

An Excerpt from *One More Day* by Diane Chiddister

Chapter 1 — A New Country

On his best days, Thomas thinks of getting old as living in a new country, a remote island nation perhaps, someplace only recently found. He's sending reports back to the mainland. The world waits for his findings! Well, perhaps the world isn't actually waiting. This place isn't quirky, certainly not sexy. It's just old people living together, packed in one building. It's the culture here at the Grace Care Center.

But the world should perk up its ears. Strange things are happening.

For instance, they're happening right now at the table where he sits having breakfast. The woman sitting opposite lifts her plate high. She tips it. Now eggs fall through the air. A streak of yellow! Potatoes tumble down too, brown and oily. Goodness, here comes the garnish, little pieces of kale drifting like wings. And the woman tipping her plate, the one with the tiniest nose Thomas has ever seen (Thomas tries not to study her nose when they're eating) — she seems to be smiling! Aides are swarming around her. Oh, yes. She's having a wonderful time.

Thomas tries not to smile. He likes the women who work here, doesn't want them to think he's in cahoots with the plate-tipping woman. He's sorry they now have to work harder, scrub the table, mop up the floor. But this place is curious. It's definitely curious.

Curious. As an anthropologist, it's his favorite word.

Thomas aims his attention at his own plate. He's new here, and this is curious too. This is worthy of his attention.

He studies the gleam of his plate's blinding whiteness. Each part of his meal seems precise and symmetrical, a perfect circle of scrambled eggs, a neat square of potatoes, Three Little Pig sausages all in a row. A ruffle of some green leafy vegetable he takes to be kale adorns the side of the plate; on top, two slices of pink candied apple. Red on green, then yellow and brown, a rainbow of color adorns gleaming white. Who came up with this thoughtfulness, this attention to detail? What could be the underlying purpose of such precision?

He's only an anthropologist; he's not God. He can just speculate. But he feels certain the underlying purpose is the creation of hope. All is not lost! That's what the food is telling these people. The forces providing these perfect circles and squares are benevolent, the world is benevolent, there is more good than evil — that's what this symmetry says. Yes, you are old, his meal says, your body is failing, you may lose your mind. But here in the Grace Care Center

there is order, there is reason; just look at the perfect circle of eggs, the tight square of hash browns. This orderliness will not let you die a meaningless death. Perhaps you won't die at all.

The symmetry of the food creates the appearance of a world rich in meaning and order.

Of course, the tiny-nosed woman is having none of it. That's for sure.

Maybe she knows this doesn't make any sense. Most cultures don't try to spark hope in their old people. No, they kill them! Thomas knows this.

Indigenous peoples the world over, since time began, have been marching their old people off the edge of a cliff or abandoning them in the wild to be eaten by bears. Or drowning them. Or bashing in skulls. Thomas used to lecture his classes on these practices and his students ate it right up. They loved it.

And of course killing old people makes sense when there's a shortage of food, and there's always a shortage of food. Take your weakest people, your sickest, your most vulnerable — and that's old people, of course — and dump them. Get rid of them.

So the strangest part of this new land of aging is that it puts old people together in buildings and keeps them alive.

It's true that the food here doesn't taste very good. While the presentation of the food is attractive, the taste often is not. Does that undermine his theory? Thomas isn't sure. The eggs are barely warm (of course,

that's his own fault for not eating more quickly) and as tasteless as pudding without butter or sugar. The hash browns are just slippery slices of potato that have no zip, no zing. Which means no salt, of course; that's the problem. Nothing here has any salt. Is there an evolutionary purpose in making the food tasteless? Well, of course, that keeps people from eating and then they die a slow death. Same basic idea as the killing of old people in indigenous cultures; it just takes a bit longer.

It's a contradiction, of course, at odds with the hopeful stance of the food presentation. Well, sometimes cultures have contradictory practices. He's seen it before.

But maybe this isn't a contradiction at all. Food isn't scarce in American culture, but jobs sometimes are. So perhaps the powers-that-be aim to warehouse old people together to create jobs for these nice young women? It's difficult work, to be sure, wiping up old people's butts, washing their crusty old bodies. And the people who work here don't get paid much. So keeping the old people happy might make the job easier. Hence the gleaming white plates, the colorful garnish, the Little Pig sausages all in a row. Yes, the purpose must be the creation of low-paying jobs.

It's a new theory! Not bad, either. And he didn't have to travel to Borneo or hack tall grass in Papua New Guinea. No. He simply had to live his life. He just had to get old.

Thomas needs someone to tell. He needs someone to spin theories with. He needs Hal. He and Hal just let their thoughts roll; first one speaks, then the other, then someone tweaks and embellishes, the new energy taking wing in unseen directions like the kale floating from that gleaming white plate. Then one or the other sees something deeper; the theory becomes both airborne and rooted. Ah, he loves this part. And then he or Hal get carried away and go a step too far, they're ridiculous, they laugh and it's the best laughter Thomas knows, the laugh of new thinking, of pushing the edges. Sometimes he and Hal pause for a moment and just stare at each other, filled with awe. Hey, look what just happened! Look what we did. We thought up something entirely new, we brought new thinking into the world.

Ah. Thomas sits back. He loves being an anthropologist. What would Hal do with his theory on the Grace Care Center food presentation? Something unexpected, something wild. Yes, that's just what this theory needs.

But where is Hal? At home Thomas could count on him each Monday morning, could count on his old friend showing up for an hour and they'd spin theories, they'd laugh at old stories from the department. After that hour, for even the rest of the day, it made sense to Thomas, this business of getting old. Then Thomas could see things in perspective, a perspective that buoyed him, kept him bobbing up on the surface, just north of despair. Yes, he is old, very

old; his time is short. But he had a life! He was an anthropologist of some standing. He published papers, taught classes. He had tenure, for God's sake.

