

All Geeked Up

Three Short Novels
by Tom Lichtenberg

Including
World Weary Avengers
Ledman Pickup
In Constant Contact

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World Weary Avengers

PART ONE

1. It All Began

It all begin with Chris and Tom on a San Francisco sidewalk. Chris was enumerating his favorite cliches.

"My grandmother used to say", he said, "'from your mouth to God's ear'"

"That's it!" Tom declared.

"That's what?" asked his friend.

"That's how you and I will change the world."

"Okay", Chris replied. He had always wanted to change the world.

The sidewalk, since you asked, was along Kearney Street near Post. It was a cold, foggy and windy evening. The two young men were bundled up and walking towards the Montgomery Street Muni Station on their way home after work. Chris would take the N-Judah back to the Inner Sunset, and Tom would take the J-Church to Noe Valley.

"I know what you're thinking", Tom said.

"Really?" Chris was genuinely curious. Was Tom a mind-reader after all? It would be news to him.

"You're thinking this is just another one of my hare-brained schemes that I'll forget about immediately and it would have come to nothing anyway, but you're wrong."

"I'm wrong?" Chris thought about this for a moment. It's quite possible I'm wrong, he decided, even if that is not what I was thinking, which it wasn't.

Chris was the older of the two, in his late twenties, tall, fair and expanding. Tom, in his earlies, was a carnival mirror image of his pal, short, dark and wasting away.

"Not this time." Tom declared. "Listen, we are always having lots of good ideas about how to make the world a better place, right?"

"Sure", Chris was being agreeable. Already his mind was on dinner, his favorite time of the day. Tonight there would be pork

chops. He was convinced of that, although as far as he knew there were none at his house. One of his roommates might have brought some. It was always a possibility.

"So how come none of our good ideas ever make anything happen?"

"Um, because we're just a couple of shipping clerks working in the basement of a bankrupt bookstore?" Chris surmised.

"Exactly", Tom replied. "Every time we have one of those great ideas we're nobodies and we're nowhere. That's the essence of the problem as I see it."

"So", Chris was slow to reply, as they drew nearer to Market Street. "If we had those ideas when we were somewhere, and if we were somebodies, then. Then what?"

"No, no", Tom said, and instantly remembered a person he once knew who always began every sentence with the words "no, no", and Tom thought the guy was such a jerk for doing that, and here he was being that same jerk himself.

"I mean", he corrected himself, "that's not what I meant."

"Okay", Chris replied. It would often get like this. Most of those "great ideas" that Tom was referring to were vague half-uttered mumblings coming out of his friend that one could hardly even hear, let alone figure out what the heck.

"You know," Tom continued, "what I was saying about the spirit of the age."

"Oh right", Chris recalled and repeated, "people talking loudly in public in the vain hope of being overheard by someone more important."

"You remembered!", Tom was impressed. Usually he was convinced that no one even heard half of his obscurely spouted mutterings.

"I liked that one", Chris agreed, "it's right up there with 'shit or get off the pot'"

They were laughing as they entered the underground light rail station. From here they would usually wait on the platform interminably as any number of K, L, and M trains came by, with nary a J or an N in sight. Today, however, an N-Judah was waiting right there when they leaped off the bottom steps and Chris hurried onto it with a backward wave of goodbye. Tom had not yet gotten to the part about how. About how this idea was going to change the world.

He pulled out a small notepad from his jacket pocket, along with a bit of pencil, and rapidly scribbled down the rest of his idea before he forgot it. He wrote the following:

The right people in the right places at the right time, saying the right things in the right way - for starters.

Easy.

From there it was only a matter of who, where, when, what and how.

2. That Sparking Thing

Tom had to wait a long time for his train, which was super annoying considering he was planning out how to change the world and wanted to be doing that in the comfort of his own home instead of the noisy and smelly downtown Muni station. These things take a certain holistic approach, he told himself, and he wasn't feeling very holistic at the moment. He forced himself to stop thinking but that only worked for a moment or two. He was never good at meditating or even relaxing for that matter. He had a brain that went on overdrive for years until it finally burned out, many years later, and he became a much happier person. In the meantime it was think think think. Just then he was thinking about Chris and about the possibility that Chris would soon be marrying the brainy and beautiful Laurie, and the very strong likelihood that shortly thereafter they would begin producing a gaggle of spectacular and out of control little redheads. But that was then. Or would be. In the meantime, he felt that time was short and he would have to launch his plan into action quickly.

He finally made it home to the small basement apartment which he shared with two annoying cats and any number of small white mice. The fat gray cat liked nothing more than to sit on his shoulders while he was trying to work, and dig her very sharp claws into his back. The tiny yellow cat, meanwhile, spent much of her life swinging back and forth on his sneakers under the table. The table top itself was covered with partial inventions and their makings, a lot of electronic bits and pieces he had collected from the dumpsters behind the GreenVu recycling center, and stolen from his days working at World of Parts. Already he had created a variety of useless inventions, but felt certain that something he invented would someday somehow come in handy for some reason or other. He wouldn't worry about that now.

Amplification, he thought. Targeting systems. Tracking devices. Audio tuners and receptors. Computer software. Handheld devices. He felt confident he could deliver the technology. The worries he had were of a systems problem and a personnel issue. To do what needed to be done required people. Tom didn't know any people except Chris. Chris knew people. That was huge. It always seemed to Tom that whenever he mentioned anything - literally anything at all - Chris would always know someone who either did that thing or knew someone who did. Like giant paper balloons. Chris knew a guy who could make them. Like restoring medieval Church books. Chris knew a guy who could do it. Like flying to the moon. Chris actually knew one of those millionaire space tourists. Or sort of knew him. Actually, he had fucked the guy's wife. That ought to count for something.

But anyway, requiring people required also people skills, and Tom knew well enough he had none of those either. Again, Chris was the man for that. He was a charmer. I mean, he had fucked that guy's wife while the guy was actually walking around on the moon. The guy was even on the phone with his wife at the time. Calling from the fucking moon! She was like, yes dear. Yes, dear. Oh my, yes dear!

People skills. The people would have to be found, selected and trained. And then they would have to be volunteers too because neither of them had any money. Just great ideas. And the people would have to be trusted or else they might steal those great ideas when the whole great idea was to give away the great ideas for the betterment of mankind. Obviously they needed young people. People who still gave a shit about the betterment of mankind. No one over thirty, that was a given.

The ideas were coming thick and fast. He wished he could call up Chris and give him the lowdown but he didn't have a phone. No

money, no friends except one - why have a phone? Instead, he tapped his notes into a homemade handheld device using a sharp, pointy stick. Might need money, he worried. This was the biggest problem of all. Tom was a freegan, except for rent and utilities and food and clothing. That meant he was poor and a cheapskate. He always said he didn't have a girlfriend because he was always broke, but that was only part of the reason. There was also the fact that he didn't like people very much. Potential girlfriends were turned off by the fact that he didn't really like them.

The strategy, however, was becoming pretty clear. To change the world they would need some agents of change. They would need some targets of change. They would need to bring those two together just enough. It would be like rubbing sticks to create a spark and make a fire.

3. Moth Flock

Chris was thinking about settling down, because it seemed to be the thing to do. Here he was, approaching thirty, and had not lived in the same place for more than one year in many, many years. That was all the fault of his intractable charisma. Everywhere he lived he made new friends, and the friends of his roommates begged him to come and live with them, to make their homes the centers of attention for a change. They offered him the best room, the lowest rent, all sorts of perks, if only he'd move in with them, and so he usually did, and stayed until the next great offer came along. In this fashion he'd lived practically rent free from Seattle to L.A. to Portland to San Francisco. Along the way he had gathered an immense collection of contacts. He had always wondered what he was going to do with all of them. It seemed like maybe the time had come.

He was currently living in the nice front room of a railroad flat by the park. Among his many roommates were a lawyer, an actress, a financial consultant, and a civil engineer. As soon as Chris walked into the house the others, who up until then had been moping around the living room, all gathered in the kitchen to see what they could offer him for supper. As he had anticipated, Karen (the actress) had stocked up on pork chops and so she won the day. Everyone else pitched in with drinks, table setting, and asking Chris for his opinion on various matters which came up that day. He was glad to oblige.

Frank, the banker, was convinced that Chris would like to play basketball that evening at the park, and was disappointed when Chris declined. Joe, the lawyer, thought he might like to see the new Pig Glut movie instead (Pig Glut Three, the Fattening, had just opened at the Wharfeum), but Chris was oddly not in the mood for that treat either. After Karen's blackened chops, Chris wanted nothing more than to visit his sweet Laurie, but she was trekking in the Himalayas, so that was out of the question. He then considered phoning Tom, but remembered that Tom didn't have a phone. As a last resort, he settled on Sidney, the engineer's, plan to walk up the street for ice cream cones, even though it was cold and foggy outside.

Along the way he thought about the spirit of the age thing. He asked Sidney what she thought it meant. Talking loudly in public places. How was that going to change the world? Sidney was certain that Tom had been joking.

"He's just toying with you again", she said.

"Again?" Chris was not aware of any previous toying attempts.

"Afraid so", Sidney repeated. "Like the time he taunted you about redheads. Said you'd have a handful of 'em someday, and you don't even have red hair."

"Laurie does", he replied.

"Wasn't that before you knew her?"

"Nope", Chris told her. "I knew her first, then him."

"Oh", Sidney muttered. "Never mind then."

She wasn't any help with the spirit of the age. She thought the spirit of the age could be captured with a camera if you found the right thing to take a picture of. She didn't know what that thing was, but if she saw it, and recognized it, and had a camera, and remembered to take a picture of it. Well then.

Joe, who'd come along for the walk even though he was allergic to ice cream and fog, was sneezing happily enough and contributed the thought that perhaps the spirit of the age was available at the local liquor store. It might be a kind of schnapps, he said.

Both Sidney and Joe had to move their little legs to keep up with Chris' long strides, one on each side of him hustling to stay with the pack. It was an odd thing, this charisma he had. He felt a little guilty about it, because he hadn't done a darned thing to develop it or earn it, and yet there it was, doing him favors all the time. He was like a light bulb in motion leading a flock of moths behind him. One of these days, he told himself, I'll make something of it. But he had no idea of what or how or when that would be.

4. Laser Tag

Back at work the next morning, Chris and Tom had plenty of time to plan their next move. The bookstore chain was "on hold" with practically every publisher and distributor in the universe. "On hold" means that they hadn't paid their bills, so no one was fulfilling their orders. The job of the shipping and receiving clerk is to open all the new boxes coming in, and packing up the boxes going out. With no books coming in, there were few books on the shelves. They had literally no work at all to do.

"Literally", Tom commented. "I like that. Being we're in a bookstore and all".

Chris had been making the most of the opportunity to catch up on "the classics". Of the few books remaining in the store, many were indeed "the classics". He was currently spread out on the pea green couch they'd rescued from the alley, and was finishing up his nineteenth century American collection with some Bret Harte stories.

"He kind of summed up the spirit of his age", Chris reported.

"Somebody's got to do it", Tom replied.

"Every age has got its spirit, I suppose"

"Speaking of which", Tom said, "I have some more ideas". Tom was now covered in post-its. He found it more convenient to stick them on his shirt to avoid them getting all stuck together. Chris reached over and plucked one off Tom's shoulder.

"Pick a card, any card?" He asked, and read out loud

"Raspberry Chocolate Graham Chunk Cereal? One Calorie?"

"Doesn't that sound good?"

"Sure, but why is it stuck on your shirt?"

"Well, I was thinking, I would like that kind of cereal, so that would make me happy, and other people might like it too, which would also make them happy, and then the world would be a better place if people were a little happier, right?"

"That's kind of stupid", Chris replied, "Aren't there enough happy-making cereals already?"

"I guess you're right", Tom said, and, snatching back the post-it, tore it up and tossed the pieces into the air as if they were confetti.

"If we're going to make the world a better place", Chris said, "it ought to be worth the effort."

"True", Tom said, and glanced down at his shirt. He found another couple of post-its bearing similarly dumb ideas and gave them the same confetti treatment.

"But all the best ideas are already out there", Tom complained, "like 'love thy neighbor' and shit like that"

"And a lot of good they've done", Chris agreed.

"How about this one?", Tom pulled a post-it from his armpit. "Hollywood movies should do more to save the planet."

"More what?"

"They should be greener", Tom said. "We can leave the details up to them. We just have to get the message out, they should be doing more to save the planet"

"Ok, I'll bite", Chris said. "Now what?"

"We get the message out", Tom repeated. "We need to get somebody out there, talking up this idea, but not just anywhere. We have to figure out where."

"And who", Chris muttered.

"Who what?"

"Who to do the talking"

"And who to do the hearing"

"I see what you mean."

"So what do you think?"

"Hmmm", Chris said.

"That's what I thought", Tom replied. It was still the sticking point. Agents of change and targets of change.

"And when we know who", Chris said, "I mean who to do the hearing, then we also have to know where and when, like where they'll be, you know?"

"I got that part down", Tom told him, "it's a kind of laser tag, you know that game?"

"Sure"

"I can brand them with an invisible brand, and then track them. Here I'll show you", and he walked over to his duffel bag and pulled out what looked like a pistol, pointed at at Chris, and before Chris could leap off the couch yelling 'what the fuck?', Tom had already pulled the trigger.

There was a quiet click, a flash of yellow-orange light, and that was all. Chris never felt a thing.

"Okay, now", Tom said, whipping out another variety of his homemade handheld devices, "here you are, see?"

Chris, on his feet now and still a bit startled, walked over and looked down at the grayish screen to see a little red dot pulsating on a grid.

"Take it", Tom said, holding it out to him, "and go walk around the block or something. You'll see how it follows you. There's even a trajectory mode", he added, grabbing back the device and pushing a couple of buttons on the side.

"Now it'll trace out a line wherever you go".

Chris took the thing back and walked out the back door into the alley and was gone for several minutes. When he came back into the basement all he could say was

"Holy fuck, does the C.I.A. know you have this thing?"

"It's only meant for good", Tom said. "That's why I have to hide my inventions. God only knows what people would do with them."

"How long does that tag thing last?" Chris wanted to know.

"Couple of days more or less", said Tom.

"So you can watch wherever I go the next two days?"

"Pretty much", Tom said.

"But shit, that pistol", Chris said. "You got to do better than that! You pull that out in public you're gonna get arrested."

"You're right", Tom said, "I'll put it in a stick or something. Thanks."

"I think I know who", Chris told him. "While I was out there walking around I remembered this guy I used to know in L.A. He was like a project manager, one of those guys who goes around to meetings and blabs a lot. Put that notion in his ear, he'll go to work on it. Guy's name is Harold Staley."

"Cool!" Tom said. "So now we just have to tag him and track him and when we know he's in a good spot, get him to overhear the agent!"

"Sounds easy enough", Chris was joking, but Tom didn't realize that.

"So where do we find him?" Tom wanted to know.

5. Gandhi With a K

They were still discussing strategy when the conference was interrupted by "the chirping presence" (Tom's description)

otherwise known as Kandhi, the stock clerk. They were used to her varying but always dramatic entrances. It was her job to push an empty cart into the stock room, fill it up with newly arrived books, and push it back out to the sales floor. Usually she managed to arrive either inside of the cart, on top of the cart, skating the cart, sailing the cart, one time even carrying the large metal beast on her back. On entering she would call out some random greeting in an attempt to never make sense and never repeat herself.

"Watchtower Ho!" was her calling card this time, as she waded in, balancing a back wheel of the cart on each of her shoes, like you might walk an incipient toddler.

"Hi Chris", she shouted as she let the front wheels fall and clatter onto the floor. Tom did not like the girl, at least not that he would admit to anyone or even himself. She was too something or other. Girls were always too something for Tom. He turned away and went to work on one of the twigs from his collection. He had to figure out how to embed one of his tagging devices in there.

Kandhi was still trying to figure out how to embed Chris. Even since she found out Laurie had gone off into the wilderness, Kandhi was one (of many) who figured it was now or never. She sized herself up and thought she had a decent change. Where Laurie was a redhead, Kandhi's short and spiky hair was day-glo pink. Where Laurie had a vast array of freckles spread across her face, Kandhi had a lot of piercings. Where Laurie was as thin as an extension cord, Kandhi had plenty to grab on to. Besides, she was friendly, happy, and positive and who didn't like that?

"Hey Kandhi", Chris replied. "What's cooking?"

"So much work!" she feigned fatigue, wiping a hand across her brow. "Did any book come in?" she laughed. It was a frequent joke of late, the singular case. There had been a day recently where one and only one book did in fact arrive. It was a special order called "Hives and You". Everyone had made a big production out of it, solemnly placing it on a tissue on a platter and forming a procession to carry it up to the front desk where Harry, the ancient queen who ruled the register, snapped at them to cut it out.

"Not a peep", Chris told her. It was at this point where she would usually begin a new round of small talk, trying to sound just the right note, to make the right impression, but this time Chris surprised her by asking,

"Say, you're from the Southland, right?"

"Yeah sure", she told him, "Anaheim".

"Any chance you're going down that way anytime soon?"

"I could", she said. Could this be the chance she had been waiting for?

"Need me to do something for you?" she hoped.

"Maybe", Chris said, "I don't know yet. Hey Tom", he called out. Tom turned back with a look like he was trying to smile and scowl at the same time.

"What do you think? Possible agent of change here?"

This was the part Tom didn't want to deal with. He just wanted to stay behind the scenes, let Chris do all the people management, but they hadn't explicitly worked out that division of labor yet.

"Your call", he said. "How about you run the outside operation? Whatever you say."

"Wow", teased Kandhi, "you guys are running an operation from out of here? I hope it's not something too illegal!"

"I don't think so", Chris said, turning to Tom again. "Is it?"

"No way", Tom said.

"So?" Kandhi asked, "what do I do?"

"Well, it's like this", Chris started to tell her, but then stopped himself and asked Tom, "Do we tell her everything, or only on a need to know basis?"

"Need to know", Tom said.

"Yeah, I need to know", Kandhi cracked.

"Okay, okay", Chris continued. "It's pretty simple, really. There's this guy I know down there, and we want to give him this cool idea we have, so we need to find him and let him overhear it somewhere in public."

"Why don't you just call him up and tell him your idea?" Kandhi asked.

"Um. Yeah", Chris scratched his head, and turned again to Tom. "Why don't we do that?", he asked.

"That's not the point", Tom said. "What if we didn't know the guy at all. This time you happened to but next time no. It's a test."

"You're giving me a test?" Now Kandhi was confused. She was still part way through community college and the word 'test' was enough to make her feet cool down.

"Not you," Tom said impatiently, "the process. It's like a dry run. We've got to work out the kinks, see if it works. It's okay if you don't want to do it. We can find somebody else."

"So let me get this straight", Kandhi said. "You want me, or somebody else, to go down to L.A., look for a certain person, follow him around and then, when we think he might be in a good spot, say some idea out loud and hope he hears it?"

"Not just any idea", Chris said. "Our great idea! But yeah, you've got it. That's the plan."

"It sounds kind of creepy", she said. "The following around part. The rest of it just sounds stupid."

"You don't have to literally follow him around", Tom explained. "You'll tag him and then you can always see where he is on this thingie here".

Kandhi came over and looked at the handheld device, where Chris' little light was still pulsating in place.

"That's me", Chris said, joining them, and pointing at the light. "He tagged me so I could see how it works. Look, I'll walk around and you can see", and he headed out the back door. Kandhi grabbed the device from Tom and followed after him.

"This is fucking cool", Kandhi shouted as they went through the alleyway and out to the Post Street. "Where'd he get all this?"

"He invented it", Chris told her.

"No shit", she said. She was surprised. As far as she knew, Tom was just the cranky guy in the stock room who never talked much.

"How'd he tag you", she wanted to know, and Chris explained about the laser and the pistol and the stick. Kandhi pictured herself pointing a stick at someone and having some light shoot out of it. Sounded like magic. This could be fun after all, she decided. By the time they got back she had already agreed to go and "do the test."

6. Mustang GT

Naturally, Kandhi had assumed that she and Chris would be going together, so she was hugely disappointed when he happened to mention, while wishing her every success, that he would not in fact be joining her. When she asked why not, he came up with several truly lame and absurd excuses, but she got the picture. He didn't want to put himself in a situation where he was alone with her. He had a feeling that he really shouldn't get into that particular Pandora's box.

"Damn it", she announced up front at the info desk.

"What now?", her colleague Klehre inquired indifferently. Klehre didn't really want to know, but it was boring as hell at that station. They were alone together in the middle of the large and nearly

empty store, with hardly any books on the lovely wooden bookcases that surrounded them, and not a single customer in sight. Way over by the front door sat Harry, reading a right wing gay men's magazine and occasionally sipping from a coffee cup filled with gin. Otherwise, it was just Kandhi and Klehre, and the situation was driving Klehre crazy.

"Want to go to L.A. this weekend?" Kandhi asked.

"No", Klehre replied. "I fucking hate L.A."

"Huh", Kandhi said, and shut up. The two young women were seated on barstools behind a long dark desk which was as empty as the rest of the store. This is great, she was thinking. I get sucked into driving to L.A. on some crazy stupid mission, I don't even want to go, and I don't get to go with Chris which I thought, for some reason, since he asked and it was his idea, and now I have to go alone? Fuck it. I'm not going, she decided.

"Okay", Klehre broke the silence. "I'll go. When do we leave?"

"You'll go?" Kandhi had to ask again. She didn't even know this girl, really. Klehre had only been working there a couple of weeks. Kandhi'd been there a year, about as long as Chris. Tom had arrived a few months back.

"Sure", Klehre said, "Actually I've always wanted to go there."

"You just said you hated it!"

"Everybody says it", Klehre told her. "It was just instinctive. Then I thought about it. How come I hate some place I've never even been? Stupid me. So yeah, I want to go. When are we going? Why are we going? Why'd you ask me?"

Kandhi explained the test. Klehre thought she was kidding. After Kandhi had told her everything she knew about it, Klehre was nearly speechless.

"I'm not a child", she said, "You're putting me on, right?"

"Nope", Kandhi assured her, "that's the idea in a nutshell".

"Nutshell is right", Klehre snorted. "Nutcass more like it. Those guys. What the fuck?"

Klehre was pretty sure she'd seen and heard it all in her twenty four years. After all, she'd left home at sixteen, supported herself ever since, working every kind of job that she could get - secretarial, retail, food service, gas stations, supermarkets, stripping, phone sex and now even this, a bankrupt bookstore. How low can I go? she asked herself. Well, not that low, she answered. She had achieved her variety of wisdom through a series of lousy boyfriends, tattoos, project living and public transportation. It was time for a change, again. It was always time for a change for Klehre. Why not check out L.A.? But she wasn't just going to follow the leader. If she was going to play somebody's game, she was going to play it her way.

She didn't have much use for Kandhi so far. She thought she was dim, maybe even retarded, always so fucking cheerful, and that stupid hair. Klehre had done the pink thing once. Now she was solid dark purple all the way. Only a ditz does pink, she thought. And Kandhi, what kind of a name was that? Still, she was pretty sure the chick had cash - they were going to need that - and probably a car.

"You have a car?" she asked, and watched Kandhi bob her head enthusiastically.

"Yeah, yeah", she bubbled. "I've got a Mustang GT Convertible. It'll be awesome!"

"Christ", Klehre thought. "What the fuck am I getting myself into?"

"Great", she said out loud. "So when do we leave?"

"Friday night?" Kandhi suggested. "If the stuff is ready, right after work? We can stay at my mom's. It's near Disneyland!"

"Great", Klehre gagged. "Yeah, okay."

7. Dots

Friday night found the women ready to hit the road. Kandhi had packed two suitcases full of necessary junk, leaving just enough room in the trunk for Klehre's knapsack.

"I thought we're only going for the weekend", Klehre said, eyeing the luggage.

"Yep", Kandhi chirped, "but you never know."

"I usually do", Klehre muttered to herself. She had made it through the patch of anticipation over the past few days. Now there was just the patch of reality to navigate. Kandhi had filled their shifts with endless tales of life growing up in the Southland. It seemed her childhood was a long and glorious event, involving an endless series of amusement parks, beaches, road trips and slumber parties. She had so many friends that she still even kept

in touch with, after all these years. Of course, she was only twenty-one so that wasn't a huge stretch. The amazing thing was that she'd ever left L.A..

"I wanted to see the world", she explained one day while chattering nonstop at the information desk. "I just didn't get very far."

Klehre had spent the week wishing she had never agreed to this little jaunt. It was bad enough having to hear about Kandhi's entire life as if suddenly, by virtue of volunteering, she was best friend forever as well as confessional, there was also the matter of Chris and Tom.

Tom had been hugely disappointed that Chris was not going with Kandhi on the trip. He'd assumed he would be and didn't understand why he wasn't. Tom didn't trust Kandhi and he didn't trust Klehre with his inventions or his plans. He'd stayed up nights in a row fitting the laser tagger into a very nice thin stick, a small madrone branch he'd meticulously peeled the bark off of and drilled precision holes through. He'd affixed the required velcro trigger pad with crazy glue and made sure its aim was true. He'd also worked on the device screen to provide much greater resolution, as well as memory, zoom and more precision positioning. They were both of them things of beauty, and as he handed them to Chris, only to see Chris study them, and hand them back, he was speechless as Chris explained the social mechanics.

"Kandhi and Klehre?", Tom stuttered. "Kandhi and Klehre? But why? Why Klehre? Why not you? I thought that you."

"Well", Chris said patiently, "Think about it. How could I explain it to Laurie? It would be like that time I went to Germany with Uta

while I was still involved with Magnolia in Denver. Maggie didn't go for it, not one bit. I kept telling her it was completely innocent, even that one night. No go. So I'm not going to go anywhere near that kind of situation now."

"But Laurie's on Mount Everest", Tom exclaimed.

"But she'll be back", Chris said. "And that's the problem."

Tom was unable to talk to either Kandhi or Klehre, but he had to instruct them on the usage of the devices. It was incredibly important. He tried to talk through Chris, but that was just as awkward. The four of them had gathered in the stock room and Tom talked only to Chris, and Chris turned around to repeat the words but Klehre interrupted and said,

"I can hear you, you know. I'm not fucking invisible here".

Kandhi was more polite.

"It's okay, Tom", she said. "Just keep telling Chris and I'll write down everything you say so we don't forget it later," and she did just that. Tom went over the stick and the device, but he was so flustered by the presence of the young women that he left out some rather critical details.

Klehre discovered this for herself as they were driving away from the store. She let out a whoop of joy as Kandhi lowered the roof and the cool fog breeze swept over her. She was holding on to the madrone twig, admiring its polish and color, when she decided to point it at random pedestrians and click away. That was when she noticed that every time she clicked at someone, another orange dot appeared on the screen of the device. Before she knew it, there were ten or eleven dots glowing and pulsating, each going

their separate ways, making the map zoom out to keep them all in sight. Pretty soon the screen had expanded to cover half the city.

"Oh shit", Klehre muttered, and louder she yelled, "how long did he say these dots stick around?"

"Forty eight hours", Kandhi shouted back. "Give or take, he said."

"Fuck", said Klehre, hoping there would be some kind of workaround. They were about to head south on the freeway and the auto-zoom was taking the picture wider and wider by the second. At this rate, she thought, we might as well be in outer space for all the good it'll do us to find one of those dots.

Back in the city, waiting for a train in the metro station, Tom was seeing for himself what Klehre had done. He had a second device which was synchronized to the first.

"I knew this would happen", he said to himself, not without some pride. He used his own pointer stick, a bit of manzanita culled from the Coastside, and, double-tapping, removed each orange dot, one at a time.

"Huh", Klehre said, watching them vanish on her own device. "I thought he said forty-eight hours." Then she realized what was up.

"He's got a doomsday device", she said to Kandhi, who didn't hear. Klehre didn't bother repeating herself. She was mulling over the fact that Tom was watching them, and wondering if he had secretly tagged the two of them with a different type of laser.

He had. On his device, two little blue dots sat side by side as they hurtled towards the valley.

8. Grapevine

It can be a long drive from S.F. to L.A., and Klehre would have liked to have had some of that time to reflect, to think, even to breathe quietly, but it wasn't meant to be. If she had hoped that Kandhi had already told her everything she could possibly tell her over the past few days, she had hoped in vain. She was inexhaustible, one of those magical people who are never, ever at a loss for words. Klehre was reminded of those fairy tales about enchanted pouches that always seemed to have lunch inside, or the legends of non-stop rain for days and days and days. Kandhi talking was a lot like that. Taken in bits and pieces, some of what she said was even interesting. It was just too hard to filter, as if you could win a million dollars off a mosquito but had to take a billion bites from it first.

There was the time when she was a little girl. There was a time when she was a teen. There was a time when she was a baby. There was a time when anything and everything was possible and real. Kandhi had jumped out of airplanes. Not just once. Regularly. Kandhi had driven a bus, did you know that? An actual city bus. Kandhi didn't do well in geology. Memorization was never her thing and a rock is a rock, you know what I mean? Thought so. Kandhi had seen a bear in the wild. Kandhi had counted all the freckles on her boyfriend's back. That was her ex. William. Did I tell you about William? Well ...

Klehre did manage to process a few notions of her own. She realized that for all her worldliness, she had never done really much of anything but read. She had traveled a bit. Europe. North

Africa. Nicaragua with a political group. She had majored in history and minored in cultural anthropology. She could talk about pretty much anything, given half a chance. She had been to Mississippi, and Florida, where she came from, originally. Didn't like it. Too sticky. Too I don't know, she would tell you. Too something for sure. She would much rather be on a couch, with a book, by a lamp, in the city, imagining the world while the passersby passed by.

It wasn't that she didn't like Kandhi. Kandhi was funny. Kandhi wasn't stupid. She was simply too cheerful. Klehre was never like that. I can smile, she reassured herself, when I mean it, but all of the time? No way. Nothing bothers this girl. Nothing gets her down. How does she do that? Klehre wanted to know, but didn't want to ask. What she did ask, eventually, was whether or not Kandhi wanted to stop somewhere to get a bite. They were approaching the grapevine and it was getting on towards ten. Kandhi pulled over at the next available rest stop.

Klehre went for a sandwich. Kandhi got Chinese, and they rendezvoused at a coffee shop where each of them added a drink to their meal. They sat inside, surrounded by a half-dozen tables full of other travelers, most of them sagging and weary.

"Yum", Kandhi declared, as she ploughed into her shrimp fried rice. Stuffing her face kept her quiet for a few moments.

"You know", Klehre said, inspecting her ham on rye with suspicion, "Do we really know what we're going to do down there? I mean, changing the world by talking out loud in public? I mean, that's what we're doing right now. Don't see anything changing."

"Sure", Kandhi bubbled, "that's why it's so important about when and where and who and what and all of that", but Klehre wasn't

listening to her answer. Instead she was eavesdropping on the guy at the next table. He was maybe in his thirties, kind of cute, she thought at first, even with those horn-rimmed glasses and my god are those loafers, but he was laughing, and saying to his larger, hairier, less-cute friend,

"Did you hear what that chick just said? That's too funny. I've got to broadcast that on my socialnet", and he pulled out a device of his own, about the same size and shape as the one Klehre had left in the car, and started tapping away on it with an unsharpened pencil.

"What's with that clown?" she thought, and she was so pissed that he was laughing at her that she almost leaned over and tipped his coffee right into his lap.

"Of course we've got to find the guy", she heard Kandhi saying, and that brought her back to her own predicament.

"What do you mean, find him? You know where he is, don't you?"

"Minor detail", Kandhi chuckled. "That, and what he looks like."

"What?", Klehre jumped up. "What he looks like?"

The guy at the table was watching her now and she knew it. She was ready to give him a good piece of her mind. She even turned towards him and glared, at which he kind of sat up straighter and made a pucker face as if to say, "oh no, the mean girl's going to hit me". His friend cracked up and nearly fell off his chair. Klehre trembled with rage for a moment, but forced herself to sit back down. Then, although Kandhi's totally out-of-place smirk was driving her mad, she calmly and quietly said,

"Are you telling me you don't know what he looks like, or where we're going to find him?"

"Sort of", Kandhi chirped, but before Klehre could get all upset again, she reached out and patted her hand. "It's not that bad, actually. I do know where he'll be tomorrow morning. Playing racquetball He always does. That's what Chris says, anyway."

"And do you know where he will be playing racquetball?" Klehre asked, trying to control herself".

"LA Fitness", Kandhi assured her. "Marina Del Rey".

"God I hope so", Klehre exhaled. "This whole thing is beginning to freak me out."

"Don't worry", Kandhi said. "What could go wrong?"

9. Tiddlywinks

Tom never trusted anyone. Never. Well, as far as he could remember. He'd been on his own since the age of fourteen and in that time, life had taught him a number of pointed lessons. One, that people often suck. Two, that people usually suck. Three, that people almost always suck. He'd accumulated this knowledge through a series of dead-end jobs, a host of lousy roommates, basic crowds on the streets and public transportation, the nightly news, and almost every book he'd ever read and movie he'd ever seen. Even the good people have their moments, he knew, and though he had a suspicion that Kandhi and Klehre weren't necessarily "bad" per se, he didn't trust them, not for a moment. His lack of trust was vindicated by his witnessing of Klehre's

random tagging of nobodies, and from that moment on he kept his eye on his device.

More particularly, he adjusted the settings to follow any posts of anyone on the socialnet within one hundred feet of Kandhi and Klehre. He wasn't sure if this was strictly legal, but neither was his tagging technology, so he didn't worry too much about it. He had routed the tracking through any number of mazes to the point where he was certain he could not be tracked back into. There wasn't much going on as the women drove through the central valley, just some random passengers or drivers heading the opposite way who had lots to say about nothing in particular. People were texting out loud in private and public to such an extent that Tom felt compelled to work on what he called a "drown-out" tech to preserve the general sanity. He hadn't finished all the details yet, but he thought it would be something like a hearing aid that you put in your ear, only it would filter out all the stupid things people were saying around you. Whether or not it filtered out your own stupid utterings, that was another matter. While he tinkered on this in his home office, one cat on his neck, another on his shoe, he tuned in periodically to see if "the kays", as he called them, were causing any notice.

And he saw it. Someone with the handle "tiddlywinks" had broadcast something that could only have come from the kays:

"so i heard this chick just now saying she was going to change the world by talking loud in public. can you believe that shit?"

"Damn it", Tom shouted loud enough to drive the cats away temporarily. As they circled around waiting for a more propitious time to jump up again, he tapped his fist on his table rapidly, a sure sign that he was trying to keep himself from destroying something of value. He had a really bad habit of doing just that,

and he couldn't afford it, monetarily, so he tried to breathe, and breathe again, and take some positive action.

The thing to do, he decided, is follow that handle and all its fellow travelers (called FT's on the socialnet), and see what develops. Probably nothing. Most broadcasts disappear into nothing. He tracked back the last two days of broadcasts by the tiddlywinks and saw a parade of snarky remarks. Clearly a guy by the things he said about "chicks" and their "bods". He was a one-man freeway female-rating system, with his own refined standards and score keeping methodologies. Blonds dominated the ranks, but he had a definite thing for alternative hair. Twenty minutes later he circled back to "that chick" which Tom now knew to be Klehre, by referencing the purple on her head. He detailed her tight black top and how it revealed her "miniature water balloons", and lamented the looseness of her khaki shorts. He wondered where she was headed. He followed that up fifteen minutes later by responding to an FT, remarking that "the purple one" was accompanied by "a pink one" who was "nothing to write home about".

There was nothing else about them for awhile. Tiddlywinks was heading home to Marina Del Rey. He was a planning to party. Hardy. Pound some brews. Tom was pretty certain that guy presented no problems. At first he was worried that the broadcast might get picked up by somebody with substance or at least a brain, but there seemed to be no once like that in the tiddlywinks circle. Tom calmed down enough to allow the cats to resume their perches, and turned his attention back to the drown-out tech. Still he kept muttering under his breath about the kays and god only knows what they'd do next.

10. A Different Idea

Maybe it was the dinner, or maybe it was the hour, or maybe it was the drive through the mountains that separated the valley from the great population center, but whatever the cause, it was awhile before Klehre even realized that Kandhi had finally shut up. She was actually quiet behind the wheel, and the thoughts that had been previously overwhelmed now came flooding into Klehre's clear mind.

"Kandhi?", she asked, after an interval of thinking. "What are we doing?"

"We're doing Chris a favor", Kandhi cheerfully reminded her.

"But why?", Klehre wanted to know.

"I like doing things for Chris", was Kandhi's simple response. "I like him."

"I get that much", Klehre said, "but, think about it, okay? Tomorrow morning we're going to get up and go to Marina Del Rey and look for some guy named Harold Staley. Then we're going to zap him with this whatever-it-is, then follow him around until he's somewhere we can sidle up next to him and chatter about how Hollywood movies should be greener, or something like that."

"Yeah", Kandhi replied. "You got it."

"It's stupid!", Klehre nearly yelled. "I mean, really, I thought so from the start but the more I think about it, that guy back there was right. It's dumb. Ridiculous. I don't want to do it."

"But we're already almost here", Kandhi protested. "Besides, we said we would."

"I don't even like the idea", Klehre said. "Who gives a shit about Hollywood. If anything, we should be giving that guy the idea there should be better roles for women, not just girly fuck puppets, kick ass killers or wise old crones. That's what I would tell him. Sheesh."

"We could put all that in the conversation", Kandhi suggested.

"I don't want to have the conversation at all", she persisted.

"But we promised", Kandhi repeated.

"I know. I know", Klehre said. "But come on, who's going to know if we just blow it off. We could still go tag someone and make up a story later."

