

One Night on the Illinois Prairie

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Part One

“All right,” I said aloud, my voice reaching into the vast black emptiness between the stars, “I’ll give them one more chance.”

I knew who *wouldn’t* do it. So I had to find someone who *would*.

It wasn’t going to be any of the older folks. They had divided themselves up into fragments that bickered and squabbled and even fought wars with each other. The younger folks, most of them workers, were looking for work. The students were bestirring themselves to some small degree, but few teenagers saw any real opportunities for actually *doing* something. And children ten years and younger couldn’t read enough to really know what was going on.

That left kids in sixth grade, and seventh grade, and eighth grade—middle school—to do the job.

Keep in mind: this was going to be a *global* movement. The kids had to be unified, energized, and highly motivated for the long haul. They had to be able to maintain a global conversation unprecedented in human history. They had to get along with each other, no matter what. Because they had an enormous job. They were going to weave two powerful forces together, **clean energy** and **democracy**, into a fabric that would wrap around the Earth.

That was a job for kids in sixth grade. What did they care about some old war? What did they care about robber barons on Wall Street? They were ready to build something *new*, based on the most obvious blueprint of all: harmony with Mother Nature. Harmony with the Earth. They were ready. Why not? *Somebody* had to clean up the mess. *Somebody* had to stop the devastation. And then that somebody, having started the Big Job, would of course take on the challenge of designing a whole new world: one that works.

The Big Job was a job for kids in seventh grade. Did they want to live in a world without polar bears? Did people really have the right to starve and drown those polar bears? What happened to Justice for All? And did the kids around the world want to live in the same shabby concrete building, or mud hut, or trailer, twenty years from now? What happened to Prosperity for All? Might as well get to work.

Yes, the Big Job I had in mind was a job for eighth graders too. They're pretty good readers by then. They know how to look things up, in the school library or on the computer. And they're big enough to take on some responsibility. Most of the *leaders* doing the Big Job, at least at first, would be eighth graders, kids thirteen and fourteen years old, in countries around the world.

* * *

But I had to start with just one kid. Maybe I wasn't going to get many volunteers, so I wanted to start off strong, with a good example.

Quietly and unobtrusively, I visited the middle school in Dwight, Illinois, a farm town south of Chicago. In an eighth grade classroom, I spotted a candidate fairly quickly. She had bright eyes and a quick smile. She raised her hand often with an answer to her teacher's questions.

Her name was Mary Ann Lincoln. She was an actual descendant of the Lincoln family, although her ancestors traced themselves back not exactly to Abraham himself, but to a Lincoln cousin. Close enough. Mary Ann was deeply proud that she was a Lincoln, and that she lived on a farm on the Illinois prairie.

Something new had recently come to her part of Illinois. Last summer, Mary Ann had ridden with her father and mother in their old blue pick-up truck to the construction site of a "wind farm" about five miles west of Dwight. She and her parents, as well as everybody else from fifty miles around, watched as huge cranes, working in the cornfields, erected towers made from three long steel tubes. The towers stood over two hundred feet tall, like white smokestacks scattered across the prairie. The cranes then lifted a *nacelle*, a white box almost as big as a school bus, and set it atop the tower. Inside the nacelle was a generator that would make electricity, *clean* electricity, to power the farms and towns of Illinois.

Mary Ann watched as a crane lifted a round white hub up to the nacelle. Then the crane lifted, one by one, three long white blades up to the hub: slender eagle feathers that would catch the prairie wind.

One evening in September, Mary Ann took a picture of a dozen wind turbines silhouetted black against a blazing scarlet sunset over the western prairie. The spinning turbines were tall and majestic, like strange new flowers standing against the fiery sky.

On Thursday, December 10, 2009, in honor of the Global Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen that week, the middle school kids went on a field trip to visit the new wind farm, now fully operating a few miles outside of town. Sixth grade kids, seventh grade kids and the eighth grade kids, along with their teachers and the middle school principal, loaded into two yellow school buses. They rode

west on Route 17 out of Dwight into the open farmland. The immense fields that stretched to the horizon were covered with brown corn stalks about a foot tall, dusted lightly with snow.

After a ride of about twenty minutes, the buses turned off the highway and then zigzagged on a grid of county roads, some of them paved, some of them dirt, until the kids were in the middle of the wind farm: wind turbines stood near and far all around them, their white blades spinning in the pale blue winter sky.

The buses parked about a hundred feet from one of the wind turbines. The kids poured out of the buses into a cold wind on the first really frigid day of winter. Everybody was bundled up, with good coats and hats and scarves and boots; the parents had made sure of that. The temperature was zero in Dwight that morning, and even colder out here on the prairie, where a strong steady wind from the west stung the cheeks of anyone who faced it. The kids and their teachers walked along a short gravel road through the corn stubble, then they stood in a cluster with their backs to the wind, facing a towering wind turbine, the biggest machine any of them had ever seen. Almost straight overhead, the big white blades swept “whoosh . . . whoosh . . . whoosh” in the silver-blue sky.

