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The Happiest Man in the World

Alec Wilkinson

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Acknowledgments

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alec Wilkinson has been a writer at *The New Yorker* since 1980. Before that he was a policeman in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, and before that he was a rock and roll musician. He lives with his wife and son in New York City.

ALSO BY ALEC WILKINSON

Midnights

Moonshine

Big Sugar

The Riverkeeper

A Violent Act

My Mentor

Mr. Apology

THE HAPPIEST MAN IN THE WORLD

An Account of the Life of Poppa Neutrino

Alec Wilkinson

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For my wife and son
and our friend
Alexandra Truitt

The port we sail from is far astern and, though far out of sight of land, for ages and ages we continue to sail with sealed orders and our last destination remains a secret to ourselves and our officers. And yet our final haven was predestined ere we stepped from the stocks of creation. Let us not give ear to the superstitious gun-deck gossip about whither we may be gliding for, as yet, not a soul on board of us knows—not even the commodore himself—assuredly not the chaplain—even our professors' scientific surmisings are in vain. On that point, the smallest cabin boy is as wise as the captain.

—HERMAN MELVILLE, *WHITE JACKET*

They went to sea in a sieve, they did.
In a sieve they went to sea:
In spite of all their friends could say,
On a winter's morn, on a stormy day,
In a sieve they went to sea!
And when the sieve turned round and round,
And everyone cried, "You'll all be drowned!"
They called aloud, "Our sieve ain't big,
But we don't care a button! we don't care a fig!
In a sieve we'll go to sea."

—EDWARD LEAR, "THE JUMBLIES"

PART ONE

DAVID PEARLMAN WAS sitting under a pine tree in Flagstaff, Arizona, when he thought of the play, in July of 2004. He was living, with his dog, in a white minivan that was nine years old. The van had been a gift, a few months earlier, from a woman and her husband who'd befriended him in Key West, Florida. They had also given him the dog. Shortly before he met them, Pearlman had undergone a reversal of fortune—a favorable arrangement he believed he had struck had dissolved instead, leaving him destitute. He was seventy-one years old.

Pearlman was fifty when he was bit on the hand by a dog, in Mexico. For two years he was so sick that he assumed he would die. When he recovered, he felt so different from who he had been that he thought he should have a new name. He began calling himself by the first one that came to him: Poppa Neutrino. A neutrino is an itinerant particle so small that it can hardly be detected. Pearlman incorrectly believed that its existence was theoretical. The name appealed to him, because, being suppositional, the particle represented the elements of the hidden life that exert their influence discreetly. Also, because of the particle's capacity for unremitting movement. Mr. Neutrino is nomadic. I once unfolded a map of the country and asked him to trace the routes he had traveled, and before he had completed the first twenty years of his life the pen had worn through the paper.

The van's backseats Neutrino replaced with a platform on which he laid three squares of foam for a bed. All the windows except the front ones he covered with duct tape, and behind the driver's and passenger's seats he strung a curtain, so that anyone who looked in the van while he slept

would think that it was empty. At the end of June, he and his dog, a female Boston terrier, left Key West for California. Attached to the van was a trailer on which sat a crudely made raft that Neutrino had built from plywood. Some of the wood he had bought, and some he had scavenged from construction sites. The raft was twelve feet long and four feet wide, and it had a small cabin. People who saw it did not usually conclude that it was a raft. It looked like a tree house, or possibly a shed for poultry. It did not look like anything that would float.

On the passenger's side of the van, in letters about a foot high made with rubbery, black tape, Neutrino had written KEY WEST TO CUBA. He planned to sail to Cuba from California, through the Panama Canal. Crossing the country, though, he had thought that he might prefer sailing west, across the Pacific by himself, something that had been accomplished on a raft only once, by William Willis, in 1964, when Willis was seventy years old. In 1947, Thor Heyerdahl, the first modern man to sail some ways across the Pacific on a raft, sailed, with five companions, aboard the raft *Kon-Tiki,* from Peru to Polynesia. Neutrino regarded Willis and Heyerdahl as heroes.

Neutrino drove to Los Angeles and left the raft at a friend's house. His wife, Betsy Terrell, who had for several months been visiting her family in Maine, called his cell phone and said that she wanted to drive out west and see him before he left. They met in Phoenix then retrieved the raft, then drove to the mountains outside Flagstaff to escape the desert heat. Neutrino now felt that if he could make it across the Pacific he could continue around the world and return to Key West. No one has ever sailed around the world on a raft.