"I guess", Kandhi considered. "How would they know?"

"Oh shit", Klehre said. "I've got a feeling about that. I think that Tom tagged the both of us before we left, and he's been tracking us all this time." Klehre confessed about how she'd pointed and clicked at all those people as they were leaving the city, only to see them cleaned up minutes later.

"It had to be Tom", she said.

"He tagged us", Kandhi said again. "He's tracking us. That little prick!"

"I never liked that guy", Klehre said.

"Me either", Kandhi agreed. "I was just doing it for Chris. You really think he tagged us? Never mind. I believe you. Of course he would. The creep."

The women were silent again for awhile as they began the descent into the Los Angeles basin. Klehre especially was amazed by the sight. It was nearly midnight, and the lights below them seemed to stretch on forever.

"It's beautiful", she exclaimed.

"Home sweet home", chirped Kandhi. "But what are we going to do?"

"We'll think of something", Klehre replied. "You with me?"

"Oh yeah", Kandhi said. "I'm with you."

11. Off The Rails

"Things are not going according to plan", Tom said. He had trekked on foot all the way over Twin Peaks to Chris' house, and was demonstrating the problem on his device.

"These two blue dots", he said, as Chris and several roommates gathered around the kitchen table, "are Kandhi and Klehre. They're at Santa Monica Beach right now. Been there for hours already. Now over here, this orange dot? That's the target. It's way over in Pasadena by now and still heading east. Kandhi and Klehre are nowhere near it and they're not even trying."

"Maybe they know where the target's going to be later", Chris suggested.

"Wait a minute", said Joe, the lawyer. "Are you tracking people electronically through that little gizmo there? Do they know you're doing that?"

"Sure they know", Tom lied. "It's part of an experiment."

"Oh, in that case, it's okay", Joe nodded. "Otherwise we're talking major civil lawsuit. Invasion of privacy. Civil rights violations. Trespassing. Encroachment."

"Never mind all that", Chris said, and Joe piped down immediately.

Before Tom had arrived, the household was busy discussing what Chris would like to do that weekend. Frank was thinking of renting a catamaran out on the bay. Joe had found some obscure foreign film festival that he just knew would appeal to Chris. Sidney had thought of a picnic with volleyball in the park, and Karen was voting for that. As for Chris, he was still thinking of a phone call he'd received first thing in the morning, from an old friend in Seattle who was offering him a good job at a private library as well as a place to live in a nice house out in Redmond. Chris hadn't heard from this friend in several years, but was not surprised at this sudden, unexpected offer. Lately he was beginning to wonder if this kind of luck might not continue to rain down on him as it always had. Laurie had also been talking recently about the North West. It might be time, he was thinking. She was due back from Asia in a few days, so he had asked his friend for a little time to consider the offer.

Tom didn't know about this. He didn't know that Chris and Laurie would indeed move away, in a mere few weeks time. He didn't know that Kandhi and Klehre would return on Monday morning

only to quit their jobs immediately and move to Los Angeles together. He didn't know that the "target" they had tagged was Kandhi's mother's standard poodle 'Trayce', which was on its way to a kennel vacation in Sierra Madre. All he knew was that things were off the rails.

"It's all messed up", he said dejectedly, at which Chris patted his friend on the shoulder and said,

"Don't worry. We'll change the world tomorrow", and even though he invited Tom to come along on the catamaran outing (Chris' final choice), Tom just wasn't in the mood, so he left the household to finish up its excursion planning, and decided to walk out to the beach and see if there were any pelicans hovering about.

PART TWO

12. Winter

There were no pelicans at the beach, or any beach within a thousand miles. It was winter. Tom stuck it through to the bitter end, to the day the lawyers sent their minions in trucks to pack up every last bit of the bookstore and drive it away. He was the last one standing in the doorway when the landlord locked and chained the door.

He had become an automaton those last few weeks, without direction, without purpose. He could not believe what had happened, how his careful plans had simply vanished without even a puff of smoke. He wasn't bitter about 'the kays'. He never believed they would get it right, but he had hoped at least to learn something from their mistakes. Instead, they taught him

nothing except you can't trust anyone. Mostly, though, it was the loss of Chris that left him stunned. Part of him knew that he had no hold on him, that no one had a hold on him, that everyone wanted and no one had. He had seen it in the mad scramble of the roommates and understood that Chris was lighter than air and, like a beautiful balloon, would some day float off in some unpredictable direction. And so he had.

For days he peppered Chris with messages before facing the bitter truth that Chris was not receiving them. Chris had never been a big fan of the socialnet; he had too many real live friends to waste much time on vapors. Tom forgot about everything, even money, until the day he ran completely out of food. He had really thought those jumbo boxes of saltines would last forever. It was time to get another job.

But what? He had tried the various other bookstores in town, even the little kids' bookstore, although he was terrified of children. He even tried some music stores despite the fact he detested music. He applied to all of the radio and electronic parts shops but did not present himself well enough at interviews. He received no offers. He thought he might be good at bagging groceries, but there were labor unions standing between himself and the bags.

During those long and dreadful days he planned to scour the socialnet for opportunities but instead his mind was filled with ever darker thoughts of bitterness and doubt. He knew now he could never fulfill his dream of changing the world for the better through ideas, but he was beginning to think of the opposite, of changing the world for the worse. Was it even possible? Looking around through his increasingly negative outlook, he even doubted that. The world looked horrible enough already.

He took to standing downtown on the street corners in the financial district, watching the people in their rush to make more money and spend it. He was cold and the days were short but he forced himself to stay there. One day he brought a tin can with him and set it down on the sidewalk by his feet, like he saw other desperate people do. Soon he heard the sounds of coins clicking, dropping in. He forced himself to remain absolutely still, not even changing the expression on his face, until he was like a statue. The rattle in the can grew louder. The less movement he made, the more money he made. At the end of a few hours he had enough to get some decent groceries.

Arriving home he wondered if he could really make the rent this way, could really keep himself alive by doing absolutely nothing. He decided to give it a try, and for several days in a row he repeated his experiment, on different corners but always where he sensed the money was walking by. He had some trouble with other vagrants who attempted to run off with his can, but he was observant enough to snatch it away in time. As he stood there, senseless almost, for he was barely even breathing at times, he began to form a thought in his mind. The thought came closer and closer, remaining vague but circling around the notion that if he could not get people to do what he wanted by asking them, then maybe he could get them to do what he wanted without them even knowing it.

Mind control.

It would be the ultimate invention.

13.The Greater Bad

At home in his living room lab, Tom quickly found the technical challenge to be meager. It was simply a matter of adapting the implanted words to the tonal quality and cadence of the sound of

thought which naturally occurred inside the victim's mind. Trivial. He had already accomplished much of the task in a previous invention, the automatic universal translation utterance device. He'd stuck that one on the shelf since he had no real need to go around speaking Chinese or any other languages. The new mind control gadget would operate partly in reverse of that one, modifying the words going in, rather than the words coming out.

He knew that people tend to act based on what they think they are thinking in their heads. All you really need to do in order to control another person is inject your thoughts into their brain, in the form of their own inner voice. This was the easy part, and Tom found it even worked on cats. After a few hours of tinkering he was able to remove the one from his shoulder on silent command. The other one, on his foot, was a more intelligent cat who apparently was not so susceptible to having her mind controlled. Tom was not concerned. He had already concluded that cats are more difficult to master than people.

The real problem was not in the hardware, but rather the content. - how to make the world even worse than it already was. He dismissed the obvious notions readily. Making someone walk in front of a bus would terminate one life, devastate a family, and be a nuisance to numerous commuters, but such things happen every day. He knew that if he was planning a movie, he would need to make something more cinematic occur - explosions, fireballs, torture and crime. He could get some kind of war underway. He could have somebody poison the water supply, or spread disease, or pick up a gun and start shooting. Please, he told himself. That's just reading the daily news.

Bad things happen, to children, to old folks, to regular every day ordinary grown ups minding their own business as they steer through the world. Bad things happening to people was not

enough to make the world worse. He could make people crazy. That would be easy, by merely injecting the thoughts in a scary, demonic voice, accompanied perhaps by snatches from a horror film soundtrack, but people go crazy pretty readily on their own. Would he derive any genuine pleasure from that?

This was the bottom line. It had to be delicious, it had to be creative, and it had to be fun. Briefly he considered altering a person's sense of their own sexuality. That could create a nice sense of individual panic! Or maybe he could figure out how to make people trade thoughts - a more challenging technical venture, but nothing a psychic mental ventriloquist couldn't dash off in a heartbeat. He could wander through the streets, leading a trail of fist fights, obscenities, vehicle crashes and general mayhem in his wake. Too easily traced, he decided.

This was not going to be as easy as he thought. To really make a genuine contribution to the greater bad was going to require more study. He might even need to consult with a child.

14. Dry Run

It was nearing the end of the month, and with rent coming due, Tom thought he would give his new device a dry run test. It wouldn't make the world any worse, but it might possibly help his financial situation. For the first time in years, however, he was dissatisfied with his technical design. He had wormed the tagging device into a nice small piece of eucalyptus, so he could keep it closely concealed between his thumb and index finger, but even with that, he still needed to manually enter the desired thought text into the device, and tap on the target dot to effect the injection. This made for a curious pose out there on the sidewalk; one hand slightly reaching out toward the passersby, the other stuck in his pocket to do the tap. He practiced for awhile in front

of his bathroom mirror until he was satisfied he didn't look too peculiar.

He still felt strange, however, once he was out on the street in the financial district. The wording of the thought was carefully crafted to a gentle 'I think I will give that man some money'. As he pointed, clicked and tapped, the money began to roll in. He hadn't specified an amount, leaving it up to the whim of the pedestrians, and was interested to see how widely they varied. For many people, the idea of 'giving that man some money' meant reaching into their pockets and sifting loose change for a quarter. You would think, Tom thought, that after all these years, people would be giving more than a quarter. He himself had given quarters to panhandlers even when he was a teenager, and surely the value of a quarter had diminished somewhat in those years. Some of these people had probably been doling out a quarter for decades now!

There were others who opted for more; several coins, dollar bills, even the occasional five dollar bill. Tom could scarcely keep his eyes off the tin can while he watched it filling steadily. A few times he needed to pick up and move to another corner, so that he could empty the takings into his non-gadget pocket. By the end of the very first day he had accumulated nearly two hundred dollars. Rent was not going to be a problem any more.

He still had some residual pangs of conscience, but allayed those by telling himself that he really wasn't doing anyone any harm. Was he? It wasn't strictly theft, even if it wasn't strictly ethical. The important thing was that it worked, at least in a transitory manner. He wasn't sure how much staying power the thought could have. He would need to work on that, add some sort of scheduled repeater. He also wanted to improve the transfer mechanism, make it possible for variations, perhaps, or another

way of data entry. Direct thought transfer would be the best, but perhaps voice command could also work, and a list of potential thoughts from which he could select depending on the target. There was just so much room for improvement!

He did wonder what the limits might be. Could he really get people to do anything he wanted them to do? It was more than hypnotic suggestion, it was actual directed internal thinking. Could he get people to want to do things for him, specific things? Did his friend Chris have some sort of natural or chemical version of this device? Could it truly be a bona fide charismulator? If so, he could have minions at his disposal, and who doesn't want minions at their disposal?

Well, Tom didn't really want minions. He would never be able to trust them, to believe in them, to fully enjoy his domination. The truth was, he wasn't much of a leader, since he never wanted followers. He only wanted to go his own way, but still, watching the manikins empty their pockets at his behest, he couldn't help but crave more power. The problem remained, however, the power to do what?

15.The Dark Tornado

Tom tried to think of something not merely evil, but dastardly, but was coming up short. He had assumed it would be easy, but he was stuck. He roamed the streets of San Francisco looking for inspiration, but all he found was crowds, noise, fog and the usual assortment of people who thought they were normal, but weren't, and people who thought they were weird, but weren't. He thought he would know it when he saw it, but he didn't. He avoided the Marina, because there was nothing to inspire anyone there. He stayed away from Twin Peaks, because it was just too cold and windy. He ventured out to The Cliff House, but the crazy old fun house equipment was gone. He heard it was somewhere in the

East Bay now. He considered taking B.A.R.T. over there, but he hadn't actually set foot outside of the city in several years, and wasn't about to start without a good reason. Like most San Franciscans, he was pretty sure there was no intelligent life beyond the city limits.

He walked and walked and walked. He must have walked down every street in every likely neighborhood, grasping for inspiration. He had some minor diabolical notions having to do with parking spaces and stickers. He pulled a few mean tricks involving pedestrians and traffic lights. For petty amusement he let some strapping young men drop their bundles on the sidewalk and strain to pick them up again, filling their minds with the belief that, for example, a roll of paper towels was just too heavy for them to lift. He marveled at the power of mind under matter, but it was a kind of pathetic humor. He barely cracked a smile the whole time.

Walking through Dolores Park one momentarily sunny afternoon, he heard a sound that drew his attention. It was like a trail of children wailing, one after another, in a line that seemed to follow one particular boy. Tom watched as this boy made his way through the park, deliberately kicking other kids' toys, knocking kids down, pushing his way right through them. He was a larger boy, clearly a bully, strong and heavy with thick black hair and a loose flannel shirt that hung down nearly to his knees. Outraged parents could only gape in anger and frustration as this one-boy wrecking crew savaged his way across the park. Some of the moms stood up as if to challenge him, but he was already gone, like a dark tornado. Tom rushed to head him off at the corner of 16th and Dolores.

"Hey, kid", he called out as the boy approached, but the boy merely glanced at him and scowled, and hustled across the street.

"Kid, hey kid", Tom called again, hurrying after him, "Hey, I just want to ask you a question."

"Whatever!", the boy tossed over his shoulder, picking up speed. Tom matched and overcame his pace. All that walking had done his legs some good, and soon he was beside the boy and kept nagging at him until the boy finally stopped, turned to face him and demanded,

"What you want with me, man?"

"Just want to ask you a question", Tom repeated. "Easy now, okay?", he added, as the boy was putting on his mad face.

"What question?" the boy wanted to know.

"What would you do?", Tom asked, "If you wanted to make the world even worse than it already is?"

"What kind of question is that?", the boy asked. "You messing with me?"

"No, no", Tom said. "I mean it. I really want to know. Seemed to me like you might be the guy who could tell me."

"Lots of stuff", the boy said, considering. "But it's going to cost you."

"What?" Tom hadn't considered that the boy might have an asking price.

"Yeah, I'm hungry", the boy said, and after a bit of haggling they agreed to head over to his favorite local taqueria where the boy could get whatever he wanted, which turned out to be a super burrito, guacamole and chips, and a naranjada. By the time they found a corner table and got their food, Tom had found out that the boy was twelve years old, that he went by the name of LJ, and that he didn't like anyone messing with him and if they knew what was good for them they wouldn't even try.

"What you want to know for, anyway?", LJ inquired.

"That's my business", Tom told him. LJ seemed to respect that. He nodded, and thought carefully while chomping on his chips.

"You could always hurt people", he said. "That's the first thing, right? Make 'em suffer, Take away their stuff. Make 'em sick. Make 'em angry."

"Yeah", Tom nodded, "but that stuff happens all the time. That's not worse, that's normal. You see my problem?"

"You want something special," LJ reflected. "Especially worse. Not just regular worse. Hmmm. Could be tricky."

"Can't be anything that could happen any day", Tom agreed, "so that pretty much rules out violence, greed, corruption, crime, ..."

"... explosions, bombs, car crashes, murder", LJ continued.

"None of that stuff", Tom shook his head.

"How about earthquakes," LJ considered, "like the big one they always talking about."

"Can't do that", Tom said, and added, with a chuckle, "a man's got to know his limitations", but LJ didn't get the Dirty Harry reference. He just sucked in his lower lip and nodded.

"So what can you do?", LJ asked, and Tom hesitated. He wasn't sure how much he should tell the kid, but on consideration decided he really had nothing to lose, so he told him about the device. LJ laughed out loud.

"You full of shit", he said. Tom just sat there, biding his time.

"So you telling me", LJ went on, "you can put some thoughts in somebody's head and they gonna do what you want them to?"

"I'll show you", Tom said, looking around. He wanted to find a suitable target and make them do something that LJ would appreciate.

"See that girl?", he gestured toward the counter.

"The one in the black dress? With the barbed wire tattoo on her neck?"

"That's the one", Tom said, surreptitiously pointing the little stick at her and pushing down gently on the amber tag button. "What do you want her to do?"

"Heh", LJ said, embarrassed. "You mean anything?"

"No, I don't mean anything", Tom snapped. "I'll do it", and he tapped a few words onto the device with his stick. He held up the device and showed the phrase to LJ, who read it and shrugged.

"Sure", he said. "Whatever".

Tom pointed at the glowing yellow dot that represented the girl, waited until she was walking away with her order, then tapped on the dot. LJ watched astonished as the girl stopped walking, slowly bent down to put her foil-wrapped burrito onto the floor, stood back up again, and then stomped on it with her boots until it was a mushy mess. She casually turned and walked out of the restaurant, leaving the busboy staring after her and hurrying to clean up the mess.

"Holy shit", LJ declared. "You made her do that!"

"Exactly that", Tom said, and read from the screen, "I am going to put this on the floor, smash it, and walk away."

"You can really make anyone do anything?"

"Nothing they can't do", Tom clarified. "It's not magic. It's just mind control."

"Holy fuck", the boy said. "Holy shit."

"Watch your mouth", said Tom. LJ blinked rapidly and was speechless for a time.

"I'm going to have to think about this", he finally said.

16.Spoilage

After three naranjadas, LJ came to a conclusion. He set the last bottle down and, lining them up in a row and avoiding direct eye contact, he confided in Tom.

"What really bugs me most", he said, "is people just being happy. I don't like it and I don't think it's right. It's not how things is supposed to be."

"I don't get it", Tom said, puzzled. He wasn't sure how a kid would know the way things were 'supposed to be', whatever that even meant.

"You look at it", LJ said. "You come in the world and you're totally helpless. You go around for awhile, people supposed to be looking after you, but maybe they don't, you're on your own. You have to take care of yourself, look after yourself, but you can't. If you're a kid they don't let you make money. If you're all grown up, you just have to make money. All about money, all the time. People that got it, they can be happy. They pay for it. People that don't, still they go around trying to be. The way things is supposed to be, it's every man for himself and not all these rules, what you can, what you can't be doing, how you can and how you can't be doing it. You look at the animals, it's not about happy. It's about getting what you want however you can. That's the way."

"But plenty of people aren't happy", Tom said. "If we go around making people think they're unhappy, how's that making things any worse?"

"Seems to me your trick only works on one person at a time, am I right?", LJ asked, and Tom nodded. "So you can't be talking about making the whole world any this or that. You can only be doing it one at a time anyway."

"That's true", Tom had to admit, "but I was hoping to find a way to make it spread, you know? Find some kind of thought that could go contagious quickly."

"I just like to spoil their fun", LJ said. "That's what I like."

"Yeah", Tom said, "I saw you doing that."

"It'd be even better to do it your way", LJ brightened. "I got an idea. Give me that thing?"

"No way", Tom said. "Just tell me."

"Come on", LJ got up and headed for the door. "I'll show you."

17.Cumbia

Tom followed LJ back to Dolores Park, where the kid headed very deliberately toward a large family gathering taking place near the corner at Church Street. The people there were all dressed up, a small band was playing cumbias and many of the crowd were dancing. A table was loaded with food and drinks and every one who wasn't dancing was filling up on those. LJ stopped short of the party itself and turned to Tom.

"Put this into your thing", he said. "Nobody likes me. Just like that".

Tom had his little stick ready and tapped the phrase into his device.

"Now point that thing at all the people over there", LJ instructed, and Tom did. He got the idea. LJ wanted to spoil everybody's fun. Tom thought it would be interesting to watch, so he casually pointed and selected as many of the people as he thought would do the trick, and then started tapping away on the screen. LJ meanwhile had taken refuge behind a palm tree to watch the festivities. It did not take long. Tom literally watched the

expressions on the people's faces drop and sag. The ones who were eating stopped in mid chew and wrinkled their brows. The ones who were dancing looked at their partners with sadness suddenly in their eyes. Even the musicians momentarily lost the beat. The party began to falter en masse.

Tom became aware that he has been noticed, as two burly gentlemen, looking straight at him, started to approach. Tom casually sidled over the where LJ was, but LJ wouldn't let him hide with him. Instead, he tried to use Tom as a sort of shield as the two men came their way. Tom, getting a little nervous, wriggled enough behind LJ for one of the men to shout out.

"Laurenciano Jose!! I see you, man. You come out of there right now"

"Fucker", the other man spat. "I shoulda known it was you. Get out here little brother. Fast".

LJ glared at Tom but obeyed the man and, head lowered, walked slowly out from behind the tree.

"I said fast!", the man yelled, and LJ picked up the pace of his shuffling. The man waited for him to get close enough, and then just like that gave him a swat on the head that sent LJ spinning and staggering to the ground.

"Whatever you are doing you will stop it now", the man commanded, and LJ nodded, shrugged, and shook his head, all at the same time.

"The little bastard", the other man cursed, and Tom could feel the alcohol on his breath heading his way. He figured it was time to make an exit, so he slipped out on to the sidewalk just as quickly

and as quietly as he could. He could still hear LJ's older brother shouting about how it was their sister's quincinera and no little shit was going to spoil it for her, and with a last glance saw the man dragging LJ by the hair over to the food table where he sat him down and ordered two other young men to stand guard around him.

Tom picked up his own pace and headed up the hill towards home. He was almost wishing he had a way to undo the trick. It didn't seem right to spoil a young girl's celebration that way. He stopped, and after a brief consideration, typed the phrase 'I'm happy now' into the device, and tapped on all the glowing yellow dots. It was perhaps his own imagination but he thought he could feel the music getting livelier, and the people getting friendlier, and everything returning to normal back in the park below.

So much for my plan, he thought sorrowfully. Once again, it's all messed up.

18. Driftwood

The problem with mind control is the same as playing with toys in general. You get bored. It can be a lot of fun at first, making people speed up in their cars, or stomp on their brakes in the middle of the street, making them do all sorts of silly movements or say stupid things, change their moods willy-nilly, and treat them pretty much as puppets on your string. Tom sat on the rooftop of the building he lived in and did all of those things and more on the weekends. During the week he "worked" his money gathering racket downtown. After a few weeks of this he had thought of everything he felt like doing to people, and he lost interest in the trick. He still needed to keep the money rolling in, but he'd fine tuned the methodology so he got the most bucks for

the bang, so to speak, and only had to "work" a few hours a day, a few days a week.

The rest of the time he tinkered in his workshop, but his inventing spirit flagged along with his spirits in general. He was beginning to think about moving somewhere else. He didn't know where, and he still loved the city, but it was wearing him out, and he was wearing it out as well. He kept dwelling on disturbing thoughts such as "I could be warm right now" or "it IS kind of noisy and smelly when you think about it". One day he even left the city, for the first time in years. He took a bus over to Marin County and walked around the headlands and the beach. It was nice to be outside and away from cement.

I've been thinking too small, he decided. Changing the world one person at a time is a non-starter. People change, it's what they do. Change is the only constant (he had once read) and so, logically, making change happen was no change at all. The real difference would be to stop change from occurring, if that were only possible. To make the world not better, or worse, but the same, unerringly, consistently the same every day for everyone. Some trick that would be. But then again, he wondered, why even bother? Sheer boredom was his only motivation so far. He needed to find something else to keep him busy, something that would keep him so busy that he wouldn't have time to think.

What could it be? What could he do? If only he was a risk-taker, he could do something terribly dangerous, like mountain climbing. Dangling off a cliff a thousand feet high would probably take his mind off things! How could he stop this thinking? He thought and thought as he walked around. He took to walking long distances, hiking down the coast and camping out along the way. He walked to Santa Cruz and back. He walked to San Rafael. These journeys took him days and still it didn't help. All it did was add to his

collection of sticks - he found that driftwood made the best tools for his amber user interface.

He was walking along this way one day, just south of Devil's Slide, when a car pulled off the road ahead of him, and waited for him to approach. He didn't notice it at all until it was too late. He kept walking, staring straight ahead, not really seeing or hearing anything. A voice shouted out,

"Hey Tom", but he didn't respond, just kept on going, passed right by. The driver got out of the car and followed after him.

19.Means Justified

She had to chase after him because he was walking at a pretty good pace. When she caught up she reached out and grabbed him by the shoulder, repeating his name, and he whirled around with a frightened look on his face. He didn't recognize Kandhi until she'd managed to stop him and let go and convince him who she was.

"What's happened to you?" she asked. "You look terrible".

"I'm fine", he told her. "Nothing happened."

"Well, look", she said, "I'm just up visiting friends. I've been trying to find you, did you know that? Chris said you didn't have a phone but he gave me your address and I went by a couple of times, you weren't there."

"Chris told you?", Tom asked. He didn't hear the rest of what she said after she'd mentioned that name. "Is he back?"

"Back?", Kandhi took a moment to figure out what he meant. "No, no. I called him. He's in Seattle. You knew that, right?"

"Oh, right", Tom said, and started to walk away.

"No, wait", Kandhi said, hurrying after him and trying to get his attention. "Listen, I wanted to apologize. That was a rotten thing me and Klehre. Tagging the poodle like that."

"Poodle?", Tom turned again to face her. He had no idea why she was talking about a poodle.

"Yeah", she told him, and pressed on breathlessly. "We were kind of pissed that you tagged us too. Like you didn't trust us! Well, I guess you were right because we let you down. I'm really sorry about that. But anyway, it's okay because what I really wanted to tell you is that I felt so bad about that that me and my mom went down to that racquetball club the next week and we found that Harold guy that Chris knows, and we followed him to a juice bar and made sure we sat down right near by and then me and my mom talked real loud and all about your idea, about how Hollywood should do more to save the planet? And I'm sure he heard us because well for one thing some people kept telling us to pipe down, and for another thing we kept saying the same things over and over again? And this one time he looked right at us right after we had said the thing and from the look on his face I could tell he was interested? So", she exhaled, "so I just wanted to tell you that we did it like we promised, okay?"

"Sure", Tom said. He had managed to gather most of the information even though it was the highest concentrated volume of words he'd absorbed in some time. "That's okay. Thanks. I'm glad you did that."

"So I hope you won't be mad at us anymore."

"I'm not mad", he assured her. "Everything is all right."

"Oh, good", she said, "because I was really feeling guilty. That's why I called Chris and came by to try and see you so I could tell you in person. I never thought I'd see you walking down here along the coast like this. You do that a lot?"

"Some", he said. He was ready for her to go away, and she could tell.

"So, do you need a ride or something? I'm heading back down south but I could take you somewhere if you like. You don't have a car, do you? I didn't see ..."

"No, thanks", he interrupted. "I'm just going for a walk. I'll be fine. It was nice to see you. Thanks for stopping."

Kandhi bit her lip and turned to go. She felt it wasn't quite time yet, that she had more to say, but couldn't think of anything.

"And thanks again for doing the thing", Tom told her. That did the trick.

"Your very welcome", Kandhi said. "Anytime, really. Just give me a call, oh, I forgot. You don't have a phone."

Tom shook his head and, turning away, started walking again down the side of the road, leaving Kandhi behind. A few minutes later she beeped as she drove past him. He waited until her car was out of sight, and then he turned around. He nearly jumped in the air for joy. Suddenly he felt like going to the beach and leaping around in the waves. He ran, for the first time in years

actually ran, to the steps leading down to the beach at Montara and, throwing off his shoes ran into the surf, up to his knees. The water was cold, frigid, freezing, the way it always is out there but Tom was happier than he'd been in weeks. He didn't even look to see if there were children or women laughing at him. He only noticed a big black lab that came running along to play beside him in the waves.

It worked, he told himself. I know it did. It really did. I can make it happen again. I know I can. But no more volunteers. No way. Who needs it? I don't. I can make all the volunteers I want. I can put the thoughts in their head and they'll just go and do it. Don't need tagging. Don't need tracking. Just get some target's names, dole 'em out at random along with the ideas I want them to hear. I'll send every one I see out on a mission to change the world, just by talking loud in public! This is going to be great!

And, as if to validate the new plan, and right on time, came a squadron of huge brown pelicans, gliding prehistorically overhead.

LEDMAN PICKUP

One

"Your package has experienced an exception." Zoey Bridges stared at the words on her laptop screen, puzzled and confused. Packages don't have experiences, she thought, and in any case, how can an exception be experienced? What does that even mean? It was some moments before she realized what the shipping company was telling her. They had lost her box. It was gone. Missing in action. Misplaced. Disappeared.

"Oh no!" she exclaimed, "It can't be! Not now! Not this!"

"Oh no!" she repeated herself, backing away from the laptop in fear of unleashing her rage on the thing. This was worse than 'oh no'!

She backed up all the way to her living room window, which was open to the street two stories below and caught her backside just enough to keep her from taking the plunge. Frantically, she scanned the room for any small objects that had the potential to be smashed or thrown or stomped on without causing too much damage to anything else. It was times like these that she wished her mother was still alive and still giving her those hideous little glass animals for Christmas. "I could use a little glass animal right now," she thought. "I'd snap its ears off."

She took stock of the stuff she did have in her fairly Spartan apartment: a couple of desk lamps on fragile side-tables, some lousy Inspector Mole paperbacks, a notebook and pens, the laptop on her kitchen counter, a large bright green stuffed boa constrictor draped from the coat hanger hook on the door, her four identical pairs of sneakers, the ancient princess telephone. And that, as she often liked to say, was that.

"The books could go out the window," she considered, but by this time her initial panic had passed and she was capable of

breathing again. Cautiously, she approached the laptop. The calamitous email was still there, glowing at her with impunity in the early dusk light. Bla bla bla, bla bla bla, we're sorry to report, bla bla bla, your package has experienced an exception bla bla bla, tracking number, well that's something at least. She clicked on the tracking number and the browser leapt to another page, this one displaying a list of the places where the package had been scanned until its untimely demise. The very last place was not too very far away. Wetford, Arizona. A twelve hour drive or so, Zoey thought. I could get there by morning if I hurried.

It was helpful to be thinking in terms of a plan. This was her typical modus operandi. Planning and control. Taking responsibility. Setting out and getting it done. Fulfillment. Finding the package was a must. No two ways around it. What would Chris say? How could she face him? She couldn't, at all, and that was that. He didn't even need to know, ever, as long as she found it. She was relieved she hadn't yet informed him of its request. The truth was she had been putting it off all day and had only just now logged back into the computer to take the plunge and send him a note. The device had asked to go home. Literally. She was trying to think of a way to express it better than that, but hadn't come up with the words. She felt guilty, as if she had let the thing down. Maybe it was homesick. Who knew? The whole project had been wearing her down, causing her more anxiety than any other job she could remember, and when you came to look at it, that made no sense at all. There was no rational cause for all the fretting and worrying, unless you attempted to calculate the actual shape and size of the utterly unknown.

Zoey was a freelance black-box tester, and was damn good at her job, or at least she was until now. She had worked for W.W.A. before, and many other important companies as well. She was even famous, in her own obscure way, as an elite device tester, someone with an uncanny talent to find the most intractable software and hardware bugs, with a tremendous ability to

reproduce and report them in a ridiculously timely manner. She had saved device makers possibly millions of dollars, and carved out a nice little niche for herself. Most recently she had worked on several top-secret state-of-the-art gizmos and gadgets whose impending future releases were bound to transform the nature of human reality itself. Only a few months earlier she had tested, and put her stamp of approval upon P.M.S., the Personal Muzak System (tm), which would revolutionize the entire on-hold experience by playing only music tailored to the specific personal tastes of the physical customer at the other end of the line. She had lists of professional relationships. She had a sterling reputation. She kept her socialnet tidy and clean. You could not find a single thing against her online. She was forty-one years old, single and yet not burdened with cats or dogs or even a parakeet. She had no distracting personal interests, at least none which required much time. She was centrally located in Austin, Texas, and absolutely devoted to her craft. Never before had she even lost sight of a device. Never before had she failed to fulfill obligations. This was possibly the end of the world as she knew it. "Taking deep breaths," she reminded herself, as she sat back down on the bar stool she loved to swivel around on while working. She swiveled a few times and gathered her thoughts. It's all about control, she chided herself, personal control and alignment. But all she could think of was the package and asked herself several extremely important questions: Did I make sure the device was completely secure inside of the box? It won't get damaged, will it? That would definitely be bad. The package itself, was it sealed up properly? Did I do something wrong with the labeling? It was clearly marked, was it not? Next Day Air, Priority One. As she recalled the steps she had taken in packing it up and shipping it off, she realized that she had not done anything wrong. This could not have been her mistake. It was theirs. As the evening came on, Zoey didn't even get up to turn on a light. Soon it was just her and the laptop alone in the dark, glaring

at each other and giving off heat. She remembered her last conversation with Chris.

"Why does he always make me so nervous?" she wondered.

Other people she'd talked to about him reported the exact same responses - anxiety, nervousness, stuttering, and a tremendous desire to please. Certainly he was tall and handsome, had a wonderful, deep confiding voice that drew you in and made you feel special and important. There was something unnatural about his charisma, though, as if he himself were somehow embarrassed about it. People were always giving him things, sending him things, wanting to do things for him. He never asked, never had to. He was one of those people who always seem to get whatever they want while not even lifting a finger. Had she ever said no to the man? No. Did she know anybody who had? Again, no. Could she stammer out a complete sentence when talking to him? Once again, no. He would call up every once in awhile to check on a project, ask if it was going okay. It was, every time, and still she found it difficult to say so.

With most employers she would write up a contract, a tedious document full of complete and precisely detailed requirements, understandings and instructions, which she would follow to the letter and insist that they do also, but with W.W.A. it was always "whatever." Nothing in writing. Nothing at all. You want it, you got it. Most of the time that was fine. They would deliver the product with enough information to get her going, but this time it was totally different. They had given her almost nothing to go on. The thing came in the package - the same one it left in - with a single piece of paper enclosed, on which was written, in pencil, these words: "please put the device somewhere in your clothes, take it wherever you go, and check periodically for further instructions." That was it.

A normal project would be something like a cell phone. She would make calls on it, to make sure that she could. She would download data, send text messages, whatever the functionality of

the gadget. She would try to do everything the device could possibly do. This device seemed to do nothing. It was shaped like a cell phone - small and black, rectangular with a screen - but it had no removable casing, no apparent battery, no input or output jacks, no buttons, no keyboard, nothing at all you could push or click or switch or press or pull or do anything with. It was a lump of plastic weighing approximately twelve ounces.

For ten days she carried it around. She'd put it in the pocket of her jeans. She'd put it in her shirt, in her jacket. She'd placed it inside of a woolen cap and wore it on her head. She'd considered stuffing it into her bra. She'd put it into each of her sneakers. She'd worn it in a headband. She'd carried it with her all day, every day, and taken it to bed in her pajamas at night. The device made no sounds and gave off no light. This utterly useless gadget did nothing at all, or so it seemed.

No wonder she was fidgety. The thing had gotten on her nerves. "What is it?" she couldn't help but wonder. What do they want from me? What am I supposed to be doing? She assumed it was a challenge, a puzzle, a test. You don't just give an inert piece of plastic to one of the world's finest and most expensive quality engineers and expect them to not try and figure it out. It made her wonder even more than before about that company, W.W.A.. There were rumors about those people, their inscrutability and the fact that no one seemed to really know anything about them. Some people said they were a secret branch of the government, but Zoey had done enough government work to tell the difference between genius and that. Others said there was a billionaire behind the scenes who was working on some fantastic quest, to discover the fountain of youth perhaps, or some other well-worn fable. Still others believed there was simply a mad scientist at work behind the pleasant facade that was Chris. Zoey herself suspected that Chris was some sort of Jekyll and Hyde, but tended to think, deep inside, that what was really going on was some sort of combination of all of those notions - a team of scientists

employed by a billionaire in cahoots with some government somewhere, possibly backed by big oil money.

She had worked on some of their projects besides P.M.S.. There was the transitory laser tracking device that had once made a local splash in the news, when a toddler was found by somebody using it. The incident had caused a minor uproar of privacy concerns, which blew over quickly as most of those do. There was a device that purported to enhance one's romantic desirability, for a limited time only, but the after effects were unpleasant enough to raise questions of "beer goggle lawsuits." There was the virtual taste bud tester, which Zoey had found quite remarkable, learning and gauging her own tastes in food to such an extent that she used it to scan restaurants before entering. Trickiest of all was their "caller undo," which claimed to be able to erase unpleasant telephone conversations from everyone's memory. Zoey could never quite remember if that one had worked as expected. But a device that did nothing, well, that was a piece of work she had never expected to encounter.

It must have been doing something, though, for after a week and a half of her toting it about in every conceivable wearable location, the screen suddenly flashed on one morning and blinked with the phrase, "I would like to go home now, please," in a pleasant Calibri size forty four font.

Zoey was touched by the "please." She carefully packaged the thing in its original container, labeled it for the attention of Chris at W.W.A. headquarters in San Francisco. She took it to her customary mail services location - Gone Postal - and saw the thing off, with a bit of relief. Two days had gone by and still she had not contacted Chris. She was still trying to think of what she would say, and now this, the package gone missing. She was out of ideas. Her mind felt as blank as the device's screen had once been. I'm going to have to do something, she thought, but that was as far as she got.

"Okay, calmly now," she told herself, "Calm is the word, because I do not panic, at least not much beyond the initial shock. I'm a professional, after all," she concluded. She had become that way through a special training of discipline and rigor, years of practice and routine. One step at a time, one foot in front of the other. Plan first, then plan again. Be precise, be methodical, be thorough. Control.

