

Authentic Indiana

By

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Not for the first time, Dulsie looked at the time-faded picture with wonder. She had never in her life seen cornfields so vast and lush and tall. They were nothing like the strangled, faded-looking spindles she was used to, but abundant and impossibly green. Not only that, but she always marveled at how much her grandmother had resembled her when she had been Dulsie's age. The same roundish welcoming face. The same thick, blonde, semi-wavy hair. She had her father's brown eyes, but if it weren't for that (and the glorious cornfields in the background, of course) Dulsie imagined people might think *she* was the one smiling up from the farm scene.

"What're you lookin' at that old thing again for?" Grandma would ask whenever she would find Dulsie gazing at it, pensive and a little wistful. Now Grandma Kinzie had skin veined and lined like a road map. Her hair was thin and white. Her voice creaked like a rusty gate and her hands were twist-fingered and spotted. Dulsie thought her grandmother was the most beautiful woman alive. Grandma Kinzie was just about Dulsie's favorite person in the world, so she didn't mind inheriting her plain, honest face and sturdy, average build. She hoped that it meant that one day she would not only look like Grandma but *be* like her. Full of wisdom and patience, Grandma Kinzie never seemed ruffled by the trials of life. And life had changed dramatically since the sunny day Makinzie Paul had smiled into a camera in front of her father's cornfield.

Dulsie knew that the people had done the best they could back then, but in the quiet of her mind she couldn't help but wonder if they could have prevented it had they *really* tried.

"Hindsight, Sweet," her grandma would gently remind her. "Wisdom makes the best choices she can with what she has. Remember, a lot of good has come from The Repair," Grandma Kinzie often said, "Greedy people had no choice but to relinquish power. Everyone had to share. Yes, there were practical improvements in technology, but *people* changed, too.

"But they were hungry!" Dulsie always argued. "I'm glad we use things like Tesla Energy now, but is it worth it if people starved?"

She thought about those conversations often and still the questions bloomed in her mind. Very few could afford to be greedy these days, perhaps, but it didn't mean that there was no one walking around carrying an ugly heart.

Then came the news that, while drenching everyone in hope so keen it was nearly painful, made Dulsie wonder if it would only facilitate exploitation for those already inclined to take advantage of the people around them. The shocking headline reminded Dulsie of her grandparents' stories about where they were when, as small children, they watched on live television the towers in New York come down that sunny September morning. She would forever remember every detail of the day she first learned of the beginning of the end of life as she knew it. Someday she would tell her own grandchildren about the wild thrill of hope and dread that had zinged through her the day she read the first headline:

Food Supplies Expected to Blossom After Decades of Withering

Indiana agronomists Brendon Clark, DAgSc and Maysee Albert, DAgSc, make breakthrough discovery in recovering success of Indiana crops. Drs. Clark and Albert, along with their team, hope to begin implementing their formula in our home state before commencing distribution as far as possible. In an interview with Dr. Albert's assistant, entomologist Corla Frank, we learn that the aim of the formula is to make each crop more "authentic".

The team is confident that, should their formula be successful, we may no longer be confined to the conditions of The Repair, and Rationing could likely be a thing of the past. "Corn will be corny again," Frank tells us. "It will taste the way your grandmother described it to you; the way it was before we lost most of the bees."...

Dulsie was born after the genesis of The Repair, so she knew nothing of the bleak days before Rationing or the transitions of the world leaders' reluctant acceptance of efficient technology. Grandma Kinzie often told stories of her girlhood. Everyone was totally dependent on expensive, wasteful, fuel for energy. Wars were fought over it. And while food came in endless varieties, rather than the limited choices of Rations, there were always people in the world who went hungry. Grandma reminded the family often to count their blessings.

"Sure we get tired of wafers and fish," she would say, "and I sure miss the taste of good bread and beans, but I'd rather eat the same old thing every day if it means that everybody else gets a full belly, too." Grandma's humble sincerity was one of the many

reasons Dulsie wanted to be just like her.