The play came to Neutrino intact and all at once, as a species of epiphany. He had begun by thinking what would happen if all the players but the quarterback ran to the same part of the field, and the ball was lobbed to them.

Would the barrier of players enclosing the receiver be sufficiently thick that none of the defenders could prevent his catching the ball? And would their approach to the goal line be slow but inexorable? Over the years Neutrino had occasionally amused himself by trying to invent a football play that couldn't be stopped. None of the ones he had concocted, however, had held up when he looked at them closely. When the play occurred to him, he saw exactly how it would unfold, and no means by which it could be prevented.

On the back of an envelope, Neutrino wrote the names of the teams he wanted to have use the play, then he went to the library in Flagstaff and looked up their phone numbers. The woman who answered the phone at Notre Dame said that the coach would call him, but he didn't. Neutrino then called the Arizona Cardinals of the NFL, the University of Illinois, Washington State University, Boston College, the University of Kentucky, Columbia University, and California State University, Fresno. At one of the colleges he reached an assistant coach. He said that his name was Poppa Neutrino and that he had a play that would take the team to the Rose Bowl. He said, "Please don't hang up on me," and the man hung up.

Eventually, Neutrino called the University of Arizona, in Tucson. The year before, their team, the Wildcats, had won two games and lost nine. All eleven coaches had been fired. A receptionist told Neutrino that someone would call him back. The next afternoon someone did—Mike Canales, the new quarterback coach. The season before, Canales had been a coach on the staff of the New York Jets. Neutrino explained the play to Canales, and Canales invited him to meet the next morning at the student center. For fear that Canales might withdraw the invitation, Neutrino did not tell him he was calling from Flagstaff, 250 miles away.

Neutrino drove through the night to reach Tucson. He walked around the campus until it was time to meet

Canales. After they had talked for a while and Neutrino had drawn the play for Canales on a napkin, Canales asked Neutrino if he was free to attend the University of Arizona's training camp, in August. In terms of innovation, Canales said, the play struck him as being equal to the forward pass.

Neutrino drove back to Flagstaff. He told Terrell that he was going into football, and she said, "I'm sure you'll do well at it." In a few days, she returned to Maine to study for a master's degree in education.

Neutrino felt that Tucson in August would be too hot for the dog to live in the car. To raise money for a hotel room, he decided to sing for change on the street, in Los Angeles.

BEFORE SAYING MORE about the play and the raft and what became of them, I feel I should describe Neutrino and his past, and some of the influences that have worked their effects on his character and thinking. I feel I should also say that despite my hopes and plans I have no confidence that I can accomplish this succinctly. My own affection for detail is not the only obstacle. Neutrino's past is lavish and prodigal, and it does not easily compress. When I close my eyes and think of him, I don't see his face so much as entertain a torrent of impressions—his essence, that is, broken up into a series of planes, as in a cubist painting.

Most of us go forward presuming that the future will resemble the present. We have an address. We follow a profession or a trade. On nearly all the nights of our lives, we go to bed knowing what we will do the following day, absent the intercession of good or bad luck. None of these observations typifies Neutrino. He is profoundly responsive to impulse. He does not always appear to have a reason for what he does, and sometimes he goes about things so awkwardly, even ineptly, that he brings on himself and the people around him difficulties that might not otherwise have arisen, but he has ardently imagined who he might be, and he has fearlessly embodied what he imagined. His past is one long poem to the random life. I wouldn't have wished to enact it myself, nor would I care to have taken part, but I respect the achievement.

The novelist William Maxwell said, "I can never get enough of other people's lives." Referring in *The Outermost Dream* to the pleasure he took in published diaries and letters and memoirs, he wrote, "They tell what happened—what people said and did and wore and ate and hoped for

and were afraid of, and in detail after often unimaginable detail they refresh our idea of existence and hold oblivion at arm's length. Looked at broadly, what happened always has meaning, pattern, form, and authenticity. One can classify, analyze, arrange in the order of importance, and judge any or all of these things, or one can simply stand back and view the whole with wonder."