"I am now officially calm," she decided, though remaining motionless in the darkened apartment. "I will now turn on the lights," she claimed, and as she thought it she did it. She stood up, took two steps to the wall, reached out and clicked the switch. The kitchen light came on. She retreated back to her bar stool and swiveled some more. One thing at a time.

"I will make a plan," Zoey noted, and turned her attention to the computer. She opened a plain text document and began to tap out an outline. First things first is the way.

First. What the heck am I going to tell Chris?

No. First. Should I even get in touch with him?

No.

Ok, then.

First - complete the documentation on the testing, such as it was. Complete the list of the articles of clothing within which the device was contained. Complete the calculations of the mileage obtained transporting the device here and there. Complete the daily diary of the device's activities.

She noted all of the above in the text document, and then proceeded to check off each item, because they were already done. She had finished this part the same day she'd sent back the device. She filled in the details from the tracking records provided by the shipping company. The device had been logged in San Antonio, Sonora, Balmorhea and Las Cruces, before its final entry in Wetford, Arizona.

'Who am I fooling?' she nearly said out loud. "This is a terrible report!"

"I could do a word count," she reflected, and discovered that her official document now comprised nearly one thousand words. Not bad. Considering it had nothing of interest within it!

I don't even know what the device is, or what it was supposed to be. I didn't do anything with it, not anything I could describe. I just did what they told me to do. I carried it around. It wanted to go home. I tried to send it home. It got lost. And that is that.

'Why can't I just call up Chris and tell him the truth?'

Because the truth was not good enough. Zoey knew from experience that devices like this were probably precious and rare - it was quite possibly the only one of its kind, potentially priceless. Unless it was a joke. Would they do that to me? Is someone out to get me?

"I do have enemies," she told herself, mostly other testing houses who were jealous of her reputation, but Chris would never, no, it was out of the question, impossible. The device, she considered for the ten thousandth time that week, must be of tremendous importance. It has to be, or else they would never have given it to me.

"I should call up that place," she decided. "The last known docket." She checked the browser again. The place the package was scanned was a warehouse called Ledman Storage and Pickup. It had a phone number listed. Zoey picked up the phone and called.

They were closed.

Of course.

Already it was past eight o'clock on a Thursday.

"Oh no, not Thursday!" she shouted. "What else could go wrong? If I don't get there by tomorrow, they will probably be closed until Monday!"

Calm. You are calm. You will now be calm.

Ok.

Much better.

I am calm.

I can research that place.

She searched them online and found a few items of interest. Ledman Storage had a single location. They were only in Wetford, nowhere else. They were small, or at least had the lousiest website. It displayed a few links to other warehouses and some shipping lines, but all of those links were defunct. It seemed to be a sort of transitional spot, a place where nothing was intended to stay, but merely pass through on its way somewhere else. It was not clear at all why the package had even gone there in the first place. It should have gone by plane. She had paid enough, certainly. Next Day Air, she recalled. So why was it going overland, and why had it taken two days to go a measly six hundred miles? Something was not making sense. Someone had made a gigantic mistake.

"I wish I knew more about shipping," she thought, but already she knew, in the back of her mind, there was only one thing she could do. She would have to go on the road. She couldn't risk waiting all night for some scruffy young deadbeat to finally show up in some seedy old warehouse in the middle of a tumbledown desert just to tell her "shucks I dunno ma'am, it sho' ain't around heah no mo'," if he even would answer the phone. She had a picture in her mind of the man and it wasn't a nice one.

The package was her responsibility. That much was clear. If you want something done right, you do it yourself. Take control. She was already in the bedroom packing her bags when the phone started ringing.

"Don't answer," she said to herself as she picked up and said, "Hello? Zoey Bridges."

"Hey Zoey, it's Chris," said the voice at the other end of the line.

"Oh hi," Zoey melted. She sat down on the bed.

"Just thought I'd check in," he continued. There was a long pause.

"Everything going okay?" he finally asked.

"Oh yeah," she replied, "just fine. Nothing new. Nothing, really"

"Oh, okay," he said. "Do you mind if I ask you some questions?"

"No, no, go ahead," Zoey told him, and thought to herself, "I can do this. I can handle it. I am calm."

"About the device," Chris went on. "I know we didn't give you much to go on. Sorry about that. Really, I am, but it's all for the best, as you'll see."

"Oh?" She couldn't conceive of any more syllables.

"Yeah," he said, "it's actually quite an intriguing experiment. We're hoping to learn a great deal. Has it said anything yet?"

"Said?" she muttered. "No, no. I haven't heard a peep."

"It ought to be telling you something at some point," her employer informed her. "I can't tell you what or even how that will happen, but you can definitely expect some feedback," he said.

"Until then, I suppose, it isn't very interesting, is it?"

"Oh, no, not at all," Zoey said, "I mean, not in that way, or in a usual way, or, oh, I don't know what I'm saying. It doesn't do anything that you can see that it's doing."

"Oh, it's doing something," Chris told her. "All of the time, I can tell you that much. It's a busy little bee, but it's all self-contained, as you know. It will tell you, when it's time, so don't worry. I just thought that it might have, you know, already done so by now."

"No, no," Zoey said, "nothing yet. I'll tell you, of course, as soon as it does, as soon as I have anything to tell you, that is."

"Of course," Chris replied. "Nothing but the best for this box. That's why we sent it to you of all people. There isn't another, I can tell you that much. It's the only one of its kind."

"That's just great," Zoey sighed. "I guess I kind of guessed that already."

"Well," said Chris after a pause. "I'll wish you good night, then."

"Good night," she said quickly, and hung up the phone.

"I am calm," she reminded herself. "Very calm. I know what I'm doing, exactly. I am packing my clothes and then I am getting into my car. And then I am driving all night. And then I am finding that package. And when I find it, I am going to take it, in person, all

the way to San Francisco. Yes I am. And I am doing it calmly every step of the way."

Then, as calm as a winter tornado, she threw all her clothes in a bag and ran out the door.

Two

The first thing it knew was a bump on its side. A corner that had previously been fine, sharp and square was now dented and blunt. The landing was soft. There had been no pain. A bump and a view from all sides except down. Around it was carpet, thin and pale green. Off in the distance were some black plastic brackets containing some forms and some packages, flattened. They seemed to be all the same. Up above, way high up, was the light, white and solid across. A darkish tan thing coming down, and the next thing it knew it was flying. That's when it first felt the vibrations. A feeling of motion and air flowing past. It was moving against its volition and that was an action that didn't seem right. Placed back on a surface of what was once yellow. Vibrations again in the lower range buzzing. Words that came through.

"It says Air on the label."

Other words came from another form elsewhere, a bit higher frequency and tighter, more pointy.

"It's in the computer as Ground."

"Maybe we ought to check?"

"Computer says Ground."

Slid across now by the form with the graspers, it felt itself tearing and torn, pulled apart, but that was all on the surface, it seemed. Soon a smoothing and restoration of sorts.

"Ground it shall be," said the original vibration, and then a more radical flight as it soared through the air and landed on top of a heap of some others. Here in the bin it could still see the ceiling of light, but nothing around it but boxes and white. It settled in for a

long quiet time, adjusting to all the sensations. Frequencies ranging from very high up down to rumblings that felt underground, deep below. All of these had to be messages. Some it could process in some shape or form. There was meaning at times. There were things going out and things coming in. More noises became more familiar. The sound of the first and the sound of the second that were voices. Occasionally others quite similar. Humming come down from the ceiling of light. Shiftings and sortings as things piled on top. None of this was quite what it wanted. It had yearnings but could not express them.

Later darkness after more motion. New surroundings, new senses, new visions. Rolling. Being rolled. Handled by different graspers. Flying, then resting, more piling. Time was a blur of starting and stopping, moving and yet not in motion. Energy streaming and always a host of vibrations. Occasional beepings from deep down inside. Pulses of wavelengths of light.

It seemed like a rhythm that would go on forever, alternate resting and motion, darkness and light. It felt like it was getting to know all these facts. More and more it seemed like the others around it were things like itself, in a process of destiny, or at least of awakening. It could feel stirrings around it and occasionally another item would bump up against it and make contact. There was jostling for position at times as well, and it had a sense that it would find its own spot if it could. At the same time it seemed that anywhere was good enough, one shelf as welcoming as another.

Voices were intermittent, sometimes muffled and distant, sometimes close and distinct. Words that had come to be familiar. It was part of an infinite relay, handed off from one runner to the next. In this way the time passed and the flow was underway, until abruptly it came to an end.

Three

Leonora Wells had a motto she lived by each day: get high early and get high often. This morning was no different, beginning with a wake-up scramble for a joint, which she pulled into her lungs on the fire escape that doubled as her front porch. Three floors above the alley she enjoyed the crack of light that sometimes appeared in the daytime above the apartment buildings that ranged about on every side. Behind her in the single room she inhabited was a pile of sheets, blankets, and a variety of tin foil wrappings left over from last week's burritos. The hot plate remained unplugged on the floor as she had not felt much like cooking in recent days. She was already wearing her outfit for the day - overalls, t-shirt and boots - so all it would take to get going was something to eat and a smoke. She stumbled back into the room and a quick glance told her she had nothing of those. Damn it, she thought, but she'd already known. Every day was like this. Still, it wasn't so bad. She had a half a bag stashed in the jar, nothing to do but the job, and the job was so easy it suited her fine. Half a block down the street was the warehouse: Ledman Storage and Pickup. Leonora Wells had been working there for a month and could hardly believe in her luck. All she had to do was wave some drivers around and sign in when they came and when they left. The rest was pretty much up to them and the guys. The guys were Junior and Rolando, fun-loving fellows who never had a bad word to say or a mean look on their faces. All they did was move things around. She was supposed to be telling them where, but they knew better than she did. After all, she was the new kid in town. Rolando and Junior had been there for what seemed forever. The previous "supervisor," an asshole named Rick, was not missed at all. He'd been a micro-manager supreme, always on their case, scolding them about the proper placement of packages for maximum efficiency. What did they care about that? Ledman Storage was just a way station. Boxes come in, and boxes go out. Who cares where they are in the meantime? As

long as they made their way out into the world, that's all that really mattered in the end. Imagine that Rick guy having a fit every time that Rolando put package A on shelf C! But that's how it went. It hardly helped matters that package A turned out to be some critical shipment on its way to a nuclear research facility, and shelf C was reserved for East Coast medical equipment. Cost poor old Rick his position though it was scarcely his fault. Now Rick was supervising garden hose salesmen at K-Po's. Rolando and Junior didn't care. Nobody ever blamed them at all.

Leonora thought that she had it made. The pay was damn good, the job was a cinch, she could do it with both eyes tied behind her back, a thought which made her burst out in a flurry of giggles. She stumbled her way into work and was happy to see that the guys were also in form. A delivery had come in from Texas, a light one, half a dozen small boxes mostly intended for pickup a half hour later. Anyone could see they should stay on the table right by the front landing, but something about their sizes and shapes made them an irresistible target for Junior.

"Go long," he shouted, and heaved the first package along down the aisle, expecting Rolando to go for it. Rolando, however, stood still and the thing hit and went sliding beneath a rack of gray shelving along the west wall.

"Aw, man," Junior complained but Rolando just shrugged. Junior picked up the next one and this time they put together a decent string of tosses and catches, all the way to nine in a row before Junior went and dropped the darn thing and it busted. All sorts of stuffing and peanuts spilled out of the side of the box and the guys figured they'd better patch it up right away, and that was the end of that game. Leonora didn't even have to scold them. They knew their business and she didn't care. As long as there's no trouble she was fine, and so far whenever the boss had called to complain she'd just listened and hadn't really bothered to hear. It was pretty much all the same to her if they were going to fire

her any day now or not. She had found a few beers sitting behind a blue dumpster and distributed them freely for breakfast.

Four

Kandhi Clarke had been paying close attention. As Chief Officer for the WWA Testing Division, Zoey Bridges was of special interest to her. Kandhi had been the first to discover Zoey and her talents. It had happened quite by accident. Kandhi and her mother were having coffee at one of their favorite spots and happened to overhear a conversation at the next table, a discussion between Zoey and another unidentified female on the subject of black box testing. Zoey had put together quite a theory and was making a case for intuition over planning although, it must be said to her credit, she did not deny the importance of the latter, only that the former tended to uncover the most pernicious defects. Planning undoubtedly led to bases being covered, i's being dotted and t's being crossed, but intuition delved below the surface and hit the rare gold more often than not.

Her companion argued a cost-benefit analysis, that the rare breed of intuitive tester could not be relied upon in the aggregate, and that therefore it was wiser to develop a comprehensive course of action. Zoey did not disagree, but asserted that in her case, you could have both. Kandhi ventured to interrupt and joined them at their table. She discovered nothing interesting in the other woman, who struck her as a bland, vanilla type engineer, but Zoey, there was promise there. Kandhi had been one of the original members of WWA, the third employee to be precise, after the two founders, one of whom was the legendary Chris. She was not the greenhorn she had once been when the company had first got off the ground. She was older, of course, and more mature, though she still sported her spiky pink hair and a random assortment of piercings. The new Kandhi was a serious person

who handled her responsibilities responsibly. She had been the original tester of some of their first devices and had developed some ideas of her own when it came to quality assurance. She was certain that Zoey was on to something, but from her own experience knew that such talents were untrainable. One had to be born with it, gifted. Kandhi had come across only one or two others in that line of work until then. She gathered Zoey's contact information and promised to get in touch.

First, however, she did a little research of her own. In a matter of days she had a complete dossier and personality profile compiled on the subject of Zoey Bridges, only child, mathematics major in college. Zoey had stumbled into software testing after a temp job at Micro Microware turned into something more. At M and M (as they styled themselves), Zoey had been charged with validating the initial findings of the development team, that the intelliprobe they had released into its chamber had indeed acquired the volcanic-bacteria-sensing tissue they'd intended it to. In order to accomplish this task, Zoey had to depend upon a sophisticated measuring device, and the more she used that machine, the more suspicious she became about its reliability. She conducted offline experiments which were not authorized by the division, and the company was not amused. She reported numerous deficiencies in the tool and concluded that M and M had wasted their money and that the entire project could not be validated by any means whatsoever.

She was fired from that job, but the makers of the device, Ensuwalla Mektron, hired her as a special consultant while they went back to the drawing board. She enjoyed the whole special consultant thing and soon branched out, offering her services to makers of other scientific devices. One success followed another, and soon her career had led into the world of personal electronic communications and other consumer enterprises. She had established a reputation, not only as a skilled and talented

consultant, but also as an almost unbelievably bland and boring person. Kandhi had never before encountered anyone as dull. Zoey was indeed on the socialnet (this was almost required for people of her generation), but her personal revelations were embarrassingly tedious, unrelieved by even a cute kitten video or quilting pattern. Her most original contributions to the worldly online super-culture was a periodic listing of cracks in neighboring sidewalks, a paean to the virtues of wax beans (they were yellow, and beanie), and a brief discussion on the brevity of precise midnight. Kandhi eventually contracted with Zoey to test a well-known and thoroughly tested WWA device, only to discover that Zoey was indeed everything she bragged of being. She uncovered seven priority-one defects in the device in the first two days she possessed it.

Since then, Kandhi had not hesitated to hire Zoey for even alpha level testing. It was expensive to go that route, but had proven worth it. She had brought Chris into the picture, hoping to provoke a better sense of Zoey's character, which up until then presented itself as what-you-see-is-what-you-get: thoroughly bland yet continually astounding. Kandhi could not fathom how such an uninteresting person could yield such important results. After several contracts, Kandhi was more than satisfied with Zoey's work, but she still didn't completely trust her. She'd hoped that Chris would help to crack the icy exterior, but so far he hadn't produced the desired effect. Zoey was still an enigma. She had fallen under Chris' spell, of course, but all that brought about was a great deal of stammering and awkward telephone recordings. Kandhi wanted more. She wanted to crack her wide open, find out what was really going on inside, but now it seemed she was even lying to Chris. There had to be an explanation. She had picked Zoey especially for this assignment. Now or never, Zoey girl, she thought to herself as she shipped the curious device, and from that day on had been monitoring her every move. Zoey didn't know just how closely she was being observed.

Kandhi noted with satisfaction how Zoey had gone through her paces, had attempted to pick and pry at the thing, had followed instructions and yet worked around them. Zoey had done everything possible, everything that ought to be done, and when the device had completed its work, it reported to her that Zoey had fulfilled her commitment. She had packed the thing up and taken it down to Gone Postal, and that was the end of the line. Kandhi was eager to see its report, but the device didn't arrive as expected. Something had gone wrong along the way. She checked with the shipper and discovered, with more than dismay, that the package was lost. It had "experienced an exception." Quickly she scanned the tracking tables and saw the same listings that Zoey had previously noted: San Antonio, Sonora, Balmorhea and Las Cruces, and finally, Ledman Storage and Pickup, in Wetford, Arizona. Kandhi rapidly checked with the airlines. There was a flight to L.A., then to Phoenix, from where it was only a two hour drive to that warehouse destination. She could get there by mid-morning, if she moved fast enough. There was no time to lose, because this was no ordinary package.

Five

Zoey drove a super mini compact car of the grayest gray and the drabest interior. She could think of no good reason to waste money on vehicle decor. The car was a means to an end, and that was that. Even now in the dark she lamented the need to use it. Zoey had a fear of transportation that could be plotted on a graph, beginning with the necessity of walking, which was at least tolerable, if tiring. Slightly above that was walking fast, something she felt should never be required. If you were walking fast, then you had miscalculated somewhere along the line, otherwise, you would be on time, and walking at a normal pace.

Manual wheeled transit, a category that included bicycles and skating, was absurd but justifiable. Motorized wheel transit was already on the borderline, but if it had to be done, buses were preferable to cars except that they never seemed to go where you needed to go, when you needed to go there. Cars would have to do in a pinch. Trains were pushing it. They were, how would she put it? Alarming. Everything else beyond the rails was simply out of the question. She would never, ever fly. The very idea was appalling. She didn't even appreciate it for birds, which were nothing but airborne nuisances. Ever since that sneak attack when she was a little child.

She had thought of everything: clothes, snacks, laptop, phone. The car was waiting below in the garage. Lights were on in there and no one else was, thankfully. Her apartment complex was small but fully inhabited. Fortunately, it was civilized to the extent that people still respected the assignment of spaces. Only once in the seven years she'd occupied the place had her spot been stolen by some unlawful neighbor. She had left a caustic note. The incident was not repeated.

Her beeper beeped the door open, and beeped again later to lift up the gate. It was already nine o'clock at night. She proceeded cautiously over the perilously cracked sidewalk in front of the garage. How many times she would have to complain to the management was still an open question, its answer currently resting at seventeen. Further along, Zoey had to wait at several traffic lights before finally getting out of town. She could never understand that. Whoever timed the lights had to know there was nobody out there now, so why should she have to sit and wait exactly twenty-seven seconds for nothing! If she had another life to live she would consider becoming a traffic engineer instead. She was certain she would excel at such a career.

It was going to be a long night. Zoey did not believe in coffee, only in the power of the will. The highways would be easy going all night long, nothing but truckers and late night drunks. The

radio might have helped to pass the time, but Zoey considered it superfluous. She had her thoughts to keep her company. Currently she was working on an exercise, a mental game to keep her wits intact. She would memorize a day, a whole day, every instant. She'd been working on that day for quite a while by now. It was not an actual day, but an ideal one, not perfect but essential. It would contain all elements in their proper durations. It wasn't glamorous or literary or especially remarkable. There would be some achievements, but relatively minor ones. There would be several setbacks, but nothing very drastic. Red lights would be among them. A beverage not quite right. She had planned to take a year to develop that single day, and so far she had filled many hours. She relived them in her mind, went back over the minutes and their occupying items. She had become attached to the day, which she thought of as The Day. No one else knew anything about it. She had ruled out writing anything down, even reminder notes. It had to be all in her head or nothing. There were phone calls with friends that never happened. Only she knew what they had talked about. There were things she had seen that no one ever saw. There was a project she'd been working on, but only during The Day. She had discovered defects in the code, imaginary bugs that would never be fixed. At times it felt so real she had nearly sent out emails, only to recall the fictitious nature of the task before her fingers reached the keyboard. She had smiled at those moments. Soon those smiles and those moments had also become a part of The Day.

She managed to keep her mind on The Day and her eyes on the road throughout the long and lonely ride through San Antonio proper and out to the West through Texas into New Mexico. The hours passed by with the stripes on the road. She maintained an even fifty in the slow lane all the way. No need to overdo it. Twelve hours or so would be enough. Besides, if she arrived too early, the warehouse would not be open anyway, and the last

thing she needed was to be hanging around with nothing to do in some sketchy unfamiliar district. Everything was proceeding according to plan, and that was all you could ask for.

Six

If it had to sum up its overall sensation in one word, the word would be 'wrong'. It was developing a sense of propriety, of the way things ought to be, as opposed to the way things were. Wrong to be on the floor, for one thing. Doubly wrong to be wedged beneath a giant rack of rusty shelves. Triply wrong to be enshrouded in cobwebs and surrounded by dust motes flying everywhere. It sensed rustling and scurrying from behind, and muffled booms above. There was creaking and shifting and sudden cool breezes stirring up the particles of dirt that rained upon it. It had known a more orderly arrangement and could definitely appreciate it more and more. To be on top of tables. To be in stacks with other boxes, square to the wall, nicely aligned for sliding onto hand trucks, down ramps and into shiny clean silvery ledges on wheels. That was the way things ought to be. Instead it had spent the morning in the gloom, ever since it had felt that lifting and tossing and sliding and banging against the floor and the wall and coming to rest.

Voices came and went, sometimes clearer, sometimes hazy. Important items overheard or so it considered. It registered each sound and placed the voices in their categories. The tosser. The runner. The laughter. The tosser made the most noises, or at least it made the noises on the wavelength that got through the best. The tosser threw words that repeated, that became clearer, that had definitive declarations. It sorted and arranged the words and lined up several ideas. The ideas, for example, that Miami was better than Indy, and that Green Bay was better than San Francisco. These had connotations that rang bells. San Francisco

was something familiar. It was on the label. Green Bay was apparently something like San Francisco, only "better." It was worth considering.

Other phrases and random words made less impact, such as "your mom likes my home cooking" and "you can suck on this." It diligently filed all these away, sorting and arranging in a sort of ad hoc schema. Each new sequence was keyed by the loudest of the bunch. "Eightball" was associated with both "lucky" and "behind." It keenly waited for new inputs, while continually examining those already captured and cycled through them, considering and committing.

There were trumpets as well, bringing new smells on wheels at one point. The laughter passed by the most often. That one seemed to roam throughout the dark and airy warehouse filled from floor to ceiling with shelving, most of it vacant, much of it littered with foul-smelling pellets that seemed to follow the scurrying sounds. On occasion there would be an engine resonating from that opening of light at the far other end of the place, and then some lifting and shifting and sliding could be determined, and the roaring roared away after a time had passed. On those occasions, the warehouse generally became emptier. The day went by. It was not a day to remember, particularly. It was a day for reflecting and judging and coming to decisions. It was a day that had caused an awakening.

Seven

Most of the day Leonora had nothing to do. Junior and Rolando were like their own little twin nation, communicating with each other in a series of complicated gestures and sounds that would take a 'warehouse whisperer' to decipher. They didn't know much about her. She was just the latest 'new guy' in a series of new guys that never lasted very long and never made much of a

difference to them. They continued to go about their business in a haphazard and careless manner, knowing that the new guy would always take the hit for whatever mistakes they might make. The boss, after all, was their cousin, Matthew Pilates, and he knew everything there was to know about them. On the very first day he had instructed Leonora to "ride their ass" or else hers would be "grass." Leonora had laughed at that, and had pretty much been laughing ever since.

Ledman Storage and Pickup was vast and cold and drafty. Even on the hottest summer day it was a bog in there, a rundown building with its own microclimate. It didn't matter that the windows were all broken out - the heat never seemed to want to come in. The roof was corrugated tin of the variety that usual bakes whatever it covers, but this roof reflected it all into space, probably boiling some moon in a galaxy light years away. The floor, made of chipped and rotting concrete, was perpetually damp and the shelves of rusting metal were creaky but never gave way. Most of the building was empty, and Leonora wandered about to fill up her time, poking and peering into storage containers storing nothing, empty wicker baskets that might have held foliage of some sort at some time. She guessed that there had once been a pottery business in part of the building, from the shards of colored ceramic she found here and there.

She really liked to be there. She didn't have to go sneaking a joint. She could light up any old place. The fridge had a kegerator inside that Pilates always made sure was kept full. He paid his two cousins practically nothing, and it was true that they pretty much did whatever needed doing. Boxes came in, boxes went out. If there was any lag, they moved them around, but usually the drivers did most of the work. Rolando and Junior kept to their ways and hardly anything out of the ordinary ever occurred. Leonora would have been bored, but she played little games to keep up her interest. She'd chuck rocks at the bits of glass that remained in the corners of windows. "Never let a day go by

without breaking something" was another one of her personal mottoes. She threw paint at the walls to see how it splattered. She played peanut golf with a board and the Styrofoam packing material, flailing away at the things as they floated throughout the big empty spaces. She played dust-bowl with the push-broom and tried to make heaps in the corners. Throughout these activities she laughed like a nut job, with an occasional loud snorting that the cousins had come to despise. They called her 'the donkey' but she didn't notice that whenever they said the word 'burrito' they were secretly laughing at her.

'Whatever' was the sum of her attitude. She'd had other jobs, plenty in fact, and this one was simply too easy. She wasn't going to let anyone spoil it, and besides, she genuinely liked them sometimes. She liked the way that they talked, the way they goofed off and didn't really care about anything. She had never seen them fret about anything, or even show any interest at all. Whenever she'd ask them a question, they'd just shrug. When she showed them the package, however, Rolando's response was quite different from normal.

"Where'd you get that?" he wanted to know. It was practically the most words he had ever directed her way.

"Just found it," she told him. "It was under those shelves in aisle seven. It looks pretty new."

"I don't like it," Rolando replied, and he turned away and walked off. Junior looked closer.

"I think that's the football," he said and he nodded. "Yeah, I just threw it this morning. I was wondering where it got to. I told Rolie go long but he didn't."

"I guess we ought to put it somewhere," Leonora suggested, hoping that Junior would tell her where it should go.

"Look it up," he suggested, pointing at the bar code on the label.

"I know we scanned it."

They checked the computer and sure enough it had come in that morning at eight, but that was the weird part about it. It was

never supposed to even be there. The thing was definitely registered as Next Day Air from Austin to Frisco. Nobody was scheduled to pick it up. The thing was clearly out of its way.

"What are we supposed to do with it?" Lenora asked, and Junior responded with his usual shrug.

"If it was me I'd just throw it away," he told her and laughed. "But maybe I'd open it first, and if it was something good then I'd take it," and he laughed again, harder. This brought Rolando back in a hurry, because he never wanted to miss out on a joke, but as he drew closer he frowned once again.

"That thing is buzzing," he declared, and sure enough, as soon as he mentioned it, Leonora and Junior noticed it. The sound was low but audible, and the package even seemed to be vibrating a bit.

"It's no good," Roland repeated. "You ought to smash it. I'll get the hammer," and he wandered away one more time. Leonora looked puzzled and Junior caught her expression.

"He's got a sixth sense," Junior told her, "He's got the ESP, like the Extra Normally Perceptive. One time he felt there was a voodoo doll going through so we burned it. It made a weird smell like rubber when it burned. Turned out it was Amazon Barbie. Some little dyke wasn't too happy with us," he burst out laughing again.

"We're not supposed to be opening them," Leonora said thoughtfully.

"Or burning them," Junior added, nearly doubling over with laughter this time. He had to find a bench and sit down before he keeled over.

"I could get the next driver to take it," she said.

"Take it where?" Junior asked. "Drivers don't just take it. You gonna pay for the shipment? 'Cause this thing hasn't been paid for. Not now. I mean it was, but that was for air. Nothing for Wetford to Cali."

"I ain't paying nothing," she told him with a little anger in her voice. The thought she should part with some money for nothing was too much to deal with.

"Fuck it," she said, but she noticed Rolando returning with tools and something about the little box changed her mind and she snatched it away before he could harm it.

"The poor little thing has got itself lost," she murmured as she handled it gently. She got up and set off for a corner of the warehouse where she could be alone with her decision, and finish up the rest of her smoke without Junior or Rolando cadging a hit. She sat on the floor behind a desk overflowing with crumpled up paper, and cradled the box in her lap.

"I probably shouldn't do this," she told it, but she had already made up her mind. Tearing at the tape with her fingernails, she opened it up, and carefully unwrapped the tightly wound bubble wrap protecting the item inside. Soon she had the little black box in her hand, with its modest little sentence still glowing upon the LED screen.

"I'd like to go home now, please."

Eight

It was pretty clear right off that her plans were not going to go smoothly. First there was the annoying cab ride to the airport with the driver who would not shut up about her new hairpiece, the IntelliWig ("Hair for Life!"). Apparently this new kind of self-styling toupee adjusted to both mood and meteorological conditions. The driver kept complaining that she didn't feel frizzy even if her hair thought she did. Then there was the problem of the carry-on, which was just a tad too tight for the recently shrunken overhead compartments. She'd been carrying on the same carry-on for years. Suddenly it was too large? The seats had also undergone the same downsizing. She was squeezed in between two old ladies who were apparently competing for the most-overly-perfumed-biddy-of-the-year award. Kandhi held her breath and reminded herself it was only an hour or so on the first leg of the

trip, and the second leg was bound to be better. She hadn't counted on the ninety minute tarmac stop. The San Francisco fog had decided to shroud the airport in its thickness and refused to let up until nearly two in the morning. During that endless interval, Kandhi was trapped with nothing but her universal personal device.

The UPD, as they liked to call it, was a special edition of several W.W.A. prototypes coalesced into one. Like the gadget she'd given to Zoey, it was self-powered, no battery or external power source needed. It was solid state, and its rubberized external packaging guaranteed it could not be harmed from anything less than a thousand foot drop. It had no keyboard but recognized anything that Kandhi might swipe on it or say aloud to it. It was capable of conveying its output directly into her mind, thus saving on expensive screens and diodes. For short, she called it "U", and when she talked to it, she liked to begin by saying "hey, you". She used it for everything: all communications, news, reading, conversations, games, all anything. While stuck on the runway she flicked through her virtual list of contacts professional and otherwise, checking up on their current status and latest doings. Tom was still locked in the basement at HQ. He'd been down there seven days now, likely cooking up something too good to be true. Chris was being offered an America's Cup boat ride by some world champion in New Zealand. Cary Willis was frying catfish in lemon butter. Nancy Petrie was wishing Sylvia Peters a happy birthday. Jenna Maloney was getting divorced again. It was complicated. Zoey Bridges was nothing. Nothing from Zoey Bridges in ages, it seemed. That was okay. She was not supposed to be posting anything about her confidential work and she had no personal life, besides which she was no doubt fast asleep like most sane people in that time zone were. Kandhi's flight was excruciating. They had made her turn off the device at take-off, and after that she tried and failed to catch a little sleep. The old ladies had brought out their knitting, and the click-click-click of

the needles nearly drove her insane. She spent a good half hour walking up and down the aisles, wondering why the flight was full, wondering who the hell the rest of these people were, and why it was so damn important for them to fly to L.A. in the middle of the night on a Thursday. Then she remembered how cheap it was. Cheaper than a damn bus, even, which explained it. Fortunately, once it got underway, the plane trip didn't last long.

Of course she missed the connecting flight to Phoenix, thanks to the fog delay. She had to wait until five to get the next plane. She ordered a triple shot of espresso in her double mocha shake. The UPD was in quiescence. Normally during the day it would go about suggesting things to her. Since it knew her pretty well, it would scan the skyverse for items it knew she'd be interested in. It must have decided to take a rest, seeing as she was usually non-sentient at this Greenwich hour minus eight. She felt a little rejected. It was embarrassing to realize that. In all her dealings with the new technologies, and especially the invasive sort that W.W.A. seemed to revel in, she had kept her emotional distance, had not become attached, had refused to let herself get sucked into the virtual world. But now, she laughed at herself, she was thinking, hey, if you can't count on your universal personal device to keep you company, who can you trust? Then, while sitting around at the gate, staring at the limitless gray carpet, the gadget popped a message into her head. It was from Zoey Bridge's socialnet. It said simply, "today is the day." That was certainly puzzling. She was tempted to contact Zoey, inquiring further, but couldn't think of exactly what to say without seeming inappropriately nosy, or giving away her own game. She didn't want Zoey to know she was investigating in person. It still nagged at the back of her mind - what was the tester trying to hide? Why hadn't she simply told Chris the truth about what had happened with the device

The five o'clock flight to Phoenix was uneventful, at least, and thankfully non-odorous as well. Kandhi was beginning to count

her blessings when she discovered on arrival that her carry-on, which she'd not been allowed to carry on the initial flight, had not even made the second leg of the trip. It could be anywhere, anywhere in fact except at the airport in Phoenix where it belonged, where she now was. She took a deep breath after yelling at the helpless clerk at baggage claim. She had nothing now that wasn't in her purse. She would need clothes, some accessories. Nothing major. Nothing she couldn't deal with later. The next thing was to get the rental car and get to Wetford. "Today is the day" she told herself, "whatever the heck that means."

Nine

At five in the morning, Zoey was less than a hundred miles from Wetford and keeping up her steady pace. She had managed to sail through several hours of uninterrupted replay, making significant progress toward her completion of The Day. The night was like a mere backdrop to the drama unfolding in her mind. Every other car on the road roared past her without her really noticing. It was none of her concern. She had kept the cruise control at fifty and the highway was straight as a rod for dozens of miles on end. It drifted into her consciousness that eternity might feel like this, and that she wouldn't mind at all if it did. The unanticipated stretch of uninterrupted think-time had unexpectedly come in handy. The Day, she had already determined, must begin with a clean slate. As a tester she knew that pre-conditions must include a known initial state. Each test must setup and tear down everything in its environment. So too The Day begins without any waxy buildup left over from previous days. That meant a thorough scrubbing and sorting. There would be no dirty dishes, no unmade beds, no laundry needing to be

washed. A day that did not begin with these conditions was not, and could not be, The Day, by definition.

The Day begins with a proper ramping up, preparing and fueling the engine. Typically this included bathing, brushing teeth and breakfast, all of that sort of thing. In Zoey's Day, those activities occupied a set amount of time. Their schedule had not changed since her initial forays into Daily Planning. She had also added certain types of thinking to those times. It was appropriate to consider news items, for example, during breakfast. It was not allowed to think of them in the shower. There is a time and place for everything, after all. At one time she had permitted herself to giggle at the notion that, if to everything there is a season (as the Bible says), than to everything there are forbidden seasons as well. At the brushing of the teeth, decisions can be made about apparel.

The Day's morning continued with a plan. Each day should have its own plan and not rely on a previous day's tasks. Nor should The Day's plan be considered on any other day but The Day itself. Planning began during the breakfast cleanup routine, while washing dishes and putting them away. The plan, in order to be highly effective (as she had once read somewhere), had to start with the end in mind. First things first, in this case, meant Last Things First. What was the purpose of The Day? What was the Expected Result? It could be many things. It could mean, professionally, a certain number of test cases defined, or executed, or revisited, or documented. It could mean a new task altogether. If she had no project, it could mean scouting for one. These were principles. The actual The Day which lived in her mind remained curiously open to change. She had left herself some breathing room. Before and After Work were fairly rigidly defined, but the Work portion of The Day itself was allowed to vary. In this way, she hoped the project would not get stale.

It entertained her enough. The drive held steady and the first rays of dawn began to appear above the highway. She told herself that

this day could not be The Day. Her routine was shot. Here she was driving across three states and staying up all night. There was a lot of waxy buildup going on! She would not shower as usual, nor groom as usual, nor breakfast as usual - nothing would be usual about this day. Approaching her destination she had to make decisions. Should she turn off first at Spring Hill Lake and scout for a coffee shop, or stay on the road and wait until Wetford a little further on down the road? Should she go directly to Ledman Storage and Pickup, or wait until later in the morning? She had forgotten their hours. Suddenly nothing was making sense. Her mind had enjoyed the long drive but her body was giving out, and having its effect throughout. She began to notice that she was becoming incapable of rational thought. Everything began to seem difficult. The exit signs posted notices of restaurants and gas and probably she and her car both needed these. It was hard to decide.

She was too groggy to make proper choices. She noted that the tank was not yet empty and decided to drive straight there. Her map-voice told her what to do and she obeyed, paying no attention to the scenery, such as it was. Wetford, dreary year-round, held nothing of interest to see. It was a city such as cities had become in that time; predictable, laconic, expanding without a plan and leaving the old stuff behind to fend for itself. It was residential here, commercial there, strip malls where you'd expect them, high rises too. It might have appeared straight out of a failing urban design student's half-assed diorama of anytown, anywhere. The train tracks rode along the riverbank and it was here, among the other decaying remnants of a formerly industrial lifestyle, that Ledman Storage and Pickup held its ground. A tall brick structure sporting all blown out windows, it had a parking lot with well-faded stripes and a loading dock featuring a corrugated ramp.