Most of the people Dulsie knew wanted to be just like Epiphany, one of her coworkers at The Resource Center. Dulsie tried hard not to be jealous of her beauty and effortless talent. Epiphany was tall with golden-red hair and a charm that immediately endeared her to nearly everyone she met. Dulsie often felt lackluster and clumsy by comparison.

Their boss, Devon, seemed to intuitively place more trust and responsibility onto Epiphany's shoulders even though she and Dulsie had the exact same job description and Dulsie was quite confident that she was just as capable. She would often remind herself that Devon was old and perhaps prone to habit and routine. While he was rather deaf and seemed interminably ancient, Devon was energetic and strong. Dulsie had once seen him carry a case of cleaning supplies from the delivery truck into the store room that she or Epiphany would not be able to move without the use of a cart. It was true that Devon gravitated toward Epiphany, but other than his slight favoritism, he was reasonable and fair.

One typical afternoon at work, a few weeks after excitement over the headlines had died down, Dulsie looked up from the table she shared with a frustrated twelve-year-old when she heard Epiphany's laughter.

"I never thought of it that way! I guess you're right!" Epiphany said. Dulsie watched an old man beam at the pretty girl. When he had come in the man had been scowling, but Epiphany had thawed him.

"I still don't get it, Miss Dulsie!" came a plaintive voice at her side.

Dulsie turned her attention back to her work. "Sorry, Maude. I know, math is hard,

isn't it? Let's try again."

Dulsie liked her work at the Resource Center, but it was easy to get overwhelmed. There was just so much need and any given day she had no idea what she might face. From caring for a baby for a while so his mother could rest, to helping a teen fill out an application, to doing physical therapy exercises with older clients, Dulsie and her coworkers tried to help everyone who came in, any way they could. The main room was big, bright, and airy with lots of tables and space for moving around or playing. The walls were covered in artwork and thank you notes, poems and clippings. There were articles about the Resource Center and all the good it had done for the community. Dulsie herself was featured in a couple of them, but Epiphany smiled out of several. Dulsie found the work deeply rewarding but stressful.

"Don't you feel helpless sometimes?" Dulsie had once asked Epiphany as they were leaving for the day. "There's so much need and I always end up thinking about what I *didn't* do."

Epiphany had shrugged. "I try to be positive. Helping people is my passion."

Epiphany always made it look easy, but Dulsie couldn't stop thinking about the people after they walked out the door. She knew Maude would struggle at school and Dulsie couldn't be there to help her. People were scared and alone and she couldn't help but feel her limited contribution was inadequate. She tried not to think about the people who never even came in at all. Who was helping them? With an effort, she put it from her mind as she helped Maude work through her assignment.

After another ten minutes Dulsie suggested they take a break. Maude smiled gratefully and pulled out an old battered copy of *A Wrinkle in Time*. Dulsie smiled briefly

at the memory of helping Maude build a model of a tesseract when she wrote a report on the book last year. She leaned back in her chair, rubbed at the knots in her neck and watched Epiphany move around the room patting shoulders and encouraging. She laughed and advised, leaving smiles wherever she went.

The bell above the door tinkled and faces lit up with recognition when Korbin came in. A patient, friendly old man, nearly everyone in town knew him and had benefited from his kindness at least once. Dulsie remembered the time she had been around Maude's age when he had patiently taught her to play chess. She knew he had once helped her father fix his beat-up old truck and she couldn't count the times Korbin had driven Grandma Kinzie to her appointments and errands. She guessed that Korbin had made a personal connection like that with nearly every person in the community. He had given simple gifts of help, time, and encouragement to anyone who needed it. Korbin had a knack for serving and The Resource Center was one of his favorite ways of helping out. Dulsie, and everyone else, loved Korbin.

Dulsie smiled and waved. She was about to call out to him when she was distracted by Epiphany's voice floating from the opposite side of the room.

"How long have you been sitting there all alone? Hasn't anyone talked to you yet?" She strode over to a quiet, sullen-looking man sitting by himself in the middle of the room. "Can I help you with something today?" she asked brightly.

The man shrugged. "I just come in to set a while," he mumbled.

She studied him with narrowed eyes before asking, "Are you hungry?"