Astonishment is what I sometimes feel when I view the shape of Neutrino's life. He is an old man, and his past has included a great deal of hardship and suffering, much of it his own fault. He chose badly so often that at times I want to rebuke him, even though it would serve no purpose. The past is not recoverable, and it cannot be corrected, and I'm not sure he would change much of it anyway; by his own lights, it has all been logical, albeit not orderly. On the other hand, no setback cast him so far down that he failed to recover. In even the most unfavorable circumstances, he willed himself to prevail. He showed unstinting courage. In the minds of some people, his largest accomplishments place him among the notable, if exotic, figures of the twentieth century, at least I have read stories in newspapers and seen television shows that describe them that way. His failures, his misadventures, his lapses of judgment, his careering assaults against the order of things leave one wishing to avert one's eyes from the impact and the wreckage. Picaresque feebly describes his exploits. For companions in literature I think of Tom Jones, Don Quixote, and a few of the figures who wander the desert in the Old Testament. I am aware that some readers will feel superior to him, or look down occasionally on how he has behaved; surely that is easy to do, but I do not believe that someone is a proper subject, or a laudable figure, only if he has made a lot of money or been a politician, an actor, a freakish public figure, or a criminal. The eccentrics, the odds beaters, the benign connivers, the showmen, the pilgrims, and the raffish self-glorifiers also have their place in the pageant.

Nor is it along the periphery. I am reminded of Joseph Mitchell's responding, in 1943, to his subjects being described as the little people. "I regard this phrase as patronizing and repulsive," Mitchell wrote in a preface to *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon.* "There are no little people in this book. They are as big as you are, whoever you are."

Characters who put us in mind of ourselves, or suggest the selves we would like to be, especially if they are handsome and winning and mildly heroic or at least attractively forbearing, and especially if they are amusing and in love and consistent in their behaviors to the point of being undeviating, such characters are usually welcomed and taken to heart. None of the feelings they provoke is complicated, they are lightly and easily borne, and I wish that I had such a figure here, it would make matters so much simpler—the kindly old man with a modest past and a few pearls to share—but Neutrino is not a stock figure, nor is he likely to remind many readers comfortably of themselves, let alone any sentimental or ideal version. Neutrino is an unvarnished apparition from the psyche. The raucous, rambunctious, disorderly, and exuberant interior life raised up and given feet. He flamboyantly represents a version of the Other, and such people, while often having substantial glamour (the misanthropic cowboys Clint Eastwood has played, various poets and artists—Billie Holiday, Bob Dylan, John Coltrane, or Jackson Pollock, for example), such individuals even in their most favorable forms often carry for us an element of unease, of being necessarily regarded as sufficiently different from ourselves that we feel protected against the temptation they present—the resolve, that is, to live passionately and without restraint. From its least sympathetic forms—the bums, the vagrants, the sordid night figures—many of us all but recoil. Neutrino cultivates, exemplifies, and brandishes parts of our inner beings that most of us work assiduously to stifle in the interest of having orderly social lives, not to mention the

regard and approval of our peers. Few of us embrace the role of the other, who always risks being shunned, but Neutrino has, and quite avidly. He has never made even the most perfunctory effort to stay between the lines. Such an intention would strike him as pointless. His openness, his novelty of character, his lack of concern for convention are attributes he prides himself on and has suffered to protect.

In an introduction to *The Intimate Journals of Charles Baudelaire,* the novelist Christopher Isherwood writes—and the italics are his—

> What makes a man a hero, i.e. an individual; or conversely, what makes him a churl, i.e. a mere unit in human society without any real individual significance of his own?
>
> The term "individual" has two senses. . . . In the realm of nature, "individual" means *to be something that others are not, to have uniqueness:* in the realm of spirit, it means *to become what one wills, to have a self-determined history.*

I wouldn't suggest that anyone regard Neutrino as a model. It wouldn't be sensible. I don't even myself regard him entirely as one. Any life of extravagant dimensions always includes peril and turmoil, and people who emphatically embrace such an existence are generally a trial at close hand. G. K. Chesterton wrote of St. Francis of Assisi that he "did in a definite sense make the very act of living an art, though it was an unpremeditated art. Many of his acts seem grotesque and puzzling to a rationalistic taste. But they were always acts and not explanations; and they always meant what he meant them to mean." Neutrino is by no one's reckoning a saint, but by Isherwood's definition he is at least an individual. He is "something that others are not," and the course of his life has been self-determined. He would agree with Chekhov, who wrote in a letter, "My holy

of holies is the human body, health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love and absolute freedom."