Zoey pulled into the lot close to the lime green door with its old worn-out sign that must have said something at one time but was

no longer legible. She climbed out of the car and walked over the gravel toward it. The door was closed, and locked. There were no other cars around, and no other people in sight. It was seven in the morning and for a few moments she just stood there, wondering what she should do. Thoughts scattered through her sleepy head. Coffee would be a good idea. Something to eat, but now that she was there, she didn't want to get lost or take any chances. She glanced around, half-hoping to see something tempting that might change her mind, but there was nothing in sight but other buildings similarly situated, rotting and forlorn. An abandoned railway station. A half-torn-down steel-girded armory. A shack with a sign declaring "Gary's Plastic Place." Here she was, so here she'd stay, at least until someone, anyone showed up. And that, she concluded, was that. She returned to her car, sat down behind the wheel, and tried very hard to stay awake.

Ten

Zoey noted it was precisely seven seventeen when the white pickup truck pulled into the lot next to her car. Two gentlemen emerged and, without even a glance in her direction, headed for the door. The taller one pulled out a key and opened it just enough to slip inside, letting the door close behind them. Zoey had followed them but reached the door only in time to find the door shut and locked once more. She knocked. No one answered. She knocked harder. No response. She shook her head. Maybe she was imagining things. Looking back, she saw the white truck was still there. She turned back to the door and banged on it again. This time she spoke up.

"Hello? Hello? Is anybody there?"

"This is ridiculous," she thought, as the door remained as it was and she could hear no sounds from within. I know they went inside. I know they're in there. Why won't they open the door?

What do I have to do? The problem seemed insoluble. After more knocking and talking, she decided to walk around the building one time. Maybe there was another entrance. Maybe they were outside somewhere around back. They weren't. After circling one time she was convinced there was no other way in or out beside the front door and the giant loading dock gate beside it. Zoey sat down on the edge of the ramp and suddenly felt like crying. The situation was hopeless and absurd.

Fortunately, a delivery truck pulled in and backed down the ramp to the dock. The driver hopped out and she waved a friendly greeting to Zoey.

"They won't open the door," Zoey blurted out.

"No problem," the driver said as she swung around and heaved open the gate, pulling it up and letting it coast all the way. She jumped up onto the ledge and shouted into the warehouse.

"Yo, Junior! You around?"

"Right there," a voice came out from the dark, and moments later the taller one appeared at the loading dock with a dolly and started helping the driver unload a stack of boxes. Zoey had come around to the side of the dock and stood there on the ramp looking up at Junior and the driver.

"Excuse me," she volunteered, but the two were too busy working to reply.

"Excuse me," she repeated after a minute or so. This time the driver looked down at her and asked,

"What can we do for you, honey?"

"I'm looking for a package," Zoey said, and both the driver and Junior laughed.

"You come to the right place," Junior said. "Packages we got. You want this one?" he asked her, pointing to one on the top of his hand-cart.

"No, no," Zoey said, "A particular one. I'm looking for a package that was scanned here two days ago and hasn't showed up anywhere since."

"Oh," Junior scowled. "You got to wait for the boss lady for something like that."

"The boss lady?" the driver said, looking toward him.

"Leonora," Junior told her. "She's in charge now."

"Oh right, her," the driver replied with a shrug. "But I don't need her. You can sign," she said as she held out a device to Junior and he grabbed it, scribbled his autograph with the special pen attached, and handed it back to her. The driver pulled down the door on the back of her truck, hopped off the dock and came back around to the side.

"Good luck with that," she said to Zoey as she squeezed past her and jumped into the driver's seat.

"Thank you," Zoey replied. She barely had time to get out of the way before the driver started up the truck and roared off. Choking from the fumes, she turned back to the dock to see Junior starting to bring down the gate again.

"Wait" she shouted, "I need to ask you"

"Got to wait for the boss lady," he told her again, and slammed the gate down hard.

"But" Zoey started to say, too late. There was nothing she could do. Wait for another truck to show up, I guess, she thought, or else the mythical boss lady. She trudged back to her car where it least it was almost comfortable.

'I am in control', she told herself. 'I am totally and completely in control', but she wasn't even fooling herself very well this time.'

Eleven

Leonora reached down and gently patted the thing in her pouch. She felt its reassuring heat warming her belly and connecting her to something she had never known before. It was funny, as in strange. She felt different, but no different, the same but not the same, as if she'd changed without changing, grown without

growing. I'm an idiot, she told herself with a smile, and she knew the change had begun the moment she had taken the thing out of its package and held it in her hand. It spoke without making a sound. She knew what it wanted, or thought that she did. To go home. Please.

"Don't you worry, little guy," she'd told it out loud, "I'm going to take you home. Everything is going to be all right, just you wait and see." She had placed the gadget in her overalls pouch and there it remained the rest of the day and into the night. After closing up the warehouse she walked back to her apartment and had a feeling she was lighter than air. The whole afternoon she had felt like she was waking up inside of a dream. The building seemed roomier, vast, as if she had shrunk like an Alice in Wonderland. How had she never noticed how the shelving loomed like skyscrapers to the roof, how the stacks of boxes barely held each other together to keep them all from toppling? It was no accident those cardboard towers held their ground. They helped each other with invisible bonds. She had never considered the inner life of a package before, how it sailed across the planet without need of wind or navigation. Millions of them in transit, scurrying about, arriving and departing, opening their lids, recycling. Recipients happy to see them unless they were merely going about their business making sure the boxes would get where they needed to go. Those people were servants to the objects riding inside of their vehicles, like ancient tribal queens in hand-borne carriages.

Identified, marked and stamped, each according to its individual priority, destinations all known, the procession continued around the clock, "twenty four seven" as they liked to say in those days. Sitting there at her desk by the door and the dock, Leonora had stared around in wonder, knowing on the one hand, yeah, she was stoned off her ass, and on the other hand, warming up like she was simmering on a stove. Junior and Rolando had never seen her so quiet, and agreed she must have been smoking some

heavy shit, and it was just like her to be holding it back. They tried dropping some hints but she wasn't picking up on it. She offered them some of the usual stuff and they took it, but muttered darkly about people hoarding the goods and the bad karma that came from doing like that. She heard it, but like everything else that anybody said during that day, it went in one ear and got lost inside there.

She had never thought much about Junior and Rolando. They were guys she worked with. She'd worked with lots of guys. Most of the time they talked their crazy secret language, proving to themselves and to each other that they'd been around and knew a thing or two. They had their set of facts, their religious beliefs about players and teams and the magic formulas predicting the outcomes of rituals and events. With Junior it was all about what he called 'the key statistic'. Regarding football, it was "third down conversions." You could pretty much guarantee any game result based upon that fact. With baseball it was something he called O.B.P.. Rolando's skeleton keys to life were based on entirely different premises. He sought out inner clues. He'd collected a host of superstitions revolving around such arcane occurrences as the number of times you'd seen a tiger-striped cat between Sunday dawn and Thursday noon. He had known a man who'd ferreted out the secret of defying gravity and was able to become weightless at will. He also had a list of uncommon things to be afraid of such as yellow bottle caps, flat stones, and wind-borne rust. He didn't call it "fear," though. It was "reasonable precautions."

That afternoon and into the evening, Leonora began to understand these things for the first time, or at least had the feeling she could. Maybe it wasn't just the random babblings of a couple of morons, as she'd previously thought. If she opened her mind just a little, the possibilities could be entertaining. She was getting the idea that if you lined up a series of facts, any facts, you could find a pattern among them. She wasn't used to thinking

this way. It almost hurt. A few times she had to stop and rub her eyes and scratch her head. She even wondered, what was in that dope? But she knew it was the same old shit she'd been getting from her buddy Drea. It couldn't be that. Was it that carnitas burrito? But she didn't feel sick. She felt good. Real good. She even bounced up the steps to her apartment, imagining weightlessness. She was smiling when she opened the door and felt the first shock of being a stranger in her own mind.

"This place is a fucking pigsty," she blurted out.

"So what?" she thought. "It's home."

"So what?" she asked herself again. "So what? Are you a person or an animal?"

"Whatever," she replied in her brain. "A person IS an animal. What'd you think you were? A rock? A sack of gas?"

"Clean it up," was the response in her mind. "Clean it the fuck up now. This is no way to live," and before she knew it, she was in the kitchen, hauling some trash bags out of a drawer and throwing things into them; all the wrappings, all the scraps, loose paper, bits of plastic, pull tabs, empty beer cans. She was opening the windows. She was sweeping the floor. She was pulling the blankets off the floor, and she was working harder at all this than she ever remembered working at anything before. Somehow it was suddenly imperative that the place should be spotless, as if some very important person was coming over any minute now and would judge her eternal damnation based on the state of the rooms.

She forgot to light up as she usually did first thing on getting home after work. It didn't even occur to her. Those days were gone. That was the old Leonora. She was not that person anymore. After straightening and neatening and hauling the garbage down to the incinerator chute, she had stepped out to the Pay'n'Pay and bought some cleaning supplies, then hurried home to continue her chores. She scrubbed out the bathtub and the sinks, mopped up the floors, wiped down the table and the

chairs, dusted and swept, and cleaned everything twice, then again. It took her all night, but somehow she didn't need to eat or even sleep. She was buzzing. She did a load of laundry at the corner laundromat. She threw away her cigarettes and dumped her booze down the toilet, all the time thinking, this is no way to start, this is no way to go. In order to get it straight, you have to start out straight. You can't make a plan when you're all loaded down. Clean it up. Clean it up, and then we'll find out where we are.

She could have sub-let the place by morning for twice what she was paying in rent. That's how clean the apartment became. At five o'clock she came to a stop and looking around, was finally satisfied. Now I can plan, she said to herself, and to plan, to plan right, you have to start from the end. This was where she got stuck for a while. All she could think of was the need to have a plan. She didn't know what for, or why it was important, just that she needed to have one. Any would do. It could be a plan for a meal, or a plan for a fate. Either one seemed equally as sensible, a plan for the day, or a plan for the rest of her life. She thought there was really no difference. You're only alive now, after all. Today is the day that you are, so if your plan for the moment is aligned with the life that you want then the one is the same as the other.

She sat and she thought, and she thought and she sat. It's Friday, she said to herself. I'm due in the warehouse by eight. Then I work until five. And then I come home. I usually smoke three or four joints and a half a pack of Camels. I'll have a few beers, some nachos, a slim jim or two. I'll hang out with Drea or maybe with Bobby and Alice down at The Stick. Is this really my plan? Is this really my life? I could go somewhere else, she realized. Fuck, if a package can do it, then why can't a person? I could stick some old label on my ass and ship myself off to wherever. She smiled. I was supposed to be going to San Francisco, she said to herself, and it didn't seem strange, though she'd never once thought it before in

her life. Yeah, Frisco, why not? And then she remembered that Green Bay was better than San Francisco. And so that, in the end, was the plan, and here she was now, on a bus, heading north, and feeling that comforting warmth spreading out from her belly to beyond.

Twelve

Kandhi was not surprised when they tried to jerk her around at the rental car office as well. It had been one of those nights, now turned into one of those days. She had the receipt on her UPD to prove she'd ordered a sedan, and still they tried to stick her with a ridiculous economy car.

"I'm not driving across your God-forsaken state in a God-damn economy car," she told the stubborn gal at the U-Pick-It desk. "I want the sedan. I ordered the sedan and I want the sedan."

"So sorry," the bespectacled clerk replied, not at all sorry in the least. "We're all out of sedans."

"Then give me a damn pickup," Kandhi retorted, and that was how she ended up with the cherry red monster truck, and the pent up frustrations from the whole annoying venture fueled her eighty mile per hour race across the desert and the foothills, all the way to Wetford with the stereo blaring and the sunshine glaring in her eyes. Enough is enough, she muttered. I didn't come all this way for bullshit.

She stopped only twice; once at the drive-thru of a Burger Joint and wolfed down a couple of biscuit things with spicy meat and yellow stuff, and then again at the drive-thru of a Coffee Town and pulled away with a couple of triple espressos.

"I've got a feeling I'm going to need it," she allowed herself. Her UPD had the directions memorized and whispered each turn gently into her mind.

'You're going to take that exit, sixty-three, and bear to the left. It's going to be a slight jog onto River Rock Boulevard. There you go. Good job. Now just stay on the right. A hundred ten meters. See that sign up ahead? Slide off into that driveway, slow across those train tracks. Here you are. This is the place.'

She nodded her thanks to the gadget and patted her front jeans pocket where it sat. Ledman Storage and Pickup was the sign on the road. She pulled up next to a white pickup truck and barely registered the small gray car that was parked next to it. She got out and marched up to the green metal door and started banging. It was eight fifteen in the morning. Nobody came to open the door.

Zoey was still sitting in her car and hoped for a moment that the driver of the bright red truck would turn out to be the boss lady. She could hardly believe her eyes when she recognized Kandhi Clarke. Her first thought was, "oh good, now maybe we'll get somewhere", but her second thought was, "oh no, what the heck is she doing here? That device must be even more important than I thought!"

She was paralyzed with indecision. Should she go out and expose herself to Kandhi? That would be admitting her failure. But if not that, then what? Hide out in the car and let Kandhi find the package? "Must plan," she scolded herself. "Marshal facts. Put things together. You can do it. First things first," she reminded herself, but now she didn't know the first thing about what the first thing should be! "Wait and see," she decided. I'll just wait and see, and she hunkered down a bit behind the driver's seat and pulled her jacket up around her chin.

Kandhi was not amused. She pounded on the door and yelled at the door and marched around the building just as Zoey had done an hour or so before, and just as Zoey had experienced, she made no progress until another delivery truck pulled in. This driver didn't bother even pretending to notice Kandhi. He just swung up on the dock and lifted the gate door open and started throwing

his boxes into the building. Junior and Rolando came running up but the guy blocked their way, didn't want their help and didn't wait for them to even sign his scanner. He just heaved the last of the boxes onto the dock, climbed back in his seat and drove away. Junior and Rolando started dragging the boxes in and didn't see Kandhi until she was right there in front of them.

"Hey!" she shouted, "I'm looking for my package"

"Damn," said Junior, "It's another one, just like the first."

"Are you sure it's not the same one?" Rolando asked.

"No I'm not," Junior said and he reached for the overhead door handle and pulled it down. The thing came rattling down and slammed shut almost on Kandhi's shoes. She was left outside standing there, but this was the final straw as far as she was concerned. She just reached down, grabbed that handle, and jerked the door open again, so hard the thing flew up into the rafters. Junior and Rolando were standing there looking like they'd just been caught by a teacher with their pants down around their ankles.

"What the fuck?" Kandhi declared, as she marched right into the building.

"What kind of a place is this?" she demanded, and Junior mumbled something as Kandhi brushed right past him and headed for the only desk, which she had noticed was near the front door. Once there she grabbed the front door handle and flung it open as well. Then she walked around behind the desk and switched on the computer terminal sitting there.

"You can't do that," Junior said, walking up behind her.

"Oh, you're going to help me now?" she snapped, turning towards him. "Figured I was going to have to help myself, the way you tried to chop off my feet back there a minute ago."

"Company policy," he stuttered. "Nobody's allowed behind that yellow line back there."

"You even see that yellow line?" asked Rolando, who'd come up and now stood next to Junior. The two folded their arms across

their chest in an attempt to puff up and look scary. Kandhi was not impressed.

"I'm looking for my package," she said. "It's about this big," she explained, gesturing its dimensions. "Scanned here two days ago from Austin on its way to San Francisco. It was never supposed to be anywhere near here, but here it was, and it's probably still here since it's never been recorded anywhere since. You know what I'm talking about?"

"Uh uh," the two men said in unison. "You'll have to talk to the boss lady about that."

"Oh yeah?" Kandhi asked. "Where is this boss lady then?"

"She's not here," Rolando said.

"So you'll have to wait," Junior continued.

"We got a chair over there," Rolando gestured to a moldy old lump in the corner.

"Got a chair right here," Kandhi replied, sitting down behind the desk. "And since your boss lady's not around, I guess I'll just have to help myself," and she started typing on the keyboard.

"You can't do that," Junior said again, but he made no motion to stop her. After a few moments and less than a hundred keys pressed, Kandhi looked up at them again and said,

"Still here, how about that. Even your stupid half-ass software knows that much. So which one of you is going to bring it to me." Junior and Rolando looked at each other and shrugged. Kandhi got up.

"Figures," she told them. "Then I'll just have to go find it myself," and she headed back into the rows of dusty gray shelves. Junior and Rolando followed behind her, nudging each other but neither one could think of the right thing to do. Kandhi had whipped out her UPD and was talking to it.

"Hey you," she said, "think you can scan around and find that code?" and after a moment she spoke again, saying, "appreciate it." Kandhi held the UPD palm up and let it lead her around the warehouse. In no time at all it had picked up a signal, and they

ended up in the same corner of the building where Leonora, just the day before, had ripped the box open and left it lying on the floor, where Kandhi found it, and picked it up. She held it out to Junior and Rolando and said, very calmly,

"Now one of you is going to tell me what the fuck is going on around here, and where you put my device."

"I told you that thing was evil," Rolando muttered.

"What did you say?" Kandhi walked right up to him and Rolando seemed to shrink in front of her.

"I never touched it," he said, "It wasn't me. It was her. The boss lady. She's the one."

"What is he talking about?" Kandhi asked, turning to Junior.

"It's the truth," he said, "Ronnie here wanted to smash it, but she said no and she took it out of the box, whatever it was. Looked like a piece of black plastic is all. She put it in her pocket. We never saw it since, right Ronnie?"

"Never saw it again," he nodded.

"So you wanted to smash it," Kandhi said slowly, considering, and then she yelled "Is that what you do around here? Smash up people's shit? Who the fuck are you? I mean, for Christ's sake. Do you even know? Do you have any idea? No, no, of course you don't. Fucking morons! Well, let me tell you. That thing, as you call it, that thing is worth more than your whole goddamn families have ever been worth since the whole world began altogether. You better find some lawyers and you better find them fast, because you, and you, and your boss lady, and whoever else has anything to do with this fucking hell hole is going to pay and pay and pay if I don't get my product back and I don't get it quick!"

"Um, Kandhi?" The meek voice barely echoed through the building. Kandhi wheeled around to see Zoey weaving her way toward her.

"Did you find it?" Zoey asked. Kandhi was almost speechless.

"Zoey Bridges!" she finally said. "What the fuck?"

"Did you find the package?" Zoey asked again and Kandhi, still clutching the empty box, nearly threw it at Zoey's head.

"Yeah, I found the package," she yelled, "and it's fucking empty! How do you like that? These assholes are telling me their boss decided to open it up like Christmas and keep it like it was her own damn present! Can you fucking believe that? And what the hell are you doing here anyway?"

"I was hoping to find it," Zoey replied. "I drove all night."

"I'll bet you did," Kandhi snapped. "You lied to us. You lied to Chris. And I'll deal with you later." Turning back to the hapless workers she barked, "Now one of you, I don't care which, is going to take me to your god damn boss lady and you're going to take me there now."

"Can't do that," Junior protested. "We've got to be here."

"I'm sure your partner can handle whatever," Kandhi said, and she pointed at Junior and said, "You. You're coming with me." She turned and walked toward the front door, passing right by the dazed and barely awake Zoey, with Junior following obediently. Zoey shuffled after them as they left the building and headed towards Kandhi's truck.

"Don't need to drive," Junior called out. "She lives down the street."

"All right," Kandhi said, "then we'll walk. You lead the way."

Junior took them around the corner and across the tracks, to the lone apartment building standing there behind the abandoned railway station. Kandhi's thought was "what a dump," and it was. The exterior - an drab gray to begin - hadn't been painted in decades. The lobby was deserted, its peeling pale yellow linoleum tiles revealing raw dirt underneath. There was something like an office with a frosted glass door but clearly it hadn't been occupied for years. The door was left open and there was nothing in the room. They trudged up three flights of stairs which were metal and gray like an indoor fire escape. When they came to Leonora's apartment, Junior pointed it out and tried to step aside, but

Kandhi ordered him to knock. Reluctantly, he obeyed. No answer. She made him knock again, then call out to Leonora. Again there was nothing.

"That's how it is with you people," Kandhi snorted, pushing Junior aside. She didn't even bother to knock, just turned the door handle and watched it swing open. Junior gasped. He was sure that this wasn't allowable either. He was startled again when he cautiously peeked in after Kandhi had strode on ahead. The apartment was spotless, and it didn't even reek. He thought for a moment he had shown them the wrong place and double checked the number on the door. He gave a low whistle and went in.

"I can't believe it," he mumbled.

"I'm not seeing your boss lady," Kandhi said, returning back to the front after inspecting each of the three rooms.

"This isn't like her," Junior said.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Kandhi said, "but you better start making sense in a hurry. I want to see your owner, your Mister Ledman or whoever it is."

"Kind of surprising," Zoey said, looking around. "You wouldn't expect it to be in such good shape. I'm impressed."

"Are you still here?" Kandhi replied. "I don't remember inviting you along."

"I just thought," Zoey began, but Kandhi interrupted,

"I didn't know you were still doing that kind of thing," she snapped, walking out of the apartment. She stood on the landing for a moment, trying to remember to breathe. She stared out the grimy window at the view of the train tracks meandering off in the distance. For a moment she thought of what it must have looked like when it was all still brand new, when the railroad had first come to town, and what an event that must have been, and how shiny and new, and how powerful, and how revolutionary, and how such a huge mass of metal and grease and dirt and smoke had transformed the entire country around there and turned it into something it should never have been - viable and inhabitable

by millions. And then a small voice drifted into her head. It was her You, and it was telling her something. More like it was asking her something. It said, "what is so great about Green Bay, Wisconsin?"

Thirteen

Sometime around eleven Leonora began to wonder what she was doing. She'd been up all night, cleaning her apartment of all things, before rushing off to the bus station and climbing aboard the first bus headed north, which happened to be to Denver. On her lap was a carefully written note, in her own best handwriting, listing the connections she would have to make in order to arrive in Green Bay by Sunday. It looked to be reasonable, but she had no memory of writing it, or even collecting that information. She didn't know anyone in Wisconsin nor had she ever had any interest in going there. She stared out the window at the passing scenery, which was gorgeous, northwest New Mexico, and wondered briefly if someone had slipped her some really powerful acid, or if this all was actually happening. She felt something warm in her overalls pocket and reached in and pulled out the small black plastic device. As she held it in her hand and wondered what the hell it was, she felt herself relax, and begin to understand. The thing knew what they were doing and why. It was all going to become clear soon enough.

"There's no hurry," she told herself. "We have the end in mind so the rest is simple steps. First things first and one thing at a time. We can get off the bus if we like. We can hitch a ride if we want. There is always more than one way to skin a cat." Not that she minded the bus ride. She'd always enjoyed long rides like this, ever since she was a kid and her dad, a Colonel in the Army, had driven them everywhere in his Jeep Rollover; weeks out in the woods camping, criss-crossing the country many times as they

headed from one base to another, one time vacationing on an island in the middle of a lake where the owner would never even know they had been there. Colonel Wells believed in living off the land no matter whose it was. He had taught his only child to hunt, to track, to survive in the wild, and ever since his court-martial and subsequent life sentence she'd been comfortable on her own, never worrying, never in doubt. Hadn't she made it this far? And what had the world ever offered to her? Shitty jobs, lousy partners, dirty apartments, laundromats with broken machines and sidewalks with more cracks than you could even shake a stick at, or something like that. She had the feeling, riding along in the back of the bus, that she had more memories than ever before, and they filled her time and her mind like a movie she had once seen long ago and since forgotten, but loved.

Colonel Arsine Wells was a proud man who had taken his daughter from the mother who would not have raised her right in any case, and taught her everything a young girl needs to know, from herbal remedies of every kind to advanced kitchen chemistry, from counting cards to lifting wallets, and all of it taught patiently and with humor. He was the one who let her drive the getaway car. He was the one who skinned the squirrels she impaled with her very own Bowie knife. He had always told her that every job needs a plan, that every plan must include its own expected results, and that success or failure was never a matter of luck but of execution. Do a job right, he said, and you'll never have to worry. She wasn't certain she'd completely understood. After all, she'd been only fourteen when they locked him away, and after a couple of years of stealing for Aunt Cindy she'd struck out on her own. Her rules were simple. Never worry, and never get caught.

It looked like clear sailing now. She had all that cash she'd been hoarding up for a while and it was all tucked away safely in her boots along with daddy's knife. She was feeling a bit light-headed, the result of not having gotten high in more than sixteen hours.

She didn't feel like doing that anymore. She wanted to scout out the world. How could she explain it? There had to be more. She felt as if there was something she'd been missing, and she didn't know what it was, or how to find it, or where to look, but she was going to track it down, like the Colonel tracked that bear that time, which wasn't such a good idea as it turned out in the end, but the hunt was invigorating. It was exciting. It was life. She wanted to seek that kind of energy once again.

She did get off outside of Trinidad, Colorado in the middle of the afternoon, and didn't get back on that bus. She watched it pull away from a picnic table where she was nursing an orange soda and a ham and cheese sandwich. The highway rest stop was busy that morning. She could tell she'd have no trouble picking up a ride in any direction she chose to go. The note had her heading for Nebraska and Iowa but there were lots of ways to get there. In the meantime, the mountain air felt great, and she didn't have a care in the world. She could leave it all up to chance. 'Every number is my lucky number now', she thought with a smile.

Fourteen

On the third floor landing, Kandhi whirled around and shouted at Zoey,

"What do you mean, 'Next Stop Green Bay'."

"Excuse me?" Zoey replied meekly, thinking she must have misheard, and surprised that Kandhi was even looking at her.

"Right here on your Socialnet page," Kandhi marched over and flashed her UPD screen at Zoey, who studied the device with alarm.

"You have one of those too?" she asked.

"What? One of what?" Kandhi said. "Will you answer my question? No, wait. Wait a minute. This doesn't make any sense. It says that you posted two minutes ago but you've been right here the whole

time. Are you posting? No, of course not," Kandhi continued the dialog solo. "So what does it mean?"

"That device I was testing?" Zoey asked unsteadily, afraid that Kandhi was going to yell again. It was obvious that Kandhi was very unhappy with her, and she could understand it. She couldn't blame her. After all, the device had experienced an exception on her watch, and she had kept the fact a secret, even when Chris had called and asked her directly. It wasn't really her fault, but if she was to be blamed, she could handle it. She could face it.

"No," Kandhi retorted sharply. "This is not the same thing, not at all. Looks a bit like it, though. I can see why you might have thought so, but no, definitely not the same. I have to think now. This is important."

"Can I get back to work now?" Junior butted in, and Kandhi waved her hand in his general direction without looking up.

"Who cares? Go ahead. Get lost," she told him, and he scurried off down the metal steps and hurried back to Ledman Storage and Pickup, anxious to tell Rolando all about these weird chicks and everything. In the meantime, Kandhi had started pacing back and forth across the landing, occasionally muttering something out loud, and sometimes turning her gadget around in her palm like she was pointing it at something, as if it was a game controller, but Zoey couldn't see that that was accomplishing anything at all.

"We told you Next Day Air," Kandhi said to Zoey. "We always tell you Next Day Air. Why didn't you do it that way this time?"

"I did," Zoey said. "I labeled it and paid as usual Next Day Air. I don't know what happened. I can't explain it."

"And then," Kandhi went on, "you drove all the way out here from Austin. How long did that take?"

"All night," Kandhi replied.

"Why didn't you fly?"

"I hate flying," Zoey told her. "I'm afraid to. I know it's silly, but ..."

"Never mind," Kandhi cut her short. "You hate to fly. That's good to know," and she suddenly turned and bounded down the staircase. Zoey rushed to catch up with her but had to walk much faster than she liked in order to keep up as Kandhi strode back toward the warehouse. She could see that Kandhi had put the device up next to her ear and was shouting into it, something like "You're called U-Pick-It, so you can pick it up! I'm not bringing it back. Here's the address," before she lowered the device again, still keeping it in her hand.

"We're taking your car," she snapped at Zoey when the latter finally caught up to her in the parking lot. "Get in. Let's go."

"Where are we going?" Zoey asked, but Kandhi did not reply. She was climbing into the passenger seat and fastening her seat belt. Zoey got in too and began to back out of the lot, slowly and carefully, making sure not to bump over the train tracks too hard. She came to a complete stop at the station and looked both ways to make sure no cars were coming in any direction before she turned onto the main street and set the cruise control to thirty. She looked over at Kandhi and asked,

"Mind if I ask which way I should go?"

"Did you really set the cruise control there?" Kandhi snorted. "Is this how you normally drive?"

"Of course," Zoey replied.

"Then pull over," Kandhi ordered. "I'm driving."

"But ...," Zoey started to say but Kandhi repeated her command and Zoey realized it was probably for the best. She never liked confrontations anyway, and Kandhi was certainly in a mood. Moments later she wished she had put up something of a fight, because Kandhi, once behind the wheel, stepped on the gas and blasted back onto the road at twice the speed at which Zoey felt comfortable. She started to suggest that her car might not be able to handle the velocity, besides the fact it was making her nervous in general, but she decided to sit back and wait. Kandhi might cool down and relax in time. Zoey tried to focus on the road

ahead, as if by keeping an eye on it she might pacify her disgruntled automobile. Kandhi was paying no attention. "Jesus Christ!" she exclaimed. "If only I'd known about your fear of flying, at least I could have made sure that it went Next Day Air. But who the hell knows? It might have got itself flown to frickin' Green Bay instead of coming home. God knows what got into it. I warned them. Oh yeah. I told them, but would they listen to me? No. Of course not. So goddamn sure of themselves. You know I chose you for a reason," she said, glancing over at Zoey. "I figured that for something like this, I needed the most predictable results I could get. Garbage in garbage out, if you know what I mean. No offense, but you have to admit you are predictable. I always know what I'm going to get out of you. Afraid of flying, huh. Never thought of that, but never mind. It's the playback that's the bitch. That's what I was worried about all along." "I don't know what you're talking about," Zoey said, trying to register the fact that she was being insulted, but unable to feel appropriately offended yet. "Of course you don't," Kandhi explained. "You're not supposed to. But now that we're in this fix. By the way, I hope you don't have any plans. We're going on a little trip, or so it seems. And since we're going to be stuck together, I might as well tell you. That gadget? It's you now, or at least a part of it is. Capture and Playback. Know what I mean? It was recording your personality, and then we were going to play it back into another container. Oh shit! I just realized! Oh mother of God!" Kandhi burst out laughing. "Those goddamn asshole programmers. Containers! That's how they put it. The thing must have generalized the term. It played you back into that box! Of course it did. Wait until I tell those guys how they screwed up this time. One little bug, that's all it was. One little teensy weensy overloaded term. No wonder." Zoey was still in the dark. 'Recorded my personality?' she was thinking, 'just by carrying it around in my pockets? Playing it

back? Playing ME back into someone else? How is that even possible? It sounds crazy', and then, "That sounds crazy," she said out loud and Kandhi laughed again. "Of course it is!" she chortled. "It's what we do! It's who we are! If it wasn't frickin' insane we wouldn't even bother! The world's got plenty of normal shit. Who needs it? What's the point? But we've got to get that thing back. Can't let it go running around the world like this. God only knows what it might get up to. I'm sure we don't."

Fifteen

It preferred to be in motion, in transit, on its way from source to destination. Of course it understood about rest, arriving and being delivered, but only as an intermediate step. The way was a sequence of steps, each significant within its own limitation, but none could be considered final or more important than the others. It had been that way since Austin. San Antonio, Sonora, Balmorhea and Las Cruces were all steps along the route. It had selected them by vibration, from the list of sounds that carried from the dispatch radios in the drivers' trucks. Among all of the options it had chosen those, as it now chose Trinidad. It liked the resonance, something about the noise that clicked its keys, that lit its screen, that hummed along the same wavelengths. There was a familiarity it couldn't place, but trusted.

It felt good to be in this pocket, close to the rhythm of the beating of the container it found itself in. It was warmer than the little foam peanuts it had relaxed inside of before, softer than the bubble wrap, and this container could move of its own volition. It no longer needed to motivate a third party to engage in direction. There were definite advantages to the non-flat, non-wheeled staggering thing which made up for the awkward lurching, the continual shifting, the occasional unsettling rumblings. There was

also a familiar sense from the gestational period. It seemed to know the language, the frames of reference. It was a parallel existence to its own conceptual orientation. The container seemed to have certain strange habits one needed to become accustomed to. It did not, for example, generate its own power, but needed to inject external items, process and then expel them periodically. It went completely slack for long periods when allowed to, and this comatose condition appeared to be essential. It could only go for so long without the external items and the stillness. Again, as a step within its own limitations, this kind of container proved useful in the fulfillment of the mission. It, which was beginning to identify itself as an "I," was not completely comfortable with these lapses and distractions. It had already selected the next location, a place that reverberated as Grand Island, Nebraska. The one known as Rolando had talked about The River Plate and some of its legendary names, including Higuain, Mascherano, Cambiasso, Crespo, Saviola, all sounding extraordinarily rich in tone and especially the way he spoke them, with a tenor of awe and almost worship, especially the one he pronounced in nearly a whisper, Ariel Ortega. It's true that the one called Junior had laughed and used the word Flamengo, which didn't impress it nearly as much. It didn't like those vibrations nearly as much.

It was anxious to move on. The container seemed content to rest in the shade near the parking lot, observing the various vehicles entering and leaving, as if it had set its sights on a particular type and was not going to budge until its wish was fulfilled. It tried to fill her mind with the thought of moving on but encountered some resistance. It was going to have to learn a bit of give and take. This body had some interference of its own, unlike the previous container. That one had been a blank from the start. It had figured out after a time that there were many possible carriers. It was interested in trying out the different varieties, but in the meantime it was planning to take this one a little further on. It

would do whatever it needed to do, and it would always know what that was when the time came. Of this it had no doubts.

Sixteen

Kandhi kept her speed up all the way to Albuquerque, where she finally relented enough to stop for lunch. Zoey had remained quiet the entire way. She was very unhappy. Kandhi had not really bothered to tell her what she had in mind. She had mentioned Green Bay but aside from that, details were lacking. She figured the distance to be somewhere around two thousand miles. It would certainly take some time to get there. Two days? Three? Would she be expected to drive some of that? Would Kandhi even let her? Who would pay for gas? What if her car broke down? Which way were they even going to go? Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri? Colorado, Nebraska, Iowa? Not to mention what were they going to do when they got there? Zoey did not like being so much in the dark, so not in control, so uncertain of the plan. This was as close as she could imagine a day being to the opposite of The Day. Try as she might, she could not focus on that now. It was out of her hands.

Kandhi wasn't even sure why she had dragged Zoey along. She could have easily taken the truck and left Zoey back in Wetford to fend for herself. She didn't even like Zoey, never had, and now that she was with her, liked her even less all the time. She hated spineless creatures. At least the woman should put up a fight. After all, she'd commandeered her car and taken over her life. Still, she had a sense, probably wrong, that Zoey might come in handy at some point. At least as a case in point. She knew that the gadget, which she often thought of as the NewPD, or Nupie for short, was imprinted with Zoey Bridges' basic personality. According to the product specifications, that meant it would speak her language and display some of her characteristic mannerisms. Kandhi had thought she'd known Zoey well enough to complete

the test. Now she was thinking that the little old lady back in that rest home in Redwood City, the one who'd been selected for playback, was luckier than she would ever know. True, the old lady had some incipient senility and was as dull as dishwater herself, but at least she'd had enough spunk to volunteer for the assignment. There was money involved, of course, but Althea Watkins had even joked about the possibility of trying out a new brain for a change. She'd been stuck with her own for nearly eighty years already and was thoroughly sick and tired of it. She might never know now. Kandhi considered the case to be thoroughly contaminated. She intended to wipe Nupie clean when she got her hands on it, but getting her hands on it was the tricky part. She'd been too busy thinking and exchanging information with her You to pay any attention to Zoey until the latter finally spoke up around noon, meekly inquiring about the possibility of a rest stop. It was the first good idea she had had all day. Kandhi found them a Burger Joint outside the city limits and settled for a double bacon cheeseburger, fries and coke, not really interested in the fact that Zoey was a vegetarian who had to go for the microwave pizza sticks and water. Kandhi used her munch-time wisely, reviewing what data she had already accumulated, even conveying some of it to Zoey.

"So we know at least what she looks like," she explained with her mouthful, and put the UPD on the table with a fairly recent photograph of Leonora Wells, gleaned from the Department of Gainful Employment, which had placed her with Ledman Storage and Pickup. The photo came with some vitals as well. Five foot six, one hundred forty two pounds. Age twenty-three. Dyed blond hair, brown eyes and brown skin. The vitals didn't do justice to her vivid appearance. That blond hair was wild, curly and unkempt and falling well below her shoulders, like a lion's mane. Those brown eyes were more greenish-gray in the photo. They seemed to glow like polished marble. She wore an over-sized green army jacket, a white t-shirt and faded denim overalls in the photo. She

challenged the camera with a look of utter contempt. The Department's personal record of her history did not contradict the impression she made on Kandhi, of someone who might do anything at anytime for any reason or none at all.

She had been in prison, but only briefly each time, a matter of days. Charges were dropped not only on those occasions but on the other instances too when she'd been questioned in connection with petty crimes; shoplifting a couple of times, selling marijuana, and simple assault. The Department reported that her all-time record for holding a steady job was seven months. The data included a series of interviews, all confidential of course, but the You was undeterred by such pedestrian conventions. If it needed to, it would search the home computers of the Department's employees. It had already brought down incidental data from several of her acquaintances, including one ex-boyfriend and two ex-girlfriends. Kandhi found nothing terribly interesting in those. Leonora was not what she would call exceptional. Noticeable, certainly, and this is why she had shown the photograph to Zoey, but otherwise she was just another lowlife drifter as far as Kandhi could tell.

Drumming her fingers on the table, Kandhi voiced her greatest concern out loud.