The man shrugged again.

Epiphany pressed her lips together and reached into the pocket of her sweatshirt.

“Here.” She thrust a small package at him. It was her mid-day Ration.

“Sharing” wasn’t strictly illegal, but it was certainly discouraged. Dulsie had seen Epiphany give away her Rations before, but never said anything about it. She didn’t want to get Epiphany in trouble. It hardly made any difference, though, if Dulsie *did* tell anyone since Epiphany didn’t seem to care if anyone saw her do it. She glanced at Korbin to see if he noticed. He, and everyone else, was watching to see what would happen.

“Take it,” Epiphany ordered.

The man knew it would do no good to argue with her. He meekly took the Ration and mumbled a thank you.

Epiphany smiled at the man then strode over to Dulsie and Maude.

“Everything okay?” She asked, concern wrinkling her forehead at Maude’s unattended homework.

“Miss Dulsie said I could take a break,” Maude said, not looking up from the book.

“Well, let me know if I can help, okay?” She patted Maude’s shoulder.

Korbin appeared at their table. “How are you lovely ladies today?”

Dulsie and Epiphany greeted him warmly. Even Maude deserted her story long enough to give him a quick smile.

“Hard at work, hey, Dulsie-girl?” he asked.

Dulsie shrugged, “Math,” she said simply, indicating Maude’s work.

He winked at her. “She’ll get it.” He turned his attention to Epiphany. “I need your help with something,” he said.

“Of course. What do you need?”

“Well, we’re setting up a committee to share ideas about starting a day camp this

summer. Something safe and fun for kids to do while school is out. We need some creative minds.”

“Sounds great. I’d love to help out.”

They drifted away from the table discussing whens and wheres.

Dulsie broke her gaze from them and turned her attention back to the Maude. “Sorry, Maudie. Back to work.”

Maude sighed and pulled her books toward her again.

After helping Maude slog through her work, Dulsie helped Devon check inventory then folded towels and cleaned the bathrooms while Epiphany counseled a teen who was heartbroken after a breakup with her boyfriend. Later in the day as they closed up, Dulsie mentioned Korbin’s visit.

“So have you been thinking about what Korbin said? You have some ideas already?”

“Oh sure, lots.” Epiphany smiled.

“ I have a book of team-building games for kids if you’d like to use it. I mean, I don’t know what you’re planning...”

“Oh, I’ve got scads of books at home. Thanks, though. Could you lock the back door? I need to finish the files for today.”

“Sure,” Dulsie murmured. “Oh, speaking of the files, we should start logging the archives. I’m just dreading it. I’d like to get it over with.”

Epiphany shrugged. “I don’t mind it. We’ll get it done.” She smiled again.

Dulsie went and locked the back door trying to shake the feeling of awkwardness that had settled around her. She didn’t want to be a pest, but this was the third time she had brought up the archives and each time Epiphany had acted unconcerned. She wished she

could be so blithe about it, but she just couldn't. Dulsie wanted nothing more than to have the daunting task behind her. As usual, Epiphany was unruffled.

“Mom, I'm home! Grandma?” Dulsie sat her things on the kitchen table and leafed through the paper. More news about the agronomists' progress touted hopeful results. Dulsie tried to be excited about it, but her thoughts kept turning back to Korbin's visit.

Why hadn't he asked me for my ideas, too?

A nasty voice in her head sneered at her. *Who would want you when they could have Epiphany? What do you have to offer compared to her?*

She was thankful for the interruption of her negative thoughts in the form of her mom and Grandma coming into the kitchen.

“Oh, good, you're home,” Mom smiled. She heaved a large box of books, magazines and assorted papers onto the kitchen table. “We're cleaning out the den and you can help us sort through all this stuff.

Dulsie was glad for the distraction.

A short eighteen months after first reading the article about the resurrected crops Dulsie sat with Grandma, her parents and her two brothers at a table spread with food she had never tasted in her years. Corn on the cob; bread baked by Grandma and Mom; beans in some rich-looking brown sauce; baked chicken— and the one thing she had ever tasted before, milk.

