

## **Release**

By

Larry Russick

“Identification,” ordered the brown shirted policeman at the checkpoint.

John Goodsen handed over his ID with a smile, “Busy night.” He had waited in line for a half hour to get into Columbus.

The officer impatiently matched the ID to the man, “They’re all busy. It’s worse during the day. Where you going?”

“I’m going to see a friend in town.” John looked warmly into the stern officer’s eyes. “I’ll be staying for a few days.”

The officer slid the ID through the reader on his hand-held computer. “Who will you be visiting and how long?”

“Jackson Eberhard, three days.”

“All right,” he said punching in this information. “Remember, if you deviate from this you will be in violation of code 37514 and will be subject to arrest and prosecution.”

“Well, you know what they say about guests and fish.”

The officer smiled in spite of himself, “In three days they both begin to stink. Well, have a nice visit.” He handed back the ID.

John started his car and drove off from the checkpoint. That wasn't too bad, he thought.

They usually questioned him more extensively, sometimes making him leave his car so they could search it, while they questioned and searched him. They were always screening for terrorists. If you were a Party member (John was not) you could take the express lane and just flash your ID at the screen.

John drove the streets of Columbus into an area of tall faceless apartments. The area was brightly lit and police cars patrolled. Few people were on the streets. This was where Non party members lived. It was for their own safety. Even though they were not of the Party, they had the right to live safely. That was the law.

John pulled his station wagon into a space by Building 9, climbed out and stretched his long thin body. Opening the rear door that lifted up to his chest, he ducked in for his bag, then entered the foyer of the gray concrete building through metal doors. The foyer, which had no windows, was illuminated by a single bulb in the ceiling.

John took the stairs to the fifth floor to see his people. He was a Sharer, one of those who had people all across the country that he visited and communed with. They were always glad to see him and he them.

The stairwell was dark and mottled due to the paint that had peeled off the walls revealing the color underneath, however, there was no curling paint; it had been scraped, and also there were no chips on the floor, no smell of urine—the place was neat and clean.

That's good, thought John, they are allowed to keep clean. Sometimes the Party would not allow the Nons to bathe or maintain their surroundings. This was to demonstrate how they were unfit for freedom. The local administration must not subscribe to that policy, thought John.

The hallway leading to the apartment was clean also. There was even a rug and handmade wall sconces that provided a warm glow. John smiled, set his bag down and knocked on the door.

A man in his early sixties opened it. He filled the door frame, "John!" he said with delight. He gave his visitor a long hug. "So good to see you. We are overdue for a visit. Helen," he shouted, "look who's here." With that and an arm around him, he hauled John into the main room where a few people sat.

They all jumped up at the sight of him. An energetic woman in her 60's came forward, "Jackson, stop manhandling the poor boy. You must be exhausted, here, sit down and relax."

"I've been sitting for five hours. I think I'll stand if that's okay. How are you, Helen?"

Helen, who was beaming as if one of her children had returned from a long trip, said, "Fine, never been better, let me take your coat. Jackson, get his things. Everybody come in the kitchen; we'll have tea and bread."

There were four other people besides the hosts, a young couple with a baby and a boy about sixteen who was somber and keeping to himself. But even the boy came into the kitchen.

The guest stood in the corner of the small eating area near the one window. Jackson and the couple with the quiet baby sat at the table. Helen made tea, and the boy sat on the edge of the counter opposite and looked at John with interest and suspicion.

“You have enough food, Jackson?” John asked.

“Enough for a few days. We always seem to have enough for a few days, but there’s no work. Not for Nons.”

“Now, Jackson, let’s not ruin the fun by talking about our troubles.”

“I’m sorry; it’s hard not to think about them.”

The teenager exhaled loudly. Eyes in the room looked nervously from John’s to his.

“Jesse, hi,” said John, “I’ve been ignoring you. How are you?”

“I’m okay.”

“Very upset,” said his father. “His friend, Enzo, was picked up last week. It doesn’t look good.”

“I’m sorry, Jesse.” John looked into Jesse’s burning eyes. Everyone was silent. The air was thick in the way the air is the second before it rains.

“Enzo didn’t do nothin.” Jesse jumped down from the counter and left the room. A few seconds later the door slammed.

“I’d better go after him,” said Jackson.

“I’ll go with you,” enjoined John.

“No, you’d better stay.”