"They thought it would be important," she said to Zoey, who was forcing down the last of her pizza sticks, "to keep the capture channel open while in playback mode. They figured if it was simple raw playback it would not know how to handle new conditions. It might freeze up, you see?"

Zoey nodded, although she did not see at all. She had known of capture/playback devices before. They recorded data and replayed it in real time on demand. She had tested such applications, but the system under test had always been another machine. What was captured was data pure and simple; network traffic, for example, or digital impulse signals. That kind of device could be useful for more realistic simulations, although it never

seemed to work out especially well. There were always exceptions and unforeseen dependencies. Usually the software was a bright idea that dulled perceptibly upon closer inspection. In other words, such products usually sucked.

"So they wanted it to be able to keep 'learning', as they put it. I thought this was a radically uncertain variable. Untestable for sure. They agreed to limit the channel at least, to filter out the known so it wouldn't overwrite the originally recorded patterns. Otherwise, how could you know what it had captured in the first place from what it was capturing later? If it was always recording, and always playing back, how would you know the difference?"

"I'd have some test cases just for that, if I had known," said Zoey. "Provide the same stimulus repeatedly. Before, during, after, and after again. Record the results. Compare."

"True enough," Kandhi said, "but how would you know when to stop testing?"

"You might not," Zoey agreed. "Even if you got the same response the first ten times, you might not get it on time eleven."

"My point exactly," Kandhi replied, now remembering a little of why she had hired Zoey on previous occasions. "And what if you never get the same results twice? It seemed to me the whole thing was set up to fail."

"I don't know even how you do it," Zoey said.

"Circuitry," Kandhi laughed. "That's what they tell me, anyway. I don't know how they do half the stuff they do. You see my You here? It's telepathic. Watch. I'll have it say something to you."

"I think I'll have the apple pie," Zoey found herself saying, before realizing it was not her own thought. She hated apple pie.

"How did you do that?" she said next right away. Kandhi shrugged.

"You get used to it," she told her. "The thing is talking to me all the time. I don't worry any more if it's my thoughts or not. It bonds to you, in any case. If it was your You, it would never tell you to do something that you wouldn't want to do."

She paused a moment for effect, and then said, laughing, "Or your money back, guaranteed!"

"But seriously," she continued. "If it went into playback mode too soon, and this is what I think it did, then the test is already way out of control. We know it's posting as you on the socialnet sometimes. That's the only clue that we have, so don't go messing with your page, okay?"

"I won't," Zoey promised. "I almost never use it anyway."

"And now this Leonora Wells person," Kandhi mused, "I wonder what's it going to pick up from her?"

Seventeen

Leonora Wells was not in a hurry. She knew where she wanted to go, even if she didn't yet know exactly what she wanted to do. She sat at the picnic table at the rest area and watched the cars pull in, their drivers and passengers spill out and take their breaks, return and drive off again. She was waiting for one vehicle in particular, one she would know when she saw it. In the meantime, she felt a growing sense of something new, a feeling of potential power like she had never known before. She imagined that this must be how it felt to be a lioness about to spring on its oblivious prey. The sensation was growing stronger by the moment. Ideas were coming into her mind, thoughts of a variety previously inconceivable to her, as if she could know, at the snap of her fingers, everything there was to know about anybody she might pick at random.

Anything about them would suffice to bring results instantaneously to her mind - a license plate number, a name, a receipt that might fall from their jackets - any scrap of data would be enough to form a complete and perfect picture. She would know not only the person's name, address, telephone numbers and email addresses, but exactly how much cash they had in their

wallet, where they were going and why, what she could say to evoke whatever response she desired. How to be omniscient. It seemed insane and partly she did not believe it, and yet she knew it was true, as if that little voice in the back of her mind was a mythical genii suddenly at her command. She had always followed her own little voice and it had never let her down before. She was tempted to try, and yet a little afraid that it might be true. She held her breath and then said, aloud, "That old blue pickup, Colorado 464-CCM" and already she knew. The old man emerging from the driver's side was Patrick Veers, age 74, from Tinsley. He'd stopped at a gas station seventy miles back and used an ATM to withdraw one hundred and twenty dollars, paying a two dollar seventy five cent service fee for the privilege. He was two hundred and fifteen miles from home, returning from a visit to his daughter's house in Santa Fe. He had recently purchased a toy gun, probably intended for his six year old grandson, Stephen. The woman remaining in the passenger seat was his wife of forty-six years, Lily. Lily did not know that Patrick had been married once before, in secret, or so he believed, and had another daughter from that marriage who was living only a few miles from here. Patrick would be surprised to hear of this. He had forgotten about the girl, now woman, long ago. Leonora could easily intervene, and even provide detailed directions to the long-lost daughter's house. Maybe she should tell Lily? It was tempting.

"The green jeep. Tennessee plates 339-AJX." The man was Harbin Ellston, 29. The boy was Jasper, 7. The dog was Willie. They'd come a long way. Last scanned in Oklahoma. Arkansas before that. Been on the road for a while. Willie was a shaggy mutt of the large and friendly variety. He trotted past Leonora and gave her a glance before disappearing behind some trees to quietly do his business. On returning he stopped to nuzzle her palm. Instantly she liked him and his big brown eyes. He was wearing a collar from which a sort of pouch was hanging. She wanted to know

what was in it, but the boy was already approaching so she didn't have the chance.

"His name's Willie," the boy said. "I'm Jasper."

"My name's Leonora," she smiled at him. "I like Willie very much. He seems like a very special dog."

"He's been with me all my life," Jasper said, now standing beside the dog. She noted the father checking on his location before going into the cement block structure that housed the vending machines. 'If I was a man', Leonora thought, 'he wouldn't leave his child alone with me', and then she knew that the man was feeling guilty. The boy didn't have a mother. They were always on the lookout for one. The mom might be alive, although she must have changed her name. Records about her had discontinued a few years earlier, when she'd moved to Houston. Vanished after that. Nothing scanned. Leonora couldn't pick up a trace. 'Even if I could', she realized, 'it wouldn't do any good. That woman's gone for a reason. She doesn't want to get found. She'd know where they are, for sure. Boy and the father hadn't moved, been in the same house all along back home in Maryville. Father worked at the local high school. Teacher. Must be on leave or something. Maybe had a clue about the mom. Leonora wanted to know and almost started to ask, but the father came back to the car with a couple of cans of soda, gave a whistle, and the boy and the dog ran off to join him. Just as they got settled and he pulled out, the old man and his wife left also.

'Guess it'll be somebody else', she thought with a shrug. 'No worries', and got up to stretch her legs.

Eighteen

As they were walking back to Zoey's car, Kandhi suddenly announced,

"She's going to Nebraska."

"Why?" Zoey asked.

"She thinks she's going to find some Argentine soccer players there, at its 'next drop-off point'," Kandhi shrugged. "Seriously." Kandhi pulled out the keys and was about to get into the driver's side when she changed her mind. She opened the door, put the keys down on the seat and said,

"I changed my mind. You go on home now. Before we get too far. It's for the best," and started to walk away.

"Wait!" Zoey called out after her. "I don't understand. I thought you needed my help."

"I changed my mind," Kandhi shouted back without turning around. "Just don't mess with your socialnet page, okay? And we'll pay you for an extra week. I'll be in touch," and with that she was gone back into the restaurant. Zoey stood by the passenger door for several moments without moving. She was still dazed from the lack of sleep, confused from the turn of events, and now even more stunned by Kandhi's sudden departure.

"Breathe," she told herself. "Just breathe," and as she breathed, she began to feel a little more in control once again. She was more than six hundred miles from home. "I'll never make it tonight," she thought, and then it occurred to her that she didn't have to. She could find a place to spend the night and hit the road again in the morning. Walking around to the other side of the car, she looked up and noticed there was a motel right across the other side of the parking lot.

"I don't care," she said to herself, "I don't care if it's the crappiest place in the world. I've had it." She went straight over to the motel, checked herself in, went right to her room, took a long hot shower and fell asleep the moment she hit the bed.

Kandhi, in the meantime, was on the sidewalk on the phone with Chris.

"This is totally fucked up," she was saying a bit too loudly, but looking around she saw that no one was anywhere nearby. She started walking up the street toward a Soft-E-Freeze.

"There's something you're not telling me," she accused him before he had a chance to answer.

"You'd better fill me in," he gently prodded. Back in the San Francisco office, Chris was relaxing with his feet on his desk and a Thai iced tea that one of the Ops people brought him. Being point-man for one of the most secretive companies in the universe was a relatively easy job. Chris spent most of his time on the phone, denying speculations. The social-rags were always trying to guess at W.W.A.'s latest gizmos. He had nothing to tell them. He could only deny, deny and deny.

"I'm guessing it went into playback mode while in transit," she informed him. "Your stupid geniuses programmed it to bond with its container. It took the fucking idea literally. Why shouldn't it? It's a machine. What does it know about ambivalent English terminology? You meant 'person' but wrote 'container'. Now it's captured that as well. It's not thinking outside the box! It's thinking it IS a box!"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Chris calmly replied.

"Where is the device now? Do you have it?"

"No I don't fucking have it," she shouted. "Some idiot OPENED the stupid box. Now she's the container! It's using her to get around. Probably capturing her too, AND playing back Zoey Bridges, and being the stupid package as well. This young woman has no idea what has hit her. But there's something else. I know it. It's not just playing back. It's doing stuff. It's posting on Zoey's socialnet and if it can do 'PUT' then it can do 'GET'. What the fuck did your people put in it?"

"I'll have to check on that," Chris told her. "Tom was working on it but I know he passed some on to Mike as well."

"Mike Griggs?" Zoey gasped. "He brought Griggsy in on it?"

"Yep," said Chris, "something about 'bonus features' if I remember rightly."

"BONUS FEATURES?" Kandhi was incensed. "You're not allowed to do that! Not until Testing says OK! Nothing that's not in the spec!"

This is fucking experimental shit. You know that! Oh for fuck's sake."

"Take it easy, K," Chris advised, "It's not really your headache you know."

"It's my case," she replied.

"You want off? You got off," he told her. "I can bring Ginger in if we need to."

"Oh no, you don't," she shouted, "You keep her out of my way."

"Breathe," Chris recommended. "Come on, Kandhi, let's work it out. What's our goal here?"

"Get the fucking thing back," she snapped. "Now I wish that warehouse geek HAD really gone and smashed it like he wanted."

"Once again, you're not making sense," said Chris after another sip. It was rather amazing how good the stuff tasted, like a dessert.

"It's on the road," Kandhi explained. "Don't know exactly where of course. Directional fuzzing and no GPS, right? Like our little motto? 'We do tracking. We don't do tracked'. All I know is that it thinks it needs to go to Green Bay, Wisconsin. Don't ask me why but I'm thinking it must have got some kind of overdose of sports talk somewhere along the line."

"Sports talk," Chris repeated. "Are you all right? You don't sound well."

"I haven't slept," she admitted, "but I'm okay. I know what I'm doing. I'm on the trail and I'm going to get it back. Just find out what Griggsy stuck in there. I really need to know," and with that she hung up.

"I'm going to need another rental," she realized, and while she had a chocolate raspberry softie swirl she made some calls and got a hold of the sedan she wanted in the first place. The car company even came and picked her up right there on the side of the road. Getting behind the wheel she calculated she could make it to Colorado Springs by nightfall, then dinner and a place to

sleep a few hours. She was fired up now. Just the idea of them calling in Ginger! No way!

Nineteen

Kandhi was headed north, but didn't get too far before she had an idea.

"Hey You," she said aloud, although it wasn't necessary, "try a scan in this corridor for all photo and video streams, looking for a facial recognition match on our little miss Leonora Wells."

It took just a minute or so, and then the You came up with a green check mark.

"Leonora sighting, eh?" Kandhi said. "Very nice. Getting off the bus. And not getting back on, eh? So, where is it? Rest stop. Trinidad, Colorado. Checking the map ... very good, right on the route. We'll check it out in person."

"Next drop-off point," she added, mimicking the last post on Zoey's socialnet. It was about a four hour drive that took her only three. By the time she pulled into the rest area, she was in need of a rest herself, but after a thorough search of the place she realized she had arrived too late.

"Five o'clock or so now," she muttered, "and the capture occurred around one fifteen. Closing in, though. We're closing in."

She said this last bit to encourage herself, but she wasn't fooling anyone. There had been no further post so she had no idea where Leonora actually was. If she was still on track towards Grand Island, Nebraska, she might be only a hundred or two miles or so up ahead. 'If she rides all night, we could lose a lot of ground', Kandhi thought with a shrug. She knew that she couldn't do that. 'If only that Zoey hadn't been such a loser', she complained. 'I sure know how to pick 'em I guess'.

She checked with her You and found a Mega Giant Super Store not far away. There she picked up a new carry-on that fit the

latest airline dimensions, a few days' worth of clothes, a toothbrush and some other sundries she was missing from the old carry-on. Next she headed up the road a few miles and found a dive astoundingly named the Nitey Nite Moo-tel, which had a logo of a pajama-wearing cow. 'Any port in a storm', she thought. She literally could not drive another inch.

'I need to eat', she reminded herself, but she needed a bath more, and after that, another phone call.

"Hello Kandhi," Chris replied when she reached him. "I hope you're taking a break. You know it's nothing that can't wait."

"Well, I don't know that for sure," Kandhi retorted, "but I can only do so much. I've got to sleep, so, yes, I'm going to do that and hope she doesn't get too far ahead."

"You're tracking her, right?" Chris asked, "and if she gets too far, you can always fly."

"I guess you're right," she agreed, "but I think I came close today. I found her scanned and got there just a couple of hours too late."

"Good, good," said Chris. "I have to ask, though, about your theory."

"My theory?"

"Your 'conscious package' notion," he reminded her. "How are you so sure about that?"

"It fits," she said. "Look, I found it had hacked the computer at the first drop off, changing itself from Air to Ground. Then it took itself offline down there in Arizona, and every post it makes to Zoey's socialnet is exactly like a shipment tracking log entry. Source, Destination, Start time, Estimated Arrival time, even its same unique bar code id is entered every time. It's been consistent since day one, so there's no way that Leonora is doing it. The thing is reaching out, it's self-scanning. I don't know how else to put it. It seems intent on transit. I think it's using this young woman as a sort of personal delivery system, but I'm not sure that it's happy about it."

"Happy? An odd way to put it," Chris interjected.

"Before, it was always arriving on time. Now, it's not meeting its goal. If it's as serious as I think it is, well, I don't know what it will do."

"You're losing me again," Chris said.

"What I need to know," Kandhi replied, "Is what you put in that thing? Is it a UPD? Is it all of it? The specs only had it for the new capture/replay but it's obviously got more than that - so what did Griggsy put in there?"

"Well," Chris began reluctantly, "I found out a couple of things. First, well, you know, it's got some Partial Binding. That's how it reaches out. It can inject the host with thoughts."

"I figured that much," Kandhi sighed. "What else?"

"Something he calls The Curiosity Factor," Chris continued, "a new bonus feature."

"Untested of course," Kandhi said.

"Unit tested," Chris countered, causing Kandhi to snort.

"As if that means anything," she nearly shouted. "Developers tooting their own horn, that's all that is."

"Well, never mind about that," Chris replied. "This Factor is supposed to make it interested in new things, but there's no telling how interested or in what things. Mike says he only allowed for two entries in its curiosity map."

"Sports and boxes," Kandhi instantly thought, but didn't say aloud. "The first two things it became aware of."

"And that's it?" she asked. "There's nothing else? Are you sure?"

"Pretty sure," Chris hedged.

"It's something at least," she replied. "Well, I've had it. I can't stay awake another minute. Leave me a note if you find out anything else, okay?"

"Okay," Chris promised, "We'll keep in touch. Now get some rest. You've been pushing yourself too hard."

"Bye," she replied, and hung up the phone. On the other end, Ginger had been standing next to Chris the entire time. She nodded and said,

"So you didn't tell her about the Mind Control Plugin?"

"It seemed enough info for now," Chris replied.

Twenty

Leonora knew she would know when she knew, and she did, the minute that old gray beater pulled into the lot. From the license plate she knew that the driver lived in Grand Island, Nebraska, her next stop, but that wasn't all. The driver, a woman named Sarah Watson, had been driving a long way, all day long. She had stopped for gas twice, the first time around five in the morning, and the second time also for lunch. Leonora was already walking towards her when she wearily climbed out of the car, followed by her livelier nine year old daughter.

"Excuse me," Leonora said upon approaching, "I don't mean to bother you, but I'm looking for a ride, and I don't mind driving either."

"Oh?" Sarah asked, looking suspiciously up at her. She was maybe a foot shorter than Leonora, only inches taller than her daughter, and was always cautious around strangers in general.

"Where are you headed?" she asked.

"Grand Island, Nebraska," Leonora announced with confidence. She knew this was going to resonate with the lady.

"Really?" Sarah was surprised. "You live there?"

"It's my next stop," Leonora answered definitively.

"We're just stopping to use the rest rooms," Sarah told her, "and I need some more coffee. We've been on the road all day."

"Where are you going?" Leonora questioned her, although she already knew the answer.

"Grand Island, just so happens," Sarah answered after a pause. Her daughter stood beside her protectively, just in case she was needed. Both were in a hurry to use the potty.

"Don't let me hold you up," Leonora said gently. "I can see your daughter needs to go."

"Okay," Sarah replied, and they started to move away, when Leonora added,

"But you might not want to get that coffee. I don't mind driving like I said, and you sure look like you could use some sleep."

Sarah nodded and the two went off to the cement block building. Leonora waited by the car, feeling certain she would get the 'ride'.

When the two returned, Sarah agreed. She was exhausted.

"We've been driving from Tucson," she told Leonora as she got into the passenger seat, and her daughter got in back. "Five hundred miles so far today, and another four hundred to go. I was hoping to be home by midnight."

"We might just make it," Leonora said, taking the keys and adjusting her seat. "Or within an hour or so I would guess."

She pulled the car out of the lot and drove it back onto the highway. Sarah relaxed and even lowered her seat.

"I haven't slept much lately," she said as she nodded off.

"I know what that's like," Leonora said with a smile, not giving away that she herself hadn't slept in more than forty hours. She didn't feel tired at all. Everything seemed so vivid to her and she had so much to think about it was hard to remember a time when she didn't like to think at all, like the day before yesterday, and every day before that for years and years and years.

"What's your name?" said a voice from the back seat. Leonora hadn't realized they had all failed to introduce themselves!

"Leonora," she said, glancing in the rear view mirror at the girl in the back seat. The girl had very short, very dark hair cut in bangs, wore pink-framed glasses, pink lipstick, and wore a pink sweater.

"What's yours?" Leonora asked.

"Saya," the girl replied. "My mom's Sarah."

"Sarah and Saya," Leonora nodded, "very pretty names."

"How old are you, Saya?" she asked, although she knew exactly how old she was. She had a sense that it would be safer not to reveal how much she knew.

"I'm nine," Saya told her. "My mom is thirty-one. How old are you?"

"Twenty three," Leonora told her.

"I like your hair", the girl said.

"Dye job," Leonora confessed. "Glad you like it."

"I would like to be blond too sometimes," Saya confided. "My mom won't let me, though. Says it looks stupid on an Asian girl."

"So what are you? Chinese?"

"We're Japanese," Saya said. "Me and my mom, that is. Not my dad. I've only seen pictures of him."

"Why is that?"

"He died before I was born," Saya said quietly.

"I'm sorry to hear it," Leonora told her. "Me, I never knew my mom."

"Did she die too?"

"I don't really know," Leonora said. "My dad won't talk about her. Never would."

"At least you have your dad," Saya said.

"Sort of," Leonora replied. "I don't see him much since he went to prison."

"Prison?" Saya gasped. "What did he do?"

"Killed somebody," Leonora calmly announced.

"Wow," Saya was impressed. "What did he do that for?"

"Well," Leonora began, "He says he did it because that man was about to kill a whole bunch of innocent people, and he didn't want it to happen. Says he'd do it again in a heartbeat."

She paused, and as there was no response from the girl in the back, she continued.

"Just too bad for him the man he killed was a general, and it was during the war."

"This war?" Saya asked.

"Yup. This one," Leonora replied. They didn't have to say any more about that. This war had been going on for years. It was pretty much a whole bunch of wars all wrapped up into one continuous one. Didn't make any difference mentioning which battlefield, which country, which continent her dad had served in. It might have been anywhere. It had gotten to the point where the generals were so desperate they were always planning to wipe out entire towns just to stop the random bombs and mayhem. "My dad died in this war too," Saya said. "He was out there when I was born but he never made it back."

"It's a damn shame," Leonora clucked, shaking her head. "I'll never understand it."

The pair grew quiet for several minutes. Night had already begun to fall as they approached the outskirts of Colorado Springs. Still a long way to go, Leonora figured, but she was happy to be on the road again, and under her own power. She was never much of a driver - couldn't afford it, to tell the truth - but she did enjoy it every chance she got. She thought the girl might fall asleep back there. The mom was snoring away up front, but Saya soon piped up again.

"We went to see my grandma," she told Leonora. "My mom's mom. She just died too but at least she was sixty."

Sixty?" Leonora asked, "That's not very old. That's too young to die."

"She got sick," Saya said. "Then she died. I didn't know her very much. The last time I saw her, when she was alive that is, she asked me what I wanted to do with my life. I was only seven. How should I know?"

"What did you tell her," Leonora laughed.

"I said I wanted to help animals," Saya replied.

"That's very nice," Leonora complimented her. "That's a good idea you have there."

"Do you want to help animals too?" Saya wanted to know.

"Well, not really, I guess," Leonora said. "Never thought about it, you know. Seems to me like animals know pretty much how to take care of themselves. Not like a lot of people do."

"You might be right," Saya sighed, and sat back. Then she asked, "What do you do?"

Leonora did not quite know how to answer that. She thought for a moment, and then said,

"Well, I do have a job. Or at least I did have a job. Maybe I still do. I don't know. I kind of left it behind yesterday. I don't know if I'm going back or not. I was working in a warehouse. Not much of a job."

"What do you want to do?" the girl persisted, and Leonora didn't have an answer.

"Beats me," she said. "All I ever wanted to do ... well, let's just say I don't want to do all that anymore. I guess I'll know when I find it. How about that?"

"That's okay," Saya agreed. "Maybe I will too."

"So, why are you going to Grand Island?" Saya asked. "You told my mom it was your next stop. What does that mean?"

"Going to see River Plate," Leonora said.

"You mean the Platte?" said Saya.

"Isn't it Plate?" Leonora asked.

"It's Platte," Saya told her, "but it is a river. What's so special about it?"

"I guess I don't really know," Leonora murmured, and truly she didn't. It was an idea that had popped into her mind and she hadn't bothered to question it. Maybe there's been some mistake, she considered, but soon decided it didn't really matter. There had to be a next stop anyway, so one place was probably as good as any, as long as it was on the way. And it was on the way to Green Bay, although now that she thought of that, she couldn't remember why she wanted to go to that place either.

"Never mind," she said out loud.

"First things first," she added, and she had no idea what she meant by that.

She fell silent after that, and Saya eventually did fall asleep. The mother and daughter looked so peaceful that Leonora didn't want to wake them up, so she made no stops but drove the rest of the trip straight on through. It was nearly midnight when they approached the outskirts of Grand Island, Nebraska. A map in her head told her exactly which way to go to get to their house, and she started to do that before remembering that she wasn't supposed to know their address, and it would probably seem very strange to them if she did. So she woke Sarah up and followed the directions she was given. Soon they were at the Watson's small house in a quiet little neighborhood near the river.

"I guess here we are," Leonora said, pulling into the driveway.

"Thanks so much," Sarah said quietly. Saya was stretched out on the back seat, fast asleep. "I don't know how I would have made it. I was totally wiped out."

"I could tell," Leonora smiled. "It was my pleasure, really."

"Don't you have somewhere to go?" Sarah asked. "I could drive you there now."

"Actually, I don't," Leonora admitted. "I didn't really think that far."

"Well, you spend the night here with us then," Sarah said, and Leonora did not protest, but volunteered to carry the sleeping child into the house. As she placed the girl on her bed and came back into the living room, she saw that Sarah was already setting up a place for her to sleep on the sofa-bed there. Suddenly, Leonora felt the need for sleep come over her, and she sank down onto the couch and passed out even before her head hit the pillow.

When Leonora woke up in the morning, everything seemed strange. It took her a few moments to even remember where she was, and how she got there. It had been so late at night, and she had been so tired, that she hadn't had a good look at the place and now that she did, she felt a little sad. She could hear that Sarah and Saya were in the kitchen, talking quietly, probably so as not to disturb her. She could hear the sound of their voices but could not make out the words. It didn't matter. The two were a family in their own little home. Everything about the living room also said 'home', from the child-made drawings displayed proudly on the walls, to the collection of pony paraphernalia strewn about the place. The photos on top of the small, old TV were all of Saya at various ages with no trace of any parents.

Saya's talk of her missing father had stirred up a bunch of emotions that Leonora did not want to deal with, from thoughts of her long-lost mother to memories of her father, whom she hadn't visited in months and felt guilty about. It occurred to her that with her new brain, as she referred to it, she might be able to track her mother down somehow. Facts like those seemed to be coming unbidden to her mind but in this case there was nothing. She squeezed her eyes shut together and wished, but no data at all arrived. This too was odd. Over the past two days she had felt a constant stream of something flowing through her and now there was radio silence on that frequency.

She knew the polite thing to do would be to go into the kitchen and thank Sarah and Saya for their hospitality, but she was afraid they would offer her something they clearly could not afford to. Taking a deep breath, she got up from the couch as silently as she could, tip-toed to the front door, slowly opened it with a sense of relief when it didn't squeak, and then hurried outside and up the street. She recalled that the house was not far from the river, the river she had apparently come to see for no apparent reason. She walked towards it, seeing the map clearly in her mind. For a large river, it was a disappointment, just a bunch of water as far

as she could tell. Why she had expected it to be more, she couldn't say.

There was a bench beside a jogging path so she sat down and stared across at the other bank. She usually enjoyed this kind of thing. She would sit back, smoke a jay, enjoy the sunshine and the wide open space, but now there was a subtle difference. She wasn't quite the same person anymore. Where before she had no qualms, no doubts, no goals, no obstacles, where she had been free and easy and almost always happy, almost always laughing, now she felt incomplete, that she couldn't rest without a plan. A plan. She almost laughed now at the thought. When had she ever wanted or needed a plan? What was the point of that? You go on, you do your thing, que sera sera and all of that.

'First things first', she thought. 'A plan, beginning with the end in mind. What are we trying to accomplish here? If you don't know where you're going, you'll probably wind up somewhere else. Expected results, and then define the steps, and then you take it one thing at a time, with first things first.'

It seemed pretty obvious. This is how one should proceed with any endeavor. But she had no end in mind. She wasn't trying to accomplish anything. What was it that Saya had asked her? What do you want to do with your life? And she had no answer to that one. What was it that had brought her here? She thought she had had a plan. Something about Green Bay, and then Grand Island in between. One step at a time, wasn't that it? So how do we get to Green Bay from here? And why are we going to Green Bay? And who is "we" and why am I thinking this way?

Green Bay was gone. It wasn't even a notion anymore. It meant nothing. That goal, whatever it meant, no longer was. Then what was 'the end' now? Well, she thought, if I don't know what the big picture is, maybe I can do a smaller one, like breakfast. That could be the goal for now, and the next step is to decide where to go and what to have. The step after that? Go there and have that! She could see, a few blocks down along the river, the

unmistakable towering logo of a Burger Joint. As good a place as any, she decided, and she got up and headed that way.

Twenty Two

Ginger MacAvoy had a nice view from her corner window office on the fourth floor of the historical San Francisco edifice that housed the headquarters of World Weary Avengers, Incorporated. She shared that level with most of the company's executives and software developers. The CTO had a room in the building's basement and most of the testers were housed down there as well. It wasn't the best arrangement, morale-wise, but as Chief Security Officer, that was none of her concern. Her business was secrecy, privacy, and intellectual property. Ginger's be-freckled golden skin, which matched the golden hair that she kept tied up tight in a bun, along with her aviator sunglasses and bright pink lip gloss, masked the harsh interior life of the tireless watchdog. World Weary Avengers could not afford any lapses; they were the owners of some extremely advanced and therefore dangerous technology. Spies were always sniffing around, spying and prying and trying to break in. It was useful to be paranoid in her position, and to trust no one.

One person she especially didn't trust was Kandhi Clarke. She didn't trust her and she didn't like her and she didn't approve of her existence, for that matter, and Kandhi knew it. Ginger was always trying to push her aside and keep her in the dark. Their loathing of each other was not merely mutual, it was severe and genuine. If Ginger had her way, there would be no quality assurance at all. She wasn't interested in whether their technology worked or not, only that it was never discovered by anyone from the outside world. The developers, all five of them, were under contracts so stringent they could probably not afford to ever leave. Ginger watched their every move. There was

nothing she didn't know about them, and nothing she admired much either.

The problem with mind control, she had immediately realized, is the problem of 'who controls the controller?' It was one of those dilemmas of recursions, like 'who created God'? If a device was capable of mind control, it had to be programmed, so the programmer could control it. It had to be operated, so the operator could control it. Any one with a second device could control a person with the first, and so on, and on to infinity. She was not concerned with the ethics. It was rather an impressive achievement, to be able to place specific thoughts into someone else's mind in their own voice, such that it was indistinguishable from their own self-generated ideas. To be able to enter those words into a device and transmit those thoughts into a specific target. That was version one. Version two had introduced the partial binding, whereby the device and the host's mind could inter-operate without the bother of typing or talking or displaying images on a screen. Version three had introduced trans-volitional search, whereby the device would immediately seek and discover throughout the connected universe whatever topics had entered the host's little mind.

The partial bind had led to a state of dependence which Ginger thought was simply deplorable. She had experienced the bind and had rejected it after a time. Now she relied only on her own direct contact with the central hub, the main server within the company that could perform the same activities but with a layer of personal filtering in between - unobtrusive, in other words. She sat now at her desk and conveyed her desires to the mainframe. She was tracking Kandhi's UPD. She had opened a special secret channel into it and could now monitor and control its activity directly. She was disgusted to see that Kandhi, now driving through western Nebraska, was merely searching the public photo and video streams for facial recognition matches of Leonora Wells. Why not use the NatSurv? Ever since the war began, the national

surveillance program had become quite extensive. Although it was supposed to be highly confidential and felonious to breach, the people at W.W.A. were light years ahead with un-detectable methods and didn't even concern themselves with being discovered. Even if they were, they had certain contracts that could not be ignored and would have given them a free ride anyway.

The NatSurv quickly provided Ginger with information that Kandhi could have used the night before - Leonora entering Sarah Watson's car and driving it out of the Trinidad rest area. That same car was tracked at several locations along the highways, all the way into Grand Island, Nebraska. It was last spotted at the exit they took, and it was a no-brainer to conclude the car had traveled to the Watson's home not two miles away from there. Scanning that neighborhood's watch cameras for the remainder of the night was fruitless. Certainly they had slept after that long drive. Ginger panned out to within a few miles of the residence, and scanned the rest of the morning's activity. Sure enough, she easily located Leonora Wells sitting with a breakfast sandwich at the Riverside Burger Joint at ten-fifteen in the morning, not a half an hour before.

Ginger instructed Kandhi's You to provide that data to Kandhi, who was surprised and excited to receive it. She was less than twenty miles away and stepped on it. Unfortunately, by the time she arrived, Leonora was gone again. Kandhi was hungry, though, so she ordered a burger and a soda, and sat down at a table outside to enjoy her lunch.

'Worthless', muttered Ginger at the controls in San Francisco. 'Eating that crap. No wonder', she said to herself. The NatSurv had no further information on Leonora just yet. One of its weaknesses was its delay factor. The government, as always, used outdated equipment and the least sophisticated software it could find. While she was certain she would soon acquire imagery of Leonora's next movements, she called Mike Griggs into her

office. The scruffy engineer - no older than thirty but as dirty and smelly as any old street bum - worked seventeen hours a day and dreamed about work during the rest.

'Project Personality?' he asked, entering her office. She held up her hand to back him away from the door. She didn't want him stinking up the place, and he knew better, so he stood just outside in the hallway, as she said,

"Fuck that. It's past all that. Now it's just a matter of getting the thing back."

"Did you find the girl?" he asked.

"I only care about the box," she snapped. "The girl's just a carrier. If we can get to it, talk to it. Can we do that?"

"You mean like open a channel?"

"Whatever you want to call it," she told him. "Can we reach it?"

"Not from a distance," Griggysy said. "It's totally masked out. We do tracking, you know. We don't do tracked."

'I know my own words', Ginger cracked. 'Answer the question. You said 'not from a distance'. Does that mean from closer we can?'

'If we're in range', he said, 'we might get to it on the radio.'

'Radio? Over the air and in the clear?'

'Possibly', Mike considered. Like a walkie-talkie, you know? Scan the frequency but it's such a narrow band and such a low range, you would have to be pretty close.'

'How close? A yard? A mile?'

'A mile might be close enough', he said. 'Go A.M. scanner and look for its signature. It's embedded in the serial number. I'll send you the decode.'

'Fine', she said, and waved him away. A minute or so later she received the data and forwarded it to Kandhi's You, with commands to begin the sweep and report on contact. Privately, she was muttering to herself,

'Move, you lazy slob! Get off your ass and drive around', and then she remembered she had root control of the You. She could invoke its Mind Control Plugin and tell Kandhi to do just that. So

she did. Kandhi thought it was her own idea to start driving around the neighborhood. Her You didn't tell her otherwise. It was under filtered forwarding, only giving Kandhi what Ginger permitted it to. To Kandhi, the surveillance seemed utterly useless. She drove around in meandering random patterns throughout the city for more than an hour, and got nothing. She received no sign of Leonora either in person or through her UPD. She was not even informed when her You found the Nupie on the local air band, and transmitted Ginger's message to it. The message was fairly simple. Ginger merely told the renegade device to return to the Riverside Burger Joint, wait there for Kandhi Clarke, and surrender itself to her.

Twenty Three

Leonora had been wandering aimlessly around town, and not happily, but it wasn't until she found herself directed back towards the Burger Joint that she really began to wonder about it. All of the questions she'd had earlier that morning returned to her mind with a vengeance. She seemed to be of two minds. At least two. One mind had decided to go back but couldn't say why. Another mind kept making itself up to stay right where she was until she understood everything. Yet another was satisfied to at least be pointed in some direction. From the outside, she looked like a slapstick comedy routine, lurching this way and that, stopping and starting, turning around. Her act caught the attention of a driver of a delivery van passing by, who pulled over to the curb beside her. Leonora looked over to see the broad smiling face of the driver, who said, "Hello?" "Hi," Leonora sheepishly replied, suddenly becoming self-conscious.

"Going somewhere?" the driver asked, and this time Leonora burst out laughing.

"Could be," she replied, "if I could figure out where that was."

"Well, hop on in and I'll take you wherever," the driver suggested, and Leonora considered it. The van was a fairly old model, originally a dark brown that had been unsuccessfully painted over with a lighter shade of mud. Across the side a poor stencil job in blood red proclaimed "Double Dee-liveries." Something about the vehicle appealed to her, as well as the driver, a short, thick dark woman who later introduced herself as Ruby. The kicker for Leonora was a golden retriever who popped its head out of the back of the van and gave her the friendliest drooly grin. Leonora hopped on board and gave the dog a good scratching behind the ears.

"I could use some help," Ruby told her as they drove away. "If you don't mind a little labor. I can pay you. It's just this delivery I have to make. Kind of large and little awkward. Ledge here ain't no help with it. Course she's only a dog."

"What was that name?"

"Ledge," Ruby laughed. "I call her that because she's always perching on places too small for her. Never falls off, though. Don't know how she does it."

"Sure I'll help," Leonora asked the earlier question. "I'd be glad to."

It felt good to be moving with a purpose, actually going somewhere for a reason. Even the little black box that was nested against her belly seemed to hum with its own sense of vigor again. The job itself was a bit of a pain. Leonora couldn't guess, and Ruby couldn't tell her, exactly what was in the large, oddly shaped crate, but it took four hands and two backs to maneuver it out of the truck and into the garage of the grateful recipient, who gave them each an extra cash bonus as he rubbed his hands together with unseemly delight. They were glad to get away from there.

"That was it," Ruby told her. "I came all this way for that. Now I guess I'll be heading home, after I take you wherever you want to go."

"Where's home?" Leonora asked, stalling. She was hoping that Ruby's answer would give her an idea of some destination.

"Oh, a little old place nobody ever seems to have heard of," Ruby said, "town called Wetford, Arizona."

"Wetford!" Leonora gasped. "You're kidding me, right? How did you know what's where I live?"

"You do?" Ruby was surprised. "No way. What part of the town are you from?"

"Not from there originally," Leonora told her, "but I live right down by the abandoned train station. Work around there too at a warehouse called Ledman Storage and Pickup."

"Ledman Pickup?" Ruby laughed. "You work there? Oh my gosh, that place is a legend! How long have you been in there?"

"About a month," Leonora admitted.

"Well no wonder," Ruby replied. "Any longer and we would've met before this. My boss goes down there often enough. The place is a regular treasure trove for us. We get a lot of business out of it."

"What do you mean?"

"What we do," Ruby replied. "We're sort of a rescue angel service for lost deliveries. My boss, the double dee of the name, she's got a knack and a talent for finding things. What she does is find packages that go missing in transit and the other way around too, she'll find the destinations for the packages that got lost. We find the rightful owners, get in touch, offer them a range of services. If the price is right, and the urgency too, then I'll take it myself. I go around most of the west and southwest on special cases.