After Dad prayed over the meal, everyone stared around at one another though the heavenly aroma of the food nearly made them all dizzy. It just seemed too good to be true.

What if, after a lifetime of anticipation, the first taste would be no more than the bland sameness of the wafers they ate twice a day, every day?

“Well, what are you waiting for? It’s better when it’s hot!” Grandma urged. She picked up a thick piece of buttered bread and took a bite. “Ohh,” she sighed. “It’s almost better than I remember.”

That was enough to thaw Dulsie and her family out of their paralysis. Dulsie took a tentative bite. Her senses sparked like fireworks with flavors and textures she had never experienced before. The bread was soft, sweet, and smooth; not the dull bland nothingness of the wafers she had always eaten. The corn was sweet and wonderful. Fat kernels, yellow and shining with butter and salt, Dulsie understood why Grandma had missed these things so badly.

A little of her looming sense of apprehension faded into delight as she enjoyed the food and laughter in the comfort of her family. Maybe it would be okay. Maybe people would be so thankful that they wouldn’t dare go back to the old ways of frivolity and greed. Maybe everyone would be content with being content and not take from others so that they might have more.

After those first few days of adjustment to a new way of living, Dulsie began to relax. Everyone still seemed to have enough to eat, more than she had ever known, in fact, and the predictable routine of life carried on without any major surprises.

At first.

It was about three weeks after the big change that it began. Dulsie was working a typical Wednesday at The Recourse Center, helping a teen fill out a job application. Devon was out of town having meetings and Epiphany was giving a tour to a group of

local business owners. They were hoping to partner with them in creating even more opportunities beneficial to the community. Dulsie was used to tuning out background noise in order to focus on her work, but her attention was jerked away from her task when Epiphany's voice carried across the room, unnaturally loud.

“I LOVE MY JOB. IT’S AN AMAZING FEELING TO COME IN EVERY DAY AND FEEL LIKE I’M MAKING A DIFFERENCE.”

Cold silence dropped over the room like a leaden blanket. Everyone turned and stared at Epiphany who was clutching at her throat and looking thunderstruck. Dulsie had never seen her so flustered. She could understand why, though. Epiphany had not shouted. She had not merely been talking at an extra-loud volume. Her voice had been amplified as if she had been speaking into a hot, hot microphone, causing her voice to bounce around the room, drowning out all other sound.

“How’d she do that?” the boy next to Dulsie muttered.

Dulsie, dumbstruck, shook her head. It wouldn’t be the first time a change had been made at The Resource Center with Epiphany in the know and Dulsie in the dark, but she was fairly certain they had not installed a sound system. Even if Epiphany had been wearing some sort of microphone that Dulsie had known nothing about, then Epiphany herself would surely have been aware of it and not now wearing an expression of mortified astonishment.

Epiphany recovered quickly, but seemed afraid to speak again. “Excuse me,” she mouthed. Still clutching her throat she caught Dulsie’s eye and beckoned to her desperately. Dulsie’s eyes widened. Giving tours were one of Epiphany’s favorite tasks at The Resource Center. Dulsie had only ever done it once before when Epiphany had been

too ill to come to work. Otherwise she consistently claimed the appointment of tours for herself. Deferring it to Dulsie was unprecedented.

Flustered, Dulsie murmured an apology to the teen.

“Don’t worry about it, she needs you more than I do,” he mumbled uncomfortably.

Dulsie stood to take over and Epiphany darted out of sight.

For the next twenty minutes Dulsie hardly knew what she was saying. It hardly mattered. The business owners she was supposed to be showing around were obviously as spooked as she was by Epiphany’s bizarre display of vocal spectacle.

The mood at The Center was decidedly subdued for the rest of the day. The teen had ducked out unnoticed while Dulsie had been speaking to the business owners. The few who remained seemed content to play a quiet game of Euchre and politely declined any help at all.

Dulsie busied herself with the paperwork she had been dreading for several months. She would have to shoulder it alone without Epiphany here, but it was worth it to finally get out from under it. All this time and still they hadn’t touched it though Dulsie had asked Epiphany several more times if they ought to tackle it. Each time she had come up with an excuse.