The bulk of us settle down sooner or later. The past figures more in our thinking. We have fewer adventures. This hasn't happened to Neutrino. Nowhere in him have I observed the fatigue that overtakes so many of us as we age. The sheer force of life running through him is so pronounced that sometimes being with him is thrilling. I do not feel inclined to judge him, any more than I would care for other people to judge me. Nevertheless, after trying more than once, he has sustained a long and loving marriage, and not everyone has. Some of his children have prospered, and some have not, roughly in accord with the natural order. That an old man concocts a novel football play while preparing to cross an ocean on a homemade raft are circumstances I find cheering, inspiring even. ("Innocently to amuse the imagination in this dream of life is wisdom," the novelist Oliver Goldsmith wrote, in the eighteenth century.) My own ambitions, however simple or narrow, I hope will be as undiminished, if I ever arrive at his age. Anyway, I have been broadened by knowing him. What wisdom he possesses he has won from the flames.

In the roomy account of Neutrino's past that follows, laced with colorful characters, parallel narratives, and startling turns of fortune (you be the judge), Neutrino was necessarily the principal source. Whenever he raised someone's name, I tried to find that person. Since Neutrino is elderly, many of the people he mentioned are dead. Sometimes I would find people who were surprised to hear that Neutrino was still alive. These tended to be people who knew him thirty and forty years ago and who regarded him as someone whose optimism, passion, immoderation, and adherence to severe philosophical practices could only conclude before long in his extinction. In other words, they dismissed him as a nut bound shortly for glory. Sometimes they sounded a little disappointed that he had survived.

While they regarded themselves as adventurous people, they had lived far more cautiously than he had, and his demise would have affirmed their decisions. Knowing that this reckless and joy-obsessed figure still thrived seemed to make them wonder whether they had lived as fully as they might have. Furthermore, whenever I found someone, what struck me was that his or her recollection was always more extravagant than Neutrino's. Most of us grow larger in our own imaginations as we age. Neutrino had become enlarged in the minds of other people but had remained the same size in his own. I regarded this as a sign of stability and character, of psychic well-being, even while I also regarded his judgment as frequently questionable and occasionally simply unsound. Nonetheless, in all cases of conflicting accounts, I took the version that was less dramatic—that is to say, his. There is nothing in Neutrino of the fabulist or the self-inflater; episodes of zealous self-deception (to which all of us are occasionally subject) I view as being different from mythomania.

To begin with then, Neutrino is about five foot nine, with broad, sloping shoulders. His forearms and hands are so thick that they look like tools. He has a square face, widely set eyes, and a flawless nose. From each of its wings a curved line descends to enclose his lips, like parentheses. His eyes are a chalky blue, like a glaze on pottery. His regard is direct and measuring. He is extremely vigilant. He has a short white beard, and short white hair, which he cuts by gathering strands between his first and second fingers and clipping the parts that stick out. He began losing teeth years ago, and he has only two of them left, one on each jaw. When he started singing, in his fifties, he still had many of his teeth. Not having teeth interrupt the flow of air from his chest has made his singing voice better, he says.

The first teeth that Neutrino lost were the front ones. He was fifteen and had just joined the army, having said he was eighteen. He lost them in a fight with another soldier. The

soldier hit him first. Neutrino found the teeth on the ground. It was a very cold night, and he pressed them back into place, and pinched the gums, and perhaps because of the cold, when he took his hands away they stayed where they were, and they were fine for fifteen years. He looked funny, though, because he had reversed them. In the center of his forehead is a scar he received one night as a young man when he came out of a bar in San Francisco playing a trumpet. A kid on the sidewalk asked to see the trumpet, and when Neutrino handed it to him he hit Neutrino with the bell of it right between the eyes.