All the faces held frightened eyes and tight mouths, except for the baby, sleeping peacefully in his mother’s arms.

“Jackson, be careful. John, stay here. It’s bad out there. You don’t know—”

“I know. Don’t worry.” John followed Jackson out.

John and Jackson went down the five flights.

“John, you shouldn’t come—“

“I should.” John’s soft brown eyes narrowed; there was a certain authority in his voice. Jackson left off.

“Where will he go?”

“Probably down by the river. That’s were his friends used to meet after curfew until the police caught them one night.”

John didn’t bother asking why they let Jesse leave the apartment. You can’t stop a determined teenager. They were careful to avoid the open areas between buildings.

Jackson knew when the police would make their rounds and where they parked to sleep.

The air around the gray buildings was dead. Nothing moved. The sky seemed black due to all the security lighting.

Waiting at the last building, Jackson looked at his watch and with a hand signal, let John know when it was safe. They ran for the trees that stood beyond the project’s perimeter by 100 yards.

They reached the trees, gasping for breath, “I’m not young anymore.”

“Maybe not your body,” said John.

Jackson led John down a path deeper into the woods, stopping every few minutes to listen. The sound of the river became louder. The trail emerged in the pale glow of stars and reflections off the water.

Suddenly they heard a bullhorn, “Stand where you are. Don't move or I'll shoot.”

It seemed all around them and they stopped, frightened, thinking they were surrounded. However, lights played on the water about 50 feet down river ahead of them. They moved cautiously in the direction of the lights.

“Go f\_\_k yourselves you slimy bastards. I can go anywhere I want. You can’t stop me.”

“Shut up kid. You’re not going anywhere anymore. I might just shoot you right here, you little terrorist.” An angry brown-shirted policeman waved his weapon.

“No stop!” Jackson emerged, walking in their direction, “He didn’t mean anything.”

They turned their lights on Jackson; their guns too.

“Yip, yip, yip, yip, look at me, I’m a terrorist.” Suddenly a nearly naked man came running along the water’s edge, waving his arms and yelling, “Look at me, yip, yip, yip, I’m a terrorist.” He ran up past them and then back, flailing his arms, jumping and dancing, getting wilder and crazier with each pass.

Everyone turned to look. “Yuuhaa, yeehaa you can’t catch me, you can’t catch me. I’m the dancing terrorist!”

Then he started dancing and splashing water while making a babble of noises.

“Hey, you! Cut it out,” yelled Nieves, the policeman in charge. “Edgerton, Lacy, get that guy.” Two officers holstered their guns and went to seize the man. He took off running again. He was fast.

One officer stayed back to guard Jesse and his father, watching the show going on by the water’s edge.

Then a shot was fired. It was Nieves. “Shut up and stop running, or I’ll shoot you,” he yelled.

The man stopped and was quiet. Edgerton and Lacy grabbed a hold of him. They dragged him over to Nieves. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Nothing,” said John.

Nieves hit him in the stomach with his gun, “Well, there will be.” Then speaking to the 4th man, “Jeffries, bring the other two over here.”

Jeffries, who was standing just a few feet behind Nieves said, “They’re gone.”

“What!” screamed Nieves, “You idiot.”

“They must’ve slipped off in all the commotion.”

“Well go find them. Edgerton, go with him.”

Edgerton and Jeffries then went up into the woods.

Lacy roughly handcuffed John.

“I’m sorry. I was joking. I didn’t want my friends to get in trouble.”

“Well, you’re in plenty of trouble now.” He leveled his gun at John’s head.

“Kneel down you son of a bitch. Move away, Lacy.” Nieves kicked at John’s head. John ducked, but it caught him in the shoulder and put him on his back. Nieves then aimed his gun and was about to shoot when his communicator pinged. He cursed, “What the hell do you want?”

“Nieves!” the voice shouted.

“Yes, sir,” responded Nieves with annoyance.

“You have that kid yet?”

“It’s not a kid, sir. I think we’ve got that terrorist you’ve been looking for. I was just about to defend myself against him.”

“Don’t shoot him, you moron, bring him in for questioning. You hurt him and I’ll . . .” His voice dropped into a low growl.

“He’s fine. We’ll be there in 30 minutes.”

“You’d better be.” The communicator went off.