Dulsie shifted uncomfortably at the nagging suspicion that she had been doing it on purpose. She tried to shove it from her mind as she carefully logged dates and documentation into the computer. She made several entries, but it was no good. The voice in her head persisted.

Remember the Christmas newsletter? The voice asked reasonably. Everyone submitted a poem or a story? A Christmas memory? Epiphany volunteered to collect and

organize them and your story about Grandma Kinzie's quilt somehow got left out.

Dulsie shrugged away the memory and rearranged her papers.

And the 4th of July party. The voice insisted. Remember how she turned her chair so that her back was to you? It cut you off from the group. You would have had to pick up your chair and move it to be part of the conversation.

“Stop it.” Dulsie muttered to herself. “It doesn’t matter.”

But it did matter. It was always covert, but it happened all the time. Just subtle enough to make Dulsie wonder if it was only her imagination, but often enough to keep her from ever feeling confident. Epiphany dismissing her ideas. Epiphany leaving her out of projects, decisions, conversations. Epiphany undermining her in unobtrusive ways. Like the time Dulsie had painstakingly lettered the month’s events on the big white board only to come in the next day to find that Epiphany had erased her work and rewritten it all in her own style. Dulsie found it merely different—not improved, but had said nothing. She never said anything when she felt slighted by Epiphany. She hated the ugly way it made her feel. She didn’t want to be jealous or resentful. Epiphany had always acted so subtly that Dulsie felt as if—though Epiphany *had* been discourteous on these occasions—to confront her would be sullen and petty.

She didn’t want to confront her. She didn’t want to compete with her either, and that was another big reason for her discomfort. Dulsie felt constantly compared to Epiphany and always inferior. Her eyes smarted as she thought of Korbin choosing Epiphany for his planning team instead of her. The stupid things like the tours and the rewritten white board she could handle. She didn’t like it, but she could handle it. But Korbin. Dulsie’s stomach squirmed uncomfortably at the thought of Korbin’s enthusiastic approval of

someone who seemed determined to make Dulsie feel bad about herself. She felt her cheeks burn with shame as she set aside a completed stack of paperwork and reached for another. It shouldn't matter that he liked Epiphany. Everyone liked her. She just couldn't help feeling like one of the people she respected most in the world was validating Epiphany's treatment of her.

Dulsie stared at the information in front of her, taking none of it in. She shook her head. It was hard to concentrate with her mind crammed full of these caustic thoughts. To make matters worse, the memory of the alarming scene of Epiphany booming her voice, apparently unintentionally, circled over Dulsie's head like a bird of prey. What did it mean? Her sense of dread that had begun to fade came creeping back.

With great effort, Dulsie shoved Epiphany from her mind and got some work done. After another hour and a half Dulsie stood up and stretched, pleased with the progress she had made, but still aware of the apprehension hovering over her shoulder.

"Grandma?" Dulsie shouted as she walked through the front door. "Grandma I need to talk to you!"

"Out here, Sweet," called Grandma's voice from the back porch.

Dulsie found Grandma sitting in one of the rocking chairs with a big bowl in her lap. Another bowl sat next to her on the table. Grandma smiled and held up a handful of thin, bright green pods. "Look here," Grandma Kinzie smiled, "I haven't shelled peas since I was a girl. Korbin took me to a farmer's market today! You won't know about those, but we'll go again soon. I got some apples, too! We'll have them tonight with our pork chops."

Grandma looked so content Dulsie hated to burden her with her own discomfort. She

lowered herself into the other rocking chair and grabbed a handful of pea pods, casting around for a happier topic when Grandma set aside the bowl of shelled peas and folded her hands in her lap.

“Do you want talk about what’s bothering you, Sweet?”

Dulsie’s eyes widened in surprise. “How did you—”

“You’re my grandgirl,” she said simply. “Grandma knows.”