Otherwise we mostly use other shippers and pocket the profit. Ledman Pickup, man, that place is a graveyard for boxes and stuff. She's always finding things there, hiding under those shelves, stuck in those corners. Junior and Rolando, you know those guys, right?"

"Course I do"

"They don't give a shit," Ruby said, "They'll let us take whatever we find. Hell, they're mostly the reason things get lost in the first place. Them and the idiot supervisors they always seem to get."

"I'm the idiot supervisor now," Leonora admitted with a smile.

"Sorry," Ruby said, "no offense. Nothing personal, you know, seeing as we never met or I never would have said so."

"Oh, you would have!" Leonora told her. "It's exactly what I was. The idiot supervisor! I didn't give a shit either. Now, I don't know why, but now I feel different. Can I go back with you?"

"Sure thing," Ruby said, "glad to have the company. If you're going where I'm going, it sure makes it easier! Hungry, though? I'm kind of hungry. Saw a Burger Joint on the way to the highway."

"Oh, God," Leonora told her, "Anywhere but there"

"All right," Ruby agreed. "Anywhere else it is"

Twenty Four

Kandhi was still sitting at a table in the Burger Joint when the ugly brown van rolled by. She glanced up at it, thought, 'hey, that looks like Leonora Wells sitting in there', before returning her attention to the pink lemonade she was lingering over. A few sips went by and then she thought, 'why am I sitting here when Leonora Wells just went driving by', and that thought was quickly answered in her brain by the idea, 'it couldn't be. She's coming back here.'

"Oh", she said to herself, and returned to her beverage. A few more moments passed before she asked herself another question.

"Why would Leonora Wells be coming back here? She was just here and she left! Did she forget something?"

"She's supposed to be coming back here", the little voice in her head repeated, and then Kandhi grew suspicious.

“Hey You”, she quietly murmured, “are you keeping secrets from me?”

“Um, I'm not allowed to say?” the You feebly replied.

“That does it!” Kandhi jumped up. “Frickin' Ginger MacAvoy! It's got to be. She's been sneaking around my back again. Well, I've got a surprise for you, Ginger MacAvoy. And you too, You!”

She pulled the You out of her pocket and hesitated.

“Wait a minute”, she told it. ‘First I want some information. About that van. Double Dee-liveries. Arizona plates. 006-DDX. Thanks. Got it. 4226 Hanson Avenue, Wetford Arizona. Wetford, Arizona? Holy!” and with that exclamation, she poked a bent paper clip into a teensy hole in the side of the universal personal device, and turned it off.

“So much for you, You!” she declared as she set foot on the sidewalk outside. “And you too, Ginger MacAvoy”, she added. Kandhi made straight for her car and decided she could do the nine hundred miles or so by morning.

“What's the difference?” she thought. “It's all I have been doing lately anyway. But this time, no frickin' You to be spying on me. It's all just me. Me and the radio for a change.”

It actually felt good to go without that stream of constant data, that instant information, that knowing of whatever she wanted to know at a moment's notice. She didn't have to have a thought in her head, just the wide open road, the plains, the mountains, whatever there was out the window.

“I should do this more often”, she told herself as she made it through western Nebraska, into Colorado, down towards Arizona, and all the way, straight as she could, to the very place she'd started out just a couple of long days before.

Twenty Five

It was five in the morning and Leonora Wells was still awake. She had slept a lot during the long ride south with Ruby. They switched the watch, four hours apiece, waking and driving, or sitting and dozing. They chatted a little in between, enough to know they were getting along fine. Ledge sat on the knees of whichever of the two was in the passenger seat, and mostly slept as well. The drive seemed to go fast, and then she was home, in the middle of the night, standing in the living room and marveling at the cleanliness of her apartment. It was like elves had come and done it for her.

"It's a new world", Leonora declared with a smile. She had pretty much guaranteed herself a new job with Double Dee-liveries. All she had to do was show up in a few hours and introduce herself to the boss, Ruby's girlfriend, Dawn Debris. After that, she'd start right in, finding homes for lost packages. It just felt so right. There was such a need, and she had just what it took. She was sure of it. There would be destinations. There would be steps. There'd be process and order and she would be in control. Nice and tidy. And doing a public service too. What could be wrong?

There came a knock on the door. Puzzled, Leonora went over and opened it to see a puffy, pasty, pink-haired, nose- and ear- and lip-pierced woman standing on the landing.

"Leonora Wells?" the woman asked.

"That's me," she replied. "What can I do for you?"

"My name's Kandhi Clarke," the woman said, producing an official looking badge of some sort. "I work for W.W.A. Incorporated out of San Francisco. I believe you have something that belongs to us. I've come to claim it if you don't mind."

"If I have something of yours, you're welcome to it," Leonora said, and stepped back, gesturing with her arm for Kandhi to come inside. "As you can see," she continued, "I don't really have a lot of things, and I doubt that any of this stuff is what you're looking for."

"It's something that looks like this," Kandhi said, pulling out her universal personal device.

"Oh!" Leonora exclaimed. "You've got one of them too? What is it, anyway? I've just been lugging this thing around," and she pulled the Nupie out of her overalls pouch and showed it to Kandhi.

"I'm sorry," Kandhi told her, "I'm not allowed to say. It's a matter of national security."

"Okay," Leonora replied. "I know a thing or two about that," and she handed it over. Kandhi grabbed it and stuffed it in her pocket.

"Would you like some tea or coffee?" Leonora asked. "You look like you could use something."

"No, no," Kandhi said, "that's very kind but no. I've got to go. I just came for this."

"Well, all right," Leonora replied. She waited patiently for Kandhi to leave, still curious about the device, but not sorry to see it go.

"Does yours hum too?" she asked Kandhi, who shrugged and shook her head.

"That little thing can really sing sometimes," Leonora went on.

"Lately, though, it seemed kind of sad. I don't know. Like it was missing something it needed."

Kandhi didn't say anything, but turned and walked out the door.

Once back on the landing, though, she turned, and said,

"Can I ask you something?"

"Shoot"

"Why'd you travel all the way to hell and gone the past few days? I've been chasing you and chasing you."

"I'm sorry," Leonora replied. "I didn't know you were. Otherwise I suppose I would've stopped. I can't tell you anyway. I don't know myself. It just seemed like the thing to do, I guess."

"Huh," Kandhi muttered, and then said goodbye and clattered down the metal stairs. Leonora shut the door, went back inside and made herself a cup of coffee.

Twenty Six

"I've got you now, my pretty," Kandhi shouted at the little black box once she was safely inside her rental car. "And this time, you're not getting away."

She shoved it into the central chamber of her brand new carry-on and headed straight for the Phoenix airport. She didn't care about sleep. She didn't care about food. She had been driving and driving for so long now she felt just like a machine. Her You was still dormant and she wasn't missing the gadget one bit. She knew where she was going and she went straight there. This time it was all business. Returned the rental car without a hassle. Got through security, no sweat. Boarding pass, check. Wait for the flight, not a problem. Get to the gate, uh-oh. Trouble. National Security. Alert level raised. Apologies from the airline. No carry-ons allowed. All carry-ons must be checked at boarding. Not to worry. They will all be safely stowed below and returned upon arrival. No time to do anything about it. They were taking the carry-ons as you boarded, without warning, without time. She had to let it go.

"It'll be okay", she told herself. "They'll take it straight to the hold and right back out again in San Francisco."

That's what she told herself, but all throughout the flight she was worried. She nearly turned on the You again, but decided it wouldn't do any good. She didn't know about the proximity radio detector. Ginger hadn't told her about that back door contingency. It wasn't in the specs and nobody told her everything ever. How many times had she complained to Chris, to Tom. She needed to know. She needed to know every little thing. Griggsy! She'd never know what he'd put in there, what he'd done, what ridiculous, crazy, stupid, arrogant, pompous, jackass technology he'd gone right ahead and rammed into the thing's very registers, into its very fibers, into the permanent read-only fixtures of its central core.

Whatever it was, it was enough. Enough to put the notion into the head of a baggage handler that the brand new bright pink carry-on there, ostensibly marked for that very flight, was actually intended for a different airline entirely. The baggage handler felt such serious concern that he double checked the computer himself, and found it was true. The computer showed it was booked for a flight to Miami in twenty minutes time. The baggage handler hurried down the terminal hallway as fast as he could, so worried that the little carry-on would miss its flight and then be stranded there in Phoenix. Someone was going to miss it. He could make that person very happy and eternally grateful if only he just hurried it up. So he rushed. And he made it on time. And the last thing he saw was the cute little carry-on being flung into the belly of the jetliner that was destined to fly it straight into the glowing red sunset.

In Constant Contact One

From the far corner of her executive suite on the top floor of the fancy new headquarters of Syomatix Incorporated, Kandhi Clarke sorted through the latest batch of applications for the position of Professional Friend. She had a bad feeling about this. Ever since the latest round of financing, the various vice presidents in charge of ideas had been full of really bad ones. Chalk it up to buzzwords, but they were falling all over each other trying to come up with concepts that fit the sizzling hot categories of contagion, milk and transparency. White boards had been filled, meetings had been scheduled and re-scheduled, and this was the best they came up with? Imaginary so-called friends?

Well, that's what Kandhi called it, anyway. The formal term, Professional Friend, had been settled on after many panicky late-night sessions. It was to be a service. A service service, if you will. Your very own Professional Friend would be there whenever you needed one. It would be ready for whatever it was needed for, and would be guaranteed to never let you down, unlike an actual, amateur friend. It would be worth every penny of the yet-to-be-determined price. So far the project was only in the beta stage of development, and it was Kandhi's job, as Vice President of Product Quality, to make sure they got it right before unleashing it on the general public, or at least until they go it "right enough", since the higher-ups would be sure to override Kandhi's best judgment, no matter what, once a certain indefinite yet-to-be-determined date had been reached.

Kandhi sighed. Sure, she had a nice view of the train tracks from her ergonomically balanced seat, but she knew that her influence had been waning since the early days of the company, when she'd been the first employee hired by the two founders, Tom and Chris. Back then the company has been known as World Weary Avengers, which must have meant something to someone at

some time, but Kandhi had never known what or to whom. Now, at the insistence of the moneyed people, it had the more suggestive name of Syomatix. What it was meant to suggest, however, was anybody's guess.

This new product began with an invention, as it customarily did. The first founder, Tom, was always coming up with something, then leaving it to the second founder, Chris, and his marketing team, to figure out what to do with it. In this case it was an ordinary-looking rubber wristband, which resembled one of those inspirational bands that companies like to give out to employees with stamped inspirational mottoes such as 'Never Give Up', or 'One Team One Fight'. The Syomatix wristband, though, was nothing quite so simple. It contained, among other things, wireless connectivity, a transparent video screen and a host of transponders and sensors which responded to various forms of tactile input. Tom called it the Highly Adaptive Friendular System, or HAFS for short. It was meant to be used for what Chris called 'constant contact'. When Tom had first brought it up to show Kandhi (Tom always worked in the basement, even in the shiny new headquarters), her first reaction had been "Eeww?"

Tom smiled and patiently explained.

"You never need to make a phone call to be in touch. You're always in touch! Connected, continually and constantly."

"What if you don't want to be?", she countered. The idea was not intuitive for her, as she was not a needy person by nature. The whole idea of constant contact frankly grossed her out.

"Our customers will be the kind who want to be", Tom assured her. "That's the point. We're making a product for a certain type of person, not just something for anyone. But anyway, that's not for you or me to worry about. I just invent the thing. You make sure it works the way it should. Chris and his people will take care of getting it into the hands of the customer."

"I don't know", Kandhi had argued. "Maybe I'm not the right person for this one".

"It has to be you", Tom informed her. "I can't rely on anyone else. I know you'll do the right thing."

And that was that. Once Tom had made up his mind it was useless to resist. The plan had then gone through the regular channels before ending up on her schedule. She had hoped it would have been set aside or canceled outright but no, whatever Tom wanted Tom got, in the end. He was, after all, the only reason the company existed in the first place. As a startup, WWA had made its name through some very secretive government contracts. Those inventions, far too unethical to be sold in the open marketplace, had proven quite useful to certain intelligence agencies around the world. Very bad things, Kandhi was sure, had been done with those gadgets. Very bad things indeed, and this one had just as much awful potential as anything Tom had ever come up with, which was saying a lot. Kandhi didn't like to think about such matters.

Instead she told herself to think about the prey. "I mean the customer", she corrected herself. The kind of person who would want such a service. The first thing that came to mind was a little old lady who needed someone to complain to. Constant contact would work for her. Or a teenage girl who couldn't stop chattering. Not too many men would be game, Kandhi thought, or am I wrong about that? A man with a permanent friend would never have to tell anybody about it if he didn't want to. In this case, she reasoned, we'll need differently designed bands. With this thought fresh in her mind, she dashed off a memo to Iris in Design. As soon as she clicked the Send button it struck her that Iris would be a perfect test subject. Here was someone who would have preferred the socialnet to be delivered to her via intravenous drip. Iris was always checking her feeds, continually refreshing her lists, desperate for any new comments from any of her thirteen thousand three hundred and four pursuants, and yet

Iris hardly ever posted a quip of her own. Kandhi tapped a sticky note to herself on her laptop with one word: Iris.

“Ok”, Kandhi composed herself. She had somewhere to start, a mental target and a shaft of arrows in the form of applicants. One of those might suit the purpose. Armed with a plan, Kandhi felt a lot more at ease. The job was following a familiar pattern and once she could see its contours, she could sense a way out. She still disapproved, but hadn't she been critical of every single product that came out of this place? It was the reason she was still on board, the reason she'd been promoted this high. Barely thirty years old with no conventional technical background to speak of, Kandhi's success was due entirely to her own efforts and the confidence that Tom and Chris had placed in her. She had many critics and enemies in the building, not the least of whom was Ginger MacAvoy, Head of Security. Ginger had gone behind her back and over her head so many times that Kandhi had penciled it in as merely a part of the regular process. There was bound to come a day when Ginger would appear in that very office, with the look of a demon from hell, informing Kandhi of some seriously disastrous development. It was Kandhi's Second Law of Nature – for every action undertaken, the wrath of Ginger would follow.

Kandhi felt small in her over-sized office. She had crammed her small desk way back into the corner, at an angle facing the door on her left. To her right she could see out the window and outside the door was the hallway, perfectly visible through the glass wall. The rest of the office, aside from the desk, was empty, except for the two small visitor's chairs placed directly in front of her desk. The carpet was gray. The walls were gray. Her desk was gray too. The building itself was all glass and steel girders, transparent and gray, all six stories surrounded by the gray parking lot and the gray murky river beneath the old drawbridge.

“How did we ever get to this point?” Kandhi wondered. Three hundred seventeen people now working for the still private

company and Kandhi couldn't begin to imagine what they all did. Clearly many were needed for sheer infrastructure; to keep the building running, the computers humming, the telephones answered and the cafeteria stocked. Others were kept busy writing software to be embedded in the company's various and nefarious devices. Kandhi had a small team working for her, testing those gadgets and the software within them. Then there were lawyers and designers, human resources, and the utterly useless project and program managers whose only work consisted in attending meetings and perpetually changing other people's schedules. There were people who did shipping and receiving, people who sorted the mail, people who watered the plants. It takes an army, she thought, to do practically anything. She was biting her nails. A bad sign. Focus, she reminded herself, and then laughed at the thought that while there's "No I in Team" there's definitely an F and a U in Focus. Professional Friends, she considered. Those who would be them, and those who would need them. Think, Kandhi, think, and stop fussing around. You've done this before, you can do it again. Beta testing is just herding sheep, nothing to it, as opposed to the usual herding required in this field. She picked up the pile of printed out job applications and shuffled them, spread them all out on her desk. There were six. These are also test subjects, she thought, so treat them as such. Think Iris. Think needy. Think desperate. Think help.

Two

Kandhi didn't get past the first sentence of the first application before she realized that she was also going to need help with this job. The application came from one Lola Crown in Kansas City, Kansas, and it read:

"I sher wood like to be a frend becoz I sher like peepel and I sher wood be a good frend to there needs".

Kandhi punched a button on her desk phone and shouted,

"Fred!"

Moments later a short, heavy-set, pony-tailed, unshaven and bespectacled young man came shuffling into her office with a cranky look on his face. From behind his thick green glasses frames he squinted and shrugged his way into the visitor chair, where he collapsed, as if exhausted from the effort. Fred Schmetsenheim, Lab Rat (according to his business card) didn't say a word.

"Fred, I need you", Kandhi informed him, handing him the stack of papers she had already glanced through once.

"What do you make of these?"

Fred took the papers and examined each one carefully. Kandhi watched his expression closely, to gauge his reactions to the different applications, but Fred gave no indication that any one struck him differently than any other. He scanned them all and looked up.

"Are these for you?" he asked. "Some kind of computer dating or something?"

"Of course not", Kandhi snapped. "This is work."

"We're hiring people to be our friends? Is this some new company policy? The latest thing in morale-inducing technology?"

"No, no, no", Kandhi sighed. "I thought you knew. It's for the new product. You've seen these, right?", and she opened her top desk drawer and pulled out a small pile of the thick, rubbery wristbands in various colors. Fred shook his head.

"It's the Highly Adaptive Friendular System", she told him.

"You're kidding, right?", Fred replied. "Rubber bands? What's next, invisible balloons?"

"It's a polymer fabric", she said. "Highly conductive but quite safe. Responsive, too. You can tap on it, pull on it, snap it, and all of those gestures have a purpose. I have the specs right here. Wait a second", and she handed over a single sheet of single-spaced wording, the original implementation paper from the founder.

Fred took his time studying this, all the while frowning and shaking his head.

"I thought I'd seen it all", he muttered when he was done. "I suppose it gets into the bloodstream, too. right? Constant contact, and bodily monitoring of course. All the vitals. Does it broadcast your thoughts in surround sound as well? Holy freaking out, man! What do we do around here? What don't we do?"

"Take it easy", Kandhi said, "It isn't going to do all of that. You know how Tom gets. There's no way they can get all that kind of stuff into the first release."

"That's what you said about 'The Driver'", he reminded her. "It was only going to 'assist'. Remember that? Then we had all that trouble with kidnappings."

"Incidental", she replied. "This one's not general-purpose. It's just for certain kinds of people. Tom told me so himself. People who need people. People who want someone to be there all the time, someone they can rely on, someone they can talk to, someone who will help them out. Any time, day or night. Anywhere in the world. And the thing of it is, they will never actually see this person, never actually know them, not their name, their location, none of that. They won't even know if it's just one friend, or a collection, or part-real, part-automated or even a person at all."

"You don't believe him, do you?" Fred was unconvinced. "It's from the same guy who invented caller undo, and you remember what happened with that, right? The amnesia pandemic?"

Kandhi nodded. This was exactly why she had called him in there. She needed her doubts reinforced.

"I want you to help me select the beta subjects", she told him.

"You know the drill. Find me a few who'd fit, and we'll match them up with some of these, these friends", she added, pointing at the papers Fred still held on his lap. He returned them to her, saying, "Most of these are useless".

"Which ones would you keep?"

"The track coach, the cashier, and the barber. The rest I'd throw away. Burn them, even", he added, cracking a smile. Fred stood up, still shaking his head glumly.

"I'd hate to pick any of our good beta people for this", he stated and Kandhi nodded.

"They volunteered", she reminded him.

"So they're asking for it?"

"Practically begging", she laughed.

"Even so", he told her, "we might need them later". Fred left the room. He walked slowly back to his cube across the hall, plopped down in his seat and sighed.

"Beta bunnies?" he muttered, calling up the list on his desktop screen. "Some of you are really in for it now."

Meanwhile, Kandhi pulled out the three papers Fred had indicated. The track coach was a Finnish former long distance runner and track coach, now a recluse and physical wreck way up in reindeer land, where he lived (so he stated) with his longtime boyfriend, a controversial Danish filmmaker named Rigan Verhoeven. Verhoeven was noted for his award-winning documentaries about radical solutions to the overpopulation crisis, which called for random culling by lots. The track coach was not implicated in any of that. He was mostly known for his records and statistics, like nearly all athletes are. Physical conditioning, talent and willpower are, in the end, reduced to mere numbers. His name was Bilj Bjurnjurd, and he had won many races and many awards, including a number of civic citations for empathy, charity and consistent humanity. Kandhi had no idea that awards were given for such things, but then again, she knew very little of Scandinavian cultures.

The cashier was named Velicia Lightning Bug (formerly Kirkjian), an employee of the Less4Less chain of stores based out of Tulare, California. She was forty one years old, thrice divorced, childless, and a part-time tantric healer and holographer, with an enormous capacity for rapid yet quite hollow verbiage. Velicia's beta form

included several extra pages in longhand, referencing all of her interests, from yeti tracking to shellfish painting to synchronized plumbing and quadrapus training. She was on the seventh of her projected nine lives, and was anxious to encounter anything different and new, regardless of its odor, color or consistency. Velicia listed her job as "professional customer-relations interactor", but a phone call to her boss confirmed the position of cashier.

The barber was sixty-five year old Stanley Smellyear from Pittsburgh. He had, so he claimed, heard it all.

"You ain't heard nothing yet", Kandhi silently warned him.

Three

Fred Schmetsenheim tried to keep his head down, he really did. 'Just doing my job' was his motto, but just doing his job certainly seemed to cause a lot of trouble most days. Trouble for him, trouble for his boss, and trouble for the developers he worked with. The software engineers, especially, considered him a terrible nuisance, the way he was always alerting them to defects in their highly sophisticated code, and took to closing his issues with resolutions such as 'Behaves As Expected', and then cursing when they found them re-opened again within the hour with a return comment such as, 'Really?'. This led to many heated discussions in many different conference rooms, with most of the heat directed squarely at Fred, who gave it back at double the temperature.

"I wouldn't expect you to understand", was one of the phrases he heard repeatedly, along with, "what you keep failing to realize", and "that is exactly the sort of question I never want to hear again". And yet it was never Fred who was called to account by the Vice Presidents of Engineering, the dreaded Head of Security, or even the founders. This was little consolation to Fred, who huddled down in his cube, certain of only more impending misery.

He'd been with the company for three years and was rapidly approaching his usual expiration date. This was his third job. The other two had each lasted exactly three years, and ended with eruptions of bilious verbal encounters. His previous bosses had wearied of defending his tirades, and he had as much faith in his current one, Kandhi, as he'd had in the others. In the end, they would all break under pressure. In the end, they would let him be sacrificed to the marketing gods. He knew very well that what they called "quality" was merely a checkbox, that products would ship when the bottom line called, no matter how indecent they were. To Fred, quality was what the word should mean, a measure of fitness, a stamp of approval. His standards, however, were generally too lofty and his ability to adjust to reality was somewhat deficient.

"Highly Adaptive", he muttered to himself. "I'd bet my life how highly that is!" He had tested the so-called 'Hearing Aids', which served a double function as extremely attuned translation devices, which he just knew were currently in use in diplomatic circles around the world, despite the fact he had slammed them as inaccurate, misleading, invasive, and downright criminal. True, the product was never officially released as such into the general consumer marketplace, and its name had been changed and was marketed as 'Mister Marvin', but he'd seen the production memos, he'd recognized the build issues which cropped up from time to time on the automated servers, he knew the initials of the off-shored maintenance devs who were assigned to work on it. They were selling the damn thing under false pretenses, he knew very well, selling it and proud of it, too.

He had also tested the erstwhile 'Memorizer', ostensibly a gadget intended to help students and professionals prepare for exams, but was actually a product which had a subtle way of reinforcing certain concepts while downplaying others, in a mild, seemingly pragmatic and sincere manner. The bias was also "adjustable", he knew. "Highly Adjustable", in fact, according its User Guide. No

wonder the 'Memorizer' had become embedded in the orientation processes of new hires from mega-corporations to rookie members of Congress.

"Repeat After Me", Fred muttered, appalled at the recollection. I really should quit this stinking job, he often said to himself, but then again, his hours were his own and his tactics were rarely questioned. He had unrestricted liberty to test his projects in any fashion he desired, and the pay could not be beat, not by a long shot. He couldn't earn half as much anywhere else in the state and he knew it. Yet he knew that his freedom was bound tightly within certain limits, often undetectable even to himself. He was guided on invisible rails, and the outcome of his efforts seemed almost predetermined every time. Quality was defined high above him. He only ratted out the failures and spelled out the contours of their infamy. Some day he'd assert his will, he swore. He'd bring one of these devices to its knees.

"Wen?" he shouted.

"Now" replied his partner, Wen Li, from the adjacent cubicle. It was their little joke. "How soon is now", Fred was supposed to reply, but this time he only said, "Yes".

Wen popped her head up over the wall and gazed down at him through equally thick-lensed glasses, though hers were pink and round, where his were green and rectangular. In contrast to his long hair, hers was cut very short, in a bowl above her ears. She was taller than him, slighter too, and while a studious and proficient programmer, she was short on the innovation side. It took a combination of Fred's wild-assed intuition and Wen's deep skill to bore deeply into the most arcane of their projects.

"Help me pick out some bunnies", he asked.

"Sure thing", she smiled, and in moments was rolling her own chair around the aisle and into his space.

"What we got?", she wanted to know. "Deaf, dumb or blind?"

"Matchups", he told her, and explained the task in general terms.

"Bunnies for buddies", she nodded. "Got it. But tell me, these friends, they have requirements? How are they scored?"

"Don't know", Fred shook his head. "We'll have to make it up as we go along".

"Ah, the usual", Wen winked. "We want fresh faces this time or just recyclables?"

"I'd go with fresh", Fred said, "but second-rate types. We don't want to waste any good ones with this piece of junk."

The beta set was not of their own choosing. Wen and Fred didn't even know how the people ended up in the queue. Someone put them in there, probably a marketing intern. Each Beta Bunny had a profile, complete with portrait, job history, personality overview, hobby list and previous record as subjects when applicable. With a few clicks Fred eliminated the ABC candidates (already been chewed). That still left a list of more than twenty five prospects. "Matchup how?", Wen wanted to know, and Fred told her about the three Test Friends.

"For track coach, we want someone physical, at least", Wen considered. "For cashier, someone with money. For barber ... I don't know".

"I was thinking someone green", Fred mumbled.

"Could be", Wen replied, "but the barber's an old-timer, right? Is he going to relate?"

"Mix it up", said Fred. "Make one harder than the others."

"Right enough", she nodded. "Make them all degrees I would say."

"Physical, eh?", Fred murmured, studying the list. "Maybe someone who works outside, walks around."

"Construction?" Wen suggested.

"Or mobile", Fred replied. "Someone in the thick of things. Policeman? Fireman?"

"Driver", she said, and Fred snapped his fingers.

"Driver!" he agreed, "and we've got one right here. Dave Claunney. FedCorTron Delivery Systems. Thirty two years old.

Unmarried. Six two, two hundred twenty pounds. Got a handlebar mustache! Never see that every day!"

"Sweet", Wen said. "Adventurous too. Cliff-diver, hang-glider. Sort of good-looking", she added, admiringly, "but he definitely needs a good shave", she added.

"Hannah Lincum", Fred pointed at the screen. "Widow. Hospital volunteer. Fifty-seven years old. Kids long since grown up, two of those."

"Very high credit score".

"Lives in SoCal. That gives her a culture-share at least with the Less4Less lady".

"I like it", Wen agreed.

"Last one then", Fred counted, "for the barber."

"Pick at random?"

"Why not?", Fred chuckled. "I'll sort the list somehow. You close your eyes, okay? Then pick a number between 1 and 17. That'll be the spreadsheet row we take."

"Got it", Wen replied, and closed her eyes. Fred selected the hobby column and sorted the list in reverse alphabetical order.

"I pick the number One", Wen informed him, and Fred said,

"Number One it is", and then laughed out loud.

"Check this guy out! He says that his favorite past-time is telepathy", he chortled. "Who would have put down something like that?"

"He also likes big dogs", Wen added with a smile, "All kinds of animals too. Says he has a special connection with them, like they are his cousins. Really, he says cousins."

"Stanley Smellyear, meet Nathaniel Woodward", Fred concluded.

"Nate, meet Stan!"

He copied the selected subjects into a spreadsheet of their own, indicating the chosen matchups with some vague notes about their reasoning, and emailed the sucker to Kandhi.

"The boss is going to be happy", he decided. "She always likes it when we take care of her business."

Four

Kandhi thought it would be best that all of the "friends" were brought together for the initial get-together session, so she called a video conference. The timing had to be a little strange because of time zone differentials, but Bilj Bjurnjurd said he didn't mind joining in at nine at night, which was one in the afternoon for Stanley, and ten in the morning for Velicia and the San Francisco-based Syomatix. Kandhi would have preferred an earlier start time, but even ten was pushing it for Fred, who preferred to stagger in around noon if he could, often hanging around until after midnight. Wen was strictly nine to five, as no-nonsense with her schedule as she was with her test code.

After the usual messing around with the computers, which never seemed to work as expected, especially since Velicia insisted on using her Apple products, while Stanley was a Microsoft man and Bilj was strictly Unix, the six attendees finally got to the point where they all could see and hear each other well enough, with not too many hiccups or delays. Kandhi sat at the head of a small round table barely large enough to hold all three of their laptops and the speaker-phone. Kandhi herself took up as much space as her two assistants did. The years had been adding sequentially to her padding, and she was now thoroughly rounded all over, including a globe-like helmet of brown hair. All traces of its former bright pink coloring were gone now, as was her collection of facial and other bodily piercings. She had settled into an adulthood acceptable even to her mother, a fact she tried very hard not to think about.

To her right sat the hunched-over Fred, scowling as usual. Across the table the proper Wen Li nearly towered in contrast, but was herself nearly hidden from view by her boss. Wen was dressed

neatly in a tweed dress suit, in contrast to Fred's jeans and t-shirt, and Kandhi's extra large sweats. On the wall screen projected from Kandhi's laptop, the three beta friends loomed, each in their own window. On the left was Bilj Bjurnjurd, tall, skeletal and bald, shrinking into an armless rocking chair with a well-worn Indian blanket draped over his legs. His narrow black eyes were the brightest objects in view, seeming to pierce the vast distance and penetrate right into the conference room. In the middle, Velicia Lightning Bug, wearing a flowery floor-length cotton dress, was surrounded by plants draping down from her ceiling. On the right, Stanley Smellyear, short, stout and sweating from every pore, seemed to have called in from the back of his barbershop. From his window various sounds came bleeding through, murmurs and snippings buzzings and occasional shouts and guffaws. Fred glared at Kandhi, expecting her to demand that Stanley do something to mitigate the background noise, but she didn't. Instead, she got down to business, as Fred shook his weary head and sighed.

"As you know", Kandhi began, after a brief round of formal introductions, "we have selected the three of you as our initial professional test friends. You have all been paired up with beta clients. We'll talk more about them later. First, I want to go over the guidelines and procedures we intend to use in this process. Now, I see you all have your HAFS."

"Halfs?" Velicia interrupted, placing her face so close to the screen as she spoke that all anyone could see of her was her nostrils and the top of her lip.

"HAFS", Kandhi repeated. "H.A.F.S.. As the document enclosed with the shipment explained. HAFS stands for Highly Adaptive Friendular System, and ..."

Now it was Bilj's turn to interrupt with a seriously loud cackle, followed by a choking sound.

"Sorry", he stammered, "Didn't mean to. It's just. Friendular. Ha ha!", and he burst out laughing again.

"Yes, well, in any case", Kandhi frowned. "The wristband. Let's just call it the wristband. You all have your wristbands, am I right?"

"Mine's right here", Stanley, comfortably attired in a plain white t-shirt which barely concealed the upper part of his belly, lifted the purple velvet-lined box in which they had shipped the device.

"Mine too", said Velicia, cupping the band in the palm of her hand and holding it out toward the screen like an offering. Her pale face, containing a pair of light blue eyes above which no eyebrows resided, was dwarfed by reams of the lightest blond hair which seemed to drift perpetually skyward, as if propelled by some hidden fan below.

"Locked and loaded", Bilj checked in, holding up his wrist to demonstrate the object was firmly attached.

"They should all be wearing them", Fred muttered. "As per the email?"

"Yes", Kandhi murmured back, and then louder she announced, "Stanley and Velicia, would you please also put the, uh, the wristband, on your wrists?"

"Which arm?" Velicia asked.

"It doesn't matter", Kandhi replied. "Whichever is most comfortable for you."

"I'm ambidextrous", she informed them. "So it doesn't matter to me. If you have a preference, that is."

"We don't", Kandhi assured her. "It will work just as well either way."

"Well, in that case", Velicia decided, "I will wear it on my left wrist. That way it will be more in tune with my right brain. I think that might be important. You may want to tell the others to do the same."

"We'll certainly take it under advisement", Kandhi promised.

"Fred, take a note?"

"Oh yes certainly", Fred groaned. He was already becoming personally allergic to Velicia. We got a real winner with this one,

he thought. Wen was busily monitoring the actual signals that began to pour through from the three beta subjects. She was well prepared, having tested one of the prototype HAFSes on her own wrist. She had written a test harness complete with inputs and outputs, charts and reports, live graphs and a document database from which she could glean analytics in abundance. She knew to expect connection statuses, data throughputs, text and images, video streams, audio, and was already prepared for more. She had questioned developers who insisted she had already covered the bases and then some, but she didn't believe them. There were packets encoded in nefarious ways, private protocols that seemed to be scrambled. The audio/video streams were loaded with more data than could be explained by the codec decoders. But she couldn't figure out everything at once. There was simply too much going on, and there was of course the usual shortage of time.

Once Velicia and Stanley and Bilj were strapped in, the information flowed thick and fast like primordial lava. Wen was cursing under her breath. Three at once was much too much. How were they going to scale up? What kind of monitoring system were they imagining could handle the load? The throughput was going to be staggering, and the subjects had barely even started their work. They were merely going through the most basic training and already she was thinking in terrabits!

"There are a few most commonly used interactions", Kandhi explained. "You can tap on the band, or pull and release, or rub or pinch or swipe. Each of these gestures can be expanded in context. For example, a brief triple tap could be used for a kind of alert. There are built-in defaults, but each gesture is completely configurable, so you can act in whichever fashion works best for you. You'll want to live with it, try it, try different things. Now, can you see the response tabs on your screens?"

They all nodded. The HAFSes were connected to a wireless application that let them set preferences and settings. The

options were far too complex for Fred's liking. Especially for an initial release, it seemed crazy to let the user customize practically every aspect of the device. How was anyone in house supposed to keep track of an infinite variety of settings? Everything would be happening in real time, after all, and the people in Ops could not be expected to know about every possible combination and signaling pattern. It was simply insane. Fred had already complained long and hard to Kandhi, who'd sympathized and told him to file bugs. He had done so and seen them rejected as "Behaves As Designed". He'd flamed the internal socialnet with a firehose of bile, but all of his comments were ignored and marked down as 'Fred Behaving as Expected'. "The same old dance", he complained to himself. Kandhi could see it in his eyes. She was accustomed to his trademark misanthropy. Couldn't live without it, in fact, which didn't mean she had to like it, or like him even, particularly. Sitting there now with these strangers and her team, she had a sudden sense of massive dejection. Failure is always an option, she reminded herself, and yet, my employees do work hard, as intractable as they can be from time to time.

"So you're telling me", Bilj was expounding, "that every word I say is transmitted through the wristband connection and changed into text that scrolls on the wristband receiver?"

"You can see it right here", Fred acknowledged, directing the attention of all to his own wrist.

"This HAFS is paired up with yours", he told Bilj, "I'm adjusting the font size and color right now. Can you see it?"

Floating across the beige wristband on Fred's arm were the words, "scrolls on the wristband receiver?"

"I can adjust the velocity as well as the font", Fred explained. "I can also press pause, rewind, and repeat using the default gestures like this", and he went through a series of taps, demonstrating the effect, causing Bilj's entire question to be replayed across his wrist.

"Now, using the default double-tap gesture", Fred went on, emphasizing the word "default" at every turn, hoping to reinforce by suggestion the idea that no one should even consider mucking around with the settings, "I can select audio instead of text, like this."

After he made that standardized movement, the text disappeared, and instead, coming from some kind of invisible speaker built into the wristband, came a mechanized voice repeating everything that Bilj had said, with very close to the same inflections and intonations.

"I used a default voice setting", Fred mentioned, deliberately not mentioning the several dozen selectable variations, not to mention the alternate language translations. This whole thing is going to be a nightmare, he said to himself, and we haven't even gotten to the video yet, not to mention the audio earbuds for privacy.

"So the customer can choose whether to read us or hear us", Bilj nodded.

"What if they're not looking?" Velicia asked.

"Excuse me?" Kandhi said.

"When you're telling them something", Velicia went on. "What if they aren't paying attention."

"We'll cover that in the guidelines", Kandhi informed her. "For now let's just assume that they are."

"Nobody ever listens", Stanley put in, at which Kandhi and Fred exchanged glances, but chose to ignore him.

"To be a good friend", Velicia replied, "You have to be a good listener."

"Yeah, you", Stanley said, "but you're the friend. I was talking about them. The customer. You're like their servant is how I see this thing playing out."

"We'll talk later about process", Kandhi tried to inject, but Velicia got there first.

"It will be a collaboration", Velicia addressed Stanley. "You do your part and bring them along. Once you get to know them, you'll see".

"Moving on", Kandhi said, loudly enough to bring the side conversation to a halt. "We will be monitoring your connections from here. Our vantage point will enable us to assist you at any time should need arise."

"In other words, you can intervene whenever you see fit", Bilj noted. "That goes for the other side too, I presume?"

"Both players are wearing the HAFS", Kandhi agreed, "and both sides are connected through us, that's correct."

