

Collected Stories

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The Depths

Rage

Common Denominator

Savage Glen

Alphanumerica

Hell's Outpost

Why I Love Democracy

(writing as Enrique Batsnuwa LaCzynevitch McGomez)

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“All passengers prepare for emergency landing!”

Every nerve in Mason’s body was a live wire. There wasn’t a damned thing left to try, but he couldn’t let go. Even though he knew the jetliner was out of control, even though the ground was rushing at him with all the visual impact of a tsunami, even though he knew he was about to die a death beyond imagination. “Everybody out of the aisles! Seatbelts fastened! Heads down between your knees!” He switched off the cabin speakers.

“God in Heaven!” the copilot screamed. “Oh God! Oh God! Oh Jesus Oh God! Oh Jesus oh God oh God oh God oh—”

“Ground, this is AAL-7. We are going down. We are going down. Beth I love you, I love you. Kids, I love you I love you I lo—” His throat seized. Blood filled his eyes, his arms locked, his entire body went into shock. To port and starboard, black smoke billowed and wheeled, racing its orphan wisps in dark tendrils that swept the glass like loose wipers. Now the smoke passed as though cleared by a gigantic lung, and the visual window blew out to a rocketing, reeling panorama of fuzzy landscape and crystal clear details—ancient cacti, gutted cars, weeds and rocks so sharply defined they might have been etched into canvas—as his head jerked back, as his mouth shot open,

as his airways broke wide for one riveting, endless, mindblowing scream.

The smoke and dust were terrific, all but obscuring the crash site. Flames shot through the plane's corpse, danced and raged overhead, lit the windows and passed. The smell of jet fuel was everywhere. A trough the length of three football fields had been ripped out of the land, ninety feet wide at its broadest. Nose, cabin, and tail were in three distinct sections, buried, rather than scattered, due to the dramatic incline of descent. The right wing had detached completely, the left was a black crumpled ruin. And the real-time concussions, the aftershock of impact, still sang in the earth, still sent small stones tumbling.

And the rifts in the desert appeared as tiny sand pools. And the dirt spilled round as the hot dusty creatures burst aboveground at full tilt and maniacally charged the wreckage. Their pecking order was evident; the fastest and toughest were the first inside—the first-pickers of cufflinks and fountain pens, of ribbons and bows. Seat belts and oxygen masks were savaged in the rush, the carnage completely ignored. One squealed, and there was a sudden frantic pile-on of hairy bodies. In a minute the victor came up grasping a cheap patent leather billfold. After a short, brutal flurry, this little monster used his teeth to tear out a photograph of a sweetly smiling family. He snatched it with his paw, pressed the treasure to his chest, and threw the billfold, with its cash and traveler's checks and credit cards, to the losers.

Crash investigators have one of the toughest jobs on the planet. You never really adjust to it—ever—though it's imperative to develop a steely exterior, and to always treat it as just a job.

Crash investigators for major airlines have upped that career ante considerably. Analytical and technical aspects aside, it's not just a matter of noting and recording the dead—angles, impetus, collateral consequences—it's a matter of cataloguing torsos, mutilated faces, miscellaneous body parts, many burned beyond recognition. A museum display in Hell: the plane's great black ruptured body, split open like a ripe pomegranate, the horror of charred corpses duly strapped in for the unbelievable, some cut right in half by those very seat belts . . . the nauseating stench of a charnel house, the hundreds of wild fixed

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expressions that not even death, not even flames, not even formaldehyde can repair.

This job description, and the once-sanguine men and women who complement it, provides for a sober on-site experience. Those who try to survive by alleviation—through camaraderie and inappropriate or disrespectful behavior—don't last. They're not tolerated by the professionals who have built up the fortitude to take nightmares in stride, to break down only in the womb of family, and to regularly come to work with a set of gonads that would humble a daredevil.

Deale got through it with an air of iron efficiency. An amazing man, able to consider the trajectory of a mutilated child with the emotional detachment of a chemist at his microscope—even if that innocent cadaver happened to be a dead ringer for his own beloved blonde daughter. His men were fellow travelers, treated with complete seriousness, no matter how deep or trivial their issues. Deale could get along with almost anybody, in a business sense, so long as that anybody behaved with mutual respect.

One person he couldn't get along with was the by-the-book, automaton type; the type that uses rank and connections as wedges to override authority. So when the tall ponytailed brunet in worker's protective goggles, black form-fitting jumpsuit, and narrow steel-toed boots flashed her I.D. he automatically became a different creature, the kind of man his crew secretly admired. Deale glanced at her credentials with an air of surly indifference. Marilyn Sharpe. Yeah, pretty sharp all right, and way too good-looking to be taken seriously. Colder than dry ice. Didn't know her place in a man's world: started off *expecting* to be taken seriously, then had to show she wasn't soft, *then* had to show she was the baddest bitch in the litter. Lipstick lesbo waxing bull. Eyes deep and cool, mouth soft and wide. But that voice would wilt a satyr:

“You're Deale? I've been assigned to manage this site; those bodies are not to be moved by anyone, not without my okay.”

He looked away. “We're pristine here, Sharpe.” Deale hiked a leg up on a bumper for his watching men's sake, adding with thinly veiled condescension, “Is there anything we can *help* you with, agent?”

“I want absolutely nothing removed from these victims. Every ounce of personal belongings is to be meticulously accounted for.”

Deale stomped over and got right in her face. “Agent Sharpe. If you're implying . . . if you're hinting for a nanosecond that one of

my men is some sicko stealing off the dead then you're going to find yourself with real problems here. Meaning, with me."

She met him chin-to-chin. "Inspector Deale. My department isn't accusing anybody of robbing the dead of cash and valuables. What's pertinent, and this obviously has nothing to do with you or your men, is property of sentimental value. Relatives of victims of three of Southern Nevada's last major air disasters have reported articles missing—articles of great personal, rather than monetary, dearness; objects naturally overlooked by investigators, but worth gold to the next of kin."

Deale smirked and backed off. "So old Dickey Riley still gets around, huh?"

"Riley?"

Deale blew her off. "The Columbia pilot. Don't play innocent."

"Not familiar."

Deale considered her askance. "Richard Riley was pilot of the 747 that took down three hundred and forty-eight fares and a crew of eleven just shy of Vegas way back in October. The only survivor, if you can call it that. When they put him back together he started raving about ghouls in the desert, stealing spiritual items off the dead."

"Transients? Campers?"

Deale smiled wryly. "No, Agent Sharpe. Real ghouls. Things that go bump in the night. None of this is classified; it's just the stuff that trickles down the airmen's grapevine." He bowed for effect. "Maybe I could set you two up."

She pulled on her mask and surgical gloves and made for the plane. "First things first."

Sharpe wasn't sure what to expect, though she'd been briefed on issues of Riley's temperament, the urgency of personal sterility, and bedside protocol. She knew Riley had broken virtually every bone, lost copious quantities of vital fluids, been burned over seventy percent of his body, and been pronounced dead at least three times, twice at the scene of the accident. She knew he could communicate only by *kazoo*, the artificial voicebox implanted in those with irreparable throat trauma, could eat and eliminate only via tubes and traps, and then only with assistance, could neither go outside his protective room or tolerate visitors without their first being scrupu-

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lously scrubbed and inspected. Columbia Airways, bound both by contract and public relations, made sure he was well cared for.

Richard Riley greeted her in his customized sitting gurney, both arms and four of his seven remaining digits supported by cable casts, the steel half of his skull painted flesh with a waxy veneer. This waxy impression was evinced, too, in the yards of grafted skin covering the man, forehead to ankles. Facial reconstruction: seventy-three total hours of experimental surgery, eleven unbelievably agonizing flirtations with insanity. At this time Riley was suing for no further treatments. It wasn't a cosmetic matter anyway. The ex-pilot's countenance was a red and gray patchwork of butt and back grafts, strung together with wire, staples, and tender loving care. Pig hide eyeflaps had to be extended for sleep, and the removable false lower jaw, clamped in place to encourage basic skull conformity, needed hourly shifting to prevent the tongue's sliding back into the gullet. He was wrapped in a pair of light sheets for Sharpe's sake; ordinarily the constantly calving skin grafts, if not permitted to breathe, would drive him to itching madness. The shades were always down in Riley's room; the least kiss of sunlight was screaming hell—even the fluorescents had to be tempered with special film. Only a pair of small emerald-green reading lights made objects visible, though their surreal cast predictably intensified the viewer's initial sense of horror and alienation.

"I," Sharpe began, "am here solely for information, Mr. Riley. Please. I promise to be brief. You were coherent in the ambulance, and periodically between surgeries. Corroborated reports have you swearing your downed jet was assaulted by creatures that raided the dead for personal items. Since that accident there have been similar tragedies producing losses of otherwise worthless items that are still unaccounted for. Our computer models demonstrate that these accidents have peculiarities consistent with your crash. The incidents—though not all were aviation-related—took place in a specific desert region of Nevada, miles removed from civic bustle and commerce. The Nevada Triangle, they're calling it. All incidents involved a human toll exceeding fifty persons; these were genuine disasters. Except for your particular case, there are no eyewitnesses from any scene.

"Our agency, Mr. Riley, is interested in satisfactorily addressing the grievances of those relations who are on record as stating their loved ones have been removed of objects of depth. We have to be. These are very serious charges, and the bereaved have garnered very

serious legal representation. The FAA is being deemed liable. My agency has partitioned large funds for the purposes of putting this matter to rest. To this end I have been assigned to take whatever steps are necessary. A visit to a recent crash site brought up your name and story. I'm not here to be judgmental; I have to follow whatever leads are made available."

The man in the gurney let his head rock back to view his guest directly. This slight adjustment of angle and additional wedge of green gave Sharpe a cleaner look at something she hadn't bargained for: only half of Riley's uppers were dentures; the other side, now grotesquely illuminated, were his own salvaged and replanted teeth, projecting through a partial cheek and serviced by a sanitary white dribble cot. It would have been possible, had she the stomach or inclination, to look straight down his throat at the vibrating mechanism now assaulting her:

"I stand by my statement. I was conscious and cogent. I know what I saw. You can take that back to your agency." The effort cost him. Riley sucked laboriously at the cot while a respirator adjusted for his outburst. Sharpe could see the gurney's onboard computer calibrating and resolving.

"Let me repeat, Mr. Riley, that I am in no way judging your actions or descriptions. You were there; not me. I'll take whatever you say at face value, but I can't read your mind."

"Fair enough." The head fell back on its sponge pillow. "I remember every second up to the crash. I could never forget. My next impression was of being dead, but of still living. It is an odd thing, ma'am, but in catastrophic shock the body does not feel pain—at least not the same animal that has wracked me since—and the mind is clearer than at any other time. I did not hallucinate, nor did I make a deal with my demons. I *saw* this thing, this hairy little hissing creature, work its way into the cabin and look around. It evidently thought me dead; what other conclusion could there be. I . . . I may have fancied the same at the time.

"It went through my copilot's uniform and wallet, took his crucifix and a family picture. Through the door I saw several more, accosting the dead with equal urgency. When this little monster came to me it stopped abruptly, bent over my face and placed its paw upon my mouth. It must have felt a trace of breath, for it gave a small squeal and scurried back out.

"Ma'am, as I say I was in deep shock. My brain and body were reeling; I know I died a moment later. I came to outside the

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plane on a makeshift stretcher—a pair of horrified rock climbers had pulled me out. One had encountered a faint pulse. I must have told the ambulance attendants, brave men who somehow beat the helicopters across the desert, the same story I am telling you now. Since then I have remained a prisoner, here, alone save for my nurses and the occasional Columbia representative, in this bleak haunted enclosure.”

“You claim they were after personal articles. Were any removed from your person?”

“None.”

“They feared retaliation, then?”

“Ma’am, I was unable to lift a finger or bat a lash. There were at least a dozen within my view. I was no threat. It was not my strength they feared, it was my innermost . . . life-force.”

“I don’t follow.”

Riley half-lifted himself, his eyes burning green. “Young lady, there are things we are not intended to follow.” His head collapsed back on the pillow. “Not while breath yet fills our bodies.” He stared at the ceiling. “Leave me now. Cling to this precious existence with every fiber of your being.”

Sharpe nodded. “Thank you for your time and patience, sir. I’ll make sure my agency and Colombia are apprised of your assistance and hospitality.”

“Go.”

“So is it gonna be like ‘sir’, or is it gonna be like ‘ma’am’?”

She gave the little photographer a dour look, one of many to come. He was shifting back and forth like he had to take a leak, and *bad*, like he’d been holding it forever. The mussy brown hair, the huge black-rimmed spectacles, the scrawny frame under thrift store combat fatigues—agents are never assigned assistants they’d choose, not in the field. That’s a federal rule, as anticipated as Murphy’s Law, jealously engaged and rigidly enforced. She hadn’t requested a photographer, but didn’t dare object; the fact that her impossible idea was given the go-ahead was enough to keep her passive and happy.

“It’s gonna be like Agent Sharpe. If that’s too formal, just ‘Sharpe’ will suffice.” They were sharing the shade of a canvas awning, eleven miles southwest of Boulder City on a desert flat that, except for the blazing sun’s proximity, might have been on Mercury. A staff limo—read: converted school bus—baked twelve feet away,

emptied of all forty-nine crew. The photographer was interning; they told her he'd be green. "How old are you, kid?"

He bristled. "Please don't call me 'kid'. My real name's Robert, but my official name's StingMaster."

"How old are you, Robert?"

He looked away. "Thirty-six. But like I said, it's StingMaster."

"Cool. So let me run the skinny by you. Stop me if I don't make sense."

"Okay, stop."

"Real mature. Now shut up and listen. Accounting has agreed to stage an accident out here, and you're along to record it. That's all that's required of you. A pilot witnessed what he called a lot of little creatures stealing personal items off the dead at a crash site. I didn't word it quite like that or we wouldn't be here. The Agency probably thinks there're sequestered Manson Family-like tribes doing hit-and-run acts in the desert. The fact that trinkets are taken instead of cash supports the concept of drugged-out airheads. They can't *really* believe that, but they have to go with something, so if you can come up with even one verifiable snap of such a lowlife, it'll be introduced as evidence against all these claims of a shadowy crash investigator looting corpses on-site."

"Man! Little creatures! You mean like elves? Or are you talking about some kinda Delta Force of guerrilla Gollums?"

"What's a Gollums?"

Robert's jaw dropped and he whispered, "*Sheesh*." He grudgingly raised his head. "Gollum's like this psycho fisherman who lives in a cave, man. Bilbo stole his One Ring but he almost got it back from Frodo at the Crack Of Doom."

"Dildo . . . ?"

Robert's face twisted all around "Awww . . . don't you people keep up? Frodo, dude, is like Bilbo's adopted nephew. Bilbo left the shire on his eleventy-first birthday, I mean like *way* after the whole Smaug thing. Y'see, the Dark Lord forged the ring in Mordor, and—"

"The Air Force has agreed to airlift a gutted World War Two bomber stocked with gas and a small detonator. They're going to release it strategically so that it crashes in a cleared area close enough to observe. The bomber's really a mess; it's costing more for the lift and drop than the plane, but the Air Force is willing to halve the bill by making this all part of an official exercise, complete with video from the air. You, as our ground cameraman, are going to get in as many shots of that crash and burn as you can, then we're going to get

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dirty. We're not trusting long-range lenses in all this rising heat. As soon as it's safe to approach, you and I'll mosey on over for your close-ups."

"And how long'll that be?"

"Forever. There're no hidden tribes of crazed hippies, Stink-blaster, and no armies of swashbuckling fairy princesses. But there has to be *something* that makes logical sense, and we're either going to find it or head home empty-handed. How many megabytes will your equipment handle?"

Robert sneered in private offense. "Dude," he muttered, shaking his head. After a few seconds he held up an old khaki camera case covered with campy Lord Of The Rings stickers. "Hwang-Yu Special Edition, UL. Bangs straight 30mm *and* digital. Hairtrigger autofocus in whiteline and infrared. Independent shutter and Dynalens. Magnesium instaflash for the life of the battery." He smirked. "Solar-chargeable nickel-cadmium."

Sharpe nodded appreciatively. "Old school." An air horn, the kind used at sporting events, barked once behind a little imported trailer. "That's it," she said, and swung up her binoculars. Robert began tweaking his camera's lens.

Four cable-suspending Chinooks appeared over a low range, each copter supporting a section of bomber at nose, tail, and wings. At a precise point the cables were released simultaneously, and the derelict, with the payload in its nose, dipped dramatically before gracefully planing two hundred feet into a spectacular explosion and mini-fireball. The fuel burned itself out rapidly and, bearing nothing inside to support a blaze, the hull was a black and blue carcass within minutes.

The agent and photographer moved boulder to boulder. The rest of the company waited back.

"Now what?" Robert wondered, stepping around the fuselage, still ticking hot in the sun. "I sure don't see any hippie dudes."

Sharpe joined him under a twisted wing, out of sight of the makeshift command post. "No dildo dudes, either." She grabbed his shoulder and shook. "Gollums! Look!"

A hairy little creature popped out of the ground, then another and another. They stared in all directions before beginning an all-out dash for the plane. "Gollums, Gollums!" Sharpe hissed, pounding the frozen photographer on the back, "Shoot, shoot! Get it! Shoot!" Robert was so nervous he jerked the camera while raising it to his eyes. Sun glinting on the lens appeared to startle the creatures—they

hesitated, looked all around, and scattered. She grabbed his arm and dragged him out into the light, even as several vanished before their eyes. They ran in a crouch in pursuit of the slowest, Sharpe noting where it submerged. She hit the spot feet-first. The pool was firming rapidly, but still soft in the middle. Using her body weight, she kicked and wiggled her way down while clutching the confounded photographer. The desert sealed up behind them.

They were on a little ledge that was dissolving even as they fought for purchase, their wide eyes adjusting to a strange half-light that filtered throughout a honeycomb of crumbly tunnels. A sudden burst of daylight to their left accompanied the rapid plunge of another of those creatures.

“God,” Sharpe whispered, “it’s real.”

Robert grabbed her arm excitedly. “Middle-earth!”

“Let’s go.”

“Are you nuts?”

“Look, Gollums—” she took his hand “—we’ve come this far, and we’re not leaving without some pictures. We’re onto something amazing here. And what are you afraid of, anyway—they weren’t chasing us; it was the other way around. Real quick thinking upstairs, by the way.”

Their breaking shelf sealed the issue. With physical support fast eroding, they were forced to creep downward a foot at a time, half-visible wraiths in the depths, rock and sand readily giving way to their tentative footfalls. Maybe thirty feet below, the creatures seemed to pass directly into the soft walls. At last Robert and Sharpe were standing alone on a fairly flat floor, bathed in a dim fuzzy light while contemplating a slender passage into the unknown.

“Gone!” Robert whispered.

Sharpe looked up and around. “The desert floor’s porous here; light filters down in bits and pieces, so to speak. There’s air, enough to breathe anyway.” She squinted into the narrow tunnel. “Not so much light outside of this hole we’re occupying, apparently, but there’ll always be some at our backs.”

“You’re going . . . *in*?”

“*We’re* going in. Make sure your magicflash is ready on that multigizmo.”

“Forget it. Let’s just get some shots of this cave and split while we can.”

Sharpe shoved. “I’ll cover your butt, you cover mine.”

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The dimness increased step by step. In a few minutes they became aware of a similar light source at the tunnel's far end; evidently another surface-lit pit. This additional illumination, faint at best, nevertheless made navigation possible, and soon revealed a small fragile cavern to their right. They slid inside to strategize, Sharpe almost screaming upon colliding with a hairy tenant. It was hanging upside-down in the manner of fruit bats, but with arms dangling against the wall. As their eyes adjusted they grew aware of dozens in the warren, suspended without a trace of cognizance. Cobwebs clung to the animals' faces and torsos; their dense body hair was, overall, in sync with the general stretch and weave of these sticky, omnipresent webs.

"Sleeping?" Robert whispered. "You think maybe they're dead?"

"Maybe."

"Where's your flashlight, anyway? What kind of investigator are you?"

"I didn't come looking for bogeymen." Something hissed in the darkness, long and low. "Let's get out of here."

"Gimme just one shot first."

"If these things *aren't* dead," she said, "a flash is sure to wake them! Don't be an ass." They inched back out into the narrow passage. Sharpe led the way, hunched, one hand feeling along the right-hand wall. They stopped just outside another hollow, still obscured by the tunnel's relative darkness.

On this pit's circular floor sprawled a deep pile of personal belongings, spilling out into various wall niches. All were mashed and charred by physical disaster; most were streaked and spattered with old dried blood. Scarves and stockings, a flyer's cap, two wigs and a set of false teeth—all jammed or hammered into cracks and gouges in the cave walls. A nauseating smell hung in the air; an old, grieving smell of caked sweat and stale perfume. Gathered round this pile were two dozen of those ugly little brutes, coveting and fondling individual items.

When Sharpe's and the photographer's living aroma filtered into that place, the entire mob turned simultaneously. For a long while stares were exchanged in dead silence. Slowly the creatures rose as a unit and began to fan out, hissing like cats. At almost the same time there came a great commotion, and the little hallway was cut off. The whole scene froze, the silence dragging on and on. A gentle stirring rose just behind them, but they were too mesmerized to turn.

“Why—” Robert whispered, “why aren’t they attacking us?”

“Because we’re alive, that’s why. These are ghouls. They prey on the dead. That’s why they only go after personal stuff; they want bits of our souls.”

“Oh, man! That seals it. Well, what’s to stop them from just offing us?”

“I don’t think that’s the scheme of things, Gollums. Otherwise we wouldn’t be having this little conversation, now, would we?”

Robert flexed the fingers of his Sting hand. “If Gandalf can survive a Balrog . . .”

“*What?*”

“I said, like—dude, where do you think they like come from?”

Sharpe shrugged. “Who knows? Dead lawyers, literary agents, my personal trainer . . . go ahead and ask, why don’t—” she was cut off by her own shriek as the first leaped clawing on her back. It was the call for a general rush; they were swarmed and thrust kicking and screaming on the pile. Teeth found their throats. A nauseating odor, a *rotteness*, pumped out the little bellows of the attackers’ lungs. Robert, screaming like a woman, bashed away with his camera until a random thrust triggered the flash. The resulting burst of light so startled the creatures that they fell away. Two went pale before collapsing.

Sharpe scrambled to her feet, bleeding at the lower lip and ear. “Gollums! You took their pictures—you copped their souls, man!” Catching on, the photographer lunged to the wall, taking flash after flash while Sharpe yelled and waved her arms, and then they were somehow banging down the narrow rock hallway, shouting and shooting all the way. The brilliant snaps of light revealed scores pouring out of the warren, wild with excitement but disoriented by the quickly repeated flashes. The press of ghouls down the tunnel relented and reversed as their fellows kicked and collided. When Sharpe and Robert burst into the original chamber the whole mob poured in behind them, scattered into small hissing pockets, and stared up bitterly while the two backpedaled along the vertical drift created by their descent, losing a foot for every two gained. The surface responded to a few direct raps of Sharpe’s fist and they were through.