Dulsie had never really come out and talked to anyone about feeling slighted by Epiphany. She mentioned her disappointment of having her story left out the newsletter or expressed her frustration once in a while at a confusing situation, but she was careful not to lay blame. More than anything she was embarrassed. She always felt like it would be small of her to complain about the little ways she felt dismissed. But after the weird display this afternoon, Dulsie felt she had to unburden herself. Grandma listened to it all without interrupting. She didn’t blame or scold. Grandma didn’t scoff. Dulsie felt herself lighten as she poured out the ache in her chest. She wished that she had talked to Grandma much sooner.

“But what do I *do* about it, Grandma?” She said when she had finished her telling. “I don’t want to cause any problems?”

“Just be you, Sweet,” Grandma said. “You just do the right thing and don’t worry about—”

“Grandma! What’s that?” In an instant Dulsie forgot completely about Epiphany, the troubles at work, and everything else.

Grandma looked at her, startled. “Where? What’s what?”

Dulsie jumped up, sending her forgotten handful of peas flying and nearly knocking

over the two bowls sitting between them on the table.

“That!” she wailed, pointing at Grandma’s chest.

Dulsie leaned closer and put her hands gently over the hollow in Grandma’s throat.

“Does...does that hurt, Grandma?” Dulsie whispered.

“What? Does what hurt? I’m fine, what is it?”

But Dulsie just stared. She gently brushed her fingertips over the spot on Grandma’s throat but it felt quite normal. But this was not normal. She had never seen anything like this before.

“Grandma,” she said softly, “you’re glowing.”

“Glowing?” It couldn’t be clearer that Grandma was sure she had not heard Dulsie properly.

But it was true. It was as if Grandma had swallowed a lighted candle and was now lit up from the inside.

“Look!” she commanded. “Can you see?”

She pushed aside the collar of Grandma’s shirt and saw that the light emanated from right above Grandma’s heart, tapering off where Dulsie had first glimpsed it at the hollow of her throat.

“Well, forevermore,” Grandma said softly, looking down at her own luminous heart.

It was only the beginning. Epiphany (who had not returned to work) and Grandma were not the only ones displaying odd characteristics over the next several days.

A loud and opinionated woman who often came into The Center to offer an unpleasant mixture of gossip and complaints seemed undaunted by her new overlarge ears and disproportionate mouth. There was the timid young girl who volunteered with

the children's after school program every Wednesday; she had always suffered from acne, but now her skin was perfectly smooth. She was obviously pleased, but said she had done nothing to treat it. Some had faces frozen in an expression of deep disgust and others a pleasantly happy one. Josiah, the friendly maintenance man, told Dulsie that his hands were no longer arthritic but dexterous as they had been in his youth. Korbin had an illumination over his heart just like Grandma Kinzie's.

Dulsie, too, recognized changes in herself, though she suspected she was the only one who noticed them. Hers were not cosmetic but in her personality. Like everyone else she anxiously checked her reflection every morning for any alarming changes. So far all that had changed was that she had become more sure of herself. Dulsie wasn't sure if her new sense of confidence was a mysterious change like the ones she had seen in others or—the thought made her skin tingle guiltily—because Epiphany had not been around to dampen and discourage her. She would have been content to ignore the reason and simply enjoy the side effect but knew her ignorant bliss could not last. Sure enough a few short weeks after Epiphany's exit, Devon cornered Dulsie at work.

"I'll be needing you to run and fetch that paperwork she's been doing from home," he shouted one morning." She felt a cold stripe of dread wrap its arm around her shoulders. Her confidence was about to be tested. Dulsie wasn't foolish enough to hope that Devon had remembered to tell Epiphany he was sending Dulsie to her house, so she sent her a text letting her know she would be there after work. Epiphany didn't respond.

That very afternoon Dulsie drove to Epiphany's. She wanted to get it over with. As she drove she tried to prepare herself, rehearsing what she would say, imagined what Epiphany might say. Talking alone with Epiphany almost always felt awkward. Dulsie

always felt she had to choose her words carefully. She had learned early on that even the most innocuous of asides could be turned around and used to make her feel clumsy and dull. And now Dulsie had to talk to her through the un-ignorable window of weird that had caused Epiphany to vanish in embarrassment. She took a deep breath and knocked timidly on the door. After a moment of quiet, Dulsie dared to hope that no one was home, but then the door opened a few inches.