Their principal, Dr. Adams, stood between the kids and the wind turbine, facing them. Thus he was facing the wind as he said with his big voice, “We stand today in the heart of Prairie Wind, a fleet of one hundred and ninety-five turbines. Each wind turbine produces two megawatts of electricity per hour. Five of these turbines could easily power a town the size of Dwight: every home, every business, every church, every light bulb in our school. So you can see that without burning a single lump of coal, without burning a single barrel of oil, this clean and quiet wind farm is producing an enormous amount of electricity.”

Dr. Adams paused. Mary Ann could see that his cheeks were already red as he faced the cold wind.

“These one hundred and ninety-five turbines don’t bother the corn. They don’t bother the cows. They don’t take up much room.” The turbine in front of Mary Ann stood in a circle of gravel about fifty feet in diameter. The circle was tiny inside the vast field of snowy corn stubble.

“The farmers make good money, just for having these turbines on their land. If a farmer leases twenty sites in a cornfield, where twenty wind turbines can stand, then he and his family can earn at least five thousand dollars per turbine per year. That’s enough money that the family can know, *really* know, that they will be able to keep the family farm in the family.”

Mary Ann’s farm was a quarter-mile east of the wind farm. She could see the turbines in the distance when she looked out her bedroom window. But she did

not have a wind turbine on her farm, much as her family would have liked one. Or two, or twenty.

“We need *more* of these wind turbines,” said Dr. Adams. “We can’t keep burning dirty coal. We can’t keep burning dirty oil.” Dr. Adams put his gloved hands over his cheeks to protect them from the wind, though he kept speaking. “We need the *jobs* of building wind turbines. We need the *jobs* of laying cable between the turbines and the grid. And we need the *jobs* of building a new grid, just as up-to-date as the turbines themselves.”

“Whoosh . . . whoosh . . . whoosh.”

Mary Ann knew about the need for jobs. Her uncle had lost his job when the hardware store in Dwight went out of business. Now he drove a truck between Chicago and St. Louis. Whenever he came to visit her father, every two weeks or so, he was always exhausted. But much as he disliked driving a truck, he was lucky to have a job. He said again and again that he was lucky, but Mary Ann could see that he was also angry.

“On this very special day,” said Dr. Adams, “the fourth day of the Global Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, we stand together on the site of a new beginning, right here in our state of Illinois. Remember this, my friends: you were here *at the beginning*. You were here to see the first wind turbines in La Salle County. You were here to see that we have finally begun to do things right.”

Mary Ann stood between her best friend, Shandra, who lived in Dwight, and Karl, who lived on a farm south of Dwight, and who was her boyfriend, though she had never told him that. She just liked to be near him, and now she was, as they stood together and listened to Dr. Adams.

“This is *your* job,” he said, sweeping his arm toward the land that stretched to the horizon around them. “Study hard in school, study hard in college, so that when your time comes, you are ready to build enough wind turbines to power all of Illinois.”

Mary Ann wondered if she would ever actually build a wind turbine. Maybe she could help to build the blades, those big feathers.

Dr. Adams continued, “I hope you will build enough wind turbines to power every home, every business, every farm. To power a web of railroads, and a web of electric buses. To power thousands of electric cars.”

“Whoosh . . . whoosh . . . whoosh.”

“All you wonderful kids, I hope that you will build enough wind turbines in your time that we can finally put the industrial revolution and the oil wars into a museum. I hope that you will build better and better turbines, more and more efficient. And I hope that you will work *in harmony*, not only with Mother Nature, but with your own generation around the world.”

“Whoosh . . . whoosh . . . whoosh.”

“Now that is a big job. But it’s the job you’ve got to do.”

Dr. Adams often talked to the kids this way, usually in the auditorium. He would get serious, and he would talk about things that they had to think about. He had talked several times already this school year about climate change. About the polar bears, the melting ice. The coal-burning power plants in China. And in Illinois. He had talked about the climate conference in Copenhagen, why it was so important.

Today, Dr. Adams wanted the kids to stand out in the cold wind—where they could look almost straight up at the long white blades spinning in the pale blue sky—so that the wind was real, and the wind turbine was real. And so that their future became more real.

“Now I want each of you to go up to that wind turbine and press your ear on the steel tower. Not your tongue, mind you! Your ear, for maybe ten seconds, so that before your ear freezes against the steel, you can hear—you can *listen to*—the gears and the generator up in the nacelle. Listen carefully to the sound of the wind making electricity.”

Mary Ann walked with Shandra and Karl up to the tall white tower, about ten feet wide, anchored to a concrete base by a ring of bolts. They had to wait their turn: the sixth graders went first, so they could get back on the bus first. Then the seventh graders pressed their ears to the tower.

And then the eighth graders stepped forward and took off their hats and leaned with one bare ear against the incredibly cold white steel.

Mary Ann could hear a hollow metallic sound coming down the towering tube: the steady humming of a big machine perched up in the sky. She could hear the rolling of gears, she could hear the turning of the generator, she could hear the deep hum of power coming down the cable to the ground.