“F\_\_ing asshole. All right, nature boy, get up.” He gave John another kick. John got to his feet. They led him farther upriver to a boat pulled up on the sand. Nieves pushed John against it, “Get in.”

“Nieves,” said Lacy, “Haines said not to hurt him.”

Nieves turned his gun on Lacy, “You want some of this too?”

Lacy backed away. John got in the stern of the boat. He did not look worried but very attentive. He heard a fish jump out towards the middle of the river, a sound of another world.

“They’re gone.” Edgerton and Jeffries returned empty handed.

“Shit . . . all right, get in,” cursed Nieves shaking his head in disgust.

They drove the boat upriver a couple of miles to a dock that lead to the back of a brick building sitting near the foot of a large bridge. John could hear the humming of tires on steel grates.

No one spoke. They led John with shoves and yanks down the dock and up into the building. All the men shielded their eyes from the lights inside the police station. They took John down the hallway, uncuffed him, and pushed him into a room with white walls. A small table with three chairs was in the center.

John settled himself slowly into one of the chairs. He took a few deep breaths, and began to slow down his breathing in preparation for what was coming next. He was not afraid. He thought of his wife and his child who had died and was not afraid. He thought of the One. He thought . . . . He stopped thinking.

An officer entered. He had lightening bolt insignias on his jacket collar. He looked tired; the lines in his face looked tired from the strain of maintaining themselves. He carried a black metal box with dials and knobs on it.

“Hello, John, nice to make your acquaintance,” he said without warmth. He set the box on the table. “I’m going to ask you some questions.”

He opened the box and pulled from it three wires, two thin with needles on the ends and one power cord, this last he plugged into the wall.

“Lay your arms on the table, palms up.”

John did so. There was a black spot on both wrists above a prominent vein.

“I see you’ve been with us before.” The officer inserted a narrow wire into each dot. The wires caused only a drop or two to exit the wounds. He turned one of the dials. John’s upper body trembled. He turned it back.

“What is your name?”

“John.”

His interrogator watched the dials as John answered the questions.

“Are you from around here?”

“No.”

“Have you eaten today?”

“Yes.”

“Who were those two people, a man and a teenager?”

“They were my friends.”

“What were their names?”

“What is your name?” responded John.

“I’m asking the questions. What are their names?”

John remained silent. The officer turned a knob and John’s upper body trembled.

“What were their names?” He turned the knob back.

“What is your name?”

“Lt. Haines, thank you for asking. Now, answer my question.”

“Sarah.”

Haines looked at his dials and then the face of his prisoner. “What?”

“Sarah,” John responded again.

“Sarah?”

“Your daughter, she is sick.”

“How do you know that?” Haines had anger in his voice.

“Sarah is very sick. You think she is dying. I am very sorry.”

Haines looked at the dials again, and into John’s eyes. John’s eyes confused him.

There was something there that he recognized, even welcomed, but it disconcerted him

because he saw that look so rarely.

“Th ...thank you.”

“She is not dying.”

“What...?”

“She’s going to be okay.” Gratitude and confusion hit Haines at the same time. Tears formed in the corners of his eyes.

“When you sit by her tonight, tell her how much you love her and that you know she’ll be all right.”

Haines switched off the machine, pulled the needles out of John’s wrists and wiped them off with a cloth. Then he packed up the device and left the room.

There were loud voices in the hallway. “What do you mean he didn’t know? He knew them.”

“Shut up, Sergeant.”

“I’m telling you, he knew them.”

“Perhaps *you’d* like to be questioned,” said Haines in a menacing tone. “I’m sure the Party could learn a lot from you.”

Nieves became silent.

“Keep him here and don’t harm him. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“But ...”

“But what?”

“Nothing.”

A few doors were slammed and then things became quiet.

A guard entered, “Come with me.”

He followed the guard; another guard brought up the rear. They went down several flights of stairs and entered a dimly lit cell area. He was put in a small cell by himself. There were other people in other cells, but they watched silently. John could barely make out their faces in the gloom. He sensed hopelessness and fear.

His cell had a bed, a toilet without a seat, and a sink. John lay down and immediately fell asleep.

“Get up!” a hard voice commanded. It was Nieves. John sat up slowly. He didn’t recognize where he was at first, then it dawned on him with a shudder. He rose; Nieves roughly put on the hand cuffs.

“You try anything, I’ll shoot you. I don’t give a damn what that asshole said.”