“Man!” Robert panted, shuddering on his knees. “Was that ever hairy!” They watched the breach seal. After a minute they staggered back to the base on eggshells, expecting the ground to break up with every step. The bus was waiting in the heat; the crew on board, the gear packed.

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“Hold it!” Robert whispered. He shielded the camera under his shirt and brought out a black steel film canister on a leather thong. “Our secret’s safe in here,” he said, draping the canister around his neck like a pendant.

“What secret? Why in the world—”

He squeezed her shoulders in his arm. “Just for now. Trust me, dude.”

“Don’t you shush me!”

Robert surprised her by passionately clutching her hands. “We’ve got the proof, man! We’ve got what dudes have been tripping about for, like, *forever*. We’re gonna be rich, we’re gonna be famous. We’re gonna be rich *and* famous.”

“We’re gonna be committed. Lunatics don’t get rich and famous off of daft interviews.”

“Who said anything about interviews, man.”

“So . . . what? You’re organizing Nevada Triangle tours?”

“*Trust* me.”

The driver, all sagging belly and flushed flesh, leaned against the right front fender with a forearm resting on the windshield’s hot frame, his free hand languidly waving them in. He clung to the handrail for perhaps two minutes after they’d found a seat; his head down, one foot on the first step and the other in the dirt. He climbed in like an invalid, sweat rolling down his back and chest.

Robert, unable to sit still, brought his voice down low and leaned in. “Ummm. Listen, sir or ma’am . . . I been thinking. About this whole thing, I mean, and I got the feeling we should like make us a pact.”

“A pact?”

“Yeah, a pact. You know, like a private agreement, dude-to-dude.”

“I’m listening.”

He nudged her gently and rattled the film canister. “In here’s pure gold. These pictures aren’t just worth a fortune, man, they’re like priceless. We can name our sum to any TV station in the world.”

“Those photographs are the property of the Agency.”

“Oh-h-h . . . I dunno ’bout that, man. I’m an intern; I’m not on anybody’s payroll. This camera’s my property, and so’s the film. Until I’ve received a check from ’em, they got no say whatsoever. We’re in this whole deal together, see? You got the credibility and I got the goods. By that math, Agent Sharpe, these pictures of the little Orc dudes are both our property.”

She leaned in tight. "It's like Marilyn."

Robert's whole face lit up and he stuck out his hand. "A pact it is then!"

She shook hands. "A pact it is." They sat as schoolchildren, hands folded on laps. Little by little Robert's left hand crawled across his thigh. Their fingers locked.

"Okay, folks," the driver wheezed. "Let's roll on out of here and snag us a couple of cold ones." The passengers all cheered and he wiped his forehead, grimacing. "Everybody make sure your seatbelts are on." Once he was certain they'd complied he gasped and turned himself in his seat like a man boarding a wheelchair. The engine kicked over. "Ah, Christ," he muttered, and put the bus in gear. As they bumped along he gradually leaned against his window. His face was very red. Bit by bit he sagged into his seat. Suddenly he sat bolt-upright.

And the bus banged out of control, accelerating in a serpentine path off the dirt road to the lip of a rocky gorge, where it did a swan dive into an outcropping, flipped twice in the air, and smashed onto its roof in a storm of diesel smoke and thrashing flames.

And the ground erupted in a flurry of sagging pockets as the hairy little figures raced out, clawing one on top of the other for first dibs. One of the scrappier fought corpse to corpse, snatching medals and keys, earrings and key chains, finally lurching onto a scorched man and woman locked in a horrified embrace. He ripped open the man's fatigues and scratched around until he came up with a little film canister. He rattled it against his ear, stretched the leather thong, tested the cylinder's side for smoothness. Another paw made a swipe, but he bit and slashed, jealously clutched the canister to his chest, and dashed out the bus.

Rage

The night rears, and I sag.

Seize and recover, seize and recover. Headlights burn my eyes, but I don't dare close them; no way. Got to stay upright.

There's Oscar loitering in the half-shadows. I know he sees me: his left eye gleams and drops. But there are no unnecessary movements, no increased tension. We've dealt before.

Oscar gives a discreet toss of the head, and I follow him down the stairwell, where a pool of pitch obscures us from the sidewalk above. Oscar glares.

"Like I told you, *S.A.*, don't come shuffling around here like the walking dead. Put on some decent clothes, wear something casual. Jeez."

"I need a dime," I mumble. "Just a roll."

"Yeh, yeh, yeh. You need a dime, I do the time. Don't play with me, dog. Make this worth my while."

I grip the twisted steel handrail. "I need a dime. I've got to stay awake. Got to."

Oscar backs off, sneering. "Then do some espresso, man. Get off my turf."

"Please . . . if I fall asleep it'll happen again. My rage . . . will escape. I can't keep letting it happen."

“Shit, homey. What do you mean, your ‘rage’? Are you gonna start on me again? We all got rage. You keep that stuff at home where it belongs.”

I hang my head. “No, man. I can’t control it. If I fall asleep again, I’ll go off again. It’s that simple.”

Oscar backs away melodramatically. “Simple? That’s some heavy bullshit, brother. And it’s the same crap you ran by me last time. Read the papers, man, we got enough nut jobs around here. You don’t need no more whites. What you need is a good headshrinker.”

“Fuck you.”

“Fuck you too, bitch! Get your homeless ass out of here. Don’t you be disrespecting me, chump.”

I cling to the rail. “Please. I’m sorry. Just this once.”

Oscar appears to seethe. Finally he says, coldly, “Where’s my dime?”

I stuff my free hand in my left front pocket, pull out a few crumpled bills and a mess of change. “Eight dollars and thirty-nine cents. It’s all I could manage. I’ll make it up to you next time.” In a moment I feel the handful scraped away and the slim foil-wrapped roll take its place.

“There ain’t gonna be no next time,” Oscar mutters. “Now split, fool.”

I climb the steps like an old man and stagger down the sidewalk, streetlight to storefront. My mouth is caking dry, but it doesn’t matter. Tear open the roll. Pop the little handful of pills without washing them down. Next thing I know I’m sitting on the curb, gagging, tears squeezing from my eyes. Saliva rushes into my mouth but I refuse to vomit. The bitter, bitter mouthful dissolves and peristaltically works its way down my esophagus.

The sound of brakes. A spotlight’s beam hits my eyes. The officer’s voice is icy.

“Are you all right?”

I wince and turn my head, nodding. “Something,” I manage, “caught in my throat.”

“Do you need medical assistance?”

I shake my head and make a great show of swallowing. “Better,” I say, and open my mouth wide.

The beam breaks from my face, searches the curb and gutter. The light is switched off. “Move along.”

I stand and raise a grateful hand, walk down the sidewalk with forced aplomb.

Rage

But now the night's an iron heel. How much longer before the uppers kick in . . . the cars hum a sick street lullaby, the library steps dribble and pool. Stumbling, cinching, weaving—sit down, mother-fucker, or fall down. An alley, dark and rank. A plywood slat, leaning against the wall. The amphetamine will work; it *must*, if only I can rest. Sit.

Tucked behind the plywood is a bed of flattened cardboard, stained by booze and pee and God knows what. A bum's crash pad. My arms tremble uncontrollably, a burning flash takes my chest. Recline, behind the wood, out of sight. Close your eyes or they'll fry right out of your skull. Just for a minute, just for a breath.

Just rest.

There he is, on the move. I must have slept, and well: my juices are flowing, my mind sharp. We're creeping down the alley, one shadow after another. He's intent and resolute; he doesn't know I'm on him.

I follow him over a sagging fence; a fence that fights me, like everything else. He's looking, looking. And now he's far ahead, inching around a corner to study the street. I can sense what he wants. He's found a man walking alone; a man in a nice suit, tapping a silver-knobbed birch cane. His excitement rises with the sound of the approaching cane. Can't reach him, can't stop him; my limbs are in a web. I can only scream silently as he grabs the man and drags him headfirst into the alley, bashes his skull repeatedly against the cold brick wall, chokes him to death and hurls the body back down. I holler for him to stop, and he seems to glance up for a second, then bends down to frantically root through the dead man's clothes. He leans back on his haunches, analyzing something important in the fractional glow of streetlamps. He peers around, and his blank eyes squint as he looks my way. But he can't, or won't, see me. In a minute he drops back out of sight, ravaging his prize as the night caves around us.

A bed. An unlit room. A smashed-out window framing a dirty false dawn. I must have broken in, must have sleepwalked here. Dank and smelly, but familiar.

The uppers didn't work; that son of a bitch Oscar. Still, there's a residual effect: jazzed jaws and fingers, teeth grinding for the pulp.

My eyes burn like snapping embers . . . this is an old abandoned hotel; rats on the floor, cobwebs in the corner. A half-memory challenges me, and I reach under the mattress to pull up a billfold stuffed with cash and credit cards. The driver's license reveals a distinguished, elderly gentleman smiling pleasantly for the D.M.V. Just a face in the crowd. But he knows me, and he fears me. I cram the bills into my trousers pocket and my palms begin to sweat. My fingers itch like crazy. Who am I?

Outside are scrub-peppered hills. A strange landscape, yet I feel I've known it all my life. Climb out into an overgrown alley—this section has been going to sod for years, but once I'm on the road there are plenty of small businesses, even some nice homes. And I glimpse a pursuing figure just to my left—a raggedy, disgusting creature who looks like he just crawled out of a cave. Christ, it's my reflection in a waking storefront window. The image is so disturbing I refuse to look again.

An open doughnut shop; only a few customers before the morning rush. The amphetamine must still be circulating: the thought of food makes me want to puke. I smooth my wad of bills before purchasing a large black coffee. The clerk and customers regard me strangely, but is it only my wild appearance? The coffee is burnt motor oil—I have to get it down, have to keep it down. I can't allow myself to faint.

On a crumb-covered tabletop, the local paper's banner headline screams up at me: *Canyon Killer*. Half-memories swirl like falling leaves: a jogger . . . a wandering bard . . . a young photographer. Victims mangled and mutilated. Tension razzles my nervous system in little electric waves. Dirty whites. Have they found the old man yet—the bills are burning in my pockets. Wolf down the coffee, ignore the pain. Too paranoid to order a refill. But I'll have to do some more caffeine; anything that will help me stay awake.

Dawn is breaking as I grope along the sidewalk. I'm gonna swoon, man. What is it that makes a man fall asleep on his feet? Oscar won't be out until dark. Even assholes have rhythm.

Helicopters sweep the hills in the semi-darkness, their searchlights' beams jerking this way and that. You can make out the call of their rotors as they move between crests.

To my left, an old woman sits slumped against a market wall. She raises a languid arm and smiles gummily. What does she want: money . . . company . . . sympathy? I blow her off until I see a sheriff's car climbing the hill, then instinctively sit behind her, away

from the road. She grabs my hand and jabbars her psychedelic what-not while I peer around her, see the car slow and continue up the road. My mind refocuses.

“I read you,” she’s saying, gripping my hand with passion. “Sleep. Sleep is your problem.” I try to pull away but she only clings tighter.

“What do you want, man? Money?” I pull out a twenty and hold it in her face. She snatches the bill like a bullfrog catching a gnat, shoves it in her bra with one claw, retakes my paused hand with the other.

“You are hiding,” she drones. “You are on the run.”

“Fuck you, lady. Let go of my hand.” I push myself upright. She’s trying to haul me back down when her eyes shoot open and her jaw drops.

“No! It’s *you!*”

“I *said*,” I snarl, “let . . . *go!*” Pull myself free, bang around the wall and slump down the bricks, my head brimming with sleep’s cement. Pedestrians pop out of nowhere. Traffic picks up. It’s all a drone, man, I can’t stay awake. Feel my way around the shop . . . a space behind garbage bins. Don’t close your eyes, jerkoff, stay awake! Don’t close your eyes.

He’s slinking ahead, but not so hazily, not so irresistibly. I could reach him, if only I could break free of this mucus. And I know where he’s going; I can feel his want.

He moves like smoke, seeping between buildings. Just a shape: a head and torso impelled by four liquid limbs; a spectral spider. He doesn’t look back, though I scream myself hoarse.

Down a broken walkway to a gutted cottage, stripped black by wildfire. I’m almost on him when he reaches the sleeping old woman, but my arms and legs lock into a slow-motion spacewalk, my long howl of protest splinters and fades.

He has her by the throat now, he’s lifting her up the wall and choking her for all he’s worth. I can’t stop him, but for one crazy moment he pauses to look behind. I’m drifting back out of reach, my fingers cramping, as the woman’s head bobs and bounces, as her arms slap left and right on the wall. Then, with one final, impassioned squeeze, the nosy old witch is silenced.

Kicked in the bathroom door in the hotel's lobby. Shaved and hacked off hair by the handful. A little pomade and a found baseball cap and I look almost human.

The sporting goods store provides striped jogging sweats and running shoes. More important: I've purchased a programmable alarm device. Once I figure it out, I'll set it to vibrate at ten minutes, before rapid eye movement can take hold.

Everybody's staring at me. Or am I just paranoid; everybody's staring at everybody. How long before they discover the old lady's body.

Christ, I'm swooning. Coffee does nothing, NO-DOZ is no help at all. I almost passed out leaving the store. It's coming on dusk; got to hang on for Oscar. I'll buy the cocksucker out. The whole wad, man, for just one long, electric white, bitter rush into night.

This time that savvy eye glints rather than gleams. Oscar, leaning insolently on the railing, drops and sardonically wags his head.

I shuffle up with my hand patting the running brick wall, trying to not stumble.

"What did I tell you, fool? Didn't I say you wasn't to come around here no more? Now split."

I show him a handful of bills. "I want quantity this time."

"What did I just say, asshole?" Oscar shows his silver caps. "I told you to split. You ain't welcome, you ain't wanted. We don't do business no more. I don't know you."

"Listen, man. I can barely stay on my feet. You don't understand. I *can't* keep falling asleep. I just can't." I start down the stairwell.

"You go down those steps, boy, and you don't come back up. You hear me?"

I whirl and climb, my rage rising with me, but the moment's passion leaves me drained. "Please . . ." A loud burring comes from my left pocket. You can see the fabric vibrate.

Immediately Oscar is a live wire. "What's that!" A hand finds his back pocket and I hear the characteristic click of a switchblade. "You're one dead narc, motherfucker."

"No, no. It's an alarm. I'm still learning to program it. I keep telling you—I can't let myself fall asleep."

I feel the blade's tip poking my belly. "Back off," he says.

Rage

“Please. Just this once.”

“*Back off*, Sleepy, and I don’t want to see you no more. If I catch you on my street again I’ll kill you.”

I backpedal down the walk, turning to see a police cruiser nosing around the corner, recovering in time to force a shuffling jog. The spotlight’s beam hits me before swinging onto Oscar, now leaning casually on the railing.

At the corner I stop to look back. Oscar is talking jocularly with the officers, who haven’t left their car. It’s obvious they’re looking for something bigger than pissant dealers. The car moves along.

Slip back into the alley. There are more official vehicles about tonight, and the helicopters, as always sweeping the hills, appear closer to town.

Passing out. I’m going, man; I know it. Dead on my feet. Pull out the alarm. The LED winks cheerily. Set it for ten minutes, and for five-minute repeats thereafter. Back in the pocket. Clinging to a fire escape ladder, the rust breaking off in my fingers. Letting go. Slipping like silt, as the black ground rushes up to meet me.

Through the alley and across the road, between the parking lots to the main street—I know where he’s going. One deep shadow in the lesser darkness, he flits in and out of the streetlights, makes straight for the railing and stairwell. The web has me again, and it’s too late anyway—he has Oscar in a chokehold and he’s fighting him, dragging him back to the walk between lots. He drags him right through me, Oscar struggling and gagging all the while.

There’s a strong sound beneath me—a hum and vibration. He turns and looks all around, flagging in the dark. And I’m being pulled out of sleep’s murk like a fish on a line. The vibration ceases; rapid eye movement is renewed. He drags Oscar’s body all down that bisecting walk and across a haunted road, frantically bashing the skull on asphalt. I’ve almost caught up. And now he looks back, arches like a cat, and redoubles his efforts.

I’m making headway, closing in. He hauls the body down the alley, snarling back at me.

Another burring of the alarm, somewhere on the line between grogginess and complete insensibility. Five minutes have passed; it seems like five years. He collapses with the body. After a pause he

pulls himself upright, grabs the corpse and, with gathering ferocity, repeatedly smashes its head on the ground.

When I cry out he stops and turns like a cheetah at the kill. His eyes, two white holes in the night, widen with mine. He grabs Oscar by the hair and drags him along, weaker now, slamming back and forth down a reeling alley bordered by leaning buildings.

Another burr and he collapses, just outside the old hotel's window, then drags himself inside. I haul myself along the brick wall, yelling in a vacuum, as Oscar's body passes through the frame.

Pulling myself into the room is like fighting quicksand. He looks up, rips his nails out of Oscar's eyes and goes for mine, even as the alarm shocks us back into alignment. I tear a sheet from the bed, wrap it around his neck and squeeze my way out of slumber. His hands find my eyes, but I have leverage: enough to stand on the bed, enough to loop the sheet round an old wall fixture, enough to use my body weight to draw the sheet tight. I sink back down until we're face to face. And my mouth spews a mantra while I watch his black lips writhe in sync:

Die, you son of a bitch, die. Die, you son of a bitch, die. Die, you son of a bitch.

Die.

All data regarding the Canyon Killer Murders point conclusively to derelict Owsley Martin as the perpetrator and sole concerned party. Martin was a vagabond living since his late teens in the hills of Laurel Canyon, drifting down to the populated areas when he required sustenance: one of those hit-and-run relics of the hippie era known colloquially as "coyotes." He was discovered hanged by his own hand in an abandoned hotel room off of Deep Ridge. The instrument of his demise was an old sheet taken from one of the ground room's beds. The body of a petty drug dealer, one Oscar Benecito, was also discovered in the room, but forensic analysis shows he expired before Mr. Martin, and was therefore not a party to the actual hanging. This was a murder-suicide.

Long-time Canyon residents remember Martin as intense and highly antisocial, prone to bizarre behavior and empty nights spent talking to himself while walking the hills. According to several locals who had spoken fleetingly with Martin during the three weeks of murders, he had complained of an inability to stay awake, and these

witnesses received the distinct impression that Martin suffered from acute narcolepsy.

However, the autopsy reveals that Martin was a victim of pineal gland damage involving the body's circadian regulator—that aspect that controls the sleep-wake cycle in healthy beings. Blood sugar and serum albumin indicators demonstrate that Martin was not a narcoleptic—that he had in fact functioned *without sleep* for an astonishing twenty-six days. The tax on his mind and body must have been incredible, producing delusional psychopathia and a complete inability to differentiate between reality and fancy. Owsley Martin was a man who, paradoxically enough, only dreamt he was asleep.

One major footnote demands appending in this case. Although fingerprints, DNA analyses, and hair-and-clothing vestigial evidence prove beyond contest that Owsley Martin was the sole culprit in the Canyon Killer Murders, there were three additional deaths in the city, and two in the hills and canyons, that have been attributed to a so-called Copycat Killer, due to their striking similarity to the Martin slayings. The bodies—a tourist, a shopkeeper, a hitchhiker, a deputy sheriff, and a deep canyon squatter—were murdered and mutilated with Martin's trademark ferocity, and were forensically determined to have been dispatched, one by one, in an erratic line leading from the city to the hills. No indications of a perpetrator, outside of the immediate signs of struggle, exist to cast light on the identity of this mystery figure.

A massive operation was undertaken in the depths of Laurel and Topanga Canyons. Some two thousand squatters and derelicts were rounded up, fined, and physically expelled through the highly commendable efforts of Los Angeles County Sheriffs, CalTrans, L.A. Firefighters, various citizens groups, and, eventually, one regiment of the 43rd National Guard out of nearby Santa Monica.

Over a period of two years the entire area was segregated by electrified fence, in the locally famous Hands Helping Hands project, a County-funded enterprise that, ironically, provided strong temporary employment for those very evicted squatters.

The Canyons are now indigenous plant and wildlife sanctuaries, rigidly protected by officials and citizens alike. They are off limits to all civilians, and are rigorously patrolled by County inspectors and by periodic helicopter runs. No unauthorized person has ever entered the sanctuaries.

Yet there are scores of residents, still shaken by the grisly murders, who whisper of an odd nightly phenomenon. It's just human

Collected Stories

nature: urban legends are born in the imagination rather than in fact. Still these dwellers lock their windows and doors, still they clamor to congressmen and councils, still they swear of a black figure roaming the hills, raving to the night of an elusive slumber, and screaming at the moon of an insurmountable, of an unknowable, of an unimaginable rage.

Common Denominator

Everybody in this country knows the feeling.

Televised events are *imprinted* on the subconscious—a photogenic president was assassinated, a bunch of half-witted miscreants burned and looted a great American city, some Third-world lunatics used jets . . . and the unsuspecting public . . . as propaganda tools.

These occurrences were not just *news*, they were Time-Life spectaculars, a dead century's standout stories.

But there's a difference between *a*) hearing about it from your buddies, *b*) mourning over popcorn and Betamax, and *c*) actually *observing* these events, in real time, with no foresight, no hindsight, no insight . . . You—Were—*There*, if only electronically, and so were somehow as much participant as observer.

That's *exactly* the soul-deep memory engendered by The Happening On Fifth Street. *You* remember—don't you . . . the talking head breaking in over Oprah—a major event in itself. The cams and copters all humping—I think it was Channel 2. But this wasn't a slow-speed pursuit. Five drunken idiots were loitering in the drive-thru lane at a Burger King in L.A.—standing there, indifferent to the decent customers attempting to duly edge their vehicles along. They

were screaming, shouting, giggling, guffawing. At a honk from a little green Aspen, one, the biggest, spun and flipped off the elderly female driver.

“Fuck you, man!” he bellowed. “I’ll kick your goddamned fucking ass, you ugly old whore motherfucker!” His friends shrieked with hilarity. One of the women—there were two, I recall—lifted her dress, yanked down her panties, and began thrusting her pelvis at the driver. The whole creepy knot just howled and howled.

But that’s all incidental, contextually; just another clip of typical Americans having fun on a hot summer’s night.

What happened next is the part we’ll never forget.

The big guy hollered, “You got me, bitch? You want a taste of—”

AND RESET!

“You got me, bitch? You want a taste of—”

“You got me, bitch? You want a taste of—”

His friends, no less exuberant, were equally caught up. The obscene woman raised and lowered her dress—over and over—her laugh ringing: “Ah-*haha*-ha! Ah-*haha*-ha! Ah-*haha*-ha! Ah-*haha*—” Her friend fell all over her giggling, hauled herself back up, fell all over her giggling, hauled herself back up . . .

The other two males, having appreciatively high-fived and butted their heads, high-fived, butted their heads, high-fived, butted . . .

At this point it was really funny, okay? I don’t think there’s a cat out there who wasn’t halfway to upchucking. It was Saturday night fun, man. Nobody knew until later that the live action was spliced with footage taken by some guy with a videocam in the parking lot: there was no reason for the media hoopla until it got freaky. And that’s when we all stopped laughing.