“Epiphany?” she asked uncertainly.

She was greeted with a chilly silence.

“Did you get my text? Devon wanted me to pick up the binder with all your—”

The door opened a fraction wider and a heavy white binder jumped out and into Dulsie’s hands.

“Oh! Thank you...Um...” How she wanted to simply walk away, climb into the familiar safety of her car, avoid a confrontation completely and drive home. That’s not what Grandma Kinzie would do. She took a fortifying breath. “Are you all right? Is there anything I can do for you?”

Dulsie jumped back a tall man’s stride as the door suddenly flew open and banged against the wall. Her jaw dropped, and she was vaguely aware of the binder hitting the ground.

“Well, you tell me,” Epiphany rasped. “Do I look okay? Do *you* think there’s anything you can do to help me?”

If finding a luminescence over Grandma’s heart was a surprise, seeing Epiphany was like a thunderbolt. Dulsie could only just recognize her under the dramatic differences. The color of her hair was exactly as it always had been, but now it swooped up away

from her face like a lion's mane. It was obvious she had not styled it to look that way. It was as if her hair now grew from her scalp by the rachises of feathers. But that wasn't all. Her eyebrows had darkened over her eyes now permanently slanted in an expression of suspicion. Her mouth curved downward into everlasting disapproval. The alarming overall effect gave her a look of a frightening eagle-hawk.

Dulsie's mind was a pandemonium, but one question battled through the fear and concern. "Are you—does it hurt?" she choked.

Epiphany's eyes narrowed making her look, if possible, even more sinister. Her voice was the same harsh rasp as the first time she spoke. "I don't feel a thing. I seem to be perfectly fine. I just look like a monster."

"I—I'm sorry, I wish..." Dulsie didn't know how to finish that sentence.

"Yeah. Me too" And she pulled the door closed with a crash.

Stunned, Dulsie picked up the forgotten binder and stumbled back to her car.

Although life everywhere continued to get more bizarre, everyone seemed to be getting used to the weirdness all around them. For many the peculiarity was looking back at them in the mirror. Some people seemed to take their new appearance in stride, but others simply could not come to terms with their dramatic changes. Dulsie was unsurprised to find that Epiphany did not return to work. On the contrary, she did not even greet Dulsie again when she came to her house to exchange Epiphany's work. Dulsie would leave the stack of paperwork on Epiphany's front step and find it completed and waiting to be picked up when she came back. It made her feel a little like a spy carrying out clandestine dead drops with a mysterious informer. Mostly she felt sorry for

Epiphany.

There were, of course, many theories about what was happening and why. It hadn't escaped notice that the peculiar changes had coincided with the beginning of the new food supply.

Dulsie and her family gathered around the television one evening listening to a press conference given by Dr. Maysee Albert, the agronomist they had read about in the paper all those months ago. The one who, along with her team, had brought back “real” food.

The small, dark-haired, scientist looked almost like a child, her small frame mostly hidden behind the lectern blooming with a stumpy bouquet of microphones. Dulsie wondered if her eyes had always been overlarge or if she too had been affected by the same strange influence as others had. Whatever the cause Dulsie thought it suited her.

“My team and I stand by our research,” Dr. Albert said. “The inarguable result of our years of analysis and experimentation have proven quite literally fruitful in dramatically enhancing the quality of nutrition and, by extension, the quality of *life* for all humanity.

“As you recall, we reported that by bringing out the innate authenticity of each grain, fruit, or vegetable, food would be as it was before our world had suffered the crises that made necessary the terms of The Repair.

“It is probable that many disregarded this detail in the excitement of such dramatic change, but *authenticity* was and is the key. But it is not only the food that we eat that has changed.”

Dr. Albert paused, perhaps sensing the world waiting, captivated and motionless, for her to solve this bewildering mystery.

“Our search for authenticity was—albeit unintentionally—far more effective than we

hoped or predicted. As you have undoubtedly noticed many individuals have sustained changes to their appearance,” she continued calmly as if it weren’t a heart-stopping shock to see someone with their chest glowing or their hair standing on end. “The reason is this: humans, too, have become more authentic. They have been, in a manner of speaking, turned inside out. In short, people now *appear* as they truly *are*.

