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## 2030: “Irreconcilable Differences”

Ken Williams

My ears are mere holes. They look like they were drilled into the sides of my skull. With them I hear the muffled cry of angry waves crashing against the rocks below the cliff. Their fury shutters up through the ground into my body. They are slamming against the cliff's existence. The high-pitched squawks of protesting seagulls fill the air. Tall pine trees sway and bend by the force of brisk winds blowing in off the ocean. My bones ache with coldness—merely another element to my pain.

The wooden chair creaks as I sink heavily into it. The distance down from my walker is a mile. Bolts of searing pain shoot up my right leg. I grimace. I laugh. Still, after all this time finding it hard to believe that the strangled sound escaping the jagged line where my mouth used to be belongs to me. How can I not laugh at the absurdity of life? My life. Knowing the ironic humor of a soulless universe. There is no leg for the pain... I reach down to feel the empty pants leg of the hospital gown...yet another joke. My steel claw can feel nothing at all.

With the one eye I have left I look down the rows of chairs. Pete is at the end, one row behind. I worry about him. He received his divorce papers yesterday: “Irreconcilable differences.” Ain't that a mouthful! You think! He's a black dude but you wouldn't know it from looking at him. The burnt skin is pinkish-white and scared. Bald head. No nose or lips to speak of. “Irreconcilable differences.” They made him a freak. Different from other humans in the poundage of scared flesh he drags around day in and day out. I remember when he first came to us. They had to put him daily in a tub of water to scrub off dead flesh. His screams still echoes in the canyons of my mind. Iran? He was burnt when Coalition Forces bombed a nuclear power plant releasing invisible fire that killed thousands. Wounded tens of thousands more: The enemy. Civilians. Us. Pete.

Next to Pete sits Pedro. A skullcap hides the half of his head that is missing. An IUD outside of Amman Jordan blasted his life. Now he sits with the rest of us. Incredibly his wife, Donna still visits. Every Tuesday and Saturday she comes for dinner. She feeds him and the rest of us watch the food dribble mostly down his chin. She talks about Padro Jr. and Isabel, his son and daughter. They visited once. Their shrieks as they ran out of the cafeteria in horror of what their father had become still lives. At least their cries didn't impact Pedro. It turns out having a half a brain has an upside.

Angela walks slowly by. She is young. Beautiful. Large blue eyes dominate a petite face. Nobody would ever accuse her of being a monster. A model maybe? Movie star? Except for her snow-white hair that till yesterday hung down to her waist. For some reason she took a knife to it. Before the nurses could wrestle it away she had hacked half of it off. Now part of her hair is quarter of an inch long while other parts—long shafts still tumble down her back. They are waiting for the weekly visit of a haircutter to somehow style the remains. I catch her stare and smile, which of course I can't. But it doesn't matter. Her eyes are dead. Nobody's home. Stiffly, robotically she shuffles by. Her nurse accompanies her a few paces back busily talking on her cell. Army bureaucrats denied Angela a Purple Heart. It seems PTSD doesn't quality. Wasn't

wounded by enemy fire. Really? Of course she doesn't care. Still...it must hurt like hell.

Our home is Friendship Town. One of twenty the government has established across the land to warehouse the "residues" of what has become known as, The Constant War. They call them halfway houses. Never seen a house that is home to hundreds. The social workers and nurses tell us it is for our own benefit so we can heal and be trained for re-entry into society. But we know different. These institutional warehouses are to keep us out of sight. Separated. The government doesn't want the populace to see the consequences of neither their war practices nor the indifference of the citizens of the land. Nobody, it seems wants to see us *freaks*. It might disturb dinner parties and holidays. Family gatherings. Theirs. Not ours. We know we will live out our truncated lives here. Occupancy is forever. I chortle. At least no one gets evicted. And the price is right. The government merely takes our veterans benefits and provides all. All that is except normalcy. A body that doesn't scare children would be nice.

Linda. My nurse arrives and greets me warmly. "Good morning." She knows better than to expect a cordial reply. Words have never passed these mutilated lips. She tells me my son is on the phone and holds it out. It's one of those new ones. Polished aluminum. Shiny. It reflects a man without a face. No ears. No lips. One eye. No hair. Ropes of scar tissues. Raw. Angry. I turn my head. I'd get up and walk away except I can't. Without legs and only a hook on my remaining arm I'm at the mercy of the kindness, or indifference, or cruelty of the world.

She begins to say something but Angela's nurse screams at the edge of the cliff. I smile a twisted smile. Angela's pain is ended. There will be one less customer for the haircutter. Somehow I need to make that two.

"Irreconcilable differences." Us. Them. You.