The police responded first, of course. These five misguided merrymakers had to be on angel dust or something. But the situation couldn’t be controlled with manpower. The Five were spilling all over one another, rhythmically repeating their shared sequence, and it wasn’t humorous at all. Their faces grew red and contorted as they gasped against an unnatural clockwork, their limbs were seizure-stiff, their eyes bugged and desperate. It was all a mad implosion of thrashing arms and melding voices: “You got-*ha* taste of *bitch* me-ha. You got-*ha* taste of *bitch* me-ha—”

By the time the paramedics arrived the street was a sea of rubbernecks. The cops had to escort the ambulances in. And these guys were no less useless: injections didn't work, restraints were a mess; they couldn't even apply oxygen through that tussle. The Five were gasping and streaming, frothing and vomiting . . . *in rhythm*. The two high-fiving males' skulls were cracked wide and gushing, and *still* their arms jerked up feebly in unison, *still* their lolling heads begged to collide. And the cops, the paramedics, the bystanders; nobody could hold 'em down—wild stuff, man, *wild* stuff. And it was the looniest form of entertainment imaginable to pick it up on that live feed, as the BK5, as they came to be known, were wheeled in on gurneys, strapped down and muzzled by oxygen masks, their purple faces trying so hard to spew as their soaking heads banged up and down and side to side, up and down and side to side, up and down and up and down and up and down and a story like that gets a brief, but very thorough, run. You learn all about the vitals—nicknames, dogs and hos, probation officers, favorite slash films, etc.—because the heroic BK5, thank our merciful God in all His infinite wisdom, survived.

Nature is the ultimate physician. When their bodies could jerk and foam no longer The Five simply went comatose, woke to an awkward celebrity, and, once they were proven lousy commercial investments, gratefully slunk out of the spotlight.

The initial focus was on ingested pathogens. That Burger King was shut down so the Department Of Health could pose importantly without being interrupted by autograph hounds, by lowriders in limbo, or by any more damned honking old ladies in little green Aspens. Other agencies wanted to know if rap music or the Vice President was the culprit, or if perhaps the Devil Himself, paid seven and a half bucks an hour to hang out a window in a paper hat, was surreptitiously pulling the BK5's strings.

The whole thing would definitely have blown over, if not for an uncannily similar episode, four days later and not two blocks away.

Rival groups of gangbangers had spilled onto an indoor miniature golf course at the new GotchaGoin' Mall. Terrified shoppers stampeded concentrically while a couple of furheads duked it out over a vital piece of plastic turf of no importance at all only thirty seconds prior.

One beady bozo bit another's tattoo.

The second creep screamed and flailed his fists.

The first furhead bit.

The second sphincter screamed.

A bite and a scream, a bite and a scream—and both arms of the human cesspool broke on their champions like opposing waves.

That, again, was the amateur part—caught streaming by a teeny bopper fledgling reporter with a broadband Blackberry. A local news crew, covering the grand opening of Thundergirl's Dine-And-Disco, picked up the action as the looping gangs cussed and whaled in what director's-chair psychologists term *staggered sync*; an erratic-yet-redundant vacillating pattern wherein one group appears to react viciously to the other's retreat, and vice-versa. But this, as I stated, is an apparent motion. With so many close-knit individuals involved, the action comes off as almost choreographed, especially on video, when in reality a seeming cohesion is deceiving the anxious observer's eye.

Even the late-night stand-ups didn't joke about this one. It took a riot squad to contain the madness, a major law enforcement presence to control the perimeter. Tear gas only made the repetitively kicking and wheezing combatants labor for breath as they grappled and rolled about. The course was smashed to rubble in the frenzy.

But officials had learned from the fast-food episode. Emergency crews and disaster specialists created an on-location makeshift hospital. SWAT teams sealed the area. Surgeons, anesthesiologists, and blood donors were whisked into a giant ring around the action, where they simply stood stunned, like a tribe of pacifistic Indians round a knot of drunken cavalymen.

Because in the end that's all anybody could do: stand there with their jaws hanging while thirty-seven spasmodic malcontents jerked and wailed and gasped and spewed into the sweet embrace of unconsciousness.

By this time it was humongous news. Even though no one *really* expected it to happen again, there were individuals, aching for their fifteen minutes, motoring around the area, videocameras in hand. Some of these guys were hooked up with community web sites utilizing a nexus called Retard Watch, stationed somewhere in New Zealand, if I remember correctly. The Board Of Health taped off the Mall for analysis, and got the same reams of nowhere-data as their cronies at the now-famous hamburger slop, but it was all a great giggle for a while there; watching these lugs in space suits lumbering around a sealed-off parking lot with little bitty beakers in their big dufus gloves. Yet we weren't really all that into the aftermath. By now we were glued to the news—ratings-sweepers on all channels,

across the board—as we perched on the edges of our sofas and bar stools, stocked up on drinks and munchies, waiting wide-eyed and wondering, like children on the night before Christmas—waiting for the mostest unlikeliest, for the unpromised third strike, for the boggler that blew away 'em all—waiting, waiting, waiting . . . waiting for The Next One.

Gilbert Flemm had it all worked out.

In a 9 to 5 suckass yellow-light bug stampede, he'd determined, as an electronics grad nauseated by the prospect of applying his talents to some soulless applications firm, to make his living online, at home, in private, at odds with the bigger picture.

He'd been inordinately successful.

At thirty-two he was, both virtually and literally, master of his own domain.

The shades were always down in Gilbert's tiny roach motel of a Boyle Heights apartment. One side of this groovy bachelor's pad was a garage-heap of miscellaneous electronics hardware, patched in to nowhere. Extension cords hung like streamers from hooks hammered into the ceiling, plugs were tangled up in power strips leading to God knows what. The little bathroom and kitchenette were badlands, practically unnavigable due to years of tossing shipping crates, obsolete appliances, and pizza delivery cartons every which way.

The other side of the room is where Gilbert lived. His home-office was a massive cluster of milk crates, monitors, drive housings, and patch bays, all squeezed into a work console produced by a series of squared components-casings made perfectly level by a broken desk top. Gilbert had achieved this console environment not by being an artisan or handyman, but by being a *burrower*. The console came about through the constant *jamming* and *shoving* and *hammering* of stuff into place; the space for his legs was effected by repetitively *pushing* and *kicking* and *kneeing* until he'd made stretch room. Grease, dirt, fly cadavers, and dead skin cells made a perfect mortar. His work chair-bed was a ratty old recliner with a floating horizontal frame, allowing him to recline full-out whenever the pixel pixies had overdusted his eyes. His personal urinal was a funky old pee jug, one of many, *crammed*, *rammed*, and *jammed* under the desk to make room for his naked, malodorous, scratched-crimson legs. Something of an inventor, he'd devised a peeduct out of a punctured condom wired to a quarter-inch polyvinyl tube trailing into the current jug's

punctured-and-wired cap. This way he could take care of vital business without having to ford the lavatory horror.

Gilbert had lots of girlfriends.

Linda Lovelace and Candy Samples were two of his favorites, bygone sweethearts now; looped into some miscellaneous folder or other to make room for recent files. Jenna and Busty and Ginger and Christy; they all came and went, but a techie's heart is not programmed to be long-broken. A man has work to do.

That work involved the remote debugging of programs, the defragmenting of drives, the importing and cleaning up of desktops. Viruses were Gilbert's best pals. Smoking out these little virtual critters made a good living possible, working from home, with mouse of steel in one hand and foggy yellow pee tube in the other. Gilbert had never met his clients—transfer of funds was electronic. In this way Gilbert also made payments; to the bank, to Pink Dot, to his landlord and various electronics outlets. And in this way he drifted along; a retired, sedentary commander in a fetid space capsule, passively sucked into the giving black hole of ever-imploding data, umbilically attached, metaphorically speaking, to a daisy chain of RGB viewscreens, battling aliens for points, trading services for digits, making long, hot, electronic love.

But lately he'd been consumed by a game called Common Denominator. "Lately" could mean any amount of time; Gilbert had no idea of, or interest in, the hour, day, week, month, year, decade, century . . . the game could be played singly or with friends, but "friend" is one of the F-words, and anyway a man has work to do. The concept behind Common Denominator is deceptively simple: the gamer sequences characters, sites, and situations; all contributing to perfectly plausible scenarios with perfectly credible culprits and conclusions—which splinter and evolve into slightly less credible culprits . . . into ramifications of feathered conclusions . . . into rationale forks and logic back roads . . . the butler never did it in CD; the butler's just a butler. But for drifting retired commanders willing to go the distance, the game's an intoxicating mindfuck; a master finds the common denominator in abstractions, in subtleties—in *qualities* rather than appearances. It's not for extroverts.

Gilbert was so wired in he could follow the game on one of six desktop monitors while simultaneously earning a living, ordering Chinese delivered, downloading porn and avant-garde music, shopping on ebay, and monitoring streaming news.

That news, of late, was a major draw, even for a carpal gamer like Gilbert. Those public seizure episodes had been increasing, both in frequency and fury, for some weeks now. Huge rewards went unclaimed, talk shows hosted prescient callers determined to stammer themselves into oblivion. Scientists, theists, and theorists rolled the dice—but all these players, posers, and pontificaters were sooner or later shut down by their own verbosity. Nobody had a clue.

Some of those episodes got really *intense*. Certain fighters had been seriously hurt, a woman and her daughter, innocent bystanders, critically injured in a fray. Collateral damage. Unrelated skirmishes and spot-looting were reported. Also, one participant, seizing in deep shock while impaled on an upright sprinkler, had drowned in his own puke. That very dramatic death, amazingly, was repeatedly broadcast on regular TV as well as over the Internet, to the wailing bereavement of congressmen, televangelists, and suffering soccer moms everywhere. The BK5, dragged out of retirement to plea for peace, were getting plenty of airplay with their ubiquitous rap single, already in the running for Best Song Lyrics. A Christmas album was pending.

Gilbert was singing along right now, partitioning CD clues with one hand, balancing his bank account with the other: “Brothahs an’ sistahs,” he croaked, “don’ play da foo’. Homeys an’ hos, ya gots t’ be coo’.” Catchy little fucker. True talent surfaces in the unlikeliest of ponds. And genius will never die: new applications, new technology, new faces were emerging. Art *evolves*: that booty-shaking finger popper was the natural extension of rap’s brilliant violation of vinyl; but now digital looping was applied—studios had cleverly used the BK5’s epileptic claim to fame—the tight instrumentless vocal harmonies, satirized by the straight community as *aw*, *crappela*, were electronically broken up and repeated as phasing backing vocals: “Brothahs an-*play* da—homeys ya *gots* t’ . . .” until it was almost as good as Being There.

Gilbert Fucking Flemm had an epiphany!

While the rest of us were grooving, grouching, and googling, he’d subconsciously cross-referenced a number of sources in real time.

1. The BK5 were on a *loop*.
2. The CD characters were repositioning in sync.
3. The televised image of the latest oddity was crackling in and out due to a glitch in one of the news vans’ transmitters.

4. Said televised image was a melee involving blowhard bikers and barroom boneheads. The location was only a few blocks from Gilbert's.

5. His police broadcast receiver was cycling; whining, grinding, reacting to some kind of pirate signal. 5a. The signal and melee were related. 5b. The signal's source was close by, but receding.

And, of course, 6. "*Yo Homey Yo*," the BK5's celebration of the creative spirit, just had to be the most godawful piece of crap ever recorded.

Gilbert patched the streaming feed to the police broadcast. The resultant scream almost blew out his speakers. He patched the combined input to an equalizer and manually cut out audible traffic until he had a fairly steady audio line, then adjusted it to screen. It was all white noise. In a dream, Gilbert used his joystick to move the CD players intuitively, his other hand tweaking the bastard signal. *God in heaven, he'd triangulated!* He gaped at his wall monitor for a minute, then, terrified he'd lose the signal, mapped and saved it to disk. He printed this out as a straight hexadecimal graph: every particular was established and tabulated; Gilbert didn't need to research the results—he'd found the common denominator.

He sat straight up. The streaming newscast contained a throbbing hyperlink for civilian-police intercourse. Almost without thinking, he control-clicked on the link. His condenser mic's icon came up. A canned voice blurted from his house speakers. Gilbert switched to console mono.

"You have reached the Los Angeles Police Department, U-Tip, We Talk Division. This thread automatically links to the State Of California's Wireless Web Archive, and the call may be monitored for your protection. A live operator will be with you shortly. If you are an English speaker, please press *1* now. Yo tengo caca en la cabeza para todos no mas por favor—"

Gilbert impatiently pinkied the *1* on his keyboard.

Almost immediately a bored voice came in, "Detective Cummings, LAPD. U-Tip, We Talk. If this is an emergency situation, please dial 911. If this is a non-emergency situation, please dial 1-800-LAPD. If this is an earthquake-related call, please dial 1-800-OHNO. If there are communists under your bed or gays in your closet, please dial 1-800—"

"ASSHOLES!" Gilbert broke in.

There was a tight pause. "Take a look in the mirror sometime, buddy."

Common Denominator

“No! You don’t understand! He doesn’t like assholes!”

“I’m not crazy about ’em either, okay? *Especially* when they get on an official line and interrupt police business!”

“Listen to me! I play this game called Common Denomi—”

“Well, *don’t*—”

“—nator and I was—”

“play *games*—”

“—watching the news.”

“—with *me!*”

“On the side. It’s not food poisoning or drugs or anything like that. Forget the lab stuff. That’s all bogus. Rudeness is the common denominator. Obnoxious behavior in public. Selfishness. Immaturity. No pathogen can single out poor ethics in people! This is a case, or cases, of affronting. Somebody is revolted by these creeps and he’s lashing out.”

A faint click. Now it was like talking in a tunnel. Detective Cummings’s voice came back carefully. “Who’s revolting?”

Gilbert ground his teeth and clenched his fists. It was too late; he was already in. “I don’t *know* who it is. All I know is, like I said, the human factor’s undeniable.”

“And how does your friend accomplish this feat?”

“*I just told you I don’t know who it is!* He’s using alpha over the ether. I just picked it up. Or maybe it isn’t a male. Maybe he’s a she; I don’t know.”

“So tell me, does your shemale friend have a name?”

“I’m trying to be of assistance, for Christ’s sake, as a private citizen!”

The gentlest ping, as hollow as the night. “I want you to understand that the U-Tip, We Talk Hotline is completely confidential. You don’t know me, I don’t know you. Every aspect of your identity is private, and will remain private. So now that we’ve got all that out of the way, Mr. Flemm, maybe we can talk.”

Gilbert’s thumb jabbed the Escape button. Sweat was creeping from his hairline. His right hand danced on the keyboard while his left rolled the mouse. The streaming live inset expanded to full screen. He punched out a sequence and a MapQuest graphic became an overlay. Gilbert reduced the opacity. “Damn.” He transferred the feed to the wall monitor. The resolution was diminished relatively, but that didn’t matter; once he’d configured his GPL to Random, the active elements in the grid translated to pixel groupings very much like churning dot matrix asterisks. The news scene was a mess. But there were isolated

right-angling pixel blotches, like Ms. Pacman in slo-mo, that moved along the streets-grid with mathematical certitude. Order was the common denominator. Gilbert was looking for the anomaly.

There.

One asterisk was chugging along oddly; crisscrossing street sides, doubling back, pausing, moving along, pausing again. Gilbert tagged it: Eleventh and Willoughby. Four blocks away. He popped off his peter pal, pulled on his shirt and pants, slammed on his boots, jammed out the door.

Deep twilight. Emergency vehicles were zooming for Seventh, and plenty of cars were turning in pursuit. It was obvious everyone in the vicinity knew what was up. Gilbert dashed across alleys and yards, hopped fences and cut across drives, finally blowing out onto Eleventh and Willoughby. His emergence must have been a noisy one; lots of pedestrians found it interesting enough to turn from the lights and sirens. One in particular, a man in dark pants and jacket, immediately made for a leaning tenement.

Gilbert ran puffing and wheezing; wanting to meet him, wanting to warn him, wanting to praise him, wanting to stop him. He saw the old door swing shut and pop open. It was a fire exit; abused, infested, a rundown hallway for beggars, taggers, hookers, dealers . . . Gilbert slipped inside and the door slammed behind him. The hall wasn't lit, so he cracked the door. Only an amber street lamp provided any illumination, and that was all of a dim narrow wedge and broken pool. He paused to let his eyes adjust and to catch his breath.

"Before you take another step, I want you to know that I am armed, and that I will not hesitate to take you down."

It was impossible to make out features in the dark. There was a strong dab of light on the right earlobe, soft crescents and planes at the hairline. Gilbert addressed that area beside the lobe.

"Look, I'm not a cop, I'm not a stalker, I'm not a bounty hunter. I know why you're doing what you're doing, and I want you to know I'm not your enemy."

A pause.

"What am I doing?"

Gilbert blew out a lungful of stress. "With the device. With the obnoxious people. I don't blame you . . . I don't hate you for what you're doing . . . I . . . I admire you."

The figure took a step back. He was now completely obscured by darkness. "Then your timing couldn't be more impeccable."

"What do you mean?"

Common Denominator

The dark blew out a sigh matching Gilbert's own. "I mean this whole thing is moving faster than me. If you've latched on, the authorities can't be far behind. And I really don't think they share your admiration." Another pause. "I'm burned out, man. Or sated; I don't know which. So . . . how'd you find me?"

"I'm IT," Gilbert mumbled. "I'm hooked in so deep I'll never get out. There's a game I've mastered called Common Denominator. It kind of forces the gamer to think outside the box. My brain cross-referenced, and I put two and two together."

"Did you call the cops?"

"Once. On impulse. It was a mistake. Don't worry; I got out of there right away."

"You sound like a bright lad. So you know all about W.T.T.?"

Gilbert fidgeted. "Maybe. Initials are all over the place."

"Wireless Trace Technology. A War Department development passed down to the police. If you tapped in for a nanosecond you're tagged. Home, phone, credit, friends . . ."

Gilbert swallowed guiltily. "That's a new one." He licked his lips. "Sir, I want you to know . . . I want to make it absolutely *clear* that I took *great* pains . . . I'm certain I wasn't followed. And as far as anything electronic goes, I'm clean. So, unless they can put a trace on a man's heartbeat. . ."

"Not just yet, they can't. How much do you know about my operation?"

"I know you're working in alpha. I know you're jamming autonomic activity over the ether. I know the signal cycles in the human brain. I know it's directional. I know the field's variable. I know . . . I know the wavelength."

A casual movement, and an arm rose out of the darkness: brown suede jacket and black leather glove. Nested in the gloved palm was an object not much larger than a thumb drive, plump in shape, with an inch-long bulbed antenna. A red diode blinked twice. "Catch."

Gilbert caught. It was disappointing, somehow: a crude thing of tin and staples. He slipped it into his trousers pocket.

The arm vanished. "Take that toy and tear it apart when you get home. I know you will; you're already dismembering it in your mind. I'm out of here."

"But what you're doing," Gilbert tried. "I think . . . I think maybe people will get the picture. About ethics. About morality."

About public comportment in general. Respect for strangers . . .” he mumbled. “For decency . . . manners . . .”

The pause was so long Gilbert began to feel he was alone. Finally he whispered, “Sir?”

“Now is not the time,” the darkness replied, “to wax philosophical. The world is pumping out idiots as we speak. We’re tagged, you and I. That thing in your pocket’s a joke; an ethicist’s objection in a hedonist’s courtroom, a forgotten blush in a government-sponsored whorehouse.” He sucked in a huge breath, let it out with a long sigh. “Right now people are being assaulted, insulted, raped, robbed, ridiculed.” The voice faded down the hallway: “Swindled . . . betrayed . . . rejected . . . abused . . .”

Gilbert stood in the dark forever. He could hear his heart pounding; one knobby little traveler in the great human stampede. When he could bear it no longer he eased open the door and slipped out the night.

“Hello, Mr. Flemm.”

Gilbert didn’t look around. “You’re wasting your time. He got away.”

“Oh, no, he didn’t. He is, as of right now, in custody, and if all my years as an official witness have taught me anything, he’s looking at life without parole.”

Gilbert’s jaw dropped. He turned. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about assault and battery.” Cummings grabbed Gilbert’s wrist and swung him about. “I’m talking about lying in wait.” The cuffs were snapped tight. “I’m talking about reckless endangerment and carrying a concealed weapon.”

The cuffs bit deliberately. Gilbert snarled with the pain. “*What weapon?*”

Cummings patted him down with his free hand, tore the unit out of Gilbert’s front pocket. “I believe it’s called Exhibit A, asshole!”

Gilbert’s whole face shook with horror. “No!”

“Yes!” Cummings slammed him against the wall before dragging him around the building’s side to the ticking unmarked car. “That could have been *my* wife in that crowd, dickface, that could have been *my* daughter!”

“I’m the wrong guy!” Gilbert gasped. “I was just talking to him, for Christ’s sake, but he took off. I don’t know where he is!”

“That’s okay. What’s important is *we* know where he *isn’t*. And where he *isn’t* is in the apartment of one Gilbert Going-to-Hell Flemm, whose transmitted signals were tracked by specialists hired by LAPD, whose computers and peripheral equipment were just seized as evidence, whose hard-copy files are even now being pored over *with attitude*. You see, Flemm, your victims could’ve been those specialists’ wives and daughters too. I sure do hope you like it doggy-style, Gilbert.”

“Wait!” Gilbert dropped to his knees. Before they hit the cement he was dragged back up by the cuffs, almost separating his arms from their sockets.

“I won’t wait!” Gilbert’s face was slammed against the rear windshield. “Motherfucker, I *can’t* wait!” Gilbert felt the cuffs unlocked, heard them drop on the asphalt. He turned, shaking head to foot.

Cummings had the unit in his gloved right hand. “You know what, Flemm? Sometimes even a predatory prick can get careless. He could be trying to zap a detective, let’s say, and not realize he’d accidentally pointed the zapper the wrong way; right back at himself! And if there weren’t any witnesses, and no prints but his own, there’d be nothing other than that poor detective’s sworn testimony. After all, it’s just a little tube with a button in the middle; easy mistake to make. And that would be a shame, man, a crying fucking shame. Raise your arm!”

“But I . . .”

“*Raise your arm!* That’s right. Now hold your thumb up above your hand. Good. Bend your thumb, at a right angle. Feel familiar, Flemm?” Cummings aimed the unit right between Gilbert’s bugging eyes. “Say goodnight, cocksucker, over and over and over.”

Savage Glen

On that lovely day Fate dumped me in the Glen I certainly had it coming, but, given my state of mind at the time, probably wouldn't have sidestepped even if I'd been tipped off to the grisly outcome.

I was a homeless, penniless, self-absorbed drifter. My shirt and trousers were grimy and riddled with holes, my hair tangled and unshorn. My toes, nine funky creatures that were bleeding and gnarled, poked numbly from their torn canvas homes. To top it off I smelled like a cesspool, and knew it. But I was way beyond stares and whispers, deaf to the clack of quickly locked latches, unmoved by the sight of glaring mothers. Man, I was so far gone the gulls laughed as they pelted my hair and shoulders.