Her ear stung with the cold. She had to put her wool hat back on. She and Shandra and Karl walked all the way around the wind turbine, looking up at the white blades from different angles. Facing northwest, with the morning sun behind them, they could see the huge gray shadow of the wind turbine reaching across the snowy corn stubble. They watched the three giant shadows of the blades as they swept around and around across the land.

Dr. Adams clapped his gloved hands and called, “All aboard!” Mary Ann and her friends hurried to the bus.

On the way home, they would stop at a diner for hot chocolate.

Part Two

That afternoon, I rode, unseen, with Mary Ann on the school bus to her farm on the prairie between Dwight and the distant wind turbines. Mary Ann stood up as the bus approached a cluster of farm buildings. Then she (and I) stepped out of the bus into the same cold wind that had been blowing that morning. She tightened her scarf, then walked with her book bag up the snow-dusted driveway toward the farmhouse. Ancient oak trees, bare and black in the December dusk, towered over a couple of red barns. The farmhouse, pale white, with a big porch and a multitude of amber windows, looked to have been in the family for several generations.

I stood, quiet and unobtrusive, in a corner of the kitchen while Mary Ann and her family had dinner. She told her parents, and her grandparents, and her little brother Richard, in third grade, about the field trip to the wind turbine.

“Dr. Adams told us that when we grow up, we’ve got to build a lot more wind turbines.”

“You?” asked Richard with astonishment. “You who can’t even build a birdhouse.”

“Never mind,” she replied. “Maybe I’ll become an electrical engineer.”

“Ha!” guffawed Richard.

“Richard,” said his mother, “eat your carrots.”

So the dinner went on, until dessert: apple pie still warm from the oven. Mary Ann was about half way through her pie, savoring the cinnamon, when she heard her grandfather say, “We can’t wait that long.”

She heard her father say, “Whatdya mean, Dad?”

Mary Ann looked at her grandfather, who was staring right at her with eyes that were afraid, and eyes that were angry.

(Because I, wanting to prod this conversation along, had stepped inside the thoughtful gentleman.)

“This poor world cannot wait another twenty years for you to be old enough to take over. We need to fix it *now*.” He thumped his fist lightly on the dinner table, something he rarely did. “I’m *tired* of the stalling and the bickering while our dirty world is dying.”

Now Mary Ann’s grandmother stared at her, with the strength in her eyes that she always summoned when she was deeply serious. “My child, your ancestor from Springfield took with him to Washington an appreciation for honesty. Though generations before him had dithered over the question of slavery, and finally drove themselves into a war that bled the nation, Mr. Lincoln did not shy away from making the decision that had to be made. He *freed* the slaves, because that was the right thing to do.”

Mary Ann nodded. She knew that more was coming.

“We made a muddle of it afterwards, for another hundred years, until finally *the black folks themselves* straightened us out. But at least the decision had been made. And Mr. Lincoln was the man who made it.”

Mary Ann nodded.

“So who is the person *now* to make the decision that we have avoided for decades? Who is the person who will say, ‘Yes, we are killing this beautiful world. But now we must stop. We must *stop!*’” She too thumped her fist lightly on the dinner table.

“Amen,” said her grandfather.

Mary Ann thought for a moment, then she asked, “What can I do? I have to study for a long time before I can become an electrical engineer.”

She heard her little brother snicker, but she ignored him.

“Well Honey,” said her grandfather, his eyes softening, “we know you’ll do the best you can.”

Mary Ann finished her apple pie, then she helped her mother with the dishes. The clock had just struck seven when she sat at her desk in her bedroom and tried to do her homework in geometry.

But she was sleepy. Maybe standing out in the cold wind that morning made her tired. She closed her book, put on her flannel pajamas, and said good night to the family. She opened her bedroom window just a crack to let in the fresh air. Then she snuggled beneath the goose down comforter that her grandmother had sewn for Mary Ann’s tenth birthday. Her grandmother had embroidered her name, MARY ANN LINCOLN, in bright green letters in one corner of the comforter.

In less than a minute, she was sound asleep.

I manifested myself, for the first time that day, as a star about the size of a baseball, hovering six feet above the bedroom floor, giving off an intense white light. Mary Ann woke up and glanced at me, then she squinted and turned her head away.

“Mary Ann,” I said, my voice gentle, “would you like to start now?”

Squinting, she tried to look at me. I dimmed myself, which I am not wont to do, but there I was in a dark bedroom, not out in the vast cosmos.

“Mary Ann, would you like to understand who you are? Would you like to understand how extraordinary you are?”

If she said, “No,” then I had the wrong candidate. I would have to start all over, looking for some other kid who was truly brave.

She sat up in bed. Her face, lit by starlight, showed no fear. Nor did she seem baffled by the fact that a star was speaking to her. After a long moment of

wariness, she became curious. She said, “Yes. I *would* like to understand so much more than I do now.”

We were half-way.

She continued, “And yes, I would like to start *now*. I would like to build more wind turbines. I would like to . . .” She hesitated. “I know there’s more, but I don’t know what it is yet.”