By nature Neutrino is implacably restless. He has never occupied a house or an apartment for more than a year. When I first met him, through a friend, he was in Los Angeles, singing on the street to collect money to go to Tucson. He had found a place that he liked among the trinket sellers and jugglers and buskers on Venice Beach, and he told me when I left to go home to New York that he was planning to stay there until he went to Arizona for the football camp. The next day, when I called his cell phone from my apartment, it sounded as if he was in a car that was moving and had the window open. I asked where he was, and he said about twenty miles outside San Diego. “I needed to get some motion under me,” he said. He has three grown children, a son and two daughters. A third daughter died from an illness in her thirties. (He also has two adopted children and a stepchild.) When I asked the older of the daughters why she thought that her father moved so often, she said, “I don’t think he can help himself.” I asked him once, “What keeps you moving?” and he said, “I wish I knew that.” He thought for a moment. “What it comes down to is, I don’t want to ride the same horse in the same race tomorrow,” he said. “I want to ride a different horse, or be in a different race.”

The solitary apprehension he has been unable to shed, and that has only deepened with the years, is that

something significant might have happened for him somewhere if only he had stayed a little longer.

WHEN NEUTRINO WENT BROKE in Key West, it was not the first time. Usually when he has had money, he has disposed of it quickly. He finds possessions oppressive. He has acquired then given away, among other things, a farmhouse with an orchard, a few boats, and a store. “The greatest feelings that I have in my life are when I have nothing,” he says. “When I’m absolutely broke, I feel liberated. As a kid, eight and nine years old, I felt that way.”

Neutrino is an idealist. His poverty is the consequence of having tirelessly pursued an existence in which he would be free from all burdens—his quest, that is, for the philosopher’s stone, the chief means of life, the end of all ends. He has a seeker’s belief that deprivation can bring about a state of receptivity, an awareness, in which a person obtains access to territory that lies at the outermost boundaries of what we are familiar with, with what we accept as our selves. He shares to a degree the spiritualist’s idea that life is something more than we believe it to be, that there are passageways leading from ordinary experience to an intensified one that has the power to make us feel different about everything that happens to us after.

“When I was a child, I had an intuitive knowledge that human life was ninety-nine percent defeat,” he told me shortly after we’d met, “and that you had to do something extraordinary to turn it into victory. I didn’t know what that extraordinary thing was. I knew that you could not be common and expect any kind of success. I didn’t think of success as worldly, as the accumulation of things, as accomplishments in the realm of commercial life. No matter how attractive a life such as that might occasionally look, you’re still going to be facing illness, old age, and death—all

the things that Buddhism discusses, the human anxieties and apprehensions—and if you have devoted yourself only to worldly things you probably won't have the ability or the interior resources to grapple with them.

"As a child I was going to save the world. From what and how, I didn't know. I hadn't the slightest idea. Different scientists had saved the world—Jonas Salk had saved the world from polio. Different military men had saved the world. Churchill had saved the world. The world was in a constant state of being saved, and I wanted to take part. Even then I understood that the average man or woman was going to wind up in Flanders Field—no good would likely come to him or her. Once in a while, perhaps maybe, you might remember them for a little while after they were gone. But mostly I was thinking, how am I going to get out of this mess? I had zero ideas. I knew I wasn't afraid. My mother was a gambler. We were always having funny money, or being broke. I wasn't scared of being hungry. If you don't have food tonight, you'll have it tomorrow. I knew that it was important to be extreme. People are always attracted to the extreme. If you're eye-catching enough, somebody's going to want to stop and talk to you. But if you try to blend in, nobody's going to stop and talk to you. Why should they? When you cease to be extreme, you become part of the mass. That's when you need to have a steady income. I have lived my life in such a way that day in and out I meet people who have remembered me for years."

While Neutrino talked, we were sitting on a bench in Santa Monica, a few blocks from the ocean. Neutrino had his dog in his lap. He went on to say that he believes that a person must ruthlessly attack any impediment to his well-being. Passivity is abhorrent to him. For twenty years, he led a group of people who traveled around the country. Nomads in school buses and pickup trucks and sometimes on boats is what they were. He called it the Salvation Navy. They painted signs to raise money and taught derelicts and

drunkards to paint them, then they left for another town, where they looked for a shop or a café or a garage that needed a sign. “First we had small attacks on the problem of living an independent and elevated life then we withdrew and assessed our progress and made larger attacks then we gave everything away so that we could go back and attack again,” Neutrino said. “Mind you, nobody’s interested in repeating it—not my children, not anyone else who was with me—but it defined their lives. It made them self-reliant. It gave them the power to know that no material obstacle could defeat them.”