I'd been working my way back down the Monterey coastline, having not seen a job or a Jackson since San Diego, maybe a year ago. My worldly possessions consisted of an old transistor radio with a dead battery, a broken hairbrush, and a pair of binoculars I'd picked up beachcombing; all kept rolled in a ratty, malodorous sleeping bag. Physically, even at this advanced stage of moral deterioration, I could have taken the necessary steps to redeem myself, but lately a particularly vile bile had come to roost in my soul. Ambition, wonder, compassion—these things were all but strangers to me. And as for the

Savage Glen

cozy, gaily motoring Beautiful People, they could go straight to Hell for all I cared. Nothing mattered any more.

Sometimes I'd hitchhike, sometimes I'd walk up or down the coast highway making camp wherever my fancy dictated. Recently I'd taken to wandering along the sand in Monterey's quaint beach communities, back and forth, day after day, until some bored life-guard or other chased me off. I never gave anybody a hard time; I'd simply nod and split. Anywhere was as good as anywhere else.

But today, as I sat on a jumble of rocks off the promenade watching the fat sun set, I was in no mood to be pushed. My stomach was rumbling and writhing, my joints ready to seize, my hands and feet freezing. All I needed was some tightwad freak to wish me a nice day. To my right, the endless beach was quickly succumbing to twilight, and to my left a commercial pier stood over the waves like a tentative centipede, its underbelly secured from the public by a sturdy chain link fence. Behind this fence bunched a solid green jungle of lady fern, so densely packed it must have grown unchecked for years. On the boardwalk above were a small parking lot, an amusement arcade, a bait and tackle shop, a diner, and, just at the boardwalk's entrance, a little market which also did business in funshine souvenirs. The market's outer walls sported a continuous mural of long shapely ferns and pussy willows under a washed azure sky. Peeking from this idyllic dreamscape were leggy fawns, reddish-brown monarchs, smiling squirrels and carefree jays. A sign above the mural, bearing script as fanciful as the painting, read *GENTLE GLEN*. Only a few people were patronizing the place, but I knew it was where I'd be bumming my dinner. As I sat scoping it out, a curly blonde in cutoffs and frilly white blouse approached an exiting customer and began gesticulating and touching. The man—a very burly, swarthy character in Bermudas, windbreaker, and fedora—smiled and ran an arm around her waist. After a few more words they began sauntering across the parking lot. A minute later another man appeared at the door, wearing a white apron and sour expression. He watched them leaning on the rail for a bit, looking as though he would spit, then reached to the inner wall and switched on the market's corner floodlights. I shook my head and creaked to my feet. When it came to making a buck some people were born with a distinct advantage.

Once the aproned man was back inside I picked my way over the rocks, ambled up to the market and leaned against the front wall out of the floods' glare. No one going in or out felt compelled to offer me anything other than a hard look. I was just reaching the point

where hunger makes panhandling aggressive when my radar warned of an approaching cold front. That man in the white apron came back out and fixed me with a very tough stare. “No offense—” he began.

“But take a hike. Right?”

“Right.”

“Just going.” I bent to lift my sleeping bag, my knees and back protesting, my head swimming. I was hurting for protein. The man in the apron disappeared. Before I could leave he reappeared with a squashed cold sandwich. “Maybe this’ll tide you over.”

“But don’t come back. Right?”

“Right.”

I thanked him and slunk around the market to a wall facing the parking lot, peeling off the cellophane with my teeth. We both knew I’d be back. It was growing dark, so I sat against the market’s west wall under an epileptic floodlight. I was just getting comfortable when that same curly blonde came hurrying across the parking lot, looking scared. Spotting me, she rushed right up.

“*Scuse* me,” she burst out, “but if it’s okay could I, like, just *stand* here with you? Just for a little while? There’s some guy back there who’s really giving me a hard time. He’ll back off if he sees I’m not alone.”

I shrugged and tore into my sandwich. Bologna. It figured. Now I could see that she was closer to forty than thirty, and that makeup couldn’t hide the wear and tear on her psyche. But she must have been really pretty in her day, before the crow’s feet and stress lines did their number on her face. She kept looking back at the row of cars, where a dark figure leaned on the rail overlooking the beach.

“Doesn’t look like he’s going anywhere soon,” I remarked, finishing off my sandwich. Half a minute passed. She was starting to bug me. “Why don’t you go ask the guy in the market to call you a cop or something?”

“He don’t specially like me,” she said, sitting way too close. “I’m not real popular around the Glen.”

I crushed the cellophane into a ball and looked away.

“My name’s Cici,” she breathed. “My friends call me Peaches.” She squinted at the cars. The dark figure was getting bolder, moving our way a yard at a time. “C’mon,” Cici said urgently. “Walk with me a ways, will you?”

“Walk where?” And suddenly I picked up on an old vibe. This whole deal smelled of a setup.

“Just to where we can get away from this guy, okay? I’ve got

a place he don't know about—nobody knows about it. We can ditch him. Look, I'm *hip* to this dude, okay? He's real dangerous." She took my arm.

"What's all this 'we' stuff? Since when did we become partners?"

"Would you just *come on*, already!" The dark figure was ambling our way. I groaned to my feet and grabbed my sleeping bag, intending to separate myself from the proceedings gruffly and with finality, but Cici, a no-nonsense grip on my arm, surprised me by dragging me around the market toward the pier's arched entrance. The dark figure began to follow in earnest.

"Look," I said, attempting to extract my arm, "just get out of your own jams, all right? I got problems of my own." Everything was happening too fast.

"*Shut up!*" Cici hissed. "*Down here!*" She pulled me around the railing onto the sand. It was fully dark now, and my heart was pounding. What was I going to do, use a transistor radio to fight off some horny pissed goon? Cici hurried me alongside the fence to a spot maybe twenty feet from the waterline. There the fence continued at a right angle, leaving beachgoers plenty of room to walk below. Glancing over my shoulder as we ducked underneath, I saw a black form jumping onto the sand.

"*Jesus!*" I tried yanking out my arm, but Cici wasn't buying. At that I realized it wasn't some kind of setup after all. She was just as scared.

"Quick!" she whispered. "In here!"

Now I'll have to be absolutely clear in my description, because I still get confused when I recall how we worked our way into that place. Cici led me around a soggy wooden pillar and behind a clump of tall, sour-smelling plants. We stepped up on a tiny wood platform, scooted around another pillar and squeezed behind a row of heavy standing planks, took a few paces toward the water on a sagging beam. She parted another clump of those plants to reveal a cut section of chain link fence. The section swung inward at her push, and I followed her in. The fence swung shut behind me. We were up to our ankles in chilly sand, completely engulfed by those plants.

Cici put a finger to my lips. "*Shhh!*"

It wasn't at all dark, for long white slats from the pier's security floodlights shone through the boardwalk's interstices. In a moment we could hear somebody run past, pause, and continue running.

Cici took my hand and led me down a snaking path hacked through the foliage. Its density amazed me. The place was a weird, groping jungle; a hidden world.

We came to a clearing where three men as grungy as I sat around a gallon jug of cheap red wine. Considerable work had gone into making the place a home. Sodden pillars bore slats nailed horizontally to serve as shelves for found bric-a-brac, walkways had been laid using large stones and cinder blocks, crude walls were fashioned of hung plywood scraps. Tacked to these walls were a few posters, a wall clock without hands, a three-years-old calendar. Strategically placed chairs and mattresses showed half in shadow.

The man to my right rose as soon as we came into the open. Not only did he have the look of an obnoxious and felonious bully, there were aspects of his expression which gave an impression of real viciousness, perhaps even psychosis. He was physically big, and broad, and of a pasty complexion that vaguely came off as diseased, but more striking by far was the fact that he was absolutely *hairless*—and not merely shaven. There wasn't a trace of hair on his face, upper chest, or arms, not an eyelash or brow hair; and all this was evident from ten yards away. Several tattoos showed loudly against the whiteness of his flesh, one in particular—the realistically depicted, and strategically placed, scars of a hangman's noose—plainly intended to shock and intimidate. "Who the hell's that?" were the first words out of his mouth.

"*That*," Cici retorted, half-whispering, "is a friend of mine. We was being chased by Otto." I was to learn that almost all verbal exchanges were served up sotto voce in this place. She marched us right up to the little group, pulled a twenty from her bra, and held it triumphantly under the hairless man's nose. "You know how he acts when he don't get his way. We had to ditch him."

The big guy tore the bill out of Cici's hand and stuck a forefinger in her face. "How many times I got to tell you nobody comes in the Glen without my okay?" He gave me a really bad news look meant to scare the hell out of me, but I just ignored him and continued looking around. Maybe he wasn't used to confronting people who didn't care any more.

He tried that hard look again, shook his head and muttered, "Funky-assed hooker."

The guy sitting to my left was filthy and heavyset, wearing gray sweatpants, tennis shoes, an enormous overcoat, a black beret. Horn-rimmed spectacles with exceedingly thick lenses caused his

eyes to appear offset. He winked and said genially, “Now as you’re native, comfort your bones and draw with us one.”

I snapped, “*What?*” wondering if I was being put on.

“Siddown and have a drink,” Cici interpreted.

“And another thing,” the big guy rasped. “You quit turning tricks out front, okay? I told you once already you’re gonna blow it for us. Keep your butt up on the pier.”

“And, Ci’,” the genial man piped, “may I be first to express our gratitude concerning the wherewithal for this night’s repast.”

The big guy grabbed the fellow in the middle and yanked him to his feet. “Elf, you go upstairs and get some grub. Bread, cuts, and cheese. And another jug of grape.” Elf, who looked like his moniker, took the bill sheepishly.

The heavysset man groaned. “*Pleeease*. Not port; not again.” He rubbed a pudgy hand on his ample belly. “Mine ulcer, she sings.”

The big guy glared. “*Grape!*”

Elf nodded and made his way out, looking haunted.

I sat and accepted the jug, half-tempted to follow Elf out. But there was something about the big man’s manner that made me do the one thing that would really gore him. Casually sipping wine, I made a show of getting cozy.

“You ain’t wanted here!” he said, reading my mind. He strode through the foliage and disappeared behind a ramshackle partition.

Cici, sitting right beside me, said, “Best you don’t challenge him too much. He’s not just rowdy, he’s really off his nut. Once he told me he’s been like, you know, confined. For hurting somebody bad. And I seen him turn weird, if you know what I mean. He gets this look in his eyes like . . . *wow!* And he carries this great big hunting knife he likes to flash around, which he says he can’t wait to use on some big mouth. But most of the time he just gets his way with his fists.” She pulled back a handful of curls, revealing an ear that was swollen and discolored. “That’s what he done to me yesterday. And no reason, neither. Just out of the blue.”

I glanced at her ear and looked away. I’d seen worse. “Looks like it’s about time you elected yourselves a new big cheese.”

The bespectacled man sighed. “No Constitution down here, amigo. It’s the law of the jungle, both figuratively and literally. And sweet old Animal’s no more guilty of being human than the rest of us.”

I grunted. “Animal. I would’ve guessed something more like Monster.” The ferns all seemed to lean to the clearing, eavesdropping.

I found myself whispering. “Groovy little setup you’ve got yourselves here. Kinda reminds be of a place I once saw in a picture book. Borneo, I think it was called.”

The man sighed again. “*Athyrium filix-foemina*,” he moaned. “Californicum Butters. Likes it shady and moist.” He glanced around meaningfully. “Obviously.”

“Crap grass,” Cici translated.

My eyes were adjusting to the contrasts of light and shadow. “What’s this Animal guy’s hold around here, anyway? Never before met a man I disliked so much so fast.”

“Rule by terror,” the bespectacled man said. “Gets his way with a gesture or a grimace.” He tossed his head. “Alopecia, along with a heavy dose of incarceration, may have played telling roles in his present behavior. But he’s too hung up to realize it’s not necessary. Here he bides, cohabiting with three of the gentlest folk you’d ever hope to meet, and still he swaggers around like there’s a mutiny threatening his little fiefdom. Still, it’s all a lark to me. I’m easy.” He smiled and offered his dry old hand. “Name’s Ollen. Ollen Keats Farthingsworth III. That seems a little prolix in present company, so I just go by ‘the Poet’.”

I nodded curtly. I’d always seen a handshake as an empty ritual; in more cases than not an invitation to a double-cross.

The Poet smiled again. “Like I said, I’m easy.” There was a whisper of brushed fronds as Elf slithered in, a bulky shopping bag in the crook of his arm. He extracted a gallon jug of port, a loaf of French bread, a package of cheese slices, and some cold cuts wrapped in white butcher’s paper.

Animal must have been listening for him, for he reappeared and strode right up, tore the food and wine out of Elf’s hands and sat cross-legged with it all tucked between his knees. He stuffed the change in his shirt’s pocket, ripped the loaf down the center and crammed in the cheese and cold cuts. Without a word he began wolfing down the enormous sandwich, starting in the middle and working toward both ends. The bully was reestablishing his domain.

Animal made a point of hogging the meal solely to get to me. Suddenly, mid-swallow, his eyes rose and burned directly into mine. The man was so loathsome I couldn’t help returning the stare with venom, and as our eyes locked everything around us seemed to freeze. Only as those ugly eyes grew progressively viler did I realize I’d been trapped into staring down a psychopath. Without averting his gaze Animal completed the swallow and slowly and pointedly rubbed the

uneaten portion in the sand between his knees. At the corner of my vision I saw Elf's face fall.

Still holding my eyes, Animal made a show of reaching under his shirt. He drew out his hunting knife and slowly brandished it at eye level. I could tell how big the thing was without having to look at it directly, and while our little contest went on and on he twirled the blade in his fingers, catching and passing the radiance from the floods above. The whole point of this gambit wasn't to frighten me, but to break my stare with reflected light.

"Ahem," said the Poet.

No one moved. I realized I didn't have a thing to gain by beating Animal at his game, but I was already in too far. The more menacing his stare became, the more stolid I made mine. Crazy as it sounds, this must have gone on for the better part of an hour. Cici, Elf, and the Poet fidgeted as I willed myself to stone. At length sweat began to creep over Animal's forehead. His eyelids twitched. I saw him blink twice, almost imperceptibly. The man's mouth twisted into a bitter snarl, his eyelids fluttered, his face began to quake. He grunted and, his eyes still married to mine, took a vicious swipe at my face with the blade. The tip just brushed my cheek, not quite breaking the skin.

The Poet was first to react. "Under the circumstances," he breathed, "mayhaps mine ulcer wouldst not complain all that vociferously." He gingerly plucked the jug from between Animal's legs, unscrewed the cap and drank his fill. Elf and Cici responded like children under a Christmas tree, fidgeting and giggling. They nervously passed the jug.

Animal ignored them. Our eyes remained locked, his expression even meaner than before.

"Look!" Cici squealed. "Look at the lights! Somebody's turned on the arcade!"

Someone above, the electrician apparently, had indeed lit the amusement arcade's parti-colored neon façade, and now ghostly primary and secondary spots were dancing about us, vanishing and reappearing between the pillars and ferns. The effect was extremely surreal.

"Like being in a snow bubble," Elf tittered. "You know, one of those little glass things you turn upside-down and shake."

Just as suddenly the effect passed, leaving only the stark, humorless spears from the floodlights.

"Shoot!" Cici pouted. "Somebody had to go and turn us

rightside-up again!”

The Poet chuckled. “Never in a day,” spake he, “hast one’s going wit so trod the moment made.”

“Shut up,” said Animal.

The Poet looked at him quizzically, a patient smile on his face. “Meaning what? Meaning let the bearing quiet run the clockwork of our lives? Meaning fault the Muse for sorrow’s sake, that our—”

“Meaning shut your stupid face,” Animal said menacingly. “I’m sick of listening to your crap, you got me? So either you clam up or I’m gonna clam you up. Is that clear enough for you?”

“We need not evoke bivalves,” the Poet responded in all seriousness, “nor the product of our bowels. If perchance mine song should ring askance—”

“I said,” Animal screamed, *“shut up!”*

The Poet stared for a long minute, blinking. Wine had made him careless, and a bit slow on the uptake. He looked at us uncertainly, wondering if his speech was garbled. The faces returning his stare were white as death. The Poet turned back to Animal. “*Believe* me,” he began, “lest I seem remiss in endeavoring to—”

What happened next happened so fast and so unexpectedly we were all struck dumb. Animal grabbed the Poet by the hair, yanked his head forward, and slit his throat in one clean swipe. The Poet gawked at the blood spurting on his overcoat. His hand started for his throat, but before it could make it he pitched forward. I sat quietly, bespattered, watching the spurts taper until the Poet was no more. Cici was in a strange posture, her hands raised, her eyes wide, her mouth all agape. I kind of expected a cinematic, piercing scream, but what came out was more like a tea kettle’s piping. And, like a kettle’s song, the sound just went on and on, finally descending in pitch until it blew away as a sigh.

“Jeez, Animal,” Elf whispered. “*Jeez*, man!”

Animal glared maniacally, waiting for me to move. I couldn’t tell if he was smiling or snarling, but I wasn’t about to stare him down this time.

“Dump him,” Animal told Elf, his eyes pursuing mine. “In the back.”

Elf wobbled to his feet. “I—I can’t lift him. He’s too heavy.” He sounded like he was about to break into tears. “What’d you have to go and do that for, Animal?” He turned to me with a look of supplication.

“In the back,” Animal repeated.

Elf turned to Cici, whose eyes were rolling round and round in her head, then back to me. “Help me out,” he whined, “huh, guy?” But I knew enough to sit tight. Animal’s stare was searing.

Elf dragged the Poet’s body through the foliage, making an awful lot of noise. In a few minutes we heard him whimpering maybe thirty feet away, and eventually the sounds of digging.

Animal hefted the near-full jug and tilted back his head, his eyes never leaving mine. He swallowed and swallowed, his face contorting. I knew this wasn’t for show, he really needed that drink. At last he lowered the jug and secured it between his thighs. There was a long silence, broken only by Elf’s distant whining and by Animal’s heavy breathing. Cici’s eyes avoided us both, and mine were fixed on Animal’s knife. In my heart I knew he was waiting for an excuse—any excuse—to use it on me, and that he was only beginning to consider the enormity of his crime. Animal belched, feigning calm. It didn’t take a psychoanalyst to figure out what he was up to. He was using the alcohol to steel himself, realizing he now had three witnesses to deal with.

The pier creaked and trembled with the tide as the tension wound down. Animal played out his scene with the jug, his eyes glazing, his mouth hanging open for successively longer intervals. I saw a ray of hope. If the big man managed to drink himself silly I could walk.

At last he set down the jug, having killed well over half. He stared dully at Cici and slowly moved his hand to stroke her hair. At his touch her eyes came to life, darting side to side, lighting on me imploringly. Animal wasn’t too drunk to not pick up on her look. His attention rolled back and forth between us—it was obvious he saw her less as a sexual opportunity than as a means to provoke me. He raised the knife until it was positioned before her face.

“C’mere.”

Cici didn’t budge, but her eyes were all over the place. Animal grinned, casually brought the blade around to her back and used the tip to snip off her blouse’s buttons one by one. He did it dispassionately, methodically, like a man removing grapefruit seeds with a butter knife.

Cici’s blouse fell open. Animal used the knife’s tip to draw it away from her body. Amid the spears of light and shadow the whiteness of her bra served more to accentuate than conceal her breasts. Animal rested the flat of his blade against her throat. Watching me all the while, he slid it caressingly around her neck and

down her back, finally hooking it under the bra's strap. His eyes gleamed. With the gentlest flick he severed the strap. Cici shuddered as Animal used the blade to fling off her brassiere. Topless, caught in that wholly vulnerable posture amid the shadowy ferns, Cici possessed a sensuality that evoked every healthy male's wildest fantasies.

The big man's strategy was definitely working. Certain primitive urges, as protective as they were erotic, made me want to wrest that blade from him, cut out his filthy heart, and cart off my prize.

Animal smiled. "Where's your manners, boy?"

Cici watched only me as Animal pulled her face onto his lap. The knife glinted against her throat.

"I *said*," he hissed, "turn . . . a . . . *round*." I carefully turned away and stared coldly at the ferns. Animal wasn't content to make a pig of himself and be done with it; he had to rub my face over and over in his gathering show of excess. Hours were lost in a greasy blur of gulps and grunts and squeals of disgust. It was a numbing experience to have to sit there, listening helplessly while the morning light drew dreamy patterns on the plants and piling. Never had a night passed so quickly. Finally Cici gave a little sob of defeat. I heard Animal's voice say, "All right, get up."

Unbidden, I turned back around. Animal was hitting the jug again, looking glum, and Cici was on her feet, naked, staring at a point equidistant between us. Animal almost lost his balance pulling up his pants. Cici turned to face me directly, caught in the classic pose of feminine abashment: right forearm covering the breasts, left hand concealing the crotch, right knee turned in. Then a really strange thing happened. She let her arms drop to her sides and looked me straight in the eye. My pulse shimmied at the mixed signals.

Animal took another long swallow, looking anything but triumphant, his drunken gaze languishing on Cici's stance. He blearily studied the way she was watching me, filled his mouth with wine, leaned forward and spat the mouthful in my face. I let the wine roll into my eyelashes and off my chin, refusing to react. He ticked the knife back and forth before me, very slowly, like a metronome's pendulum set to largo. "I got eyes," he said, and his face shook a bit. "Okay, tough guy. *You* do her, then."

I forced myself to not tense up, still waiting for that subtle drift of countenance that would show he'd overextended himself with the wine. But his size seemed to be working in his favor. Drunk as he was, he didn't appear anywhere near losing it. "Up!" he said. "Get . . . *up!*"

Rising slowly, I prepared to make my break. Again Animal seemed to read my mind. He grabbed Cici's calf and tenderly stuck the blade's tip in her navel. "Get your duds off—*now!*"

I kicked away my shoes, peeled off my shirt, dropped my pants and shorts. Cici and I stood face to face, our bodies inches apart. Only then did she begin to weep. The sound was soft as a whisper. I looked past her.

Animal swallowed and swallowed, set the jug down hard. He began tapping the blade against the glass, enjoying himself. The jug was almost empty.

"And," I said quietly, not really sure what made me take a stand, "so help me God, pigman, when I'm done I'm gonna take that bottle and stuff it right down your bleached ugly face."

The pinging stopped. Animal was gaping up at me, his expression an odd blend of exultation and amazement. His eyes danced. "Elf!" he crowed. "Make room for another!"

"Just a little man," I went on numbly, sensing his pride, and knowing I'd already gone too far. "Just a scared little man with a big, bad knife." Animal's eyes narrowed. His face assumed that same cruel expression that had so vexed me when I came into this place. With a grunt he plunged the blade into the sand, pushed himself to his feet, and rammed Cici aside. Before I could respond he had his hands on my throat and was choking me for all he was worth.