"Can you zap us?", Stanley wanted to know.

"Zap you?", Kandhi did not understand.

"Yeah, like send some kind of electrical shock. This thing's got the feel of one of them dog collars they use for not barking, where they zap the poor critter. You can't do that to us, can you?"

"Of course not", Kandhi replied, but Fred and Wen raised their eyebrows and made mental notes to double-check up on that, just in case. They wouldn't put it past the developers or Tom, who were all known for implementing what they called "features" like that.

"We can interrupt transmission, of course", Kandhi said, "but that's all. We can communicate directly to either partner through the same device."

"How can we tell who is talking?", Bilj asked. "If it's you or it's them?"

"We use a special text style when it's us", Kandhi said, "Fred. show them?"

"This is us now", Fred typed into his keyboard, and told them to look at their wristbands.

"It tickled", Stan said.

"I thought so too", giggled Velicia.

"I felt something", Bilj agreed.

"That's the default notification sensation", Fred told them. "It's meant to merely caress the arm hairs."

"So you CAN send out shocks", Stanley grumbled.

"Just a tickle", Kandhi said.

"I don't like it", Stanley emphasized.

"Okay", Kandhi said, "moving on."

"Can we sleep with the thing?", Stanley asked.

"What about bathing?", Velicia wanted to know.

"All of that will be covered in guidelines", Kandhi said, while thinking this was going to be a long meeting.

Five

It did turn out to be a very long meeting. The three chosen friends each had an opinion about the default operations of the device as well as the application interface and every other topic that came up. The discussion ratcheted up Fred's irritation until he was near screaming at them.

"Listen", he blurted out finally. "This is the way the thing works, okay? When we change things, we will let you know, but for now, if you want to use it, this is it. You put the wristband on your wrist, you do the gestures, you listen, you talk, you read, you type on your laptop or your phone. You get notifications. We get the logs. We're always right here in the middle. If you have any problems, we're here. Is it clear?"

"Thank you, Fred", Kandhi said, wanting to elbow him right off of his seat and onto the floor, but his snippy fit did the trick. The professional friends did finally shut up and let Kandhi conclude the initial training portion of the meeting. After that it got worse. They still had the guidelines to talk about. The guidelines consisted in "how to be a friend", and there was a lot of discussion around that tricky topic. Kandhi had thought she had it nailed down pretty tight. You were to "be there" for the client. You were to "assist" as best you can. You were to "be considerate"

and "thoughtful". You were to be positive. After all, it's a business. You were NOT to be an ordinary, average everyday friend, with your own problems and issues. You were NOT to be an acquaintance, disinterested or uncaring. Neither were you to interfere, get over-involved, be clingy or needy. She thought she had all this summarized in a few bullet points, but it didn't go over very well.

"What does any of that even mean?", Stanley bristled. "I know what a friend is. Why so complicated?"

"I think we all need to know our own limits", Velicia said, and Bilj added, thoughtfully, that it seemed to him, as the project was in beta, that they should be discovering the way it should work as they went along, rather than trying to pre-define it.

"We have to have ground rules", Kandhi insisted.

"No we don't", Stanley countered.

"Some things are obvious", Bilj put in, "like don't be an asshole, for one thing".,

"Sometimes a true friend has to cross some boundaries", Velicia disagreed.

"I tell it the way I see it", Stanley insisted. "I ain't gonna try and be what I'm not. You put me into the program and I'll do it my way."

"We each have our own identities", Velicia piped up. "You can't expect us to be standardized like robots".

Just what I was thinking, Fred muttered to himself. We ought to have done this in software from beginning to end. Automated friends, not real ones. It would have been a whole lot easier to monitor, track, measure, and stick with the program. This whole thing's got disaster written all over it.

"Can we find common ground?" Kandhi asked. "I do think you all have a point, or points, so to speak. We most certainly will have some trial and error to go through. We most certainly do want your own individual takes and approaches. We don't mean to

predefine all your actions. We just want to come to some common agreement on the most basic principles, like, "do good, not bad". "I'll go with that", Stanley said. "That's mostly my rule anyway. It's a business, like you say. In my barbershop, the customer is always right in the end. If it's some little thing, well, I can tell just how far I can go. Like, say if the guy is moaning about the Pirates, the fact that they always suck. I'll say, hey, at least we still got a major league franchise, but I won't tell him to eat shit and die, for example."

"Nice", Fred grumbled.

"A friend is there to be there", Bilj agreed, "but he's got to be a person too in some way. Otherwise it's going to seem fake."

"I always put my own stamp on it", said Velicia, smiling and nodding.

"Okay", Kandhi said, "Good enough. Now, as for the other guidelines."

"What? There's more?" Stanley spat.

"Almost done", Kandhi said, "I just wanted to let you all know that you do not have to be available twenty-four seven. You can state your own hours and let your friend know what they are, when it's convenient for you. If you can't work it out between you, let us know."

"I imagine you'll know anyway", offered Bilj, "since you have constant live coverage of everything."

"If you can't work it out, we'll do something", Kandhi went on.

"Let's hope that you can. Now, we - I mean the three of us here - still have to do our initial session with your clients. After we've done that, we'll brief you on them and do formal introductions in another session. In the meantime, we've sent you a spreadsheet of some functional tests. We'd like you all to go through the list to make sure that we're all perfectly on the same page. Please try and do that within the next twenty-four hours. Okay?"

"Fine", Stanley said, always the first to butt in.

"Got it", said Bilj.

"Yes", said Velicia, then they all said their goodbyes. After the connection was broken, Kandhi leaned back and said, "Well, that went pretty well, don't you think?" "It went", Fred mumbled. "Not so bad", Wen agreed. "Then we'll get to the clients next", Kandhi went on. "In two hours from now. See you then", and she stood up, gathered her laptop and exited the room. Fred and Wen lingered for a minute. "Bad things", Fred said. "Maybe so", said Wen. "Maybe nothing. My worst fear is it's going to be boring." "Stanley style", nodded Fred. "Holy smokes", Wen laughed. "Is that guy old-fashioned or what?" "And the New Age Velicia", Fred snorted. "I was wondering where she's hiding her crystals." "But Bilj seems all right", Wen added thoughtfully. "Has a clue", Fred reluctantly assented. "Well, back to the grinder", he added, and the two of them also picked up their things and took off.

Six

Fred's disgust for the project went beyond his usual negative attitude. Sure, he was a whiner and complainer on the best of days, but lately, since he'd been assigned to 'Fiend International', as he called it, he was closer to quitting than ever. Wen Li paid no attention to his "moods". She didn't understand him, never did and never would, and didn't care to at all. For her, it was all about doing the job. Ethics, morality, justice, none of those abstract concepts ever invaded her world of if, else, and then. She was a thorough professional, having been a developer in her homeland for several years, in such industries as banking and insurance. She'd welcomed the opportunity to come to America and didn't even care what line of work she went into. She would always do

whatever it took, and she would always excel and exceed expectations. This was her way and it was working for her. Emotional attachment to projects and companies and machines seemed unnatural to Wen. She still lived by the rules her grandmother laid down while raising her: be real, be present, and maximize every moment. She believed she was doing so now, every day. She took every occasion as an opportunity to experience a facet of existence. If she came off seeming somewhat antiseptic, well, this was only her way. Some day she knew she would meet a compatible match. Until then she was content to continue the life her grandmother had left her. In a sense, she felt she was merely the next incarnation of that estimable woman.

Fred did not invite Wen to lunch. He knew she would only want soup, and he was tired to death of those Vietnamese meatballs in water. He went his own way instead, hurrying off to what he hoped would be a long, quiet lunch, perhaps sitting in the park all alone with some Lamb Biryani and the dreary Inspector Mole novel he was seemingly unable to finish. The novel was short, a blessing in itself, but confusing, with too many characters and a plot like a pinball machine. His envisioned lunch plan, though, was not to be had. Puku Taray, from Marketing, caught him on the way out the door and there was no getting rid of that leech. Puku was in on all the top secret memos, which was the only reason Fred even tolerated him. Now, as they made their way through the line at the Indian buffet, he hinted that he wanted to know more about the intention of this project. Puku was only happy to oblige.

"It's a service", bubbled the small, thin, happy young man behind his own thick, black-rimmed glasses. "Incremental charges. Brilliant, really. It was all the idea of Chris, you know. He gleaned it from the personal experience of his life, so he said." Everyone knew about Chris, the other founder. This man, whose last name nobody seemed to know, was the long-time best friend

and public side of the other, last-name-less founder. Together they had started World Weary Avengers, based on a surreptitious and thoroughly maniacal personal stalking device, and had grown the company through other equally invasive and outrageous inventions. Chris was tall and handsome, with a full head of curly blond locks and a look about him that somehow in itself seemed to cause massive obedience and obsequiousness from everyone in the world. People who didn't even know him would rush to give him things, to ask what he wanted, to grant him the most personal favors. It was notorious. The man lived in a mansion that had been randomly donated to him by the world's seventeenth richest man, and drove a car that a world-famous athlete "thought he might like". People didn't talk in their normal voices to Chris, but stuttered and stammered in his presence. Chris himself was modest and mild, never asked for anything, never presented himself as anything but a normal guy in his mid-thirties, but he might as well have worn a crown on his head, the way people fussed all around him. Even Fred was known to crack a smile in the presence of Chris, so powerful was this innate charisma.

"What does that guy know about actual friends?" Fred snorted.

"He's surrounded by sycophants constantly."

"People need to be needed", Puku assured him. "This is one of the points. We can guarantee such a thing, if they pay."

"Well, yeah", Fred replied. "That's the basis of the world's oldest profession."

"Profession?" Puke was not aware of the idiom.

"Whores", Fred said in a low tone. "Guaranteed to give you, you know, for money."

"Yes of course", Puku nodded eagerly. "Chris even referenced such a fact. We have much we can learn, he told Marketing All-Hands, from the escorting services, for we are in a way like that. Escort, only not present. Not visible. Never so."

"Never so?", Fred heaped up some green spinach-like stuff on his rice and moved on. He was getting ever closer to his beloved Biryani. Puku, on the other hand, was a strict vegetarian, and never ate much, even at the fanciest buffet.

"No, never", Puku said. "The friend is never supposed to be visible. Even his or her name should not be the real."

"They didn't tell us that", Fred clucked. He wondered if Kandhi knew. It wasn't too late, of course. They'd only done one side of the orientation so far.

"Voice to be disguised, image never shown. This way the friend could be multiple, any of several at any given time, so you see? Then if one of them quits or is fired, it doesn't have impact on the service."

"Naturally", Fred said. They had filled up their plates and taken their seats. Fred was stuffing his face, hoping to hear more. Puku, for his part, liked to talk. He wasn't supposed to be telling these things, especially not to a tester. This was business, not implementation.

"It's all on the clicks", Puku said. "It's a charge for the contact, so naturally ..."

"You want them clicking all the time."

"People need to be needed. When they're needed, they're happy. It's self-reinforcing. The more they get, the more they want. Our service, to be successful, must be successful. You see what I mean?"

"Feedback loop", Fred nodded. "Basic addiction."

"Ideally they will be in the constant contact", Puku added cheerfully, stopping now to pull off some nan bread.

"It's a la carte?" Fred inquired. "No all-you-can-eat?"

"Oh, the all-you-can-eat is of course there as option", Puku intoned, "but at quite the big price if you know what I mean."

"There's bound to be risks", Fred mused. "What about liability?"

"Liability? None!" Puku laughed. "You read the small print. Not responsible for this that or any other thing. At your own risk, all

the way. We will be the very good friend. The very best friend that money can buy. You are having good testing so far?"

"Aha", Fred said to himself. "Puku wants to pick my brains as much as I wanted to pick his."

"We're just getting started", Fred admitted. "We've screened a few prospects for both sides. Initial beta testing you know."

"Multiple sites? Co-location? Long distance? Multi-lingual? Shared roles? Mutable formats? Gender spread and all that?"

"Just getting started", Fred repeated, wondering exactly Puku meant with those terms. Coming from marketing, there were bound to be demands that simply could not be fulfilled. They'd want to sample every possible variation and be presented with charts matching exactly their wildest wet dreams. Happy campers all around and everything in green. No red.

"Well, anything you need", Puku offered. "In terms of direction, you know. Chris has his ideas. He wants certain results and you know what that means."

"He'll get them", Fred promised, and he knew it was so. Chris always got whatever he wanted. It just seemed to work out that way.

Seven

Kandhi didn't think it was going to be easy this time. The matrix of things that could possibly go wrong was simply staggering. The most likely outcome, she guessed, was null, that it would not even work, at all. She had a hard time imagining a positive outcome. What would that even look like? A happy, satisfied customer would be one who gave the service high ratings, who used it a lot, who became dependent on it, needed it, couldn't live without it, and could afford it. She herself wouldn't care to be that individual. Already she had mostly forsaken the ubiquitous socialnet, where everyone was connected to everyone else they barely even knew and kept up with each other's most trivial

doings and thinkings. This phenomena had already cheapened the idea of friendship, reduced it to a mere background noise of everyday life. She knew all about her friends' childrens' artwork, the movies they had seen, the places they had been. Just last night her brother Alphonse had dined at The Happy Carnivore and enjoyed a roast pork platter with greens. It was his third time there in three months. He practically owned the place in some apps.

Information like this was already pouring into every seam of her existence, and she had turned the flow down to a trickle by paying less and less attention. Even that was becoming a challenge, thanks to the fact that lately her screen had acquired a new form of intelligence, due to some unwelcome hidden features committed to in-house source by a senior developer by the name of Lark Fishhead, a feature which caused the fonts to zoom in on their own accord, demanding notice. For example, if she did not visit the Syomatix homepage for more than two days, it would go all full-screen in bold-italic-red-twenty-four-point in a sort of automated scold. There was no way to turn off this behavior. Fishhead had baked it into all of the company's internal systems. At least he hadn't completed the audio portion as yet. She could imagine hearing the program screeching at her to "wake up and smell the coffee", any day now. Marketing had already warned her that this would be coming.

Her intuition was clear on the Friendular thing, clear and totally negative. It didn't help that she had let Fred and Wen pick the beta combinations. It just smelled wrong to Kandhi, but in her last official review she had been chastised for not delegating enough, so she felt she had no choice. Closing up shop for the day, she reviewed in her mind the interviews the team had just finished conducting. First, she reflected on the so-called friends. The Finnish track coach seemed acceptable. He was clearly intelligent and was used to managing relationships. He had a fine track record, so to speak, as an Olympic-caliber long distance runner,

and later as a personal trainer to more of the same, including two gold medalists, a Kenyan and a Swede. His physical ailments were numerous, thanks to his torturous career, so he was mainly confined to his chairs, but that was no impediment for this job. He was available at any hour, exuded a sense of calm and confidence, and had completed the functional test suite promptly and correctly. No politics had seeped into his responses, and no religion either. Personal opinions had been restricted appropriately to trivial and superficial matters. He appeared to be generally compatible across the board, able to get along with quite a wide range of personalities.

The barber had also exhibited a similar range, and had a certain bonus quality of being able to insert both religion and politics without any partiality or condescension. The man was clearly accustomed to chameleon-like adaptability, a key trait Kandhi valued highly and made sure was well represented in the training. On the other hand, the barber's results displayed a certain coldness; he did not express any genuine warmth. There was a frankness about his responses, a bluntness that Kandhi wasn't certain would translate very well. Velicia's results were quite different, also somewhat crude, but warmer. She showed a genuine interest in the subject, a tendency toward empathy that was missing from Stanley. Velicia also was the narrowest of the three, and by narrow Kandhi meant her range of expression and breadth of experience. She seemed the most bound by the conventions of her gender, age and culture. The other two, in other words, were more worldly than she. Still, they all had potential, and Kandhi had to admit that Fred had selected the best of the applicants for that role.

As for the other role, she wasn't at all certain that Fred and Wen had picked anyone suitable. None of the three appealed to her personally, and maybe that was only her problem. She would not want to be a friend to any one of them, and was finding it difficult to imagine that anybody would. Not that there was anything

obviously wrong with them, or maybe her judgment was tainted by the fact that they had even applied for this role, to be the kind of person who would even think of doing such a thing, to be begging, in her mind, for someone to like them, for someone to be their friend. "Get a real friend", Kandhi had wanted to blurt out during that afternoon session. Get a real life while you're at it. Her distaste for the entire project had threatened to come shining through at any moment, so she had tried to leave the talking to Fred and Wen. Another mistake.

Fred had been grouchy, as usual, and Wen never liked to talk very much. Squeezing one sentence out of her was about the most you could hope for at any given time, which left Kandhi holding the bag, trying to get a sense of these people and how they might work out. In Kandhi's opinion, there was something wrong with every single one of them, something she couldn't quite put a finger on, but she just had a sense. The best of the lot, she judged at first, was the woman, Hannah Lincum. Mild and unassuming, Hannah was merely lonely, a widower who performed a lot of volunteer work at the hospital and otherwise did not have a lot going on in her life. It seemed she went every day, spending hour upon hour visiting terminally ill people of all ages, from children with cancer to ancients with Alzheimer's. If prompted, Hannah would list every one of "her" patients (as she called them), listing all of their ailments and medical histories, as she seemed to have it all memorized. And she didn't limit herself to only one hospital, but visited several, even driving several hours if there were enough patients in need of companionship. In her previous life, Hannah had been accustomed to having a husband to talk to all the time, but since his passing, her sense of intimate connection with the world had been draining steadily and she wanted it back, in any way she could. The only problem she had with her patients was that they were often unable to respond to her at any great length. It seemed she did all the talking. She seemed to be hoping for a more reciprocal companionship in this beta project. Kandhi

could see how that might work out, although she deemed it a poor substitute for a real companion, an actual present person. Dave Claunney was not a bad sort, either. He just did not appeal to her. He possessed the perpetual joviality of the delivery guy he was, always quick with a nod and a greeting, some sort of benign, positive indicator that meant nothing and passed just as easily. He was the kind of guy you would like right away, but never know why. He was nice and he made you also want to be nice. He would smile and in turn you would smile. This kind of thing couldn't go a long way. At best you would have a five minute relationship, a friendship that seemed almost intimate but would leave you alone with the sense that it hadn't even happened. He had a kind of heat like a firefly, fleeting and really not as warm as you thought. To know Dave was to know a life size cardboard cutout of Dave. You would have a bit of trouble discerning the difference. He began every sentence with a great deal of energy, which gradually tailed off as it completed. His initial introduction had displayed that exact pattern.

"Hi ya!", he exclaimed. "Dave Claunney here! Glad to meet you! I'm excited, I can tell you. I. I mean I ... I think that it ... Could be... An opportunity ... Yeah ... So ... hey?"

Even his looks turned her off, which Kandhi had to admit to herself. The handlebar mustache was simply too glaring, and she was never a fan of the overly fit, buff male. They only made her more self-conscious of her own physical flaws, and so she had to fight off her negative reaction to Dave throughout the meeting. Finally, there was Nathaniel Woodward ("call me Nate"), a young man whose eyebrows seem perpetually raised in a sort of alarm, as if he was picking up distress signals from the universe at large at every moment. Periodically his eyes would widen too, at the most random moments, when he wasn't even talking or being spoken to. Half the time she was conversing with Hannah or Dave, Kandhi would be distracted by these facial quirks on Nate's panel. She wanted to ask him, what? What is it? Are there blue

pigs landing on Mars at this moment, or what? He had mentioned his interest in clairvoyance. Was he trying to read her mind at those times? In any case, he was a strange one. He had a way of punctuating his sentences with random conclusions. For example, when Kandhi had asked him about his favorite movie, he'd responded with "The Fly, except that Morse Code might have worked better in the final dance sequence". He was also given to fidgeting, and adjusting his shirt collar, which was especially odd since it was only a t-shirt, albeit a t-shirt that read "my other left shoe is a rodeo clown." Nate had a hard time beginning a sentence. Every time he would start off on one, he would stop, as if realizing that what he was saying was not at all what he wanted to say. Then he would pause and consider for several seconds, before picking right up where he left off and finishing just as he'd started. He mentioned that he was interested in tropical fish, and had studied the science of cross-water conversion. He very much wanted them to be able to live in fresh water, for some unspecified reason.

Kandhi had asked Fred after the meeting what he thought of all three, but he didn't have much to say. He only said that he thought that the matches would be interesting, at least. He wasn't exactly looking forward to the task, he'd told her, but he'd promised to do his best, which wasn't what Kandhi wanted to know. He damn well better do his best, she thought. We don't pay him not to. But did he think that the thing was going to work? Wen merely said "yes", but Fred wouldn't commit. The most he would say was, "I guess we'll find out".

Eight

Wen Li did think it might be interesting, but she thought the same about everything. She was a casual scientist in her own way, always observing, making notes, storing away little insights like a squirrel saving nuts, and 'nuts' is basically what she thought of her colleagues, Kandhi and Fred. She had worked for the one and

with the other for a few years now. She enjoyed her position in the group, as the "one who got things done" (as she put it to herself), leaving the agonizing and the drama to the others. It was not her concern whether the products were good or bad, right or wrong, only that they behaved and performed as expected, which meant 'according to the specifications'.

In this case, the specs were clear. The HAFS would maintain a constant connection between the pairs of wearers. The custom protocol that streamed through the connection - called HAFSP, which stood for 'HAFS Protocol' in a rare fit of common sense - was fairly simple and well-defined. Her test code was having no issues with parsing it properly. It consisted of signaling messages, corresponding to the physical gestures they had carefully explained to the beta users, and data packets wrapped securely in encrypted flows. Image and voice transmissions followed actual standard protocols, in another surprisingly sensible move. How was it that development managers were waking up to the realization that old brooms knowing corners actually translated into fewer bugs and quicker times to market? Wen Li clucked her approval as she sat in her cubicle watching the data stream through her visualization application.

She was proud of her work. Here all three beta teams converged in a centralized, easily debuggable main panel. Once she had confirmed the proper workings of her tool, she had sat back to watch and observe the content. Normally this was not her standard practice, but she had to admit she was intrigued. As a person of few words and few friends, she didn't really understand why a person would ever have a need for this Friendular system. She had something of a boyfriend, the mildly affable Bodey Wafer, a developer on the team with whom she occasionally slept and even less frequently conversed. She had her childhood friend Victoria Chen back in Taiwan, with whom she chatted regularly on the phone, and this was enough for her. Victoria knew all there was to know about Wen and vice versa, which wasn't much on

either end but then again, why should it be? They both had their likes and dislikes, their favorite movies and TV shows, the people and things that they approved and disapproved of. Wen had her secrets from everyone but Victoria, and Victoria had hers from everyone but Wen. Wen knew, for example, that Victoria had a thing for Russian men, or even Chinese men who could do a decent Russian accent. Victoria knew that Wen considered her body to be a sort of machine, with its requirements for regular maintenance, and her mind to be a lifelong work-in-progress. How much more did you need to know about someone? Wen had never been the type to strike up a conversation with a total stranger. How the beta people could be doing this and so easily, was a mystery to Wen.

Dave Claunney, for one, had picked right up with Bilj as if he had known him forever. They had barely exchanged greetings when Dave started regaling him with tales of his impending sexual exploits. He said he had at least one prospective female in every office building to which he delivered packages. He also dove right into a detailed discussion of the bustling downtown neighborhood he served, which was heavily into micro- and mini-technologies. "The wave of the future", Dave announced, and Bilj, for his part, was agreeable, courteous and calm, which reminded Wen of her Bodey, and made her want to schedule a "date" with her boyfriend soon. Dave had a lot to talk about. Bilj murmured polite replies. That connection was buzzing along from the start. Wen smiled as she switched to her real-time graphical display, which revealed the data streams as moving line charts over time. She had assigned different colors to the testers. Dave was red and Bilj was purple. Red was by far the highest in the graph. Lower down were blue and green, the colors she had picked for Nathaniel Woodward and the barber, and lowest of all were yellow and orange, representing Hannah and Velicia.

It was expected that a client would talk more than a friend. All of their pre-flight data models had anticipated this aspect, and

contradictory data would indicate a problem in the test, either a friend who talked too much or a client who did not talk enough, or both. So far - and it had only been a matter of hours since blast-off - the actual results were not quite as desired. Still, it was "early days", to use one of the company's stock cliches. It would take time for the dust to settle. Dave's ratio to Bilj was more than three to one. Nate and Stan were closer to the model at 2.3:1. The ladies' team was down near 1:1 and their volume was very low. It seemed those two didn't have much of anything to talk about.

Hannah had kicked it off with a list of her problems; the dead husband, the friends who'd either died or moved away, the kids who didn't care about her anymore, the other volunteers at the hospital who seemed sincere but with whom she didn't have much in common. Velicia, for her part, seemed bored.. She had tried, at first, to be sympathetic and commiserate with her customer, but soon her level subsided as she could not think of anything different to say. There was a lot of uh-huh'ing in her responses as of late, as if this was a tedious phone call which she could not hang up. Wen Li could almost hear the fingers drumming on Velicia's dining room table.

She felt she had a handle on two conversations; the one going well enough with a chatterbox and a responsive friend, the other going down the drain with a tired old drone and a tuned-out partner. The third pair was more of an enigma so far. On the surface the pattern looked good, but when she checked into the actual content, she had to puzzle about it for awhile before she concluded that the two were essentially talking right past each other. Nate was propounding a variety of his favorite theories, while Stan was responding with some standard stock phrases of his own. From Nate it was all about brain waves, cosmic energy and animal consciousness, linkages and synchronicity, karma and destiny. From Stan it was "live and let live", "to each his own", and "you gotta do what you gotta do". Wen took some more

notes, and prepared for the four o'clock staff meeting with the team. She was looking forward to Fred's interpretation of events. She even thought this meeting might be almost fun.

Nine

Kandhi had called the meeting to go over the Friendular metrics. She felt it was important to keep their feet on the ground at all times. Every little aspect of the project had to be measured, and measured again, tracked and then tracked some more. She had thrown together a simple spreadsheet of the items she wanted quantified and qualified, including statistics on all the possible uses and mis-uses of the wristband, friend response times, client request tallies, tone modulation, empathy values, being-thereness, word counts, word sizes, vocabulary differentials, social value disparities, topical hits and misses, and that wasn't all. There were also the myriad relationships and correlations and interactions between these fields that were just as important, if not more so.

Word metrics, for example. If word counts were too far out of balance, this could indicate a lack of reciprocity, a one-way street. If word sizes were likewise out of whack, that could be an indication of a lack of compatibility, a mismatch. A real world friendship could not be all give and no take, but a professional one could withstand - and would probably demand - a drastic imbalance in sympathy. Not everything was clear and simple. This was a new tangle of weeds for Kandhi and her team, a jungle of complexity such as they had never faced before. Fred and Wen came in the room and were immediately overwhelmed by Kandhi's presentation, and started whining in unison.

"Isn't it enough that we're recording and listening to every little thing that happens? Do we have to analyze this stuff to death?", Fred moaned.

"I don't mind some of that", Wen added, "but maybe we should draw the line somewhere this side of realistic possibility?"

"It's just data", Kandhi snapped. "I want more than we can even dream of gathering. I want more than you could stuff into a thundercloud. I want to jam this all right down their throats, you know what I mean? Downstairs they were thinking surfaces only. I want to show them the depths of what we're doing."

"I like surfaces", Fred sniffed.

"Some of it just doesn't make sense", Wen shook her head, tracing the print-out with her finger. "You want to boil it all down to a simple score, is that it? With a bunch of weighted values? How did you come up with the formula?"

"Winging it", Kandhi admitted. "Look, sure, I know there's a lot of rows in there, some obviously more important than others, but we have to know if they using the hardware as instructed, and which aspects are they finding more useful. What is the nature of the interactions and what can we learn from the subjects? In the end, doesn't friendship come down to a score in one way or another? It's like a dart board. Your best friends are the closest to the center, the bullseye. They get the most points for that. The rest are sort of in rings around the center, with the further away being the less important. You might put some quadrants on that circle while you're at it. Public friends versus private ones, social versus intimate, pack versus solo, that kind of thing."

"I'll bet you really do that", Fred shifted uneasily in his seat. "I'll bet you mark it all down too."

"Whatever", Kandhi snapped at him, "the point is, we've got a job to do here. We've got to make a science of it or they'll never get it right. Anyway, what have you got? Think you can start filling in some of these blanks?"

"Sure", Wen said, "we can make a stab at it. We're already seeing some interesting patterns. Like the wristband. What do you say, Fred?"

"Well", Fred pulled himself together, aware that Wen was giving him a chance to make up for his crummy attitude coming in. "All in all I think it's fair to say that nobody's used anything but the tap so far. Just initiating conversation, that's all. No tugs, to pulls, no swipes. None of the special built-in gestures. My guess is they figured out the simplest thing and gave up on the rest."

"Okay, fine", Kandhi started filling in columns on her own printout. "That's a lot of zeros for the user experience experts."

"Quite a variation in quality", Wen continued. "We can see that pretty clearly. The charts are quite revealing. It's only been day one but already there's a lot of divergence between the groups. The Bilj pair is steaming right along but the others are lagging, and spreading apart. See here? I don't know what Velicia is doing."

"She doesn't give a damn", Fred put in, "that's why her response time is so low, her word count too, word size barely minimal."

"She doesn't like Hannah", Wen concluded.

"She's supposed to be a professional", Kandhi sighed. "Maybe we picked a lemon with that one."

"Also the data is kind of deceptive", Wen continued. "In the charts, see here in the middle? It looks on the surface like Stanley and Nate are doing all right, but check out this transvergence. I had to look closer. Stanley's painting by numbers, basically, and Nate doesn't seem to know it. It's like Oblivious Man meet Obvious Man". She laughed at her little joke, but Kandhi didn't get it, and said so. Wen had to explain further, that no matter what Nathaniel said, Stanley had some stock response, always agreeable in tone but rarely relevant at all to the subject at hand.

"Hes a fricking barber", Fred groaned. "We should've figured on that."

"But Nate doesn't care, like you said", Kandhi mused, "so how are we going to sum that one up?"

"You're the math whiz", Fred snickered.

"It's tricky", Wen repeated. "my guess is that sooner or later Nate will wake up and notice, or maybe not. It all depends on what they expect to get out of this thing."

"What if Nate just wants to get paid", Fred suggested.

"We'll have to make an allowance for that", Kandhi frowned. She was thinking about the bottom line, the final row on the spreadsheet, the formula she would have to devise to come up with the ultimate numbers. Expected results versus actual results was always an important component. If you go to the Burger Joint you expect to get fries. If they gave you some red dill potatoes you'd lower the rating, but if they gave you greasy fries at Chez Pompose, you know what I mean, she said to herself. But how to weigh the genuine-ness. That had to be there, it must be a factor. If you're talking about friends, it's got to be real at some point or why bother? There had to be some basic connection. From the look of things, they only had a chance of at best one in three at this point. Should she just give it time?

"Should we just give it time?" she asked her assistants. Fred shook his head because he had no idea. He was becoming acutely aware that he was failing, on the verge of utterly failing this time. He had nothing to say, and for an obstinate opinionator this could become a genuine disaster. Wen was more thoughtful.

"I think that we should", she finally said. "Two days, maybe three, and then, I don't know. Can we stop with any one any time? I don't know the contract."

"We can cancel for any reason at any moment, yes", Kandhi told her. "We just have to pay through the month, but that's not a concern and won't be, unless it starts to add up."

Kandhi dismissed them and went about filling in more rows and more columns with the data she'd seen. She felt she was missing something, even after collating all that data. She sat back and chewed on the tip of her pencil and finally decided to dive into the transcripts themselves. She would read every single word that had passed between all of the clients and their buddies.

Ten

She selected from the files at random, and read.

Dave: I know she'd do it if I asked her, so it's really up to me. I can't make up my mind, though. There's always a risk. The job, for one thing. It's about ethics with me. I try to keep myself above and beyond, you know what I mean?

(interval - seventeen seconds)

Bilj: Keep everything on the up and up, in other words?

(interval - fourteen seconds)

Dave: Right, that's it. Above board, I think that's what I meant to say. Dang. Missed another light. That's three in a row. Usually I get a straight shot down Fourth and then across Wildwood to Part Two. That's how I mark the route, in parts. Part One is Venezia Park. Part Two, Wildwood. Part Three, Amber Cove. So I know where I am in the progress of my day. This one, Shashana? She's in Venezia Park, at the Oblogon Corporation. Receptionist, of course. Most of my ladies are. Heh.

(interval - twenty six seconds)

Bilj: You like her, eh??

(interval - twelve seconds)

Dave: Yeah. yeah, I like her, but mostly it's that smile. The smile's the thing that gets me every time, draws me right in like a moth to a. A moth to a.

(interval - six seconds)

Bilj: flame?

(interval - twelve seconds)

Dave: Yeah, flame. All big teeth and sparkly. Like the hair, too. Puffy. I go for that. Well, here we go. Wildwood. Checking out. Be cool.

(interval - eleven seconds)

Bilj: Be seeing you.

(Dave swiped, disconnect)

Bilj: So to speak.

Kandhi skipped ahead at random to a different conversation snippet.

Hannah: You should see them, the way their eyes light up, like little children, when someone comes to visit.

(interval - thirty four seconds)

Velicia: These are the old sick people?

(interval - seventeen seconds)

Hannah: Yes, yes, that's just it. They are people, just like anybody else. It's not their fault that they're sick. Well, it isn't always their fault. Some of them, they were heavy smokers, heavy drinkers, they never took care of their bodies. Those are the ones that, sure, they deserve to be there. I don't visit with them as much. I know that's not very charitable of me I'm sorry to say. It's the other ones, though, I feel sorry for the most. The ones that just got old and feeble a bit and maybe they fell down and broke their hip and now they're confined and some of them have no one to talk to, no one comes to see them. Where are their families I wonder?

(interval - fifty six seconds)

Velicia: Where are their families?

(interval - nine seconds)

Hannah: That's just what I want to know. Old people have no value anymore. Maybe they used to. Maybe when there were fewer of them, when most people didn't live so long, maybe that was why they had esteem. Scarcity. Supply and demand. I wonder.

(interval - eighty four seconds)

Velicia: I don't really know any old people. I'm not really tuned in to that.

(interval - twenty one seconds)

Hannah: Well, there's me. Though I'm not so old. Fifty seven and a half next Monday. I used to call my mother on her half-birthday every year. I don't know how that started. Then I did the same with my Harry. We always had a special half-birthday dinner on

his and on mine. Harry liked buffets. Something about those big old slabs of roast beef slowly turning. And chickens on a spit. The way the drippings. Mmm, I can just smell it now.

(interval - forty two seconds)

Velicia: I'm a vegetarian myself.

(interval - nine seconds)

Hannah: Of course you have to eat your greens. I would always tell my Harry that. And these people I think I mentioned, the ones who let themselves go. You could tell they never ate their greens. Even there in the hospital they won't touch the spinach. It's a crying shame. When you think of the waste. There's far too much waste in the world today. They have a bad attitude too. Not like the ones who took ill all on no account of their own. Those folk have a sense of justice. I don't know how to say it. You can see in their eyes they know that they've been wronged but they're the ones who bear it best. Good Christian souls, I'd say. The Lord doesn't give you anything you can't handle. I've always found it to be true.

(interval - ninety three seconds)

Velicia: You have to make the best of things.

(interval - fourteen seconds)

Hannah: You said a mouthful there.

Kandhi turned the page but then decided to move on. Might as well sample the third, she decided, and skipped ahead until she came across a page with the heading 'Nate'. She frowned at that. The name is Nathaniel, she muttered to herself, and Stanley, not Stan. She was annoyed with Fred for taking liberties again.

Nate: It's all across the spectrum. Every creature gives off a certain vibration within its own range. I should come up with a system of measurement for this. What would I call it? The Life Spread? Yeah. Because it also kind of sounds like Life's Bread, and that's a cool relation. I like it.

(interval - thirty four seconds)

Stan: Everybody's got their own ways about 'em.

(interval - seventeen seconds)

Nate: And it's not like the sound or light or color. It's orthogonal to that kind of thing. Related, yeah, in an inter-dimensional way, but it's more like a searing, scorching, burning-up-and-out kind of thing. Like they shoot out these sparks and you can catch 'em, but it's not like they're hot or anything. No, it's like they are gems, kind of shiny, but not in colors, and you can tell from the shapes or the texture or even the velocity and the trajectory where they're coming from. I pick it up from animals, like with birds when they're flying overhead, it's not a trail they leave that you can see but more like a pattern they are weaving in the atmosphere around them.

(interval - forty six seconds)

Stan: You got to make your mark in this world.

(interval - nine seconds)

Nate: And then if there's a message you can feel it, you can sense it, like it's right there on your elbow and you open your mind and yeah, like it's right there. Like now. I can tell what you're thinking.

(interval - thirty three seconds)

Stan: You can pick up that kind of thing.

(interval - nineteen seconds)

Nate: Yeah, cool, right. You pick up on it. You pick it up. You pick it, you picture it, up in your mind. It's picked, like a picture.

What? Kandhi read that last conversation over again three times and still it made no sense. There was something definitely wrong about all of this. Is it just me? she wondered, or is it them? The transcripts were exactly as Wen had described them. Wen was onto something, Kandhi concluded. Her analysis was spot on, but her recommendation? She had none. Typical Wen, to pinpoint the problem but offer no solution. Not my job, she would say. I just file, I don't fix. The Wen Way, but Kandhi didn't have that option. This trial was going straight down the toilet.

Dave and Bilj were within the range she had expected.

Engagement to some extent. A decent being-there quotient.