From being a young man with zero ideas, Neutrino became an old man with an ardent belief in a philosophical system that came to him suddenly, although after much reflection, much as the play did, and that he calls triads. He arrived at it after reading a book called *Meetings with Remarkable Men,* by G. I. Gurdjieff. Neutrino was impressed by Gurdjieff’s description of crossing the desert on stilts to elevate himself above the sandstorms. Gurdjieff also wrote that a man’s or woman’s most important task in life is to identify the one thing he or she wants to accomplish before dying.

“For years I’ve been thinking, How can I be the happiest person in the world?” Neutrino said. “I’ve had a lot of time to think. How can I have it all? Time is the most important thing, in my estimation. I want to have time to figure things out and get hold of information that’s going to help me figure out even more things. The problem with having only one desire, a monad, is that it’s limiting. The pioneers were monadic, they had a one-point vision, one thing that they wanted, and nothing could stop them—Indians, sickness, bad crops, strife with each other, and bandits. Then there was a breakthrough into the dyad, represented by the cowboy who would shift jobs, gamble, gunfight, shoot buffalo, bounty hunt, drink, and fight. The example of the cowboy roaming around the country is no longer practical,

really. Space is controlled, movement is controlled, and the dyad is not going to solve the problem, anyway. It's only going to create the inverse of the monad. A person trapped in a dyad can only be the opposite of the monad in order to establish an independent identity. Rather than advancement what you have are reaction and rebellion. A teenager who disfigures his body with tattoos and earrings and studs and wears his pants without a belt so they fall down. There's no resolving force. The triad creates the resolving force between the thesis and antithesis."

A woman stopped and spoke to the dog. People in Los Angeles treat dogs as if they were human beings. "How are *you*?" the woman said. She asked if she could pet the dog, and Neutrino let her.

"There are two parts to triads," he said when she left. "The first is that all relationships, all endeavors in life, all situations and circumstances can be categorized by triads. Friend, enemy, stranger. Boss, partner, servant. Give, take, share. Block, assist, remain neutral. Linear, existential, circular time. It's the way our minds think, the way we organize ourselves and our experience, only we aren't aware of it. Triads govern us; no one is outside them yet people aren't cognizant of them. The first triad, which is taken from us as soon as we go to school, is participate, redirect, or leave. Take part—that is, engage—or try to influence what's happening into a more favorable direction, or get up and leave. Anyone who can observe that triad is free to shape his present and his future.

"The second element of triads is a person's three deepest desires. If you can define your three deepest desires, and you can live in accordance with them, you will be happy. Gurdjieff said one wish, but a single desire is too constricting. A monad keeps you riveted. A dyad splits you, so it's unbearable. The triad opens you up. My three tasks have changed over the years, but right now they are to be free—freedom from poverty, freedom from hunger and

want, freedom from insult, freedom to travel. The second is joy and all its ramifications, and the third is art through writing, through videos, ideas, through music, through crossing the ocean in a handmade raft, and maybe now also briefly through football. When a person is motivated by the three-sided attack, they become vigilant, judgmental—that is, they assess the things they are engaged in and whether they further or impede their desires—and aggressive in protecting themselves. They're not wandering around hoping God touches them or the universe gives them a break. All I'm interested in is naming and protecting my three deepest desires. They give me the solidity to strengthen my being. By the way, how about we continue this conversation in Costa Rica? It's cheaper."

Neutrino agreed to walk over to the ocean instead. "I'm not fit for society, really," he said. "When we get on the road, in an old rattletrap car, and there's no money, though, I am a start master. I create ways to get food, to get tire changes, to move from one town to the next. I don't consider myself a superior person, but I do consider myself in superior movement. I know how to move and engage with people. I know how to make the fire of life. I don't know the *truth* of life, but I know how to make the fire. People have always been drawn to me because of it. I would say, 'Do you want to live as you're living, with no fire, or a fire that's gone out, or with half a fire, or a fire that only works sometimes, or do you want to live like me, in the fire all the time?' And they would point to the car's flat tire, and say, 'What about that?' and I would shrug and say, 'Don't worry, it's just a problem, we'll solve it.'"

At a corner we waited for the light to change. Neutrino looked at his dog. "Come here, sweetheart," he said. "Are you doing okay? We need to get you some water." We crossed the street. Neutrino gave a beggar a dollar. Two policemen approached. Neutrino stopped them. "I'll go where they don't have doctors," he said, "but I won't go