I can't remember too much of the ensuing minute or so. I still see the shadows swirling about me as unconsciousness approached, and I still feel Animal's thumbs pressing against my windpipe, harder and harder, and I still smell his foul alcoholic breath taking away what little air I could manage. But most of all I vividly see his face up against mine. And I remember how the savageness of that expression intensified, and how it became ecstatic, only to slowly lose its flame, waning almost to a look of sadness. A fuzzy spark of *just maybe* hit me—the dying man's last gasp of hope he'll be spared by a trace of humanity. Animal's sad look declined in sync with my flagging awareness; the expression becoming regret, becoming weariness, becoming stupor as we collapsed. Through the coalescing shades of gray I caught a glimpse of Animal's hunting knife protruding between his shoulder blades, saw Cici's worried face looking into mine, and finally had a blurry impression of little Elf peering over her shoulder.

There wasn't a whole lot to be done in a constructive vein. Elf wordlessly dragged Animal's body to join the Poet's while Cici and I stood silently, finishing off what was left of the wine. In a few

minutes Elf was back, Animal's hunting knife in his trembling hand.

"Only one thing to do, man," he said. "Throw this sucker in the water and hightail it out of here. No weapon, no case." He wiped the blade at his feet, encrusting it with sand. "You can just leave those guys in the back and let this stuff grow over 'em. Nobody'll ever know." He stashed the knife under his coat and looked around, searching for words. At last he said, "Man . . . I'm *outta* here!" and darted through the greenery.

Cici and I avoided eye contact, staring at the fronds long after the entrance had rustled shut. My eyes, reacting to daybreak, fell on the scant piles of our clothes. It was very quiet; only the murmuring of breakers and the creaking footfalls of stoic fishermen.

"Look at us," Cici said, embarrassed. "Just like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden." Her fingers brushed my thigh.

We faced each other, and I found myself staring frankly at her naked body. I swallowed. "Now I can see," I whispered, "why they call you Peaches." Long shafts of morning sun began to play over the foliage, bringing to life a lush and primitive arena.

"Tell you what," I said, letting my hand ride down her spine, "I'll be Adam."

Alphanumerica

Hi, you've reached the website of Ace Hunter, the Man Who Can. There are no pictures or graphics up yet, but I've tons of cool stuff to share with ya—my favorite movies, oldies, and cinema babes—so I hope we can all become great and longstanding friends on this Wonderful, Worldwide, and Way-out Web.

For all the cats out there:

I'm a good old boy who really knows how to party hearty. I totally dig rapping sports. I mean football, boxing, NASCAR. Not that other stuff, like golf and soccer and twirls and mitten-making. I like *sports*. I mean, no offense or anything, but I don't want this site flooded with pictures of men in codpieces, okay? I like *sports*. Guy stuff. Are we cool here? That was "guy," not "gay."

And for all you ladies:

I'm 6'2 with deep blue eyes, a long blond mane, and no tan lines, if you know where I'm coming from (and I think you do). I wouldn't say I'm exactly *ripped*, but that's not really my call to make. Anyway, I'm working on it. Maybe we can work on it together. My favorite books are the Kama Sutra and Fear Of Flying, but if you've got anything you wanna read to me, I want you to know I'm all ears. And a few other things. I'm not super-particular: blondes, brunets, red-heads—I'm easy. And I'm not hung up, either. You can wear what-

ever you like when we're typing; it'll just be our little secret. Promise. I'm the same as any other guy in that respect: I like to keep my sex life private. Hell, we can even rap in the raw if you want. You don't have to worry about getting up-close and personal; not with Ace Hunter, not with the Man Who Can.

I can see it's going to take a tad to get old Ace up to speed here. I'm not seeing the rush of hits I expected; in fact I haven't picked up a single response. There must be some glitch in the receiver, so I'm gonna have to ask all you guys and gals out there to just be patient. We'll get to the good stuff soon enough. In the meantime, why don't you prepare a list of questions for the Man Who Can. You know; who I'm voting for, my favorite outfielder, what's the raddest Chevy, which starlet has the tightest—you know; don't be afraid to get personal (especially you babes). That's what we're all here for, right? Just let me roust my webmaster, and we'll be right up and running. But only ten questions per contact, please!

That's odd. They can't find anything wrong with my site. So we can all just quit playing hide-and-seek here (LOL). Ya gots me, pals o' mine—I surrender; now let's get down to some heavy conversation. Go ahead, bros and babes; ask the ol' Man Who Can anything. Blaze away.

You guys are just too, too much. So I have to go first; is that it? Real Mature! ☺ Okay, hang on to your blutetooth. I've got the inside scoop on that Ahnold and Bixby rumor: they were doing jerks in that weight room, all right! Humma-humma. And that ain't all. One of me Ears informs me that ol' Camille had the hots for Lady Die! (Sorry if I offended any of you Crowners out there, but here in the States we like to let it all hang out. Oops! Let me stuff it all back in). So there you go! Now it's your turn. Hit me with your best shots, buds.

Hey, if nobody wants to visit my site that's no skin off the Man Who Can. I don't need you. I don't need anybody.

Just kidding. Patience is my long shot. But not with you honeypies! *GrrruffF!* I simply can—not—*wait*. How's about you?

Whatever.

Anybody out there like puppies? I sure do hope so, man. Because I'm not just giving 'em away, *I'm blowing 'em away!* That's right. I've got a cardboard box here with half a dozen of the little snotnoses, peeing up a storm on my best jogging sweats. Some old lady in the building gave them to me. Why? Because she knows I have so many freaking FRIENDS on the Internet I'll be able to parcel-post 'em from here to Timbuktu, no problem. But gee, appears nobody really gives a good holy crap about the Man Who Can. So I guess he's just gonna have to see how these little guys like partying in a sealed plastic bag. And whose conscience is that gonna be on? Not mine. Because I would have been glad to stop, if only someone had been humane enough to give me the word. So how do you want them? All together in the bag or delivered separately in shoeboxes? Here goes Snoopy right now, butt up and let down. Oh, that's right; I don't have an address to mail him to—none of my FRIENDS came through. Well I guess it's down the old bowl for sweet little Snoopster. A shame, really. But you can save him! I *can* be swayed! Just drop a dime. A nickel. A penny. A smiley face? A freaking "Hey, Bozo"?

Okay, enough is enough. I've decided if Ace Hunter isn't good enough to elicit one little response from the world, then the world isn't good enough for Ace Hunter. So this is it, friends and lovers I'll never know. I'm out of here; and I mean that literally. I'm closing all the windows in Hunter's Den. I'm turning on the gas and sticking my fool head in the oven. I'll do it, too, dig? 'Cause nothing is too drastic for the Man Who Can. So goodbye cruel world, goodbye cruel silence, and most of all, goodbye cruel Internet. This is sayonara, babies. If I don't get a response from one of you jokers within the next five minutes I'm fairy food. I'm going for the gas now. Drop that dime fast; don't stay a stranger. This is Ace Hunter, checking out. Hasta, amigos.

Look, I've got a book on homemade bombs, okay? And I'm in tight with this guy who can get me all the stuff I need to just keep on producing. *OK?* Now, I've been doing a little work in the kitchen, if you get my drift. Anybody paying attention yet? Maybe your eyes will open when I take down City Hall. I can do it, too. Remember? I'm the Man Who Can.

Hey Ace Hunter

This is hot69sex4U. I woud lik 2 meat you for good times. I am eighteen years old redhead with long leg and big ta-ta. Blue eye and platinum blonde hairs. I am 38DDD-22-36 brunet. What are these detail U talk about with the bombing City Hall, Ace Hunter? I woud lik 4 U 2 talk with me about this. I lik metalica, pizza, much beer, and heavywait boxing. They say I look lik 7 of 9 on Star Trik, but she not so hot. For fun I lik to paint myself purpl, gargl cup of KY jelly, and do topless jumping jaks surounded by big and many mirrors. R U fun guy, Ace? From who U get bomb material, Ace? I lik 2 meat this man. I bring my many hot girlfriend and we all have fun. But I have problem with man and hope U can help. Problem is called nimfomania but unlik regular girl I can only do with one mania, if I lik him and he cute. R U cute, Ace? Where U keeping bomb Ace Hunter?

Hi, hot69sex4U!!!!

Sorry to keep you waiting, but I got your message at the same time my agent called. We have this gig over at a swingers bar, and I'd sure like you to come along. You sound like a real cute girl and a dynamite babe. What were those measurements again? Please don't tell me you have a sticky D key. Gee, it sounds like we have a lot in common. The same taste in food, music, and sports. What more could a guy want in a woman. That *was* "38" triple D, right? Not 36? It's easy to confuse those number keys. Not that I care so much about women physically. What's important is a woman's mind, and I can tell you're way smarter than most. Have you ever tried a trampoline with those mirrors? A *whole cup* of K-Y? Where do you live, anyway?

Hey Ace Hunter

This is hot69sex4U. I have been wondering about this bombs U are making. I woud lik if maybe we coud C it together. I always think bombmaking man is very much sexy. I will bring my videocamra and fishnet bodystocking. I lik to wear it doggy styl and stand on head whil kissing many long objex and howling at moon. On trampoline. But C-ing bomb make me get turned on. No bomb, no ta-ta. Ta-tas, Ace Hunter, ta-tas.

Hey, hey, hot69sex4U!

No sweat. I've got the bomb right here, babe, and she's a real beauty. But, y'know, maybe we should get to know each other a little better first. Like, what's your favorite hobby?

Hey Ace Hunter

This is hot69sex4U. My favorite hobby bombs. I lik mak long hot nasty naked sex with man who talk about bombs. I lik masage him with ta-tas all over whil he talk about bombs bombs bombs. Ta-tas. Bombs, Ace Hunter, bombs. What is Ur real name, Ace Hunter?

Well, let's just leave it at Ace Hunter, okay, babe? 'Cause he's the Man Who Can. Besides, you're not using your real name. And don't you think this is kind of cool, like that sexy-incognito song, "Me and Mrs. Jones?" Hey?

Hey Ace Hunter

This is hot69sex4U. Yes my real name hot69sex4U. Where Jones keep bombs, Ace Hunter? I woud lik 2 mak nasty with Jones, U watch whil we mak sex with big dick donkey, Ace Hunter, on tabl. With giraf, Ace Hunter, in sink, in toylet. All night long with U and Jones. Bombs, Ace Hunter, bombs. But I not Mrs. I am black mongolyan singl girl with long tung fat ass and big ta-tas. I lik swing with Jones and bomb, Ace Hunter. Bombs. I am littl tiny japanes woman with 58DDDDDDDD ta-tas. Geisha.

Well, Gesundheit, hot69sex4U. Shucks, I don't think it's important what race a woman is, just so long as she's nice and honest and stuff. I mean, how do you keep 'em off the keyboard, for Christ's sake? That's just a joke, hot69sex4U. If anybody appreciates a well-endowed woman, it's the Man Who Can. I've been described as being a tad in the oversized department myself, so I know how you feel (that was a pun. How you "feel." Get it?).

Hey Ace Hunter

This is hot69sex4U. All my friend well-endow. We lik box naked, make slappy-slap with big ta-ta. BIG ta-ta, Ace Hunter, all girl BIG ta-ta. We lik ride horsey on bomb, Ace

Collected Stories

Hunter, show us bomb. Bring bomb, bring plan, bring material. We ring around rosey with ta-tas on you and Jones, Ace Hunter, bring Jones. I wet for you, Ace Hunter, I wet all over. Where Jones?

Hey, hot69sex4U.

You sound really kinky. And that's really cool. But, you know, I'm beginning to think I might not be man enough for you.

Hey Ace Hunter

This is hot69sex4U. Is OK. We can go 3way, 4way, manyway, anyway. Just mak meat hot69sex4U and Jones. Then I kiss you nasty in many naked place whil we talk 2 Jones about material. I gulp you lik fish on rufie, Ace Hunter. I dance on ta-tas upside down in vat of whip cream, shake booty lik disco girl, snap whip in high heel and panty, spank bad cowboy underpants, U name it. Look, Ace Hunter, no bra, no bra. U tell me where U live, Ace Hunter. I do naked hula hoop, I bongo ta-tas on 4head. Make pig sex in snorkles, dip ta-tas in jello, kiss good spot all night long, Ace Hunter, sex all night long.

Wow. That all sounds super cool, hot69sex4U. But this is the Internet. This is the Worldwide, Wonderful, Way-out Web. You could be anywhere. I could be anywhere.

Hey Ace Hunter

This is hot69sex4U. Don't worry I very close Ace Hunter. Hot sex much ta-ta, just tell me address. I hurry down street topless on pogo stick. Make stink sex with you and Jones. All night long, Ace Hunter, all night long. Bombs.

Well, gee, hot69sex4U. You don't have to go to all that trouble. I live at 737 Maple, apt. 412A. It's like this big twin-building, with lots of eucalyptus trees out front. Nothing fancy, but you can see those highrises against the downtown skyline from my bedroom win Hang on a second, hot69sex4U. There's a whole bunch of official vehicles in the street. I think there's something going on in this building. Wow. You should hear the commotion out in the hall. We may have to

Alphanumerica

evacuate. Gosh, I think so. They're pounding on my door right now. I've got to run, hot69sex4U. Somebody out there definitely wants to meet the Man Who Can.

Hell's Outpost

Oh dear God, shake me out of this nightmare. Rouse me, unbind me, before I succumb to the horror . . . free my arms and legs—get this warm sticky mucus . . . get it *off* before that thing comes back. Wake me, *please!* It's closer, it's closing in—that huge, ruby-winged monstrosity of my mind, serrated legs and long sucking feet, chainsaw-buzzing mouth and a dozen feelers; no eyes, no eyes, only black searching pits. I can't move, God—pull me out before I drown. It's leaping on me—long slick tongue, crushing press of legs. That curved stinger, rising, plunging, jacking into my chest. That burgundy abdomen, turning about, sinking onto my face . . . and my mouth a sump, a choked pit retching in red putrid slime. No, please . . . *don't* wake me—let me pass right now, let me die in my vile dreams.

Doctor Freedman waddles back into the examination room. Elderly, white, artificially hearty, but now with a lateral crease to his smile. He motions me over to the little stainless steel desk, places my scan on the polished easel, backlights it. “Here's the source of your stomach complaint; no doubt about it.” We're looking at an x-ray plate of my fisting, semi-spiral gut, all swollen and contorted. “Forget carcinoma, forget ulceration, forget diverticula. *That's* why you're so

sick, *that* explains the dramatic weight loss. Your complaint's parasitic."

I stare at him uncertainly. "You're telling me I have *worms*?"

Freedman shakes his head. "Singular. At least as far as the preliminary goes. But it's not a hookworm, not a tapeworm, not a pinworm. How it's surviving in a gastric environment is beyond me." The doctor lifts the scan to view against the fluorescents. "*That*," he gushes, "simply *has* to be the largest parasitic growth ever encountered in a living human being!" He looks at me as though I've just won the lottery. The good doctor sets me back down. "Go home and relax while I research this little anomaly. If you show signs of anemia call me immediately. But first, let's go over the fine points once more. You say that your income is inherited, that you live on a boat right here in our marina, and that you keep your personal area scrupulously clean. You mention becoming sick after eating a burrito at a little cantina in town. Describe that experience again."

"It was awful," I say, and a *rotteness* comes to my palate. "Beef and cheese. I didn't check it out first; I was hungry. I took one swallow, gagged, and spat out the rest. It was such a horrible taste, doctor. I couldn't flush it; not with mouthwash, not with bicarb. I tried to walk off the whole thing, but I simply got more and more depressed. Eventually I stretched out on a little harbor bench and just lay there with my head lolling and my stomach clenching. When I opened my eyes there were all these sea gulls and pelicans standing around me; dead-quiet, riveted, just staring. Creepiest minute of my life. I guess I was hallucinating, but that strikes me as the first piece in the nightmare puzzle; I mean that flying thing in my boat I told you about."

"Okay. We all know an unhappy stomach can play tricks on the mind. ' . . . a bit of undigested beef,' and all that, coincidentally enough. There are no indications of toxic ingestion or of food poisoning, and despite the weight loss and overall haggardness your blood count is normal, so it's safe to say your mental stress is a direct outcome of your body's stress. I'm not prescribing any medications until I'm clearer on this thing. Go home and take your mind off it. Get some rest, Mr. Rowan. Relax."

I've always been a man on the water. The California marinas have always been my home. I've lived on this little sailboat, moored in Mer Harbor, for the last twenty years, in East Basin's deepest

slip—farthest from land, farthest from the profane enticements of neon, farthest from your silly press and scatter. I'm a loner, rooming only with the sea. And, because of my self-enforced isolation, I'm aware of the breadth of things; things shut out by the glare of civilization. I am, by my own honest evaluation, far saner than all you so-called normal people put together. So I have no qualms about laying out my thoughts and experiences on this dictaphone. It fits in my pocket. It's going with me everywhere.

And I swear I can see them from my port window: giant crimson fireflies in the night, moving like embers slung in a line. They pass low over the waves from one beach community to the next. Housefly, dragonfly, gremlin, harpy—what are you things—a new breed, a mutation, some kind of alien stock? And why are there no reports of sightings, no observations other than mine? Maybe because you're, like me, under the radar, outside the window, obscured by the Glare. I'm tying down the tarp over this roofless cabin, though the pressure in my gut demands I rest. But how can I rest in the open air, vulnerable? The knots are secure, the tarp as taut as a drum. If you come back again you'll have to earn me.

The water boils around my boat—another hallucination? On a distant yacht a housecat wails on and on, and the leathery sound of wings hammers in my skull. My stomach swells and sinks. I'm being eaten alive, sucked dry. Got to recline, got to rest.

But to rest is to sleep.

“Dr. Freedman?” I breathe into the mouthpiece, and sag against the glass. My stomach squeezes into a knot, relaxes, squeezes again. “I got your message on my pager. I'm calling from a pay phone. What'd you learn?”

“Mr. Rowan—I'm so glad you called! I've conferred with specialists who've gone over your scans in depth. That's not a worm in your stomach after all.”

I jerk upright at a sudden spasm, and grate, “That's a relief.”

There's a long pause on the other end. Finally Freedman says, measuredly, “Mr. Rowan . . . it's a maggot.”

I sag again. “Pardon?”

“I know, I know. Damnedest thing. But we can't argue with these results. Now, I need you to come to the hospital right away. We'll run a series of tests, all painless, and there are a number of people who want to speak with you personally. The hospital will of

Hell's Outpost

course pay for everything—these are amazing circumstances, Mr. Rowan.”

“Amazing,” I echo.

“How are you feeling? Have you noticed any improvement?”

The receiver grows slippery in my hand. The booth reels, and I can feel the blood trickling down the backs of my thighs. “Oh, 'bout the same, I guess. How's about yourself?”

“Good, then you're stable. Get thee to the hospital, Mr. Rowan, ASAP. These are some extraordinary times!”

“That they are,” I mumble, and let the receiver fall.

It's back.

I can feel it approaching, even as I feel the goo congealing at my wrists and ankles. It's worrying at the canvas tarp; a scattering silhouette of wings and legs dancing port to starboard. Let me wake—can it only find me in my dreams . . . the scratching and tapping picks up; the tarp sags at its center.

The stretching canvas produces a space between knots, and a black spiny leg works its way inside. The leg kicks about, reaching. Can't scream, can't back away; I'm fastened here, with my gut leaping and locking spasmodically. The black body bounces above me, trying to force the leg deeper. There's a snap, cotton-soft in my delirium, as the shift in weight redistributes tension in the tie-downs, causing the tarp's edge to tighten and cleanly sever that questing limb.

The tarp vibrates furiously. In a moment there's another scratching at the point of entry, then the great silhouette lifts and passes. The throbbing in my gut subsides.

The nightmare is over. All my impressions succumb to the deep.

I know where they're going. They've passed below the horizon, but they were in descent before disappearing. Hell's Outpost. It's on my chart, though it's more a footnote than anything. Dead and porous, only six hundred square feet and barely sixteen feet above sea level. Useful for bearings, otherwise a navigation hazard. The ocean is a fractured mirror as the dry wind tugs me on; silent running. My little boat leaves a black arrow of a wake, far behind that low-flying red arrow, a carpet of tiny blinking stars below the bright gibbous moon.

I've stocked the boat with five-gallon cans of gasoline, 'cause I'm gonna burn out those bastards' nest or hive or whatever, and try to save what's left of my sanity. If I can just survive this lurching pain. There's a flat smudge on the horizon; a dried-out scab on the ocean. No sign of activity. I'm pulling up smoothly, one eye to the waterline.

The whole island stinks, even against the night and sea. But it's not a guano smell. It's unhealthily foul—makes you want to up-and-heave. There's a slight cove to moor in. The rocks gleam dully; a sick air breathes over this place. I creep rock to rock in new rubber boots, a flashlight between my teeth and four full gas cans clamped under my arms and in my fists. I'm Hell's Outpost's lone scuttling crab, carefully making my way under a white hanging moon.

The smell just gets worse and worse; now it's godawful vile. The island's gutted, pocked, honeycombed; big fissures lean in, some almost parallel with the water. I pause at a wide opening, set down the cans and transfer my flashlight. The beam's torn by crags, baring only hints of the sickness within . . . that stench, rising round the openings—if I gag I'll puke. A man can just squeeze in on hands and knees. Got to keep my mouth and nose covered while I walk in the cans behind me. Spiny, slimed-over rocks, fouling my fingers, catching my clothes. And I'm in.

It's a cavern, a low rocky vault eaten away from all sides. My light glances off mounds and mounds of rotted and rotting flesh—sharks and dolphins, pelicans and gulls, cats and dogs . . . people, of all shapes and sizes, children and adults. The whole sprawling mess is wildly alive, crawling with pallid glistening maggots and juvenile versions of those scarlet flying monsters. The stench is . . . Christ, I'm suffocating. And now my stomach's ripping in half, a leaping cavity of unbelievable pain. Air. I've got to get out. Air.

A flurry at the opening drives me back. Two long saw-toothed legs feel about, and the filtered moonlight becomes a dull bloody glow. Staggering in reverse, slipping on the slime-humped rocks—then I'm hollering on my back in a clinging, crawling web; maggots in my hair, on my lips, round my ankles and wrists, pulling me back into that bleak clotted nightmare on the boat. Strung between two worlds, my stomach blows apart and the fat white maggot erupts glistening with gut, just as the scraping shape breaks through the opening and moonlight floods the cave.

The pain drives me to my feet. Roll on the rocks, slap off the remaining maggots. I spin off a cap and toss handfuls of gas on that

Hell's Outpost

closing crimson specter. It backs away kicking, but won't relinquish the opening. It's a lock, man, an impasse; and there I am, back on my feet, shaking gas on the writhing mounds, can after can, swirling and splashing the stuff wildly, saturating everything that moves. I strike and toss my lighter, and the flare-up almost knocks me over.