“Allow me to give you a few practical examples. A meddling person might develop larger than usual ears. Authenticity would tell us that this person enjoys eavesdropping on the conversations of others. A braggart, wishing to be overheard in their boasting, might involuntarily flaunt their bragging in an unnaturally loud voice.”

Dulsie clapped a hand over her mouth, but had no time to process this before being stunned by another example she had witnessed first-hand.

“Conversely, there are many individuals who have been marked by their exceptional integrity, kindness, and honesty by a light glowing over their hearts. Their authentic selves have exhibited a luminescence, making no doubt of their virtue.”

The family all stared over at Grandma Kinzie who held a hand to her cheek with tears in her eyes.

“According to extensive supplementary research, there is no threat to the health of these individuals, the effects have been cosmetic and innocuous...”

They were all still staring at Grandma.

She saw them watching her and took a steady breath before flapping a hand at them. “Oh, now, even them book-learned people like that little doctor make a mistake now and again.” She brushed her hand over her heart. “This don’t mean nothing. I’m just as ornery as anybody else.”

First Dulsie, followed by her father and mother and finally her two brothers got up from their chairs and put their arms around the woman whose humility (literally shining out of her) belied her words.

The family sat huddled together and listened to the remainder of the address.

“Many will criticize. My response to those who complain is this. You may find that the side effects of authenticity will prevent people from lying. Selfish and abusive people will no longer be able to hide in plain sight, crouching behind their false and manufactured charm. You may ask if there is a cure for an ugly heart reflecting itself in a grotesque face, but I have already given you the answer. Selflessness. Integrity. Honesty. We have nothing but benefit to gain by such an accountability to kindness and humility.

“To those who have suffered discomfort and embarrassment, my team and I express our empathy. However, I would be remiss if I did not remind you that it is the choice of the individual that causes the outward manifestation. There will be no more pretending that the naked emperor wears breathtaking finery.”

That night Dulsie couldn't sleep. Her mind was too crammed with fragments of conversations and memories of the recent months. Grandma Kinzie and Korbin with their lighted hearts and Epiphany with her new, angry appearance. Dulsie considered her own new characteristic. She loved not living with such insecurity hovering over her shoulder, but she felt unworthy. She could not shake the guilt she felt over her relief of Epiphany's absence.

Then she had an idea.

It was an idea that made her stomach turn to ice, but allowed her to finally fall asleep.

“What are you doing here?” Epiphany accused from the shadow of the doorway. “I don’t have anything today. If Devon told you—”

“Devon didn’t send me. I wanted to come and see you. I wanted to tell you something.”

There was a long pause. Dulsie could feel the suspicion radiating off of Epiphany, so strong it nearly burned, but at least she didn’t slam the door in her face. Yet.

“So tell me then,” came the emotionless response. “What is it?”

“I wanted,” Dulsie took a deep breath, “I wanted to say I’m sorry if I ever acted resentfully toward you. And I wanted to ask you—to let you know that if you want someone to talk to, if you want a friend, well, I mean I know I’m not your favorite person, but... I’m here if you need someone. That’s all I guess. I’ll let you be now. But you can call me sometime and talk. If you want.”

After a pause that felt like a decade Epiphany answered.

“Thank you,” she whispered and quietly closed the door.

Dulsie felt shaky and rubbery as she sprinted back to her car and all the way home. She walked through the front door and heard her family chatting in the kitchen as they prepared dinner. She arranged her face into smooth lines before greeting them.

“Hey, everybody I’m ho— what?” *Uh-Oh, I must still look a little shaken up. They’re all staring.*

For a moment no one spoke. Grandma Kinzie was the first to break the silence. “Oh, Sweet,” she sighed as she moved to put her arms around her granddaughter. “Now what do you think of that there?” she asked, placing her hand over Dulsie’s heart. Dulsie

looked down and gasped. She now had an illumination, just like Grandma's.