He indicated a stairway. John headed up. Nieves followed him with a gun in his hand. Edgerton and Lacy met them in the corridor at the top of the stairs.

“You’re coming with us.”

The two police sat in the front, John in the back behind the steel grating. They drove for twenty minutes and then pulled into the parking garage below a large, new-looking building. There were only a few people on the streets downtown; it was early. They stopped in front of a set of double glass doors. Haines was there. He opened the back. “Come with me.”

John followed him into the building. Unlike the police station, this place had a high-end interior—wall paper, art work, indirect lighting and other amenities.

Once inside the elevator, Haines removed the handcuffs.

“Thank you.”

“Thank ‘you.’ My daughter is better. She slept last night. I slept last night.”

Haines smiled. They got off at the fifth floor. Haines brought him into an office with a shower and kitchenette.

“Go ahead and get cleaned up. Here, I got you some clothes.” He handed John a satchel. “You’re about my size.”

John showered and dressed. The clothes were nicer than his own, the ones he took off in the woods.

When he came out of the bathroom he found Haines sitting at the table with food, eating with some relish. "Help yourself."

John sat and added a few things to a paper plate.

"I have someone who wants to meet you. He's Principal Investigator, Benton."

At the name, John felt a chill. He had never seen anyone that high up before. He noticed nervous excitement in his chest; this could be a good thing. He went inside himself, touched a point of light, then buttered a bagel.

"You look good in my clothes," Haines said as they rode the elevator to the 15th floor. "Benton is looking forward to seeing you. However, I warn you, tell no one of this." He gave John a deadly look, then smiled and looked away. It was difficult for Haines to maintain eye contact.

"This is John. He's here to see the Principal Investigator," said Haines to the secretary.

The secretary made no special note of John. He looked like all other visitors. "Go right in. Mr. Benton is waiting to see you."

Haines didn't move, just nodded with his head toward the door behind the secretary.

"He just wants to see *you*."

John opened the door slowly and took a deep breath before he entered. It was a large room with walls covered in what looked like dark brown cork. Large cherry book cases lined the walls. The shelves held books, but also religious and spiritual symbolic

figures, gods and goddesses, Buddhas, pictures of Christ, gurus, and avatars. There were also bells, lamps and incense holders, wands, crucifixes, crystal balls, and figures of angels.

A man sat in a large backed desk chair behind a massive mahogany desk with a top inlaid with leather. His body, enveloped by the chair whose back was above his head, was hard to discern. Light poured in behind him through a wall of glass. The light was bright but soft, the yellow light of early morning just past sunrise.

“Take a seat, John.”

John sat across the desk from the man. He shielded his eyes so he could make out the Principal Investigator’s face.

“Don’t worry; I’m not going to torture you.”

John was surprised to hear that. Not because he thought he was in for more torture, but that it was referred to by its name. Nothing having to do with the actions of the Party ever was.

“I didn’t think you were.”

“I always could, of course.” His tone grew darker.

John waited to hear what this man wanted.

The men looked at each other in silence. Each felt that there was something about the other that was not easily seen.

“So, you’re one of those healers.” Benton spoke first.

“If you say so.”

“Haines says so. His daughter was dying and so was part of Haines, for that matter. You healed them both.”

“I only saw what was true about them.”

“Which was . . .?” Benton’s tone was questioning in the way a mother’s tone is when her child is not as forthcoming as she would wish.

“They are whole and beautiful like . . .” John paused; he wasn’t sure he should speak openly.

“Yes?” Benton drew the word out.

“Like you.”

“Me?” Benton laughed sarcastically. “I’m *so* beautiful.”

“You are more than meets the eye. We all are.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“You’ve heard the expression: ‘The Kingdom of God is within you’?”

“It is, is it?” Benton was becoming irritated.

John sensed it. He slowly nodded, “If it’s not there, it’s not anywhere.”

“Can you help me see this kingdom?” Benton had a smirk on his face.

“Do you want to?”

“Of course, why do you think I have all that crap on my shelves—all those books,

Bhagavad-Gita, Tao Te Ching, Mount Analog, Autobiography of a Yogi, Blue Cliff

Record?”

“I wasn’t sure—know thine enemy?”

Benton didn’t respond for a few moments, then said, “This nothingness, this is your Kingdom of Heaven?”