And I just lose it, in all that horror, eclipsing those flames. I see myself, almost as though watching a film, laughing madly at the sick triumph while the blood pumps down my legs. And I hear myself staggering to the opening, my arms and hair on fire and my voice breaking in the fumes:

Come on, bitch, here I am. How do *you* like it? I'll kill you, I'll fry you, I'll roast you right back into Hell. You want some of this? *Then come on!*

This is the whole tape-recorded journal found aboard Wesley Rowan's boat *The Loner*. The District Attorney's office is treating it as a suicide note, and the coroner has ruled Mr. Rowan's demise as Death By Unknown Causes. We at *The Harbor Herald* have permission to print a verbatim transcript, and present it here in its entirety for our readers' interpretations, whatever they may be. While Rowan's narrative is disjointed and manifestly impossible as a real-time recording, given the circumstances he describes, it is certainly well within the parameters of a taped dramatic reliving on a subsequent return in *The Loner*, as posited by at least one analyst. At any rate, comments are solely those of the journalists assigned, as subscribed by the editor, and are not meant to reflect the paper's overall point of view.

Hell's Outpost was indeed visited by a mariner on the night of 6-4-09; there are mooring marks on the island's rocks, and these marks match scrapes found on the hull of *The Loner*. Furthermore, the island's interior was completely burned out in a petroleum blaze, and Rowan was subjected to third-degree burns over thirty-five percent of his body. These data fully support the journal's storyline. The journal itself only buttresses the evaluation of Rowan's personal physician, Doctor Ruben Freedman, as to his patient's fickle state of mind.

The Loner was discovered crashed into its slip; the vessel unmoored, the cabin a bloody mess. Wesley Rowan was deemed, even in deep rigor mortis, to be misshapen and resolved in a manner beyond the pale of all historical pathology. According to the coroner's final report, a large object of unknown specificity had been forced, or

had in some manner independently worked its way, through Rowan's digestive system, beginning in the stomach and making egress at the anus, distorting and mangling the tract's every twist and turn in the process. This drawn-out passage contorted his body into a bizarre arch the report describes as "physically improbable." Forensic findings demonstrate that Mister Rowan was alive and conscious throughout the ordeal.

This case, while officially closed, will certainly draw the attention of those interested in tales of the bizarre. It seems likely, too, that associations will be made between Rowan's tape-recorded ravings and the recent spate of reports involving lost children and pets, along with all these supposed sightings of a humming blood-red creature swooping around the beach communities in the wee hours. It is not *The Herald's* intent to throw fuel on these fancies, so we submit this column solely for purposes of elucidation, and beg our faithful and intelligent readers to make of it as they will.

Why I Love Democracy

by

Enrique Batsnuwa LaCzynevitch McGomez

In researching this paper I could not help but be struck by how very much we take for granted in our wonderful country. Less than a century ago this was a different nation indeed; a nation where femepersons were unbearably repressed, where mascupersons were allowed to perpetuate their myth of gender dominance, and where demopersons of diverse ethnicity were perennially humbled and brutalized. I speak, of course, of the reign of terror concocted by that notorious agent of subjugation, that swaggering bully, the White Indigenous Male Protestant (WIMP).

Ever since the great, all-encompassing movement we know as Progressive Liberal Reform prevailed, beginning with the effective dissolution of our borders (“Illegal Alien” Anti-Discrimination Act, 2011), the changes have been sweeping and dramatic, and today it is crystal clear that the concepts *freedom* and *liberty* can only be interpreted as *absolute rights*; and that finding objectionable the behavior—no matter how egregious—of any person other than a WIMP is de facto prejudice. Now once-suspect demopersons have the

run of our streets, and law enforcement walks a very fine line between apprehension and lawsuit.

But before PLR became the single, imperative interpretation of our beloved Constitution, our great nation's political atmosphere was divided into two basic camps. These two continuously bickering factions, originally known as *Democrats* and *Republicans*, grew even more estranged after the Unutterable Depression of 2033, evolving into those defunct camps still generally described as *Left Wing*, or Government Instituted for a Meaningful and Merciful Economy (GIMME), and *Right Wing*, or the Grand Old Trustee Commission for a Humane America (GOTCHA). Not until the so-called "Minority Revolt" of 2039 did the infamous conservative arm of our government see the light, disband entirely, and free itself of its barbaric ways.

To document The Transition, I hope my use of subtitles in this paper will assist in manifesting our nation's tremendous advances.

The Economics of Compassion

Our country's political progress has been nothing less than spectacular, for time and again PLRs have demonstrated just how relentlessly *caring* they can be. I could devote pages here to the dauntlessness of those liberal American femepersons, the renowned *Screaming Sheilas*, who selflessly breast-fed platypus ducklings during the Tasmanian Drought of 2019, pages more to the intrepidity of the venerated *Poor Dearers* of the 2030s, who risked life and limb to reach a golden eagle's aerie, there to nest-sit the eggs in freezing weather for days while the crippled mother recuperated, an entire document to the valor of the old *Greenpeace* organization, wiped out in a bloody confrontation with the Upper States' Yukon "Eskimos" over the Constitutional rights of the arctic char.

But the noblest case in point—and the most striking example of how even zealous PLRs can go awry—would of course be the Great Drive of 2045, when it was discovered that that rarest of rare birds, the Funnytailed Pucebreasted Slugsucker, had in fact become an endangered species. Overnight an unprecedented national campaign was undertaken on their behalf. Parades stocked with municipally-sponsored, appropriately costumed Funnytailers raised hundreds of thousands of dollars, while entrepreneurs of every sort

made fortunes by dyeing their wares purple for the Conscientious Consumer. The public was *besieged* by Slugsucker minutia, over every medium, around the clock. *Millions* were raised for the birds' preservation through cuts in defense and astrophysical research, while homeowners everywhere became proud members of the nationwide Adopt a Sucker Society (ASS).

The results were fantastic, inspiring, heart-warming.

The Funnytailed Purplebreasted Slugsucker began to multiply in numbers that were absolutely staggering, their little fuzzy-faced offspring popping up in cornfields, backyards, nurseries, freighters, supermarket produce sections—you name it. However, one unfortunate consequence of this marvelous application of liberal engineering was that, with so many Slugsuckers about, the slug population began to diminish at an alarming rate, until slugs likewise became an endangered species.

Reformists lost no time.

"*Save The Slugs!*" they cried, "*Save The Slugs!*" and this became a Progressive Liberal anthem which galvanized the nation. Soon "Slugfests" were all the rage, and teenagers were "doing The Slime" from St. Petersburg, New Haiti to Los Angeles, New Central America. Cruising was out, oozing was in; the Ughmobile caught on like wildfire. The slug quickly became our Poster Pest, and *billions* were raised for its welfare. In no time slugs had not only made a comeback, but were absolutely ubiquitous. The slugs were happy, the Funnytailed Purplebreasted Slugsuckers were happy, Progressive Liberal Reformists were happy.

But, with a superabundance of slugs, the state of American Follaceous Health began to deteriorate at an unbelievable rate. Scarcely any leafage was safe. Finally, in a desperation move, proud Americans tightened their belts even further to finance the genetic crossbreeding of a number of supple garden strains with a hardy, fast-growing variety of African swamp grass, which was cultivated over wide areas to give the omnipresent slugs an alternate and plentiful food source.

The tragic result is known to every Liberal American schoolperson. The swamp grass trapped so much rainfall that vast areas became wetlands, the wetlands became spawning grounds for alligators, and the alligators ate all the Funnytailed Purplebreasted Slugsuckers.

"Let there be no misunderstanding here!" PuertoGeorgia senator Lolita Wang-Ho Kumba-Sanchezski said angrily as she,

resplendent in Mourning Puce, confronted the Congressional Budget Committee. “Until we learn to stop throwing money away on defense programs and industry, and begin devoting more capital to the interests of meaningful domestic problems like the plight of the Funnytailed Pucebreasted Slugsucker, this kind of horror story is doomed to be repeated!”

Penal Rights

Modern, open-minded demopersons now understand that there are no bad human beings; there is only bad legislation. The realization that murderers, embezzlers, and arsonists were once actually *punished*, instead of treated with the love and compassion they deserve, still leaves many of us with an acute sense of embarrassment. This evolution—from the barbaric to the enlightened—can perhaps best be shown in the Penal Paradox Proposition, as served by Baja Louisiana senator Imran Wendell O’Mikosovitch: “They’ve lived lives of corruption, debauchery, promiscuousness, vandalism, indolence, socioeconomic subterfuge, compulsive predation, and, in more than a few cases, unprovoked and ungovernable savagery . . . and now you want to put them *in jail*? For goodness’ sake, haven’t they suffered enough?”

Of course, Penal Rights has always been one of the major issues of Enlightened Liberal Reform. Ps. Helga Spatsznsteinski, in her groundbreaking work, *Serial Killers Need Love, Too* correctly pointed out that an overabundance of affection can have the same adverse effect as no affection at all. For example, in the early years of reformism a number of unlucky and misguided souls—formerly disparaged as “criminals”—were forced to sue the Federal Government for the right to privacy when highly competitive and overly arduous femepersons persisted in deluging many incarcerated rapists, compulsively assaultive misogynists, and child molesters with marriage proposals. As famed debutante dismemberer Ps. Muhammed-Fritz Olgafenritz (The “Hacksmith”) complained, “They only love me for my genetic makeup, not for my mind.”

And just as intrusive were the lucrative contract deals from filmmakers and biographers, the unending requests for speaking engagements and intimate photo sessions, the toys-to-cologne endorsement proposals, the seemingly infinite queues of fawning

dignitaries and celebrities. “Being a superstar,” Ps. Gorbafyoo I. Zeimensch-Umbawi proclaimed bitterly from the Tampa Federal Resort and Spa for Violent Repeat Offenders, “just ain’t what it’s cracked up to be.”

Even before The Transition, the curse of capital punishment was mercifully on the wane. It is now no more than a slew of ugly memories, perhaps best typified by that powerfully patriotic moment when Raul Ignacio “Little Nate” Ivenski Deng-Foo berated his executioners even as he was about to be administered that despicably *lethal* dose of HGSN (early Reformism’s short-lived but well-intentioned Happy Go Sleep Now pill). Umbrageous at man’s mistreatment of his fellow man, Deng-Foo heroically and famously proclaimed: “You can take away my kiddie porn! You can rob me of my drugs and electro-orifice stimulators! You can deprive me of my God-given right to whip the tar out of my children, my grandmother, and even my Bichon Frise, but, damn you, you’ll never take away my dignity!”

Or, of course, that shocking moment when six of the early adherents of Progressive Liberal Reform burst into the “Death Chamber” and clung tearfully to convicted cannibal and rapist David Hartford’s body while chanting the chorus to Danny and the Democrats’ 2009 hit *Love Them Everlasting* as Hartford was insensitively murdered by society in that notorious instrument of evil, the “electric chair”.

The odious death sentence’s abolition ensures us all that these precious individuals live to a ripe old age with dignity and in comfort, resting assured that their constitutional rights will be adamantly protected by every attorney we liberals can possibly afford.

Semantics

Nomenclature has powerfully affected our nation’s political evolution. Symbiotic Domestic Partners, for instance, used to suffer terribly under their humiliating appellation “pets” (Faunal Emancipation Agreement, 2047). Efflorescing Abode Enhancers were finally granted the dignity they deserve by abolishing their former embarrassing cognomen “houseplants” (Floral Rights Act of 2051). In the social arena, it is now of course unthinkable that Ejaculation Engineers could actually have been demeaned as “*prostitutes*”, or that

Ecobrades were once variously demeaned as *thugs*, *hooligans*, *dead-beats*, *junkies*, and *muggers*. Nowadays it is painfully obvious that such unfortunates would never have been forced to sink to their unhappy state had our nation previously been compassionate enough to bestow the tremendous grants they presently receive. Yet some throwback radical extremists, generously allowed by our great country to express their outmoded views, continue to point out that the more money our tax dollars provide for these poor victims, the more they indulge in the very behavior the policy is intended to alleviate.

What could more clearly demonstrate how lack of compassion can befuddle the thinking process?

These continuously suffering souls are of course martyrs, willing to maintain their grievous condition for the sake of preserving a cultural phenomenon which has long been the whipping boy of the Haves.

And even our own precious American childpersons have been the target of slurslingers. When Ps. Mongo Le Ramalama Deng-Hwong had the audacity to publish her viciously titled book, *Our Kids, Our Treasures*, the national outrage was phenomenal. "Our children are not goats!" cried millions of offended parents. Ps. Mongo LeRamalama Deng-Hwong was ostracized, and the quickly formed Attorneys Vying for Adolescent Rights Involving the Curtailment of Epithets (AVARICE) found themselves entertaining more lawsuits than they could handle.

Once we the people were made aware of the insidious subterfuge of negative semantics maintained by WIMPs, it became evident that all heterosexuals are really homophobic, and all homosexuals heterophobic; that all mascupersons are in actuality femepophobic, all femepersons mascuphobic. These irrational fears and prejudices, we now understand, come from a deep underlying envy of one's *opposite pole*. Enlightened Liberal Reform has allowed us to realize that, since all persons are created constitutionally equal, one's opposite pole is in actuality one's *Natural Counterpart*. Just as mascupersons and femepersons are Natural Counterparts while being diametrically opposite in nature, so too are atheophobes ("theists") in reality the Natural Counterparts of theophobes ("atheists"). Finally, after decades of dealing with bestiphobes, dementephobes, prostiphobes, narcophobes, politiphobes, lucrephobes, penuphobes, *ad infinitum*; of legaphobes fearing crimiphobes and crimiphobes fearing legaphobes, of natuphobes living in mortal terror of urbaphobes while

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the urbaphobes lost sleep worrying over natuphobes; while illaphobes dwelt in horror of wellaphobes and wellaphobes locked doors against the encroachment of illaphobes; while necrephobes anguished over vitaphobes and the vitaphobes, presumably, were turning in their graves due to the necrephobes, PLRs were struggling to find a truly democratic solution. This solution eventually came to light in the national acceptance of *Phobophobia*.

Progressive Liberal Spirituality

That old paper tyrant, the “Bible”, was originally sullied by references to the deity as “He”. Such an obvious disparaging of femepersons was first solved by the inclusion of an “opposite-but-equal” deity, which resulted in the infamous “Mrs. God” trial of 2034. This quandary was democratically solved by the admission of an androgynous deity, the very SheHe now worshipped nationwide. Then there was the matter of the former “Old” Testament, so offensive to senior citizens—vividly expressed in the great coast-to-coast Walker Brigade. Step by step, each WIMP-enforced bias has met its demise.

And there were of course great difficulties involving religious symbolism. Public displays of Nativity scenes, stars of David, etc., have all gone the way of the dinosaur. *No single religion shall have visual dominance in our great democracy!* A “Christian nation,” indeed! Our sole Yule symbol is now a giant one-eyed Buddha wearing a crown of thorns while sitting on a tortoise-shaped prayer rug before a serpent-entwined cross. From the arms of that cross dangle a crucifix, chakra, incense burner, and menorrah. And on every Nationally-Integrated Non-specific New Year’s (NINNY) all we Progressive Liberal Reformists take a neutral breath in unison and “Thank Blank” that no group has cause to be offended.

Sexual Liberty

Certainly, the alienation of homosexuals has always been a tremendous social blight. Their persecution knew no bounds. So, in today’s truly liberal democratic society, homosexuality, bisexuality,

Collected Stories

and transvestism are proudly taught to all schoolpersons as wholesome, upstanding lifestyles. Once a small percentage of the overall population, homosexuals now occupy over half the legislature, and it was one of the finest moments in our country's history when, only last year, we elected our very first transsexual president. Now every National Gayday celebration features long lines of self-flagellating, terribly repentant former heterosexuals, while our military divisions proudly mandate co-sexual bunks and showers, and many thriving businesses devote themselves wholly to the production of lingerie for pre-adolescent mascupersons. Our founding fatherpersons certainly would be no less proud than we.

The Renovated Constitution

Of all 437 Amendments to the Constitution, the earliest retain most value, for the integrity of the Amendments tend to resolve seemingly unrelated problems.

For instance, the Second Amendment worked in harmony with the First. Once the *right* to bear arms was firmly established, and virtually every American had become a walking armory, the Federal Government was successfully sued on the grounds that it most certainly *is* a guaranteed *right* of free speech to yell "Fire" in a crowded theater. Ps. Boris Q. de Little Feather courageously put this to the test by abruptly standing in a packed theater and yelling "*Fire!*" at the top of his lungs. Ps. de Little Feather's bullet-riddled body will forever be honored in the Heroes of Progressive Liberal Reform shrine in Allah Akbar State Park.

Compassion For The Masses

Arguably, the greatest breakthrough of Enlightened Liberal Reform came about with passage of the Victims' Relief Bill of 2077. What a glorious, emotion-packed day it must have been when those 170,000,000 Progressive Liberal Reformists linked arms across all 103 of the contiguous United States and chanted, "*Subsidization, Not Subjugation! Subsidization, Not Subjugation!*" until the very walls of the Rainbow House shook in the District of Vespuccia. And what an

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uplifting experience to be part of that gigantic assembly, tearfully escorting the hundreds of thousands of Aromatically Diverse and Morally Deprived unfortunates as they shuffled and jabbered into their tax-subsidized apartments to freely and democratically express themselves as Excretory Artists and Sensuality Scientists.

Freedom Of Expression

In closing I must again remark upon the stimulus for our awesome national pride. Only a truly liberal society such as ours would have the greatness to demand that every televised newscast crew include at least one Practicing Octogenarian Nudist, that every church sermon devote equal time to the oration of an atheist, and that every Intelligence Agency be made open to the General Public. It is *we*, the Progressive Liberals, who have exercised the vision to ensure that every major league team contain at least one paraplegic outfielder, that the Pentagon employ a fair quota of narcoleptics, and that, some rosy future day, the meek shall indeed inherit the earth.

Ps. Antoni-Levonitschstein, I understand it is my legal obligation to inform you, prior to your grading this paper, that any mark below passing would compromise my sense of worthiness, and possibly result in a case of Student Afflicted by Misguided Educatory Officer Leading to Despair and Broken Self-esteem (SAMEOLDBS), a gross violation of my precious and hard-won Civil Rights. Please have your attorney contact mine if you have any questions.

“E.B.” La Cszynevitch McGomez

A Deeper Cut

Devon passed out.

That's what they told him, anyway.

He'd been waiting in line like everyone else, and next thing he knew he was the center of attention for a ring of bystanders, a pair of old ladies were rubbing his arms, and the bank manager was asking if he needed an ambulance.

The worst part, initially, was the embarrassment. But on the drive home an icy fear crimped the back of his neck, made his shoulders lock up and his elbows seize, made his hands sweat all over the wheel. What if it happened again? What if it happened while driving? He could be barreling along nicely, completely absorbed in the intricacies of lane surfing, and—BAM: dead man. Or find he'd unconsciously plowed through a crosswalk full of horrified lunchtime toddlers. Splattered innocence, crippled joy. The image was so appalling Devon had a phantom episode, imagining, in one missed heartbeat, that he'd blacked out again, and was surfacing anew.

He pulled over with excessive caution; using only the rear-view mirror lest, in looking back for even a moment, some inexplicable mini-seizure should send him hurtling into a compound bloody fireball. Perspiration bathed his face and chest. He'd always been the healthiest of men; didn't drink, didn't touch drugs, didn't over-exert.

Gradually the tremors passed. But not the terror; it was a vital shadow in the center of his skull. Devon called a cab and a tow truck. He sat slumped in the back of the cab, drawing faux calm around him like a horsehair shroud. The driver was a talker; Devon let him roll on. All he could see was the cab's windshield, streaked and bespattered, a broken mosaic of shocked baby faces that never had a chance to grow.

"Your scans are clean," Dr. Goodman beamed. The clipboard, facing away, would not elaborate. "I think we can cheerfully write off the cause of this visit as one of those little anomalies that pop into our lives, shake us up a bit to give our egos some perspective, and then pop right back out as though nothing occurred. And who knows? Maybe nothing did. Sometimes nature just drops the ball for no apparent reason. I like to compare the body to a complex harp with one or more strings always out of tune, and hard work and healthful living as the elements that retune those—Mr. Devon?"

Devon blinked at him. A low hum had just passed through his brain like a train through a tunnel. There were things in there, moving around, clattering without sound. It was as if his thoughts were loose shingles on a roof, responding to a sudden high wind. He blew over.

Devon opened his eyes to another perspective. It was a skewed view, of three vulnerable specimens frozen in a brightly lit box. The action resumed: receptionist slipping out of room, staring strangely over shoulder, doctor frowning at clipboard, planted squarely before seated patient.

Goodman's entire demeanor had changed. He tapped his pencil on the clipboard—*thuda-thuda-thud*—little alien heartbeats in rubber on pressed cork. "You've heard of narcolepsy, Mr. Devon? Once we've ruled out the obvious—epilepsy, tumor, arrhythmia—we have to rely on conjecture, which, in a mature practice, comes down to empiricism rather than guesswork. What I'm trying to say is: symptoms are templates. Narcolepsy is a known condition, but it's not a common one. I'm not going to beat around the bush here. In narcolepsy, the brain's steady-state waking electrical activity is abruptly interrupted—the subject goes to sleep on the spot, rather than drifting away naturally. Why? The current's been cut off, the lights shut down. *Why?* We don't know yet; and there's that dreadful non-answer which seems, to the anxious layperson, an evasion rather than a helpful response. But it's all we've got. That, and a medication I'm prescribing. Don't worry about the endless string of Latin syllables. Although still in the experimental stage, it shows tremendous promise

in the short-term. However, there's a caveat: you must be prudent in your approach to everyday activities whenever a recurrence might prove injurious to yourself or to others, and you must curtail these activities any time you experience symptoms that are in any way out of the ordin—"

"Mr. Devon?" Goodman's smile was frayed around the edges. "Are you feeling all right now? We were discussing your prescription when you appear to have remissed momentarily. I've checked your vitals and you're good as gold. The episode was very brief, yet it absolutely confirms my immediate diagnosis of narcolepsy." He nervously drummed his fingers on the clipboard. "Miss Aines is going to administer a single dose of your prescription, and you are thereafter not to approach the medication without my approval over the phone. As I said, it's experimental, but entirely safe. Then I want you to go home and take a load off—a load off your mind as well as your feet. I'd prefer you walk rather than use a cab or bus. Moderate exercise is always a precursor to healthful recovery." He pulled open the door, hesitating halfway. "If you experience a recurrence, or become morbidly anxious, or entertain any weird, traumatic sense of alienation, I want you to give me a call right away. Miss Aines will produce my home and cell numbers as soon as you've received your medication and taken that single dose." He smiled genially while ushering Devon out. "I know you're going to be just fine."

Strangest thing.

How can a man *know* what's going on around him, behind him, within him—when he can't see or feel a thing? Devon was unconscious. The infinitesimally vague electrical discharges were unlike anything he'd ever experienced, so he had no point of reference, but he *knew* his brainwaves were somehow being manipulated—by somebody or something from somewhere bleak and far away—for reasons of cold research, for inhuman experiment, for purposes that made no sense whatever in regular terms. He could tell, by focusing, that a kind of frustrated enmity pervaded the ether connecting whoever he was with whatever they were, and that if he let go for even a second they'd—

"Sir?" A thumb peeled back Devon's eyelid. Sensible impressions were returning. The sounds of traffic. The inside of a paramedics' van, seen gurney-up. A man's face; a face like any other.