We were there. Mary Ann was my first volunteer.

“Thank you, Mary Ann,” I said, very pleased. “Now let’s get bundled up and go for a walk.”

In the next moment, she stood in her grandfather’s pasture—the cows were in the barn on this cold night—completely bundled in her coat and scarf and wool hat and gloves and boots, as she had been that morning.

I hovered nearby, with Jupiter shining in the southwestern sky behind me. The wind had settled; the winter’s night was absolutely still, and deeply cold.

“Mary Ann,” I said, “your grandfather is right. We can’t wait any longer.”

“I can’t remember,” she said, “when he was ever wrong.”

“So I have come here tonight to ask you to look up at the stars. And to lift up your arms like the blades of a wind turbine. And to learn who you really are.”

Mary Ann looked up at the stars to the west, bright in the crystalline sky. She saw her favorite constellation, the Swan, sailing on broad wings toward the black horizon. She lifted her arms like the blades of a wind turbine, at ten o’clock and two o’clock. And then she . . .

. . . understood the reach of time far beyond her thirteen years. She was back ten thousand years, in a forest of young trees . . . the first forest to grow after the end of the last Ice Age. The air was cool, but the sun shone down through dark drooping boughs of spruce. She was waiting for someone. Her hunter. The man who a year ago had been a boy, but was now hunting with the men. If he brought home a deer, he would be ready to marry. To marry her.

And then time reached again, further back. She stood on barren rock. She stared over a plain of rocks, without the rich black Illinois soil, without a patch of grass, without a single tree silhouetted against the dusty yellow sky. She was *before life*.

Sunlight shone on the rocks, but no green cell turned that sunlight into sugar and energy. Water pooled in the rocks, but no tiny creature wiggled its tail and swam about.

She felt . . . the deepest sadness she had ever known.

“Now you know,” I said, “a tiny touch of how lonely I felt.”

She looked at me, her arms still raised. She told me, “I read in school that the coral reefs are dying. I read that we slaughtered the blue whales almost to

extinction. I read that the dolphins die in nets, and that the codfish are tainted with mercury.”

“Yes, that is true. My gifts have been squandered.”

Mary Ann lowered her arms so that she could put her gloved hands over her stinging cheeks. “You must be angry.”

She understood, she understood.

“Profoundly angry.”

“I’m sorry for what we’ve done.”

“It isn’t your fault. You’re just a kid, a wonderful, beautiful kid. It’s the grown-ups . . . who never grew up.”

She looked at me, her dark eyes framed by the fingers of her gloves. I could see in the starlight the face of the woman whom she would become, a lovely woman, with much love in her eyes.

The time had come. I made my pitch. “Mary Ann, I need you to do a big job. I need *you*, and all the kids your age, right around the world, to give me one year of your time.”

She nodded. “All right.”

“I want you to *become* something. And while you are that something for one year, you will be doing a great deal of good for your family, for your farm, for your friends at school, and for your planet.”

“All right.”

“You will travel during this year. You will visit many places. You will meet kids your own age, and by the end of the year, you will be *a team*.”

“Good,” she said. “I like teams.”

“After one year, you’ll be back in school again. But you’ll change completely what they teach you there.”

“If I weren’t going to be an electrical engineer, I’d like to be a teacher.”

“Your team will graduate from school, and then you’ll go to work. But you’ll completely change the kind of work that people do.”

Mary Ann asked, skeptical, “Will there be jobs?” Her Uncle Bob was driving a truck. Shandra’s father was out of work.

“You shall weave a network of clean energy around the world. As your team builds that global grid, you shall learn to work together. And in doing so, you shall create a new democracy, a full flowering of true equality, all around the world.”

I paused, letting her catch and hold every word in her mind, in her heart.

“And as that new democracy blossoms, you shall plant the seeds of a firm and lasting peace. Because every wind turbine that you build . . . is a step away from war. Every wind turbine that you build . . . is a solid step toward peace.”

I shone with brighter intensity. I could not help myself. “Yes, there shall be many, many jobs.”

She nodded. “All right then. I’m ready.”

“Raise your arms again like the blades of a wind turbine. Face the wind from the west.”

She raised her arms, her gloved fingers pointing at the stars to the left and to the right above her. “But where is the wind?” she asked.

At my bidding, a breeze picked up, a light wind from the west, growing stronger, until it was a good steady wind blowing over the prairie.

“Cold!” she said as she turned to face it.

I backed away, rose higher than crowns of the bare black oaks . . . and then I manifested myself as a star as big as a basketball. My blaze of light filled the pasture; the winter’s first blanket of snow became radiant. My light shone through the windows of the dairy barn and awoke the cows, who mooed uneasily. My light shone through the windows of the old farmhouse and awoke Mary Ann’s family, who glanced from their pillows toward the window, then squinted at the blinding light and looked away.

“Mary Ann!” I called, my voice as loud as a thunderclap.