John became very still. Now *he* was quiet. Benton noticed the warm light that seemed to beam from John's eyes. Was it there when he came in? He couldn't remember. Maybe I just didn't notice.

"Andre." John said the name like he was remembering something he'd forgotten a long time ago.

"Andre, that's your name isn't it?"

There was an ache in Benton's chest. "My mother died when I was two; she called me that."

"Andre, mamam t'aime."

"Cut it out," said Benton weakly. "I don't know who told you about me, but you'd better stop while you're ahead. This is not a game we play here."

"Andre, mamam t'aime."

Benton rose from his chair, enraged; it fell over backwards. He started around the desk towards John, clutching his chest and grunting, "I'll have you killed—painfully—you'll wish you were never born."

"Andre, mamam t'aime," John said gently, looking into Benton's eyes.

Benton, almost reaching John, doubled over, one hand on his chest, the other on his stomach. Intense sobs burst from his mouth and his eyes ran with tears.

John leaned toward him, looking in his eyes, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"Andre, mamam—."

Benton crumbled to the floor, shaking with sobs, no longer trying to get at John. John knelt beside him with his hand on the middle of Benton's back. He waited. When the sobs subsided he asked, "Would you like to speak to her?"

Benton nodded. He began speaking softly in French.

John responded, "Je t'aime, mon cherie. I will always love you."

John sat on the rug and leaned his back on the desk for support. He let Benton lean against him and spoke quietly, as if to his own child, "Andre, mamam t'aime."

Benton's body shook. His mother in the form of John spoke to him. She told him she would always love him and never leave him. Gradually Benton stopped crying. He took a deep breath, a vast breath. He felt full and light. He got to his feet, a smile growing on his wet face. Reaching down, he helped John to his feet also. Again, both men were silent. The air in the room hung with a deafening quiet.

Benton held up his index finger, "Nothingness?"

John smiled.

"What can I do?"

"Release everyone."

"Everyone? I do hold some bad people, John."

"Release the kids, the parents."

"I'll do what I can." Benton reached out his hand.

John gave him a hug, "Goodbye my friend."

"Goodbye."

John turned around and made to leave.

"Wait." Benton pressed gold coins into John's hand. "Call me if you need help."

"Thank you."

In the outer office Haines still waited. He was glad to see John emerge unscathed. He drove John back to Jackson's tenement. "People shouldn't have to live like this."

“It’s not the building. It’s the repression and hatred that comes from fear. Fear based on ignorance.”

Haines nodded. “Call me if you ever need me.” He waved as he drove off.

John walked up the five flights and knocked on Jackson’s door. There were sounds of movement behind the door. A gruff uncertain voice spoke, “Who is it?”

“It’s me, John, don’t be afraid.”

At that, the door swung open. Jackson looked at him then quickly looked down both ends of the hallway, yanked John inside and shut the door. “Are you all right?” He looked him over.

“I’m fine, never better.”

Jackson wrapped both arms around him and lifted him off the floor. “My God, I thought you were a dead man. Helen,” he bellowed, “it’s John. He’s all right.”

Helen’s head appeared around the corner then she rushed over to them. “Put him down, Jackson, before you crush him.” She grabbed hold of John and squeezed him, “Oh, thank God you’re all right.”

Jackson kept an arm around John’s shoulder. Helen held his arm with both of hers and guided him to the kitchen. They let up on him a little but refused to let go, as if fearing he would evaporate.

Jesse was standing in the corner. When the three people entered as one unit, he came over to John with his head bowed, “I’m so sorry. I’m sorry, sorry. . .”

John spoke to him in a deep resonant voice, “It’s okay, Jesse, I’m okay; it turned out to be a blessing in disguise.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll see.”

Jesse raised his head. He had a small smile on this face, he wiped his eyes with his sleeve, “I didn’t mean . . .”

“I know, I know what it’s like to—”

Suddenly there were screams in the hallway and the sound of running. Laughter too.

“What the hell?” Jackson went back to the door and opened it. His neighbors were running past and going down the stairs.

“What’s happening?”

“They’re coming back!”

Jackson went to the window. Down below, in the circle, police vans were arriving and unloading people. Many were embracing and laughing. All the while, the police just stood there and watched; no one was getting beaten or shot or dragged away.

There was a knock on the door. Helen opened it.

It was Enzo.

THE END