“Sir, can you feel the pressure of my hand on your arm?” A pinching above the elbow. “How about now?” The full-screen thumb splintered into five fingers on a rocking hand. “Follow my hand with your eyes, sir.” The face turned. “He’s receptive.” The face turned back. “You’re in an ambulance, Mr. Devon. We’re taking you to the emergency room at Mother Of Mercy Hospital. But we’ve determined this is no emergency; that’s why we’re not using the siren. So just relax; what’s going on is purely procedural. You appear to have blacked out while sitting on the bus bench at White and Lincoln, yet no one observed any evidence of seizure or foul play. There’s no indication of brain trauma, no signs of physical injury, and all your responses to outside stimuli are well within the normal range. Do you feel okay now?”

Devon’s voice phased in and out. “Yes, I’m fine. I just need to—”

Two strong hands gripped his biceps. “You’ll have to remain quiet, sir. Until you’ve been thoroughly examined you’re under our supervision. It won’t be long. There’s the hospital now. We’re pulling up to emergency. Try to stay calm.”

“I can’t be strapped down. That’s what they want.” Devon’s mouth was too dry for more.

The paramedic rattled a prescription bottle. “The label reads fifty. The count is forty-nine. I’d call yours a pretty extreme reaction. Now just relax.”

The van stopped with the gentlest jolt. A moment later the rear doors swung open, and the paramedic said, softly, “You’re under restraint only for your own safety, okay? We can’t have you blacking out and rolling off the gurney now, can we, Mr. Devon?”

A hydraulic whine, a rocking and settling. A new voice said, “Okay to roll.”

The bright assault of antiseptic fluorescence made Devon’s eyes burn. Faces looked on curiously as he was wheeled by; faces as indifferent as the paramedic’s, as indifferent as Dr. Goodman’s, as indifferent as that burned-out receptionist behind the glass, as—

The electrical activity, Devon realized, functioned incidentally as a conduit. They were getting into his head, and they were learning what it means to be human, but it was hard work. Through this connection he’d become electrically empathic—able to glean their drive and exasperation, to know that, through their resolution, they *were going to learn* what they needed, if they didn’t kill him in the process, or if he was unable to kill himself first. He was experiencing their

excitement as well as their frustration, their urgency and their demand. He was losing hold, losing self-control. He knew it. He could feel it.

“Well, I’m taking him *off* the medication, at least for the present, and I don’t give a good holy crap what you or Lancet have to say on the matter, is that clear enough for you? As of right now he’s under our care. Your prescription arguably precipitated this patient’s arrival, and there’s absolutely no reason to believe it’s mitigating his condition in the least. Fine. You can talk to the coordinator in the morning. I’m presently handling Mr. Devon, and this conversation is officially concluded. Now go back to sleep!”

Devon embraced the room’s hard white light like a lover. He kept his eyes fixed wide, afraid to even blink, as Dr. Grant firmly replaced the receiver and turned, hands clasped behind his back.

“Mr. Devon, you’re doing great. You’ve been through a bit of a scare, but there’s no reason to worry. Your provider has authorized any necessary procedures, though I’m confident we’ve no cause for alarm.” He raised Devon’s prescription bottle like a dead lizard. “As of this moment you’re off these. I’m going to give you a sedative to help you relax. We’re calling a cab. I want you to go home and get some sleep. You have an appointment with Dr. Randall for Thursday at nine.”

“No, please . . . give me something that’ll help me stay awake. They’re getting closer. If I fall asleep they’ll be right back in.”

Dr. Grant stood quietly, his expression sour. “Who’s getting closer?”

Facets of his identity were falling like flakes of dandruff. Memories were being stripped, copied, filed; Devon’s humanness was being assaulted, weakness by weakness. The excitement was palpable; he was naked, he was down, he was roadkill. His flaws were being recognized and categorized, in some universal way only a natural predator could understand. Humans were easy, they were fait accompli. Devon could struggle all he wanted, but he was pinned and purpling, a pretty bruised butterfly. He thrashed, but didn’t budge, called, but didn’t peep, screamed—

“The more you fight me,” snarled the security guard, “the harder I fight back. You *got* that?” He shoved Devon into a plastic chair, one of many lined against the wall.

A Deeper Cut

“Listen to me!” Devon begged. “I can’t hold on any longer. Please. Something.”

The guard sneered over his shoulder. “*I’ll* give you something.” He pressed the intercom’s call button. “Security on floor one, east wing. I have a disturbed patient who somehow got out into the hall. Not a biggie, but Riley and Forbes, I’d like you to assist.”

The feelers were in. He was going. A great company was in his skull; a kind of delirious clamor and buzzing crescendo. Devon was a transparent display, every nerve-ending under intense scrutiny. Ecstasy, comprehension, anticipation. His mind was being peeled open; his nightmares, his mistrust, his mortal horror.

Devon leaped from his chair, tore the guard’s gun from its holster, crammed the barrel in his mouth. A bearhug and shattering of teeth. The gun went spinning across the floor. There was a hard stomping down the hall, a flurry of shouts, the pulsing buzz of an alarm.

He was seizing. His arms were shaking wildly, his eyes bursting from their sockets. Liquid fire tore through his frame, spewed from his mouth and nostrils, set his fraying hair ablaze.

Devon hit the plate glass window like a bug smacking into a windshield. He blew out into the night, a mass of porcupine shards, blood spraying in his wake. He heard Dr. Grant puffing behind. “Mr. Devon! Stop! For the love of God! *Stop!*”

He was rocking madly, his skin blistering, his organs swelling to bursting. Devon’s head snapped back and his mouth ripped at the corners, peeled off his face and blew away in shreds. His ribcage shattered from the sternum down. He was being zipped open, torn apart, dug into. With a shriek of bone his spine snapped free, his pelvis collapsed, his skull halved to expose the hysterical animal writhing within.

“Mr. Devon! Somebody call the gate. Devon!”

Devon’s brain turned to cartilage, to sponge, to jelly. The cerebellum split, the cortex gave way, and they were in. Electrical energy; frying, probing, hurtling into every cell.

“Mr. Devon!”

Night sucked him up like a giant straw. Consciousness was a black and wiggly thing, all-feeding, all-absorbing, all-encompassing, all

“De—

Norm

Nothing like thrill of hunt.

Nothing.

When Cerebralist run, Norm run faster.

Simple math.

When Cerry get all talky and make want deal, Normy get all angry and make want kill.

Easy Reason.

I know this. All Norm know this.

But I know better.

I see light in Cerry eye show fearblaze and I cut out eye happy. No hesitate. No oh-me-so-sorry Cerry. I strong Norm. I tough. I on Way Up. All other Norm see this, know this, fear me. I know this. I know.

I knowIknow.

Gool know I know. He sit and watch and wait. He think I go soft, right here in cave. He think I panic at kill. He think I turn-find him all teeth and gory eye, and then I run. He think he more on way up than me, that all he have do is wait. And so all he *can* do is wait. Because Gool afraid to face me. He know. Gool know some day I eat

his face alive, and taste his blood run hot and sweet, and then I feelgoodfeelgood.

Gool watch me now. Gool watch me walk tall out cave, at front of all Norm, and know his place behind me, with average Norm. Gool know I kill more Cerry at yesterday hunt than all Norm put together, and he worry. He know I watch him back as we cross field, and he see me laugh harder, jump higher, scream louder. Gool hear Norm scream response and know he must echo or be suspicioned. But Gool voice catch in throat. He know I on way up, and he snarl. But not at me. At self; at Gool.

All Norm excite behind me. All Norm know yesterday big hunt day. Norm almost find Cerry camp deep in wood, because of me, because I smart and follow clue. I on way up; I try harder. I remember. Norm know this, and Norm follow me. Gool know this, and Gool try sidetrack Norm. I see more clue now; broken branch, flattened patch, piece of cloth. Cerry try cover, but Cerry not smart. I whoop and whistle. All Norm talk excite. I break into run; run like leader, run like king.

Norm cry out and I stop, raise arms. All Norm stop. I see crowd of Cerry hide in trees. I scream happyhappy. Norm scream response.

One Cerry walk out from rest. Cerry hold white rag over head as he walk. Now he wave rag slow, back and forth. All Norm crouch, ready for kill. Cerry walk in fear, come very close. I stand tall. All Norm growl.

This it! I make king-bid. I show all Norm I leader!

I leap on Cerry, grab throat in both hands and squeeze. Feelgoodfeelgood. Cerry gasp very hard, but I hear his filthy Cerry-talk.

“Please, before you kill me, listen for only a minute. The debilitating effects of M117 were entirely accidental and are completely reversible. Your mind, and the minds of all Norms, are perfectly healthy. There is a chemical block; a simple focal screen located, in a virtual sense, somewhere in the midbrain. It prevents the evolved aspects of abstract consciousness to perform; those aspects are overridden by the baser, deeper functions of primitivity—but they are present, and functioning in real time. They’re just obscured.”

I make grip more tight on skinny Cerrythroat. “I ‘obscure’ you!”

“Yes!” he gasp. “But precedent to that act, I beg you, ingest this capsule.” He hold up funnypill. Green. Red. But not pretty

greenred. Ugly. Ugly like Cerry. “We have been diligently working on this problem. The Block is fluid. The biochemical reversion is absolutely effective, and it is permanent. Your recovery should begin almost immediately. You . . . all of you . . . all of us . . . can be saved.”

“But not . . .” and I squeeze tighter, “*not you!*”

“Swallow the capsule!”

Cerry fading; I feel it.

“It good!” he croak. “It make you happyhappy! Make you feelgoodfeelgood!”

I stare in suspicionness, but not let up on squeeze. “Make me feelgoodfeelgood?”

“Yes! Oh, for the love of—take the capsule! Make happy-happy!”

Cerry go purple. Blood show in spit. Happy purple. I squeeze all more tight. Tighter. Tighter-tight, tightest-tight. And I see redred, and I go crazygood, and I look up.

All Norm watching, careful. I know, they know, they knowIknow. Gool watch close, watch low. He know, I know; we knowIknow. This my time; I show tough. I look past Gool, I look all around and shout: “I make happy! I go sickychew! I go Norm on Cerry!” And I bite Cerry nose, twist in teeth, feel flesh come off goodhappy.

“Oh dear God!” Cerry scream. “I—take the gack—mother of mercy, please, kill me, please do it, please, take the caps—”

And Cerry shriek like woman as I scoop out eyes and smash head on rock, over, over, overoverover, smash blood happyhappy, kill Cerry and stand up with nose in mouth to smile, and Gool look on with jealousfrown. All Norm know I king.

They know. I know.

They knowIknow.

Gool quiet now. Gool sit on rock by cave front and pretend he not care. But too late. All Norm dance around me! They know, they know! They knowIknow! I show no fear! I king of all Norm! I turn to Gool and laugh, and all Norm turn and laugh too, and it feelgood-feelgood. And Gool hang head as I chew Cerry face and spit at feet. I laugh and hold up Cerry uglypill, and all Norm know I not afraid. I show them! I show Gool! I show them all! I hold up pill and open mouth wide. And I laugh as I swallow, and they know I up, I up, I all

the way up! I king, I king, I king! They know, they know, they know-I know!

Gool pretend sleep. But he watch me close. Very dark in cave; no moon tonight. No Norm see me kill, no Norm see me make happyhappy. No matter. Gool scream when teeth find throat. Norm will hear, Norm will know. Then I eat Gool heart, then I smash Gool brain. He very still now, he feel my footstep. One eye gleam in dark and he freeze. I bend over Gool, I show fang of king.

Dizzy. Dizzy. Cave go darker. Stomach kick and I sick. Back off, back off. No Norm must see me weak. Gool must not see, Gool must not know! Sick. Back off, lay down. Rest. Pill . . . *pill!* Poisonpill! Cerry trick me! Sick, sick! Rest, die, throw up. No, no . . . sleep. Dizzy. Black. Sleep. Sleep.

Sleep.

Cave bright. Light hurt eyes; I close eyes, I listen. Gool talking all Norm. He sounds more aggressive than yesterday. He see me sick, know I down. I can't let him see me weak; must not make puke or show cry. I've got to sit up, make laugh maybe, show all Norm I only play sick so they'll stop listening to Gool. My stomach. The sickness passes when I sit up. Now all Norm look hard; I laugh, must laugh, must look nonchalant. They're all just staring, Gool hardest. Smile back at Gool! Smile! Laugh! Show happyhappy. Stand up; you can do it. Avoid daylight; you'll swoon.

They're still watching me. I can feel it. Breathe deep. Slow. Monitor your respiration. Act feelgoodfeelgood. That smell, that taste. Oh, God. Charnel. Remain upright. Gool stand up, Gool narrow eyes. Gool look for support from all Norm. My stomach! I'll heave. No! Don't show sickysick. Get out of here, fast.

The daylight. The field. Run like hell. They're chasing me; all Norm run hard. Gool first, on way up. Christ, faster! They're catching me. The camp, the Cerebralist's camp. They'll take me in, they've got to. I remember, I leader, I smartest. Faster! Run! I feel all Norm breath. There! That's the killing field. Go, man, just go! Through the trees. My ankle—ignore it. Run! Make faster-fast.

Farther, deeper. I lose all Norm, but they find me. Run harder, push deeper. Show tough. I can outrun them, I can outthink them. Deeper, faster. Sprint, man. Go!

A fort of some kind. Run! Log walls and rickety sentry stations. A wood door cracking open. Help! Men peering out. Call to them! “Help!” Damn it, scream! *“For the love of God man, let me in! Help, help!”*

Confusion. “Help!” Hesitancy. *“Help!”* Hit the door running—I’m in.

A face leaning over me, the expression distraught. “Get him to the circle and find some restraints!”

Another voice, nearby: “He was coherent! Did you hear him? That was straight English!”

“I don’t give a damn. He’s a savage.”

My wind is coming back. “No . . . I’m free . . .”

A new face, and an elderly man’s voice: “I recognize him—I think. Yesterday. The one who murdered Michael. He gave him the pill.”

“Yes,” I manage, and sit up.

“He’s curing!” someone cries. “He’s brought us all the proof we need. Get Daniel.”

A hammering and hooting outside. The elderly man looks up darkly. “He’s brought us our extermination.” He helps me to my feet. “Come, son. Follow me inside.” The ruckus picks up as I limp along beside him. “They’ll breach the barrier soon,” he pants. “We don’t have much time.”

I clutch his arm. “Don’t you have any weapons? We are . . . *they* are just flesh and blood. And teeth—watch the teeth.”

“Oh, no,” he laments, as we pitch into a dark little room and fall round a homemade table against the wall. “All technology went down with the cities. Those of us bearing weapons soon found our ammunition expended in the hunt to survive. We’ve had to rough it, I’m afraid. Our spare energy has gone exclusively into researching a cure for that damnable M117 mistake.” He smiles wanly, as though I’m still too regressed to appreciate the irony. “So much for the chemical engineering of intellectual growth spurts.” He raises his eyes at a scream outside. “There is no information you can give us? To stop them?”

I wag my head. “They won’t stop. This moment is a long time coming.”

And he smiles, and he leans over, and he holds my stinking head against his chest. “No matter. The cure is effective. Daniel has a small escape door readied, and he is very fast and very clever. There are many more outposts like ours, and he will inform them of the cure

so that civilized man may take back what is lost. Science has, once again, triumphed over the dark.”

Shouts and screams. A great deal of commotion outside. A shape eclipses the doorway and I look up to see the looming form of Gool.

And the old man pulls back my face and kisses my hair. “Sleep now, son,” he whispers, “as sleep we must. Close your eyes and think of all we have accomplished.” His voice is tremulous and his fingers tight. “Look to the stars, son, trust in man, and dream.”

Horizon

K-19's most striking feature has always been the peculiar plasticity of its physics. The ability of its molecules—in both its organic and inorganic aspects—to attain fluidity on the moment, and to remain mutable indefinitely, is well documented. Everything on K-19 *morphs* as a steady state; *spontaneously*, as perceived by the senses, but *continuously* below the visual threshold . . . in its depths. Miller knew this; had in fact written impressively on the phenomenon way back in his sophomore year. But nothing could prepare him for the *eeriness* of the place; for the lush mauve tendrils crawling across heaving pasturage, for the nitrogenous pips that sparkled and passed, for the solitary brooding inn that seemed to dissolve and huff in the aching night.

The driver allowed his car to find a comfortable site after its sickening descent. He took his time, too, in releasing the cabin pressure. Nor did he look back, or make a move to get the door. The trip had been passed in icy silence, but Miller was prepared: he realized Earthmen were just as unpopular on K-19 as on any other developing world. But, damn it, this was an emergency.

He stepped out and gave the driver his print. It was scanned and handed back without a look or a word. “The tip,” Miller enunciated, “is included.” The driver didn't respond. Miller knew he was

understood; this entire quadrant recognized Universal Tongue. Miller slid the print back on. “Thanks again,” he said quietly. The car, with the faintest shiver of protest, lifted off and began its ascent.

Miller squinted in the drear. A fissure crackled in the distance, a nearby seephole kicked and spat: the first signs of real weather. A shade was pulled aside, and an odd figure stared out at him, eclipsed by the room’s shifting blushes of gradient light. The inn was the only sign of habitation for miles; Miller was certain the driver had deposited him here solely out of spite. He shouldered his case and began the gradual uphill hike. The ground worried each footfall with a tugging, sucking action; frightening at first, but only an annoyance by the time he reached the porch. An unfamiliar sprig turned at his passing, a hanging shutter leaned back and groaned. Off to his right he noticed four peering steeds mailed against the weather. They were just like the animals he’d studied remotely so long ago; fascinating then, repulsive now—fat, sprawling, disgusting slugs that wax dynamic when stimulated by their riders.

He waited. After half a minute the old door creaked open and Miller found himself staring across a dilapidated lobby at a hunched gray fellow in a state of flux. The innkeeper looked up and away, his shoulders slinking down his spine. Miller walked casually across yawning floorboards to the desk and unslung his case, peripherally observing a small group seated against the far wall; evidently the steeds’ owners.

“I’ll need a room for the night, at least. Our galleon was disabled in a drift pocket and I was one of the last men off. I had to retrieve some drives.” He held up the cylindrical Rheafur case, speaking clearly in the echoes, “They’re important drives. The rescue ship was full. The company’s sending a personal vessel that’ll arrive tomorrow night at the latest.”

“No rooms available,” the innkeeper muttered. “The place is closed.”

Miller blinked in the flickering shadows, his face cut by sarcasm and disbelief. “What do you mean, ‘closed’? *I just told you* there was an accident in the drift. I’m stuck here. I’ve a graph that says all of K-19’s right on the cusp of a major storm. The company will cover my print. Where’s your ledger?”

“No need,” the innkeeper mumbled. “Rooms all taken.”

Miller’s jaw dropped. “Taken!” The word was the crack of a whip. He seethed for a minute, then said carefully, “I’ll sleep in the

lobby then. But be absolutely clear that the company will hear all about this.”

The innkeeper shrank further. From the seated group came a cold drawl: “Lobby’s taken too.”

Miller’s face burned to the side. Two of the men stood. A different voice called out, “And he *said* the inn’s closed!”

Miles off, a young iridescent moon broke from behind a peak, recasting the floor’s shadows. Miller stamped on two and the rest disappeared into the woodwork. His expression twisted round. “Do you know who I *am*?”

“No. But we know where you’re *from*.”

A pantry door opened and an old woman oozed into the lobby. “What’s all this racket?”

“You!” Miller demanded. “Do you work here?”

She looked at him hard. Miller could tell she was bristling by the sudden spikes under her cloak at the shoulders. To his utter disbelief she folded her arms and said, “The building is closed.”

Miller took two broad steps forward. He stood pointing out the open door while fighting the urge to yank aside her molten misbegotten head. “Do you *see* that world out there? There’s a real storm brewing. I’ve never heard of a rooming race—and he almost added ‘no matter how lowly’—turning away a traveler in distress. What’s wrong with you people?”

The room locked up. Outside a lateral column of shrubs fell about, caught up in a death struggle that ended as quickly as it began. The wind moaned from the marrow. The old woman said, “Come here.”

After a respectable pause Miller followed her out onto the porch, the hard truth sinking in with each step. When they were out of earshot he said matter-of-factly, “Okay. How much?”

Her head jerked back as though she’d been slapped. “You . . .” she said, “you . . .” and turned away. Miller waited, listening to the steeds splashing about in their own waste. He should never have gone back for the drives. They were replaceable. The company wouldn’t have blamed him for being swallowed up in the offship rush. His fantasy scenarios of a promotion and raise were already turning stale. The woman’s voice was small in the night. “There’s another inn not far from here, just down the road over that hill.”

“Let me guess. Also ‘full’?”

“If they say so.”

He carefully set down his case. “You know what? Maybe I’ll just get comfy on your porch here. You don’t think that’ll bring your property value down too far, do you? And—so help me . . . don’t you *ever* think this little travesty’s going unreported.”

She shifted closer, her face buckling and swelling.

“No. Listen to me. You can’t stay outside in a storm. You won’t last.”

Miller snorted. He couldn’t help it. “What do you mean: ‘won’t last’? Maybe you should show Earthmen some respect, huh?” He blew out a lungful of stress. “And while you’re at it, why don’t you take a look at this little backwater planet of yours from an honest perspective.” He ticked off points on his fingers. “Your propulsives are notoriously unstable. Your ‘durable’ goods have preposterously fickle shelf-lives. No one will navigate anywhere near your gravitational field without first closing his eyes and crossing his fingers.” Miller’s hot white face eclipsed a wayward atmospheric globule. “Case in point: our company’s marooned galleon and my little unrequested sojourn.” He placed his hands on his hips and looked around marveling. “Say, just when *is* peak tourist season, anyway?” Patches of black moles cropped up on the old lady’s face. “Why . . .” Miller appended, “if it weren’t for the company’s sense of progressive fair play, this whole place would’ve just shaken and shimmied into oblivion long ago.”

The woman’s body twisted and trimmed; her fingers withdrawing and protruding, her face on fire in the snapdragon wind. The mass settled back down. Her eyes became smoke-veiled embers, her voice a sandpaper hiss.

“You’re from Earth; you don’t understand. Products, capital gain, your precious company—we’re not interested in all that. We’re sorry your ship was caught in the drift. But please don’t start any trouble here.”

Miller fought to control his temper. “Lady, we don’t start trouble, we finish it. If any of you people have a problem with the way we run things you can always take it up with a caseworker.”

She glared. A lump throbbed laterally along her forehead. “Over the hill.”

“With pleasure.” He looped his case’s strap over his head and began to hike.

The old lady watched him recede, watched him stare back every now and then as the occasional static electric discharge lit her cloak’s hood before crackling off. Her form appeared to be marrying

the landscape molecule for molecule. Miller's eyes, constantly torn by fluid displays of rock and foliage, burned and froze, swam and steadied as the storm picked up. When he looked back again she was gone. Maybe he was better off with a lesson learned well. If the grotesqueries at the next inn were anything like these last impudent monsters, a little tact might go a long way. It couldn't hang more than a night, and maybe a day, anyway. He'd just fall out in his room and sleep through it.