In the next moment, a wind turbine—with a tower over two hundred feet tall, and starlit blades spinning in the prairie wind—stood in the pasture exactly where Mary Ann had been standing. The blades called, “whoosh . . . whoosh . . . whoosh”, a quiet whisper over the lowing of the cows.

The light on the porch of the farmhouse began to shine more brightly.

“Thank you, Mary Ann,” I said. “You are doing an excellent job.”

“You are welcome,” I heard her say. “I like this job very much.”

“Now I must be going. I have many kids to visit this night.”

“Was I the first?”

“Yes, you were the first. You were the one brave enough to begin.”

“That’s because I’m a Lincoln.”

“Yes, and now I’m going to find some other Lincolns in the world.”

“Will you come back to visit?”

“Oh, yes. I’m part of your schooling for the next year.”

“Good.”

When the wind shifted a bit to the northwest, the turbine shifted with it, so that the three long slender white blades were most efficient.

Mary Ann was a beautiful wind turbine, pale white in the starlight, spinning majestically in the dark sky.

I departed. The next kid was in Chicago.

Part Three

Mary Ann was pumping two megawatts of electricity per hour—and had produced about five and a half megawatts so far—when she heard a small voice calling up from far below.

“Mary Ann. It’s Shandra. I want to join you in the pasture.”

“You have to be very brave,” said Mary Ann.

“I can be brave,” said Shandra.

“And you have to work very hard.”

“I can work hard.”

“All right. Then walk to the south end of the pasture, face the wind from the west, hold up your arms like the blades of a wind turbine, and look up at the stars. I hope you’re ready.”

“I’m ready.”

Shandra walked across the pasture, her boots shuffling through starlit snow, until she found just the right spot, not too close to the county road, near a grove of oak trees where the cows liked to gather in the summer. She faced the wind from the west, held up her arms like the blades of a wind turbine, then looked up at the stars.

In the next moment, a tall white wind turbine stood exactly where Shandra had been standing. The blades spun with majestic grace, “whoosh . . . whoosh . . . whoosh.”

Mary Ann produced another megawatt of electricity, which flowed from her generator into a long black cable that ran down the inside of her tubular tower. The cable then ran underground beneath the cornfields for about a mile . . . to a new substation, which fed her electricity into the grid.

She was just swiveling herself to catch the wind, which had shifted to the southwest, when she heard a voice calling up from far below, “Mary Ann. It’s Karl. I want to join you in the pasture.”

“You have to be very brave,” said Mary Ann.

“For you, I can be very brave.”

“And you have to work very hard.”

“I can work just as hard as you.”

“All right.” She felt a surge of happiness, of deep happiness. “Walk to the north end of the pasture, face the wind from the west, hold up your arms like the blades of a wind turbine, and look up at the stars. I hope you’re ready.”

“I’m ready.”

Karl walked across the pasture, his boots shuffling through starlit snow, until he found just the right spot, near a heap of boulders that he and Mary Ann had sat on

last summer. He faced the wind from the west, held up his arms like the blades of a wind turbine, and looked up at the stars.

In the next moment, a tall white wind turbine stood exactly where Karl had been standing. The blades spun with majestic grace, “whoosh . . . whoosh . . . whoosh.”

The three turbines caught the night wind blowing over the dark prairie. Their blades swiveled together when the wind shifted. They pumped and pumped and pumped their electricity into the grid.

* * *

Early the next morning, when Mary Ann’s grandfather stepped out of the farmhouse to milk the cows in the barn, he stopped dead in his tracks and stared: three tall white wind turbines were spinning in his pasture.

He remembered the intense light that had shone through his bedroom window last night.

He walked past the barn—he patted the old red boards and said through a crack to the ladies within, “I’ll be there soon.”—then he opened the gate and walked toward the wind turbine spinning in the middle of the pasture.

Walter Lincoln stood at the base of a white tubular tower, facing a steel door at the top of three concrete steps: a curved door that fit the curve of the tower. Looking above the door, he read the name in bright green letters, “MARY ANN LINCOLN.”

“Well, good for you,” he said out loud, not at all surprised.

He looked straight up at the enormous blades that swept through the silver-blue sky, “whoosh . . . whoosh . . . whoosh.”

Walter’s parents’ generation had been through the Depression. His mother’s parents had lost their grocery store in Dwight during the 1930s. His father’s parents had managed to hang on to the farm, but then World War Two came along. His father, not yet married, left the farm to fight in Africa, and then on Normandy Beach, and then in Germany, right up to the Elbe River, where they could see Russians on the other side. Sometimes, a generation had to do that.

And now a *new* generation had come, one that did not yet understand the peril of their own situation.

Back in September, Mary Ann had to write an essay for eighth grade English class about her Favorite Person . . . and so what did she do? She wrote about *him* as her favorite person. When she brought her essay home from school, she showed it to him, with a gold star at the top. She was very proud, both of her paper and of her

grandfather. Walter kept her three pages of schoolgirl's handwriting in his top desk drawer, mixed in with dairy invoices.

In the summertime, her favorite place was up in one of the oak trees at the south end of the pasture, where she sat on a branch with her friend Shandra.