But recently Hal seems not to have visited. Is he sick? Thomas feels his heart race for a moment. He can't lose Hal, not now, not anytime soon. He's lost too many friends. Thinking about Hal, Thomas feels a slip of memory floating just past his awareness. Did he die?

He pushes his plate away. No, he's not hungry. It's the worst part about this new country. It's a country in which you don't meet old friends again. They fall off the edge of the earth. They vanish.

He's no longer hungry. Thomas pushes his plate away. He hoists himself up from the chair to a standing position. Ouch! Pain slices his hip; he is trembling. This is the hardest part. He's not just observing the people who live in this country. He lives here as well.

“Thomas?”

It's the girl he likes, the tall plump one. Such a smooth face, such smooth skin.

“You're not eating. Is it okay? Can I get you anything else? Would you like some French toast?”

Thomas does his best to smile and nod. Yes, everything's fine, thanks so much. It's important to be easy, not too demanding. She's kind, yes, but she's busy, too, and he doesn't want to add to that burden.

People around Thomas are leaving the table. He's the last to leave. He's observing. Observation takes time.

The room swirls a bit. Damn. He grabs the table again. Okay, that's better.

He takes a deep breath. What sort of dizzy is this? Sometimes when he traveled to a new country, Thomas felt dizzy. He got dizzy trying to take in the new things around him, the new ways of seeing the world. He was struck by a vertigo from all the options of human behavior, the options he'd never considered. A room in the Filipino village where he lived decades ago, where people grieved a dead person, the body right there before him, but only a few feet away young people chatted loudly and flirted. Wait a minute! Too loud, too raucous. That's disrespectful. But in this culture it was not disrespectful, no others seemed bothered. This was life going on; this was a part of the grieving.

When this sort of dizzy came on him, Thomas tried to stay with it. He tried to take a deep breath, allow himself to live in the vertigo, to feel the complexity of human behavior. It's what makes him a good anthropologist, he believes. He can stay with the dizziness, breathe into it.

Now Thomas takes a deep breath. Stay with the dizziness. Okay, that's better.

Some of the residents are now sitting in front of the television, where they seem to spend most of their days. Watching what? The weather channel. Good lord, can't someone change the station? Thomas heads back to his room.

Damn. He hugs himself. This pain blasts his groin, sharp and hot. Breathe through it. He can breathe through it.

Okay. He stands upright. It's better. It's almost gone. He'll move on. Is the pain happening more? Maybe. He's not sure.

Partway down the hall, he stands still for a moment. What's with the bears? Little stuffed teddy bears sit on the window sill, some with red bows on their necks. Thomas closes his eyes. He needs to calm down. Sometimes he's annoyed at those in charge of this culture, how they seem to think he's a child, that all of these old people are children. Teddy bears.

He could complain. But the best thing would be to forget it, just let it go. Don't be a crabby old guy.

He walks on. Here's a table, a chance to rest for a second. Sitting next to the table is the woman with the tiny nose, the one who dumped her eggs at breakfast. Now she's bending over the puzzle, studying it. She pulls her arm back. She seems to be getting ready for something. Oh shit. He wants to see this. There she goes; her arm sweeps the table, the pieces scatter, fall to the

floor. Now she bends over again, pushing more pieces off. It's a farming scene, rolling hills, a happy farmer with a horse and a cart, but now the pieces tumble on top of each other, and it's destruction, just piles of cows and horses and farmers lying helter-skelter all over the place. The woman steps back from the table. She smiles. Thomas feels himself smiling as well. A small rebellion here in the hallway.

Now what was he doing? Ah yes, finding his room. When he looks up quickly, he's dizzy again. Where is he now?

It's a long white-walled hallway with doors on the side, like the hotels where he stayed for professional conferences. He's been to conferences all over the country, all over the world. Where was the last one? Tokyo? Sydney?

But he's not at a professional conference. A door opens. Out comes an old woman pushing a walker. He's an old man living in an old people's home.

His heart needs to slow down.

It's been a long time, maybe five decades ago? It's been a while since he was out in the field, living in that Filipino village. He was so young then, before the college ran out of money to send him.

Here's what he told himself ten times every day: you are just like these people. Don't think of all the ways you are different, the ways you're astounded at how they get through the day. Don't see them as strange or misguided. And

whatever you do, don't think you would never, ever, eat their most unsavory food, you would never put a whole baby duck in your mouth.

No, don't do that. Instead, observe your hand as it scoops up the balut. But don't see it as a whole baby duck if that thought unsettles your stomach. No, see it as something moist and soft, then aim your hand to your mouth. Observe yourself chewing, hear the approving sounds from the others. Whatever you do, don't think of the baby duck feathers tickling your throat, the tiny bones that crunch as you swallow. Think that you can do this new thing. Know you can do things you never imagined.

The woman walking ahead in the hallway is small and hunched over, and she seems to be flinging the walker before her. Her face is thin, beaky looking. She reminds Thomas of a bird, a big bird, a bird of prey — a hawk perhaps, a bird that does what it must do to survive. She must keep moving. She looks fierce. Her arms are pale and stick-like, yet she's heaving the walker like a strongman, a teamster.

In the Filipino village Thomas ate the whole baby duck. He grew to like it. Sometimes he asked for more.

He can do this. He is doing this. He can be an old man in an old people's home. He can do things he never imagined.