to need to leave now. You’re not safe here. I have no ill-will towards you, nor would our priests, if they really knew your heart. But they don’t know it; they only know the rumours that are being spread about you. Perhaps in the next town you visit, you’ll play it safer.”

“Or perhaps you won’t,” said Sofi. “Getting to know you wouldn’t have been the experience it was if you hadn’t spoken so freely. You are your own man; if you’ve chosen to live on the edge so that you can bring travellers’ tales to the folks here in Indiana, then more power to you. We just won’t let you come to harm under the shadow of our roof.”

“I will gather my things, then,” said Vance. “You are better hosts than I could have hoped for. Perhaps after many years we shall meet again.”

“Don’t worry about going away empty,” said Sofi. “We’ll pack your bags with bread and sandwiches, plum sauce and other good things.”

“Undeserved,” said Vance, “but greatly appreciated.”

Late that night, when few people were out and about, Vance Caron was at last ready to depart. Emilio was the last of the Gill family to speak with him, as he hitched up the one horse shay and loaded his guest’s baggage.

“I perceive,” said Vance, “that you are going to miss me a lot,” said Vance.

“I am,” said Emilio.

“You are a curious child, and I am a curious man. It can make life tough, when most folks don’t have the same thirst for knowledge that you do.”

“It can,” said Emilio.

“Well,” said Vance, “if you want to honour me, and get your own quest for knowledge off to a good start at the same time, then there is something I would like you to do.”

“Which is?”

“Don’t be angry at the people whose misplaced zeal forced me out of your town. And don’t be angry at the priests who planted that zeal in them.”

Emilio stood silent for a while, wondering.

“There are a lot of religions in the world,” said Vance. “And all of them, or at least the good ones, have some things in common. They teach people that the Powers that govern the universe have a plan for people like you and me. They teach that this plan starts with us treating one another the way we would like to be treated. They teach that we are all, every one of us, living a life of near-constant mistakes, and they teach us to be humble, and recognize the smallness of our knowledge and our abilities.

“And they teach us that because we are small, there is something out there that deserves our worship.

“This is what religions do. And they have their differences. They have their prejudices. They have their myths, their stories that people tell about the past and the future that often prove, on examination, to be quite silly.

“All of them do. I knew this when I came to Warsaw, and this isn’t the first time I’ve fled a town for fear of being tried for heresy, sorcery, or something else along those lines. I knew the risk, and I took it, because I knew that people like you would think well of me for it.

“So don’t be angry at the priests, or at your fellow townspeople. They make mistakes; so does everybody. But they also look out for each other: they’ve helped the common folk here to win the rights that your father has spoken of so proudly.

“Imagine that all the religions of the world were trees. One would be a poplar, another a pine; there would be an apple tree and a pear tree and a peach tree and a plum tree and so forth. They’re not the same; they don’t give you the same fruits. But the idea that these religions are all wrong together – that there isn’t a plan behind our lives, and that there aren’t any Powers before which we need to humble ourselves – next to all the trees of the forest, that is the bramblebush, and it bears the worst fruit.

“You, living here in Warsaw, have probably never seen the bramblebush up close. In Quebec in my own youth, brambles were a bit more common. In the old days, when men were as wicked as your priests say, and then some, it was a whole forest of brambles as far as the eye can see.

“We all make mistakes,” said Vance. “Even the religious folks. But those who believe in the Powers tend to be more humble about it all. So admit your shortcomings. And forgive other people theirs. And remember that the rights your people have won for themselves count for much more than one old Canadian having to flee Warsaw in the middle of the night in a one horse shay. If you care about my sacrifice, then defend those rights.”

Emilio stood thinking for a while. “I’ll forgive them,” he said. “I’ll remember your words. And I’ll stand up for my people.”

“Goodnight, Emilio,” said Vance, “and farewell.”