Her other favorite thing to do was to ride a bike on the county roads with her friend Karl. They liked to ride in the summertime with an ocean of corn on each side of the road.

The two of them always took a picnic.

* * *

Walter turned toward the wind turbine spinning in the south pasture. He knew without even looking, that over the door was written the name, SHANDRA.

He looked in the other direction, at the wind turbine standing in the north end of the pasture. He knew that over the door was written the name, KARL.

Walter climbed the three concrete steps, stood in front of the door and patted the steel with his gloved hand as if he were patting the shoulder of a favorite horse. "Good job, Mary Ann. We thank you."

"Whoosh . . . whoosh . . . whoosh."

Then he went down the steps and walked beside his tracks in the snow to the gate. He patted the barn as he said to the ladies within, "I'm coming."

Part Four

I should perhaps introduce myself. Without going into a lot of history, I was the Spirit who declared at the end of the First Day . . . that what I had created was "good."

I said it six times over the six days . . . and at the very end, when the job was done, I declared that what I had created was "very good." The sun was shining by day, and the stars were shining by night. The restless ocean surged against the land. The winds blew across the plains, and the rain fell to the earth.

And . . . and . . . I had brought to this tiny ball of dust the *gift* of life. Nobody was here to ask for it. I gave that gift of my own free will.

Tiny green creatures appeared in the oceans, able to feed on sunlight. Tiny wriggling creatures appeared in the oceans, able to eat the creatures who had fed on sunlight.

Seeds appeared on the land, seeds that could grow in the earth, seeds that could take *nourishment* from that earth, as they grew into a flower, as they grew into a tree. A flower and a tree that could produce . . . more seeds.

Happy was the day when I created the first chipmunk. Jubilant was the day when I created the first herd of buffalo thundering across the prairie. Sacred was the day when I sent the first bird into the sky on wings.

And then I hesitated. For a long time. Because the next step, if I took it, was going to be a big one.

Eventually, I thought that maybe I could create a special sort of people. People who, before they grew up, would spend a few years as kids. Kids who wanted to explore. Kids who had an instinctive sense of fairness. Kids who wanted to make a contribution to their village, to their town, to their community.

Kids who had endless energy.

I thought that if people spent their early years as kids, and if every kid had a good school, and a good place to play, then by the time the people grew up, they would have a genuine chance to do well during the rest of their lives.

Lately, I question the wisdom of my optimism back then.

After centuries of watching the plundering and the poisoning of all that is “good” in my creation, after centuries of watching wars that grow worse and worse, I have come to a decision, regarding these grown-ups. Some of them have become a plague upon the land. A plague upon the seas. A plague upon themselves.

I am capable of the greatest thunderclap that ever smote the Earth. But though I am angry, deeply angry, I remember that there are kids like Mary Ann.

Doesn't she deserve to stand before the altar in a wedding dress with her Karl? Doesn't she deserve to bring a child, a newborn Karl, a newborn Mary Ann, into this world?

Doesn't she deserve to smell the lilacs in the springtime, for at least the next fifty years?

Doesn't she deserve to till and plant and tend and harvest the family garden that Lincolns have tilled and planted and tended and harvested since their first generation, *before* the Civil War, on this land?

Doesn't she deserve to look up at the stars—an old white haired lady holding her husband's hand, he too white haired—don't they deserve to look together up at the stars and say, “Thank you.”

Doesn't Mary Ann deserve to have what a thousand generations before her had—a full life on a healthy Earth—though many have used their opportunity very poorly?

So I stay my hand. I do not smite these ignorant, arrogant people. Not yet. Because living in their midst are the children of tomorrow. And each child is a jewel.

I found many jewels that night:

I found Kamari, a girl in sixth grade, whom I awoke in her apartment building in the south end of Chicago. She came outside with me and walked the sidewalks to a vacant lot filled with old bricks and rubble, lightly dusted with fresh snow.

Kamari stood in the middle of the rubble and raised her arms so that they were like the blades of a wind turbine. Then she looked up at the stars, dim behind the city lights.

Suddenly, an intense white light filled the vacant lot, a light that shone through the hundreds of windows in the apartment buildings wrapped around the lot.

In the next moment, a tall majestic wind turbine stood high above the city rooftops. The three blades began to spin in the steady night wind from the west, “whoosh . . . whoosh . . . whoosh.” The streetlights along 119th Street began to glow a little more brightly.

I found Leroy, a boy in seventh grade in Washington, D.C. He insisted, when he understood the nature of what he was called upon to do, that he bring along some of his friends. I of course agreed. They stood, eight of them, four boys and four girls, in a row along the long grassy National Mall. Leroy stood at one end of the Mall, near the Lincoln Monument.

President Lincoln was watching as the eight kids lifted their arms like the blades of wind turbines. The kids looked up at the stars, dim above the city lights.

Suddenly an intense white light lit the entire Mall. President Lincoln neither squinted nor turned away his eyes. The light shone on the museums, it shone on the memorials to soldiers who had died, it shone on the White House, it shone on the Supreme Court, and it shone on the huge white dome of the Capitol.