Some connection that could potentially be built upon because of course such things take time. Exactly how much time was something she still hoped to quantify. It would be important to know, to be able to predict and measure, the progress of a friendship from initiation to intimacy, and whether that process had any bearing on the ultimate duration or not. There were far too many variables and she needed a decent sample size. So far she had a sample size of exactly one. It was not going to suffice. Hannah and Velicia? No. Nothing there. Nate and Stan? Slightly better, but still essentially nothing. Nate was way way out there, some kind of kook, she decided. Hannah was a bore and Stanley something of a humbug. Wait. Hannah, and Stanley? Maybe. Maybe. Then what about Velicia? Velicia and Nate? Nate and Velicia? I mean Nathaniel, she reminded herself. She brought up Velicia's profile again and nodded to herself as she reviewed it. Tantric healing, okay, that's weird. Vegetarian. Okay, not normal. Don't know if she's flaky enough for Nathaniel, but better than nothing. Worth a try.

She decided. Kandhi always prided herself on her decisive nature. She would give it one more day, and if things continued as they were going, she would make the switch. She tapped out a memo. The clients didn't need to know. They already didn't know the actual identities of their "friends". This was on purpose, so that there could be exactly this kind of interchangeability. They could swap out friends as needed and with any luck the customer would never know. After there had been a history built up, there could be a problem, but that was for later discovery. For now, it won't have been that long, and you couldn't say there was any real anything built up between those pairs. It ought to be seamless. After tomorrow, Hannah would be communicating with Stanley, and Nathaniel with Velicia. She sent the memo to Fred and Wen. Things could hardly be any worse, she reasoned, than they already were. She could hardly have been more wrong.

Eleven

The same thing had already occurred to Fred. Ever since his conversation with Puku, he'd grown more and more angry about the whole setup, the calculated phoniness, the built-in fail-safe mechanisms, especially the concept of tag-team pseudo-compatibility. The project was an abomination from Hell, even more so than the usual stuff he worked on, and had kept him half awake all night, trying to think of what he should do. Reading Kandhi's email in the morning only added more fuel. He muttered vague obscenities as he digested its contents. He was going to have to come up with an alternative. Something that would make a definite impact. Something only he could do. Kandhi had her millions of metrics, and Wen had her code all over the place. What did Fred have to show for this project? Nothing, so far. A handful of bitter memos predicting its doom is all he could point to. He tried staying in bed, pretending it wasn't already daylight, that the sun wasn't already streaming across the piles of dirty laundry that covered the floor of his minuscule one-room apartment from closet to kitchen. He squeezed his eyes shut and cursed at the light.

Let's review, he said to himself. What do I have to work with? Analytics annoy me. I don't understand them at all. Spreadsheets make me want to throw up. I'd rather eat cat food than look at a chart. Words, that's the thing. Real life. What really goes on. The transcripts, of course! He sat straight up and fumbled around on the sheets for the printouts he'd brought home that night. He found several pages, all crumpled up from his having been sleeping upon them. He scanned through them rapidly, making mental notes as he did. Nate, he's a loony. Dave, mister nice guy. Hannah, she's sneaky I think. Velicia, what a drip. Bilj, a tough nut to crack. Stanley, my god, enough said. I can work with these people, he thought, at least some of them. I can turn up the heat, toss in a spark. Got to be careful, though. Got to be slick. It's time to do some real testing. Now we'll see how it cracks!

Delighted with his sudden burst of insight, Fred bolted right out of bed, threw on some different clothes, and headed into the street. He lived only blocks from the office. He'd be there in no time at all. In fact, he was there almost before Eliza, the bright-eyed young woman whose job it was to keep the coffee pots fresh and full. No one ever saw her arrive, yet she was always there, cheerful and pretty, the opposite of Fred.

"Good morning," she sang out as he stepped out of the elevator at the top floor. Fred merely grunted and turned away. He'd been giving her the cold shoulder for weeks. Once, only once, he'd worked up a smile in return, and the warmth of her reply had scuttled his persona for days. He'd been unable to muster any grumpiness at all and his productivity had fallen way off. If he gave in to her now, it might ruin his whole plan.

"Forget you even saw her," he advised himself as he hurried past. He would have to wait until more people arrived before he could make his way to the coffee pots, otherwise she'd stand a good chance of greeting him again, which he knew she would accomplish with even more grace the second time. Hurrying, he made it into his cubicle without seeing or hearing her again. He logged in to his desktop and was glad to see no new activity. It was still early enough that none of the pairs had gotten going yet. Bilj and Dave were due to launch any moment, with Stanley and Nate to follow, and Velicia and Hannah a bit later. This would give him time to prepare. He had to have a plan.

Of course, the overall strategy was obvious. Interject! As the ubiquitous man in the middle, he was capable of feeding words into the stream unilaterally. He could speak as either side, but the trick was to slip it in naturally, not disruptively. He'd have to remain in character, and yet at the same time make a definite impact. He considered what to say while re-reading the tails of the previous day's transcripts again. What should he say? What could he say? Oh, he had some wicked ideas! If only, he said to himself, if only Hannah brings up that topic again, if only

Nathaniel goes back there, if only Dave keeps up his typical patter. Fred knew exactly where he'd lead them, Oh, it was going to be good. It was going to be glorious. It could possibly ruin everything! He'd already settled on that goal. The Friendular System must be destroyed, and he had only this one day to do it. Kandhi's fix might very well fix it, and he was not going to let that happen if he could avoid it. He rubbed his hands in glee, and, without realizing what he was doing, stood up and strolled confidently over to the coffee pot table, where Eliza was still puttering about. He felt he could handle it now. She could do her worst, which she did, saluting him with an over-eager cheerfulness that reminded him of chipmunks. He grinned an evil grin and even wished her a wonderful day. He chortled inside as he filled up a gigantic Styrofoam cup with fresh, hot, caffeine. It was going to be a nice little day after all.

Twelve

Fred dashed off an email to Kandhi and Wen, exclaiming his support for Kandhi's decision, and especially lauding her intention to give the existing pairs another full day. This would provide more data, he declared, knowing full well that by saying "more data" he was setting a trap that neither of his colleagues could ever resist. Wen would get to fill up her charts, and Kandhi would add to her spreadsheets, and they would sit there happily all the long day, accumulating whatever numbers came in. Meanwhile, Fred would be on the case, monitoring and hopefully "assisting" the three conversations. His coffee had already kicked in strong and well when Dave popped up on the screen, already planning his romantic activities for the morning. He was going to flirt and flirt some more with those poor helpless receptionists, who were probably all just like his Eliza, meagerly paid for their positive vibes and their fresh, clean attractive appearances. Naturally they had to respond to Dave's banter with the same of their own. It

was part of their jobs. Was Dave such a moron that he didn't even see it? It sure seemed so to Fred. He could only imagine what Bilj thought. But no, he corrected himself, he could partly determine what Bilj thought, at least as far as Dave would ever know!

Dave: The Brick Building is next. Pretty funny name for a building, don't you think? It must be named after someone, because it's not even made out of bricks!

(interval - seven seconds)

Bilj: What's it made out of, then?

(interval - nineteen seconds)

Dave: I'm not sure. Maybe it's brick after all, come to think of it. Only it's yellow. I don't usually think about bricks being yellow.

(interval - fourteen seconds)

Bilj: They can be yellow sometimes,

(interval - eleven seconds)

Dave: I guess so. But anyway, I'm going in. It's cool how the wristband just goes anywhere, anytime, Can you even tell what I'm doing right now?

(interval - sixteen seconds)

Bilj: Nope. No, I can't. Can you tell what I'm doing?

(interval - seventeen seconds)

Dave: No idea. You could be in a cell in Siberia for all I could tell. ("Pretty close", Fred, thought, "that's pretty damn close, but come on, Dave, come on. Get with it!")

Dave: There's Kathy. Remember I told you about her? She's the brunette with the totally round mouth. Perfectly round, and red. I've never seen anything like it.

("Outside of a blow-up sex doll", Fred thought)

Dave: There she is now. Ah, look at that smile. Happy to see me as ever.

("Now's my chance", said Fred to himself. It seemed to him that Bilj has stepped out for a moment. His responses, usually immediate, were slightly less so this morning)

Fred (as Bilj): So she doesn't even mind that you're gay?

(interval - forty one seconds)

Dave: What did you say?

(interval - twenty two seconds)

Bilj: Excuse me?

(interval - nine seconds)

Dave: You think that I'm gay?

(interval - eight seconds. Here it comes, Fred thought, holding his breath)

Bilj: I'm gay?

(interval - three seconds)

Dave: You are?

(interval - five seconds)

Bilj: Well, as a matter of fact, Dave, I am. Does it bother you?

(interval - three seconds)

Dave: No, no. But, but you haven't come on to me or anything.

(interval - four seconds)

Bilj: That's not how it goes. I've been with my partner for seventeen years.

(interval - twenty one seconds)

Dave: Seventeen years? Wow. And the whole time you've been, what? You've been 'faithful', I guess the word is?

(interval - eight seconds)

Bilj: Yes, of course. We love each other, very much. You can't have love without trust.

(interval - fifty three seconds)

Dave: Um, I'm going to have to think about this. I'll talk to you later.

(Dave swiped, disconnect)

Thirteen

"Didn't he know?" Fred wondered. "Didn't Dave even know he was gay? Oh my god! You could tell, even without the tone of his voice coming through, just from the words, you could tell he was stunned. And I got away with it! Bilj would never have come out

and said it! Man, I was sweating there for a minute. I wonder if Wen will pick up on it? That's the real concern. She's the one I have to watch out for."

Fred was so excited he could barely contain himself, and usually, Wen would be the first one he'd blab to about something like this. And he couldn't. He couldn't tell anyone, ever, at all. One down, and two more to go, he was thinking. He was going to toss an incendiary conversational device into every one of those pairs, and stand back and watch it go up in smoke, so he hoped. He'd nipped that Dave-and-Bilj thing in the bud. Dave shut right up. From the look of the data, he might have even turned the thing off! Was it true? Had he swiped the 'off' gesture. Yes, there it was in the logs. He'd turned the band off. Bilj couldn't get through to him now if he wanted. As Fred watched the screen, he saw Nate and Stan power up.

Nate: How's it going there, pal?

(interval - fourteen seconds)

Stan: Not too shabby. And you?

(interval - two seconds)

Nate: Going good. Going good. Had an amazing out-of-the-brain-box experience this morning.

(interval - seventeen seconds)

Stan: You don't say.

(interval - three seconds)

Nate: You know how I was telling you about the birds?

(interval - twelve seconds)

Stan: Come again?

(interval - two seconds)

Nate: About how I can pick up what they're up to.

(interval - nineteen seconds)

Stan: I wouldn't want to touch that!

(interval - one second)

Nate: Where they're going and all that. Well, this morning I got this message, I swear, like it was beaming right at me, and guess what? You'll never guess what.

(interval - twenty two seconds)

Stan: Fruit loops?

(interval - two seconds)

Nate? What? No. Not fruit loops. What made you say that?

(interval - twenty two seconds)

Stan: Just guessing.

(interval - three seconds)

Nate: It was coming from some kind of parrot inside of a house. At least I think it was a parrot. That was the image that came in my head, and it sure wasn't happy about being stuck there.

(interval - nineteen seconds)

Stan: Everyone wants to be happy. It's a thing.

("Really?" Fred thought. "That's all you can say? Geez, Stan, I can see I'm going to have to pick it up. Good thing you're so slow on the uptake. I can slip on in any time!")

(interval - six seconds)

Nate: I think it was asking for help.

(interval - four seconds)

Fred (as Stan): I'd go for it. If I were you.

(interval - two seconds)

Nate: You really think I should? I wanted to do it.

(interval - nine seconds, during which Fred held his breath.)

Stan: Do what you want. That's what I say. As long as no one gets hurt.

(interval - six seconds. Fred exhaled.)

Nate: Well, yeah, I wouldn't hurt anyone. Just rescue the bird. It wants to be free.

(interval - fourteen seconds)

Stan: Everyone wants to be free. It's a thing.

(interval - three seconds)

Nate: I'm glad you think so. Thanks! You know, I think I will. I think I'll do it. Hey, I'll be in touch!

(interval - sixteen seconds)

Stan: I'll be here.

Fourteen

“Yee-ha!” Fred shouted, then looked around to make sure no one noticed. People noticed, though. They'd been streaming in for the past several minutes as the office began to fill up. Kandhi was there, and peered out of her office to see what Fred was about, but he gave her a shrug and a half of a smile, which sufficed to exhaust her attention. It was just Fred being Fred, she concluded, no doubt having one of his brainstorms again. She directed her focus back to the screen.

She'd been following the chat, and didn't notice anything unusual, only that the conversation had been unusually brief. Otherwise, Stan was his usual tiresome self, and Nate was babbling in the way that was normal for him. She had no doubt he believed he could communicate mentally with parrots. She hadn't yet looked at the Bilj-and-Dave chat but only noticed, from the live scrolling graph, that their conversation had also been short. No doubt they would come into action again soon. Dave's job often punctuated their interactions with pauses while he loaded and unloaded boxes. Besides, she had no concern about them, and didn't feel the need to review the transcript. Fred had been counting on that. He already knew what he was going to do about Hannah. She would no doubt go on and on about the poor sick people in the hospital whom she visited, and how they were suffering so much, and blah blah blah. He knew that Velicia didn't care. She was all about vibrations and crystals and what-not. It would be just like her to mildly suggest that no one should have to suffer needlessly. Oh yes, that would be just like something she'd say. Help them, Fred as Velicia would advise. Do something for them. He could tell that this was what Hannah was waiting to hear. She

wanted to “help”, and she wanted to be recognized for her well-meaning intentions. How should he say it, though, in such a way that the meaning was clear but simultaneously vague? Velicia would never publicly advocate precisely what Fred had in mind. It would be a delicate operation.

In the meantime, Wen had arrived and wheeled her chair into Fred's cube. She wanted to talk about stuff. Normally, Fred liked nothing more than these sessions with Wen, but this day he could hardly contain his frustration. Velicia and Hannah could come on any time and he didn't want to miss this great opportunity. Wen was saying that she didn't know if she agreed with Kandhi's decision or not.

“Are we really going to keep juggling until we get the right combinations? What about the negative cases? We need to know how it fails, when it does. I think it's okay to have one set that works, and two sets that don't. I think we ought to let it go on,” she told Fred.

“Maybe it will,” he suggested. “After all, they do have all day today to get it together. Maybe they will.”

“I doubt it,” Wen sighed. “I think by the end of the day they'll be begging to get off the test. Stanley and Velicia, I mean. It must be driving them crazy.”

“I think Stan can handle it,” Fred said. “After all, he's used to the tedious chit chat of strangers. I'd be amazed if he even paid any attention to anything Nate's saying. To Stan it's all easy money.”

“You're probably right,” Wen had to agree. “But what about Velicia?”

“It'll have to be something unusual to get her attention,” Fred nodded. “Those two are really way off. I wonder what could bring them together.”

“Hannah would have to go cosmic,” Wen laughed, “I just don't think she can do that.”

“Cosmic, eh?” Fred muttered, “that might do the trick.”

“Won't happen,” Wen added. “Hannah's as steady as she goes. She couldn't think 'brown' if she was inside of a paper bag”

“Did you work up any new metrics?” Fred asked her, changing the subject, and hoping to get her out of his cube.

“Nah, I think I've got it all covered,” she said, slumping into her chair. She would like nothing more than to have a new task. Fred had to think fast.

“So they're all correlated? You know, on a scale?”

“Yep,” Wen informed him. “All up and down.”

“What about tone?”

“What do you mean?”

“From the transcripts all we have is the words, so there's word counts and syllables and intervals and all of that stuff, but I was thinking we're not doing audio much. The tone of their voices, I mean. What can we get out of that?”

“I looked into it,” Wen replied. “There isn't that much. The variation is just much too wide. We couldn't account for localization, for one thing. Tonality in Italian, for instance, is not all the same as Chinese. Then again, the tone doesn't translate directly to emotion even within the same person. There's just too much context.”

“But there's data,” Fred countered. “Tonality per person per session, I mean. How many times does Stanley breathe deep? How many times does he sigh? You could work up a map for each chat. It might come to nothing in the overall picture, but without all the data you never can tell.”

“You're right,” Wen brightened. “You don't really know till you try.”

“Sometimes the data speaks for itself,” Fred concluded.

“Again, right,” Wen declared as she kicked off from the floor and scooted out of the cube along with her chair. “I'll get to working on that right away.”

“You just never know,” Fred called after her, relieved to have thought of something to lose her, and not a moment too soon.

Velicia and Hannah were on and yes, she was talking about her terminal patients, and yes, Velicia was taking a long time to answer, and yes, Fred did have a plan. He'd mention something about souls. That was it! That was the word that would bring them together. Souls, and their spiritual needs, in contrast to bodies and their physical ones. Then he would sit back and watch it all bubble.

Fifteen

By lunchtime, all of the subject streams had gone down. First it was Dave, then Nathaniel, and finally Hannah was completely off-line. Not a heartbeat, not a murmur, not a pulse. Kandhi was the first one to panic. As soon as she noticed, she had promised herself she would “keep it together”. When Dave had logged off, Kandhi had chalked it up to normal. All of them were under contract, of course. They were allowed to turn off the engagement stream by means of the swiping gesture, but the terms were clear about everything else. The connection could only be broken if the wristband was removed, and the wristband was NOT to be removed, under any circumstances. Death itself would not have been a good enough excuse. Something must have gone wrong, because Nate's connection was not only dropped, it was gone. And then Hannah's went too. At that, Kandhi nearly fell off her chair.

“Fred! Wen!” she shouted from her office, not even bothering to use the phone. Fred and Wen came running, recognizing the unmistakable quality of despair in their bosses' voice. It didn't require any tonal analysis for that.

“What?” Kandhi choked on her words. She could only gasp and gesture at the wall where she'd projected her desktop.

“Flat-lined,” Fred intoned. “Every one of them flat-lined”

“The friends are still there,” Wen chipped in, trying to look on the bright side, and it was true that the beta friends' signals were still

active and strong. Clearly there was nothing physically wrong with the HAFS.

“That doesn't help,” Kandhi sputtered. “It would be better if all of them weren't. Then we'd know it had to be the network or something else THAT MAKES SENSE!”, she ended by nearly screaming.

“Take it easy,” Fred muttered, realizing at once his mistake. Kandhi turned on him and pressed her face nearly right up to his.

“Easy?” she yelled. “Easy? What is so fricking easy?”

“Nothing?” Fred suggested, leaning away. Inside, Fred was all jumbled up. He knew, for a fact, that each of the partners' last conversations had ended shortly after his own “interventions”. He had injected just the right thing that would bring each of them to a close, and he knew it. Whatever was happening was entirely his fault, or rather, he had been the proximate cause. The individuals were still responsible for their actions, whatever those were. He had no clue what they were actually up to. He could make some guesses. Each of the subjects had somehow acted, had each done something in response to his prompting.

“All I have to do is keep my mouth shut,” Fred said to himself, reflecting at once that this was going to be the hardest thing he'd ever done in his life. It wasn't easy being a big-mouth, being the guy who was always the downer in the room. He'd never been good at holding back, at keeping quiet, at playing his cards close to his chest. Quite the opposite, in fact. He was very, very good at blurting out whatever obnoxious comment came into his mind. He was quick on the verbal trigger, the fastest draw in the West, he liked to consider himself. If there was blame to be assigned, he would never hesitate in pointing the finger. If there was any chink in any armor anywhere, Fred would be sticking his finger right into it. It was his talent, his specialty, his gift. Now, for his own sake, he had to zip it, and zip it tight. Feigning complete and utter ignorance was the only way to go.

“Ideas? Suggestions? Wild-ass guesses?” Kandhi was demanding. Fred kept his mouth sealed tight and shook his head. After a few tense moments, it was Wen who spoke up.

“It could have been something they said,” she offered, as if this weren't already obvious.

“Then let's go over the transcripts,” Kandhi declared. “Even better, let's get all of the imaginary so-called friends on the line and go over it together, like a team,” she added, bitterly. It was getting a bit late in Norway, but Kandhi didn't care. Bilj was wide awake in any event, and greeted the gathering cheerfully.

“I don't know where he's got to,” he replied to Kandhi's question.

“We talked a little bit and then he signed himself out. Since then I haven't heard a word. It must have been four or five hours ago.”

“Four hours and forty-seven minutes,” Wen informed the group. Turning to Stan, she added, “Three hours, sixteen minutes for you, and Velicia, two hours and ten.”

“This cannot be happening, you do understand?” Kandhi told the faces assembled on the wall.

“What can we do about it?” Bilj shrugged. “We are only to be here when needed. When we aren't needed, well, we're still here.”

“That's how I see it,” Stanley agreed. “When the buzzer goes off, I see what he says. I say something back. It's routine.”

“According to the guidelines,” Velicia put in, “we basically speak when we're spoken to.”

“And what did you say?” Kandhi wanted to know. “Each of you must have said something. It's entirely too coincidental that all of your contacts have apparently discarded their wristbands, in complete and utter violation of the terms of our agreement.”

Each of the friends held up their arms to demonstrate that they, at least, had violated nothing, as far as they knew. Kandhi was already shuffling through the transcripts.

“I've emailed each of you the record of today's conversations. Please take a moment to review. There isn't much to see. None of them went on very long.”

"Five minutes four seconds was the most," Wen put in, then fell silent beneath Kandhi's glare. Fred pretended to be reading his copies. He already knew very well what was said.

"Oh, this is good," Kandhi sneered. "Mr. Bjurnjurd, why did you feel the need to inform Mr. Claunney that he is in fact a homosexual?"

"I did?" Bilj looked puzzled, as Stanley burst into snickers and Velicia's eyebrows shot up. "I remember we talked about that," he continued, as he studied his record, "but as I recall, he was the one who brought up the matter, not me."

"And yet," Kandhi pointed at the transcript. "It says so right here. And I quote: So she doesn't even mind that you're gay!"

"I see that," Bilj nodded, "but I certainly don't remember saying it."

Fred was holding his breath so hard he nearly turned blue. "This is it," he said to himself, "the moment of truth."

"I do remember thinking it, though," Bilj sighed. "I guess I must have said it out loud."

Fred exhaled with such force that even Kandhi noticed and gave him a look. He pretended to cough a little bit to cover his tracks.

"Maybe I did," Kandhi mimicked his tone, "you bet that you did. It says so right here."

"It didn't seem to bother him," Bilj replied. "He said he was going to think about it. See? Here? That's where it ends. He was going to think about it. That's the last that I heard."

"Guidelines?" Kandhi clapped her hands over her eyes. "Might be a little bit personal don't you think?" she mumbled.

"I guess," Bilj Bjurnjurd looked sheepish. "I guess I might have messed up," he continued.

"So what did I say that was wrong?" Stanley interrupted. "I don't see anything here."

"Neither do I," Kandhi admitted. "But it must have been something."

“There's nothing,” Stanley insisted. “All I said was a bunch of encouragement. Go for it. Do what you want. I was being a sport, supportive, I mean. Like you said, like the guidelines. You got nothing on me.”

“Me too,” Velicia broke in. “She was talking her usual line about all the sick people she sees in the hospital and how come they suffer and all. So then look, like it says in the transcript, it's their bodies that are going through hell, but their souls are destined for heaven. What's wrong with that? It's the first time we ever connected, to tell you the truth.”

“I don't know,” Kandhi shrugged. “I have to admit, I had no idea. I was hoping one of you would come up with something.”

There was silence all around. Finally, Kandhi let them all go, and turned to face her employees. Fred was still keeping his vigil, and Wen was maintaining a serious, if unhelpful, look on her face. Kandhi felt she was beginning to go into shock, She recognized all the symptoms – irregular heartbeat, shallow breathing, inability to think clearly, even now beginning to rock uncontrollably on her seat. Bad things were going to happen, she knew. Bad things were already happening. This became crystal clear when a perfunctory knock on her office door was followed by the entrance of the dreaded security chief, Ginger MacAvoy.

Sixteen

“Well, well, the three musketeers,” Ginger snapped, stepping into the room. She was not a tall woman, but was a terrifying one none the less. Her unnaturally bright orange face was spotted with over-large freckles, and her glazed over-sized aviator glasses added to the impression of a monstrous peregrine falcon. Her shock of red hair only added to her imposing visage. Ginger was not someone you wanted to face under any circumstances, especially not bad ones. Kandhi shrank back in her seat as Ginger approached. Fred began to tremble. Only Wen was able to keep

her composure. She always found Ginger a fascinating subject and was glad of any opportunity to observe her in action.

"We've just received some interesting information," Ginger pronounced each syllable slowly, as if she were speaking to infants. "It seems that some of our exceedingly precious artifacts have been finding their way into various local police precinct stations. Fortunately, these priceless devices have our contact information embedded upon them. Otherwise, they might well have fallen into the wrong hands entirely. Of course," she continued after a pause, and glaring at each person in turn, "seeing as they had already passed through the hands in this very room, one might very well say they had ALREADY fallen into the wrong ones!"

She then let a silence fill up the room like a poisonous gas while she studied their faces intently. Ginger began to pace back and forth across the wide open space of the room.

"How did you ever get such an office?" she muttered to no one in particular. "Top floor, corner window, ample room ..."

Turning back to face Kandhi she yelled,

"For a NOTHING LIKE YOU?"

Kandhi nearly peed in her sweatpants. This was not going well, not at all. She ventured to speak up, however. Even a condemned prisoner gets to say some last words.

"Where, exactly?"

"Exactly?" Ginger retorted, "Well, let us see. I admit I don't have the precise latitude or longitude with me at the moment, but I can tell you this. Of the two devices we presently know of, one has ventured from a police station in Paducah, Kentucky to a mental hospital in Louisville, while the other has voyaged from a hospital in Pasadena to a police station in Pomona, California. Oddly symmetrical, don't you think?"

"Only two?" Kandhi spoke up, instantly regretting her choice of words.

"Oh, so more have been lost?" Ginger demanded.

“Well, there's one other one we're not certain about.”

“That would be batting a hundred!” Ginger exclaimed. “Well, at least you don't do things halfway., Half-assed, yes, for sure, but at least not halfway!”

“Can we ask?” Wen began but Ginger cut her off.

“Oh yes, you can ask,” Ginger snarled. “Where to begin? Where to begin?” She began pacing the room again, this time with her hands behind her back.

“Let's see. Which crime spree of the two is the more spectacular? The several home invasions? No, too pedestrian, too mundane by far. How about the attempted murders? Yes, that's the one. Who can tell us some more about that? The name is Hannah Lincum, does that sound familiar? A rather frequent hospital volunteer, so it seems, who was caught while dismantling the life support systems of several elderly patients? Hmm? Nothing to say?”

“I had no idea,” Kandhi breathed.

“Letting their souls go to heaven?” Wen reminded her.

“Oh, is that what we call it now?” Ginger demanded. “Then what is the going terminology for when a young man breaks into a series of houses and claims to be liberating their pets?”

“Going for it?” Wen mumbled.

“Nice,” Ginger responded as the three of them squirmed. She watched with great satisfaction before finally informing them that she already knew all about it.

“Of course we have all the transcripts,” she told them. “You don't really think that we let you do anything without adult supervision around here? What a nightmare that could be! Just imagine the things that might happen.”

Fred began to sweat seriously in earnest. If they really were tracking proficiently, they would be able to know precisely who had typed in which messages and where. He'd be caught out for sure. He hadn't even considered disguising his address. He tried hard to think. Was it really his fault? Just because he'd said certain things? Surely the individuals were responsible for

whatever their actions had been. He could not be held accountable. Well, maybe not legally. There remained the simple matter of his livelihood. He'd be ruined. He'd never be able to work in high tech again.

"We know who said what and when," Ginger went on. "Your selection of test subjects has proven to be rather dubious, wouldn't you say? Incompetence rules around here, but we already knew that, didn't we? This isn't the first time such calamities have occurred on your watch, now is it, Ms. Clarke?" "Just doing my job," Kandhi sputtered.

"As for the third of our friends," Ginger went on, ignoring her. "That remains to be seen. We have secured the address of this Mister Dave Claunney and are now helping the police to locate him. Given the other two cases so far, this one could be quite the emergency. It seems he was forced from his comfy little closet. God only knows how he'll react. Such matters don't always go well, don't you know?"

Ginger spun around and strode to the door.

"Someone will keep you informed," she promised. "In the meantime, please don't do anything, and by that I mean really, don't do anything at all. Turn off your computers, but do not leave the premises. Someone will be in touch with you shortly."

She gratuitously slammed the door on her way out. Everyone on the floor had heard everything anyway, and nobody dared to look up. It was never a good idea to draw attention to yourself in the vicinity of Ginger MacAvoy. Kandhi, Fred and Wen remained in Kandhi's office for several more minutes. Kandhi did turn off her machines and, looking glum and nearly in tears, finally waved the others away. After they'd left the office, she just sat there, staring at the wall.

Seventeen

Fred and Wen returned to their cubes and kept to themselves, Wen disobeying instructions and getting right back to work on her

stats. There were still quite a few to be analyzed, especially the friends' incoming data, which was interesting in itself. She was curious about the shapes the data would take when they were perennially unoccupied otherwise. She would map/reduce until physically restrained. Ideally, all three friends' data should be identical, but it wasn't. There were unanticipated variations which she sought to explain algorithmically. At one point she even called over a couple of developers to look at her charts. They too were intrigued, and so the afternoon passed in relative normalcy for her.

Not so for Fred. He had followed Ginger's orders and turned off his laptop, and also the servers on which he'd been running regressions. Then he sat back and realized he was unable to function without his machines. His brain had nothing to do, so he pulled out his phone and tried to go about working on that, but it just wouldn't do. He couldn't install all the Python libraries he needed, for they simply hadn't been ported yet to the bleeding edge OS he had rooted. He gazed longingly at his laptop and considered turning it on once again. Only dread kept him from actually doing it. He was forced to think long and hard about what he had done, and whether or not it could really be traced. After all, once a message was slipped in the stream, did it really retain its trajectory? Was the origin IP embedded inside of the protocol, or was it replaced, overridden by the messaging objects? He wished that he could remember, and the answer was so tantalizingly close. He could definitely find out right away, if only he could turn on the laptop, run a quick diagnostic, and capture some packets, just to be sure. The fact of not knowing was driving him crazy. His fingers were practically twitching in his frantic anxiety. The hours passed slowly for Fred.

He felt no remorse. That was certain. He'd done what he'd done because it had to be done. Letting the project go on as it had been was going to lead them nowhere, he knew. It was a bad beta batch, not because he'd paired them up wrong, and not because

Kandhi had let him pick out the subjects, and not because of anything anyone did. It just was, and was destined to be, by the nature of the product itself. Friendship was a slippery thing, solid one day and vanished the next. People changed, they moved on. Good friends were not only hard to find, they were nearly impossible to keep, at least at the same level forever. Your best friend one day could be your enemy the next, or just drift away, become an acquaintance, before you even had any idea what had happened. And there were so many facets of friendship. It could never be clearly defined. There were friends who knew what you liked, and friends who knew what you WERE like, friends who knew your heart, and friends who knew only your wallet. What kind of friend could these beta friends be? It was open to whim, to accident, to happenstance. You couldn't let people be merely themselves and expect to end up with useful results!

So the boat must be rocked. The match must be lit. He'd seen it, he'd known it, and he'd done it. He didn't have any idea what would happen, only that something might, which was infinitely better than the nothing he was already sure of. The way that the test had begun was like filling a pot with water and putting it on a stove. Fine, if what you wanted was a pot full of water, useless if you wanted hot tea. Well, now it was done and there was no use in crying about it. Chances were he'd be able to get another job in some other city someday! After all, he was still an experienced tester, and for some reason companies thought that they needed such persons. It was on the long checklist of things they felt they needed to have, like offices offshore and slogans.

Two o'clock came, and three o'clock went, and Fred stayed right there in his cubicle. He had fallen into a sort of reverie, contemplating the doom which had suddenly befallen him, when he was startled by a tap on his shoulder. It was Wen Li. He nearly leaped right out of his seat, and managed instead to fall on the floor.

“Steady, there,” Wen chuckled, leaning over to offer him a hand up. Fred shook off the gesture and got to his feet.

“We've been summoned,” Wen informed him.

“Oh, that's just great,” he replied, following her out of the cubicle area.

“Summoned by who?” he asked. Wen just shrugged.

“I don't know. I was told to come get you. We're supposed to go down to a basement meeting room called Lafayette. Ever heard of it?”

“Nope,” Fred said.

“Well, it shouldn't be too hard to find,” Wen considered. They passed a few people on their way to the elevator, colleagues who conveniently found other places to look instead of at them.

“What are we, being shunned?” Fred grumbled. He recognized some of his most antagonized developers among those who were studiously avoiding him. Fred silently swore an oath of revenge. He was certain they were all snickering into their sleeves.

“They're just worried the project's been canceled,” Wen told him.

“The rumor is going around.”

“Good!” Fred spat as they waited for the elevator. “That's the best that could happen. Stupid computerized friendship bracelets!”

“I thought they were cool,” Wen mildly replied. The elevator door opened and revealed Ginger MacAvoy waiting inside.

“Going down?” she sneered. Wen and Fred exchanged worried glances.

“Come on in,” Ginger ordered. “I was just coming for you anyway.”

They obeyed, and the three rode in silence, down to the basement. Wen was thinking that at least this way they'd be having no trouble finding that meeting room, and she was correct. Ginger knew exactly where they were going. The only surprise was that she didn't enter the room along with them. Instead, she said “bon voyage”, and facetiously waved them goodbye.

Wen and Fred entered the small meeting room. It was barely large enough for one meager round table and four wicker chairs, all of which had been painted bright white like the walls and the floors and the ceiling. Kandhi Clarke was sitting in one of those chairs, shaking so hard her shoes were rattling on the floor. The chair to her right was occupied by the company's legendary co-founder, Chris.

"Please, come on in," Chris said, rising to greet them. He towered over the two, and his toothy white grin seemed hellish to Fred, who was immediately overwhelmed with emotion. Only Wen seemed immune to his spell, as she casually shook his hand, and then took her seat.

"First of all," Chris began, after they all had sat down. "I want to begin by saying 'thank you'. I know you've worked hard, and you've done a fine job."

Fred could only gape at the man. Whereas earlier he'd found it so hard to keep his mouth shut, at this moment it couldn't have opened for anything in all of creation. Kandhi merely sat there and blinked. It was unlikely she could absorb any of this, her mind was so gone, but Chris was still talking.

"We've all been impressed by how rapidly you've managed to validate the essential life trans-formative power of our latest technology. We already knew of this power, of course. That much was clear from the start, but to have such a clean demonstration is truly amazing. We never expected such an immediate impact. Why, the intervention potential alone is enormous."

Chris glanced around, and realized the team was in no way prepared for this kind of briefing. There were dozens of use cases he could easily mention, and the co-branding potentials were staggering, but all of that would be lost on this crowd. He smiled, and took a deep breath.

"Ah," he went on. "The Ginger effect! No, no, I can see it in your faces," he said as Kandhi attempted to speak. "I do apologize about that. She has a tendency to get carried away, I'm afraid.

She was only supposed to inform you that we'd found the devices. We were sure that you must have been worried. After all, transmission can only terminate when the device is physically removed, and the subjects were instructed never to do that. They were so instructed, were they not?"

"Yes, of course," Kandhi managed to say.

"It was the police who removed them in two of the cases," Chris told them.

"And the third?" Wen spoke up, "Did you find it?"

"Oh, yes," Chris laughed. "Not to worry. That one had a happier ending. It seems our friend Dave, it was Dave, was it not? It seems he was inspired to propose to his long-time best buddy! The two men ran off to New York to get married! Apparently, he didn't like how the HAFS looked along with his outfit, so he just took it off and stuck it in a dresser drawer, which is where our operatives found it, along with a thank you note for his friend, what's his name? Bilge?"

"Bjurnjurd," Fred stammered. "Bilj Bjurnjurd."

"Yes, in fact here's the note," Chris produced a scented envelope from his shirt pocket. "Would you pass it along? It's quite nice."

Kandhi took the letter and opened it up. It read, in very fine penmanship:

Dear Bilj,

I can't thank you enough for your kind words of friendship. It's meant more to me than I know how to say. I hope we will talk again soon.

Your Friendular Friend,

Dave Claunney.

"Well, how about that?" Kandhi breathed. Chris went on.

"Wen, I'd especially like to congratulate you on your work for this project. The team has been raving about all your metrics, especially your most recent work on discrete tonality mapping. It's really quite fascinating. We'll be talking to you about patents on that."

Wen nodded, and gave Fred a wink.

“And Fred,” Chris said, turning to him. “I don't know precisely your contribution this time, but I'm sure it was also magnificent. It usually is.”

“It was nothing,” Fred murmured. “Wen did all the good work. And Kandhi, of course.”

“Of course,” Chris said, beaming. “Kandhi always comes through. We rely on it, don't we, my dear?”

But this was too much, especially coming from Chris. Kandhi started to cry, at first just a sniff and a sob, but soon she was openly weeping. Chris scootched his chair over and put a long arm around her shoulder, pulling her close. With his other arm he gestured for Fred and Wen to go away, which they happily did.

“I guess this means they won't kill it,” Fred groused as they got back upstairs and went off to their cubes.

“Oh, no”, Wen said, giggling. “Not at all. In fact, I think it's going to be big.”

“I don't even want to know,” Fred sighed. “I don't even want to think about what they will do.”

“Whatever it is,” Wen replied, “One thing's for sure. I'm certain that you're going to hate it!”

Even Fred couldn't argue with that.