In the next moment, eight wind turbines spun along the Mall, catching the steady night wind that blew over the rooftops. Leaning forward in his chair, President Lincoln could see the graceful turbines . . . and he could read eight names over eight doors . . . as he listened to the “whoosh . . . whoosh . . . whoosh.”

A whole gang of kids in New York City scattered from one end of Central Park to the other. Kids gathered as well as in the parks of Brooklyn, and the Bronx, and over in Jersey. They raised their arms like the blades of a wind turbine, then they looked up at the stars, dim above the city lights.

An intense white light filled the avenues and the streets and the back alleys of the Great City. Lo, even the deepest of the dark canyons was filled with light.

Fifth Avenue was transformed forever. Flatbush Avenue was transformed forever. Paterson was transformed forever.

Taxis stopped in the streets; people who had been riding home from a party at two in the morning got out of the taxis and stared up at white wind turbines spinning high above the trees in Central Park.

Some of the wind turbines towered above even the tallest of the buildings around them, spinning almost among the stars.

And then you know what? The lights atop the Empire State Building, and the lights along the Brooklyn Bridge, and the lights along the George Washington Bridge, began to shine more brightly.

Behold, the entire city began to glow with a fresh new light.

A bronze statue of Samuel Adams, rabble-rouser, stood on a pedestal in front of Faneuil Hall in Boston. Samuel saw an intense white light that shone over Boston Common. Samuel did not squint, nor did he turn his eyes away.

Now he could see, towering above the rooftops of Boston, a dozen white wind turbines, their blades catching the steady night wind from Back Bay.

Samuel knew that the wind turbines stood in the same park, Boston Common, where a giant oak, the great Tree of Liberty, had once stood.

And lo, the lights along Commonwealth Avenue began to glow a bit brighter.

The turbines were providing more than just electricity; they were also providing Boston with a greater measure of independence. And Samuel was very glad for that.

In Philadelphia, the scientist who had once raised a key on a kite up to the thunderbolts flashing overhead, now sat up in bed when an intense white light shone in through his bedroom window.

When Benjamin stepped outside his sturdy brick home, he saw something in the night sky, spinning above the rooftops, that he had never seen before. He hurried in his bathrobe along Chestnut Street until he could see, scattered in the park in front of Independence Hall, a dozen white Somethings . . . standing tall above the dark trees, and spinning among the winter stars.

Had he been inside Independence Hall, he could have turned in his chair and looked out the big windows at what he understood to be the beginning of a peaceful Revolution.

Grant Park in Chicago, once the scene of a violent anti-war demonstration—a battle at night between people with rocks and police with clubs—became something entirely different on the night that I visited.

My intense white light reflected off the Bean, a sculpture of polished steel—a silver bean almost as big as a house—that stood near the Park, where people during the day came to laugh at their distorted faces and to take pictures of each other.

After my moment of intense light, the Bean reflected not only the Chicago skyline wrapped around it, but a dozen tall white wind turbines as well, spinning above the trees in Grant Park.

The amber glow of the lights along Michigan Avenue became a bit brighter.

What the Nimby's might have to say the next morning about all these new wind turbines in the parks of cities and towns and villages from one end of America to the other, yea, from sea to shining sea, did not concern me.

That night, I found jewels scattered all around the world:

In northern Norway, out on the vast, rolling, snow-covered tundra, the Sami kids stepped forward. Because they knew, with a memory of centuries, that the spring thaws were changing: the deep snow and the nighttime crust of ice were melting weeks earlier. Their herds of reindeer now struggled through unnatural snow when they tried to migrate toward the summer pastures. The creeks were often swollen with too much snowmelt; the big animals could still cross, but the calves were often swept away.

The Sami kids knew the Big Secret. They knew, from their lessons in school, that a "two degree increase" in the world's temperature really meant two degrees in Washington and London and Paris, but *six* degrees of catastrophic warmth in the arctic regions. The early springs were really the beginning of a melting tundra.

So the kids of Guovdageaidnu were ready to leave their warm beds on a cold December night, when the thermometer outside the kitchen window read forty below zero. They wore reindeer hide coats and reindeer hide boots. The dried grass inside their boots kept their bare feet warm.

Each kid found a spot on the snow-covered tundra at the edge of town, so that together they formed a meandering ring around their community. They lifted their arms like the blades of a wind turbine. Then they looked up at the pink and green ribbons of the northern lights, rippling over the crystalline stars.

Across the tundra of Norway and Sweden and Finland and Russia, slender white blades began to spin in the steady arctic winds, "whoosh . . . whoosh . . . whoosh."

Several tall white wind turbines appeared in Peter the Great's summer garden in Saint Petersburg, towering over the bare black oaks, towering over the frozen Neva, towering over the great palaces along the river, as they caught the steady night wind that blew from the Gulf of Finland.

A wind turbine appeared in the courtyard behind Pushkin's apartment, spinning high above the poet's office and library.

A wind turbine appeared in an apple orchard on Tolstoy's estate, spinning above the paths where the writer had walked.

A wind turbine appeared among the birches outside of Tchaikovsky's window, spinning above the desk and piano where "Swan Lake" had been born.

Further north in Russia, in the city of Arkhangelsk, on the broad mouth of the Northern Dvina River, I met with great success. The city had been powered by oil brought by long, long trains of ancient tank cars over vast Russian distances. The oil that burned in the ancient power plants of Arkhangelsk poured out from tall brick smokestacks, poured out as black plumes that trailed for kilometers over the city and the tundra and the frozen river and ice-coated islands.

In Arkhangelsk, almost every kid in town volunteered. They had grown up breathing dirty air; they had grown up hearing that the river that flowed right past their city—a sparkling blue river with a broad sandy beach—was too dirty to swim in. Many of these Russian kids knew enough English to explore the world on the Internet. They knew what was going on.

So hundreds of Russian kids stood along the embankment, facing the dark frozen river. They stood on islands, large and small, out in the mouth of the river. They scattered across the tundra. They stood along the shore of the frozen White Sea. They lifted their arms like the blades of a wind turbine, then they looked up at rippling green and pink ribbons, and at the crystalline arctic stars.

An intense white light lit the sheet of ice that covered the river. It lit the embankment where the kids stood, their arms lifted, their faces lifted. The kids were determined, brave, and ready.

A moment later, dozens of wind turbines spun in the cold night wind, like giant white flowers at home along the embankment, at home on the islands, at home on the snowy tundra.

The string of light bulbs that lit a path across the river ice between an island and the city—a path on which commuters walked each dark morning and each dark evening—began to glow a bit brighter.

Whereas the lights in the windows of the ancient oil-burning power plant between the airport and the city . . . began to flicker and dim.

And so it went, right around the world. The kids in India were ready. The kids in Bangladesh were more than ready. The kids in China, with enormous motivation, were ready. Nepal, Tibet, Viet Nam: great kids. The reception across South America was vibrant. The reception across Africa was celebratory.

Some of my favorite wind turbines now stand in Palestine, and in Israel, towering above the olive orchards, towering above the churches and the synagogues and the mosques. Every turbine along that embattled coastline faces the same steady night wind blowing off the Mediterranean Sea.

I told Mary Ann that she would travel during the next year. All the kids would. They could visit each other's wind farms, spinning their blades for a while in a village in Mexico, spinning their blades for a while in the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris. The kids would get to know each other, as they stood together on the rocky hills of Iran, and at the edge of an African desert. They could talk about voltages and amperes and power lines; and they could talk about working together.

After a year, the kids would return home, as kids again. But as very different kids.

The kids would return to their schools as vibrant young spirits, who know the feel of the wind in all its moods, who know the healthy turning of gears, who know the joy of sending pure clean power down the cable to the earth.

And who know the wisdom of working together.

Such kids would no doubt bring something new to their classrooms. They would have a whole new outlook on what they wanted to learn. Their generation would launch a whole new way of thinking, a whole new way of building, no matter what the older folks might say.

This global generation might have to pound their fists lightly now and then, but they would prevail.

I hope.

Because I don't see much else that's going to prevent the great ship from crashing on the rocks. Copenhagen gets sadder and sadder every day.

Part Five

The following April, Mary Ann was back in her pasture in Illinois (she had been spinning in Tibet), for she wanted to smell the lilacs that bloomed on the first warm evening of spring. She was spinning in a breeze just strong enough to turn her blades, a breeze fragrant with the dark wet Illinois earth in springtime.

The lilacs were heavenly. Every now and then, a gust of wind would sweep through the lilac bushes around the old farmhouse, then the blustery gust would rise up the tall tower to the nose of her nacelle.

Shandra and Karl could smell the lilacs too.

Mary Ann decided that her wedding day—in a few years, once she was a kid again, and then a grown-up—would be when the lilacs were blooming in April.

Just then, while she was spinning with her blades swiveled to the northwest, Mary Ann heard a voice far below. She looked down in the lavender light of dusk and saw him. She knew him immediately, though he was a younger man than in the

photographs. His face had not yet been etched by lines of sadness and worry. He was not yet bowed over with the burdens of his office.

He stood up tall as he looked straight up at her blades spinning among the first stars in the evening sky.

“Hello, Mary Ann,” he called up to her.

“Hello, Mr. Lincoln,” she called down.

“The lilacs are especially fragrant this year.”

“Yes. My grandmother calls them the First Bouquet of Spring.”

“She is right. She is right.”

Then they were quiet, the two of them, while more and more stars appeared in the night sky.

Mr. Lincoln climbed the three concrete steps and patted his bare hand on the steel of her tower. “Thank you, Mary Ann.”

“You’re welcome, Mr. Lincoln.”

She watched as he walked across the pasture on his long legs toward Karl.

As the night darkened, the pale white ribbon of the Milky Way became increasingly clear, until it stretched across the sky above her, like a prayer shawl upon the world.