An odd sound rose back at the inn, a restless, banshee-like wailing. Miller stopped, trying to put his finger on it. Haunted K-19 imagery . . . peaked riders . . . a miscellaneous audio file, back in college . . . yes, the steeds had been roused; all four. The noise spiked radically as they rounded the intervening building. A pocket of air sizzled and exploded overhead. Miller picked up his pace.

It was a struggle to make any headway at all; the road had an odd disposition that made forward movement like walking in place. The steeds' compound wail became aggressive, phasing in and out, nearing . . . definitely nearing. Miller pressed on with an attitude, his ears popping, his eyes bulging—he had to be marching backward somehow . . . no, it was the road, the road: the road itself was flowing downhill. Miller cried out as first his left ankle, then his right, submerged in grit and was freed. He fell on his palms, felt his wrists gripped by a force unseen. Only by rolling onto his back was he able to struggle free. He sprinted uphill, each sole's contact too brief to allow a meaningful grip.

The wailing increased in intensity, cutting right through his brain. He shot back a glance, saw four surreal shapes charging uphill in tandem. Miller shook to the quick and scrambled to the road's summit, where he gasped for want of air and options: before him lay only bogs and gnarly banyan-like trees. The road itself descended into desolation; no signs of habitation, no trace of civilization. He stamped and bawled at the horror and betrayal, rewarded in seconds by a tremor underfoot and an answering howl. Miller simply lost it; blew out his mind in a flurry of shrieking gray, ran stumbling off the road into the abutting swamp. The undergrowth strained to meet him, muck underfoot grabbed and thrashed. Mustered by his cries, sulking columns of mist swept in from all sides, tangling him up, making for his airways while obscene things ran yipping through the shadows, leapt thrashing in the vapors, hopped flopping pool to pool. Racing low to the east, a pair of moons threw parallel shadows that passed tree to tree, creating a pulsing confusion of simian wraiths. Reeking

fumes—sulphurous, vile, increasingly antagonistic—were stirred out of the air by his movements.

Miller's case nipped him. At first the notion was so unreal he could only stare at his shoulder in shock. Next thing he knew the case was convulsing down his arm. He flung it off with a little bark of horror, blood droplets swimming in his breath, his fingernails splitting blue. The bag flopped off in one direction, Miller in another. Crashing sounds broke just behind, accompanied by a haunted cry that built and built until it seemed right on top of him. Miller slammed his back against a tree and stared up at the quartet of steedsmen, silhouetting the erratic night from a chalky precipice. As their hoods inclined, a strong pair of limbs grabbed him by the biceps.

The tree hauled him up kicking, a foot at a time. When he was eye-level with the steedsmen a pair of branches broke from the trunk; one to impel and brace his spine, the other to hold him by the throat.

Miller hacked and dribbled, clinging to the iron limbs while his body jerked to and fro. "You freaks!" he coughed. "Get me down!" His focus was going. The steedsmen watched motionlessly, unmoved. Miller forced a savage breath. "I'll see you burn! I'll see your whole planet blacklisted, quarantined . . . shut down." He was fading. The upper limb lifted him forward until he dangled, suspended midway between the trunk and the stolid observers. One of Miller's eyebrows detached, his left arm seized, teeth and bits of rotting flesh spewed out before him. "Please . . ." he choked. "I'll do anything. Anything." His face went purple, the eyes bulged and raved, the ears crimped and folded, the scalp peeled off in layers. "I'm sorry . . . please . . . please . . ." His head fell forward. "Oh mercy," he whispered. "Please."

A stalagmite-shaped bulge, seeping out of the slime beneath his feet, strained upward through bursting pockets of gas. The tree's uppermost branch shook Miller hard; an alley dog thrashing a roof rat. A long shudder ran down the branch and the tree turned to stone. Immediately the bulge rushed up, clasped Miller's feet and tugged. A stinking miasma appeared throbbing around his stretched and dangling remains. Putrefaction began at once.

On the precipice the four steedsmen watched silently for a minute, turned their beasts round as one, and began the long slog downhill.

Remembering Jack

I'll never forget the day I met Jack.

Who wouldn't remember a scene like that—stretched out flat on my back with Nick Kirby straddling me, kicking my ass to Timbuktu and back in front of everybody who was anybody, smack dab in the center of Kennedy High's main hall.

I didn't really have it coming, of course—everybody knew that; Nick was just whaling on me because I was available, because I was a geek, because he needed the exercise. It was nothing personal: Nick regularly kicked the crap out of lots of losers.

I know I was receptive; I had this flip-flop image of lockers to my left and lookyloos to my right, as my spewing tetherball of a head was fisted side to side. I don't recall feeling any real pain. I guess I was in that what-who-why state of shock that the self-preservation instinct throws into gear in case we jerkoffs and nerds don't possess the good sense to stay down until the storm's over.

And then, for no observable reason, the barrage just stopped.

I know I didn't say uncle; my lips were too swollen to do anything but serve as punching bags for Nick's knuckles. The knees came off my arms and Nick's body lifted like a flying saucer firing its null-gravs.

That new kid—the sullen, sweatshirted loner who avoided the in crowd and geeks alike, who glared his way through P.E., who always sat at the back of class—was holding Nick upright by the collar, and he was twisting that collar deliberately while the rigid fingers of his other hand slowly balled into a fist. I probably had a better look at his face than anyone other than Nick, who was clearly distracted, and I think the best word I can come up with for that expression is—wow.

“Don’t,” the new kid grated, and smashed Nick’s face into a closed locker door, “pick,” and another smash, harder, “on . . . lit . . . tle . . . *GUYS!*” Those last four syllables were accompanied by thrusts of increasing ferocity. Nick’s face had crashed six terrible times into the sharp steel gills that serve as air vents on these oblong hall lockers. When his face peeled away, it looked more like a package of fresh gutted catfish than the old Nick we all knew and loved.

The new kid picked me up and dusted me off. His eyes were clouding embers. “If he picks on you again, I want to know all about it.” He turned to the gaping kids. “This is my friend. Anybody fucks with him fucks with me.”

And with that he was gone.

When the monitor ushered me into the Principal’s office, I just knew something big was up. First off, hall fights always go to the Vice Principal. Second, the new kid was seated outside the office, scrunched between a cop in uniform and a man in a brown suit. But the kicker was finding my parents sitting across the desk from the Principal, with a starched white nurse standing by the window.

The Principal was in no mood for introductions. “Sit down.” But my parents didn’t miss a beat.

“My baby!” Mom cried when she saw my used mattress of a face. Dad beat her to the punch. He rose half-out of his chair and showed a threatening fist.

“What did I tell you about violence!”

“Stop!” The Principal’s bark was the crack of a whip. My parents snapped to as if it was they, not Yours Truly, who’d been yanked out of class to see the Big P. “I’ve had enough of this matter. I intend to wrap it up by lunch.” He glanced at the wall clock. “That gives us exactly fourteen minutes.” He showed me the Official Eye. “Michael Parkson. I’ve heard the other involved parties. Nicolas Kirby is presently in hospital, recovering from massive facial

lacerations. Although he is young and healthy, it is likely he will be severely disfigured for life. All witnesses to this travesty are playing dumb; I am convinced there's a tacit understanding—a pact of silence enforced by peer pressure. Considering young Kirby's record of campus fisticuffs, I'm assuming he's at least partly responsible, and while he has implicated recent enrollee Jack Barrett, there are presently no remaining viable eyewitnesses. There is only yourself. Now," the Principal clenched his folded hands, "Barrett, raised in a succession of orphanages, was transferred to this high school from State detention through a new outreach program. He has an extensive history of incarceration in numerous juvenile halls, and of savage reprisals in each. I argued like a lunatic against his enrollment, but there are," and he spread and re clenched his hands, "various School Department loopholes." He leaned back in his chair. "Young Parkson. This is a very serious matter. While I appreciate your position, I do not like liars. I want you to tell me what you saw, and I don't want any waffling. My hands are tied without a sworn witness. But if you finger Barrett he will be expelled and, I'm certain, returned to the State's care after facing a police investigation and mandatory psychotherapy. You won't have to worry about retaliation, if that's an issue. We'll place this whole thing in the Department's lap and wash our hands of it." He looked back up. "You now have seven minutes."

"Boy . . ." Dad grated under his breath. "I had to call off sick because of this. If you make my day any tougher . . ."

"*Mister Parkson*," the Principal hissed.

"*I told you*," Mom wept, "you don't *need* to fight, sweetheart. You talk to your mother. Talk to Mom."

"Mrs. Parkson!"

"I'm sorry," I bubbled, tears welling at the lids. It's like I could *feel* Jack's ear just outside the door, straining to catch every syllable. "I'm sorry! I didn't see anything. Look at my face, look at my eyes! Does it look like I was taking notes?"

"Don't be a wise-ass," Dad snarled. "Answer the man's question."

"No!" I screamed, and now I was weeping freely. "I didn't see anything. I was totally out of it. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I didn't see anything!"

The Principal slapped his palms on the desk. "Take as many days off as necessary. Don't come back to class without first checking in at the nurse's office. Speaking of which, Michael, you have an appointment right now. Nurse Taine, escort the boy." He jabbed the

intercom's button. "Miss Dowdie, ring the damned lunch bell! Mr. and Mrs. Parkson, go home. You're excused."

Imagine my surprise when I left the nurse's office and ran into Jack Barrett standing in the hall. He put his big arm over my shoulders and led me to the Electrical room doorway. There were tall ranks of those ubiquitous gray lockers to either side, so it's not like we were actually all that visible. I mean, I desperately wanted to be seen hanging with a non-nerd, and Jack was anything but a nerd, but at the same time I was put off by the idea of being caught with a guy's arm around me, if you get my drift.

"That was really cool what you told the Principal," Jack said. He crushed me against his chest. Now, Jack was a pretty big dude. He probably stood six-five, which only gave him like a foot and a half over me, but he was as thick and tough as an oak. "I could've been carted back to reform school, or worse, but you saved my ass." He squeezed so hard I was in real danger of losing my wind.

"And you saved mine," I gasped. "I guess that makes us even."

Jack appeared to be considering the laws of equity while he went on clutching me there, tighter and tighter. Maybe he didn't realize he was killing me; I mean, compared to him I was a petite Japanese schoolgirl. My shoulder was already deeply bruised, in the shape of a huge palm and five broad fingers. I was all caved in.

"Nobody ever stood by me like that before." Jack looked squarely in my flickering eyes. "I never had a real friend." Just saying that made him swell with camaraderie, and Jack really laid that squeeze on.

See, I know you guys are gonna think I'm bullshitting you here, but me and Jack stood there like that for the better part of an hour; discussing the pros and cons of friendship, debating simple headlocks vs. full nelsons. I lost all sensation on my left side, and a healthy chunk of bladder control. The hallway approached and receded, the overhead lights brightened and dimmed. But the really weird thing is that ninety percent of that conversation took place in the first five minutes. The rest of the time we just stood there in dead silence; a solid yacht of a guy with a trembling bird shit trim. Scads of people passed by during that near-hour. Teachers glanced over oddly, but the kids all seemed to look away. Even that hot little Marcia

Remembering Jack

Tenders walked past, and I got the feeling she was really impressed. Finally I looked cool.

Eventually we moved on down the hall and out onto the front steps. Jack was holding me up now, though I don't think he realized it. He sat me down on a planter ledge and I kind of folded into the impatiens.

"We should celebrate," he said. "What's your drink?"

The blood was returning to my arm. I swear I heard my heart kick. I was just beginning to breathe again when the full import of Jack's words struck me like a fist.

Wow. *I* was being invited to party with a Somebody.

"Oh," I gasped vaguely. "Beer's good, I guess. What do you like?"

Jack laughed. "Come on."

"My name's Mikey," I ventured. "Michael, actually. Or Mike's best. Straight-Up Mike; that's what they call me. You know, like a standup guy."

"Let's go."

We worked down the steps and across the grass to the sidewalk. There were lots of kids hanging out, mostly the cool crowd, and I just know I was scoring Seen-With Points left and right. Even that fox Candy Wille walked by us and—I know you guys won't believe this, but she actually smiled at me and took a deep breath to draw my attention to her yum-yums. Like every eye in the crowd wasn't already glued on 'em. I was in emergency room heaven, man.

Me and my buddy swaggered up to the corner. I was about to push the walk button when I caught myself. Me and Jack strutted across the street *against* the light, while traffic was forced to a halt and everybody who was anybody looked on respectfully. And I took my sweet time crossing, you dig?

We grooved on up to Larry's Liquor. The clerk watched grimly as Jack ran his eye over the bottles. He was a speckled old man, with a melting face and dour expression. The floor plan allowed customers to personally attain liquor and place it on the counter, so the clerk had developed a jaded and wary eye. Jack plucked out a fifth of Jack Daniels and grinned. "Named after me," he said. He grabbed a glass liter bottle of Margarita mix and set both items next to the register.

The old clerk wagged his head. "I'll be wanting to see some I.D."

"In my other pants," Jack said pleasantly.

There was a long icy minute where the two traded stares. Finally the old man said, "That'll be forty dollars, even."

"Where'd I say my I.D. was?"

The clerk cocked his head and studied Jack out of one eye. "You said it was in your other pants."

"And where do guys keep their I.D.?"

"Generally in a wallet."

"And where do they keep their money?"

The clerk raised his chin irritably. "If they're normal, in their wallets, too."

"So where would that put my goddamned money?" Jack demanded.

The clerk glared.

"*In my other fucking pants!*" Jack spat, and smashed the Margarita bottle over the old man's head.

Jesus. I've always been an anti-establishment sort of cat, everybody knows that, but all of a sudden I was accomplice to both robbery and assault and battery. Or whatever they call it: that in-the-commission-of-a-crime thing. Jack snatched the liquor bottle's neck in one hand and my girlie little bicep in the other. "The back door," he panted. "Never go out the front." He dragged me to the back door, kicked off the alarm, and hauled me out into the alley.

We sank down the wall. Jack spun off the cap, took a manly swallow, and handed me the bottle. "Here."

First off, you guys, I want you to know I wasn't a hard drinker back then; just the smell of that stuff made me start to puke. But I was a fugitive now, on the run with my partner in crime, and Jack just wasn't the kind of guy you say no to. And, Lord knows, I really needed that drink.

I got down a few sips. Jack yanked the bottle out of my hand, gulped some more, and wiped his mouth with a sleeve. "We've got to get out of here."

I was shaking like a Subaru, but I couldn't break down, man; not right there, not in front of Jack. We snuck down the alley to the street.

"Stand tall," he said. "Act totally nonchalant, okay? Nobody knows shit yet." He took a drink.

I reached up a shaky hand, and he handed over the bottle. I swallowed deeply this time. "What if he's dead?" I had to fight back the sobs.

Remembering Jack

Jack shrugged. “That’ll give us more time.” He snatched the bottle and really knocked it back. I watched his Adam’s apple bobbing, amazed. His eyes weren’t cinched; rather, he was searching the clouds with a perfectly clear, perfectly direct and unblinking gaze. “We’ll get nowhere on foot; we need some wheels.” And just like that his mind was made up. “Pretend you’re sick.”

“What?”

“Just act sick.” I stared at him blankly. “Christ,” he said, and punched me right in the gut.

I never saw it coming. And “punched” might be too soft a word. I was doubled over; but I mean right in half—my forehead scraped the sidewalk. I flashed everything: the booze, my remaining breath, yesterday’s breakfast, and collapsed into a pathetic fetal ball. Jack scooped me up and waved down a car.

“Get us to a hospital fast.”

The driver’s eyes were all over the place. He was a middle-aged milquetoast who looked like he was in cardiac arrest. The car was a light blue station wagon. The driver’s window was down only a crack. That’s all I could make out while peeking between my knees.

“Maybe you should call an ambulance.”

“There’s no time,” Jack said. “He’s dying. Look at him.”

“But what hap—”

“Open the door, damn you! He’s dying!”

The driver shakily reached back and unlocked the rear door. Jack chucked me in like a bag of dirty laundry, hopped in the back and over the front seat. “Get out.”

The driver seemed about to break into tears, but Jack ran his arms around him, unlocked the door with one hand, lifted the latch with the other. “Get *out*.” The driver threw his arms over his face. “God damn you,” Jack said, and kicked the door open and the driver out. He closed the rear and front doors, threw the car in gear and took off. “You did good,” he said.

I managed a sitting slump and rolled my head deliriously. “Where’re—where’re we going?”

“Not far,” Jack said, punching the dash. “This fucker’s on fumes.”

“Maybe we—” I managed, “—maybe we—”

He tore into the first available gas station. “Stay here.” I was able to raise my head, just in time to see him flipping around the OPEN sign on the front glass door. In a minute he came out with his arms full of chips and jerky. He tossed it all in, along with handfuls of

tens, twenties, and fifties. “You’re in charge of cash,” he said, and bent to fill the tank.

I threw up again and again; I don’t know how many times, mostly out the window. The next thing I knew I was sitting up front, it was dusk, and we were on the freeway, driving way too fast and changing lanes unnecessarily.

“Jack . . .” I managed, “Jack, maybe we could drive a little slower and not look so suspicious, you think?”

He sneered. “That’s gonna fool that helicopter, huh? We’ll just blend in no problem, is that it?”

“Heli—” I looked in the side-view mirror and broke right into tears. “Oh my God, Jack, they’re almost on top of us. It’s over, man, it’s over.”

“Bullshit. I filled the tank.”

Then it was dark, and we were rolling in and out of a spotlight while Highway Patrol covered our front and rear. I could see black marshy fields along the freeway’s sides, but we were moving way too fast to make out details. Another helicopter was pacing us off to my right, and a pair of sirens were clearing the station wagon a path. What’s the name of those things they lay down to puncture your tires? You know, so they can bring a chase to a close . . .

Spike strips, that’s it. Well, when we hit, the car didn’t spin out, it just kept going sideways, across three lanes, a turnout, and twenty feet of open space before taking out a couple of small trees and landing belly-up in an old culvert.

Once again it was Jack to the rescue. He pulled my semi-conscious ass out the window and dragged me through the scrub and down a little gulch. Half a dozen Highway Patrol cars were lining the embankment when I opened my eyes, and one helicopter was hovering over the station wagon while the other swept an area three hundred yards away. And I was all gnarled up in Jack’s bearhug of an embrace, and in more pain than I’ve ever imagined. “Jack . . .” I said, “Jack, I think my neck’s broken.”

“That’s all right, little friend,” he whispered, and almost crushed my spine. “It’s okay, it’s okay.” He reached into his left front pocket and I heard the click of a switchblade.

There was the frantic whine of a police dog, very close. Half a dozen flashlight beams tore all around us. Jack swung behind me and threw an arm round my neck. All I could see was a faceful of flashlight beams.

Remembering Jack

“Stay where you are!” came a voice. At the same time one of the helicopters veered and hit us with its spotlight. I don’t know if any of you guys have ever been in one of those things, but it’s like a trillion candlepower, or whatever they call it. I mean *bright* white.

“Back off!” Jack shouted. “I’ll cut his fucking throat; I swear I will.” He took a handful of hair and yanked back my head so that his lips were right up against my ear, then pushed the blade into my skin until blood trickled down my throat. “*Act scared!*” he whispered.

No problem. I wailed like a weenie, you guys. I cried out to Mother, to God, and to Jack himself, in that order. But not to the cops, man, no way. I’d never turn on a pal.

“Put down the knife and release the prisoner.”

“Fuck you!”

“Lay down your weapon!”

“*Fuck you!*”

There’s this thing they do with light. Even though it was so bright that everybody in that sea of white would have been visible from space, those state-of-the-art flashlights had us dazzled to the point it was impossible to see the cops, the dogs, or the special agent with his rifle trained right between Jack’s eyes and not six inches from my left ear. When the shot came it was just one more element of the kaleidoscopic panoply, and I wouldn’t have put two and two together if not for the thunk, jerk, and splatter. You know how they say a bullet makes a small hole going in and a big one coming out? Well, they don’t tell you that you can look right through that little hole and see cerebrum soufflé. The whole back of Jack’s head had been blown off, and the original contents were clinging to my shirt, face, and hair.

Most of the uniforms did a compound swan dive onto what was left of Jack. A pair of cops rushed in to take me down, but one was forced to restrain the German Shepherd from finishing the job on my throat, so the lone cop twisted back my arm until I screamed like a Camp Fire Girl while he used his other hand to crush my head into the dirt. His knee was in the small of my back, and he was applying the whole weight of his body. I felt the cuffs go on, saw the Shepherd slobbering six inches from my face, and heard that awful voice drilling straight through my eardrum—

“*You have the right to remain silent.*”

Anyway, that's how the whole thing went down. Since I was just sixteen at the time, I only had to do two years in juvenile hall, and then the P.D. successfully argued that I'd been acting out of fear for my own safety. Given Jack's gnarly history, everybody agreed probation was the best adult option.

Don't you just know I was a popular dog in juvie—that high-speed chase was major news, man, and the arrest was broadcast gazillions of times. The dudes all knew me before I was even processed! There weren't any girls to hang with, of course, but I made friends in the cells, in the dayroom, even in the showers. Straight-Up Mike, they called me.

Yeah, yeah. Those were the days. You guys can think I'm bullshitting you all you want, but me and Jack were buds to the max, dude, and I've got the scars to prove it. So go ahead and walk away; out of this bar, out of my life, just like everybody else. I don't need you, I don't need anybody, 'cause I've got my memories, man, and I'll always remember Jack.

Lovers

Even as a child little Celia was obsessed with self-mutilation.

The first time April found her daughter semi-conscious and frothing, Celia's eyes were rolled back, her limbs and face lacerated by every sharp object within reach. Naturally mother went right into hysterics, and thereupon devoted all available time and energy into nursing her one love back to health. But the shock, to a hard woman perennially battling guilt and self-loathing, triggered something deeper than a healthy maternal reaction. From the moment she smashed that last bottle on the counter, April's response was anything but natural.

After Celia's recovery, mother and daughter lived in a home devoid of edges and points. April's small clapboard house, situated on a lonely tract of poorly-lit land, could be modified without the inquiries of authorities or neighbors. Panes were removed, windows boarded over. A carpenter was contracted to construct grilled apertures for light bulbs, and to fit all cupboards and drawers with miniature combination locks. Then April got busy. The resulting décor could best be described as *blunt*, as *fastidiously smooth*, and as *relentlessly contoured*, for April Winter, clad in overalls and bandanna, had methodically filed, sanded, and hammered flush every protrusion in her abusive ex-husband's seized home.

Yet there were additional gruesome episodes. April, focused only on that which openly met the critical eye, understandably ignored some pretty obvious potential hazards—simply because their projections were concealed by contours. Thus evils such as car keys and fountain pens were overlooked due to the *roundness* of their secreting handbag, and the oblong, peaked prongs protruding from the plugs of electric cords were neglected—not only because they were hidden in the parallel recesses of wall outlets, but because the plugs *themselves* were innocently smooth in appearance.

Now, April very deeply loved Celia. But there was a strong neurotic thread running through her affection, showing initially in a kind of overbearing *momminess*, and eventually in outright monomania. Because of this biochemical barrage, April blamed herself, unjustly, both for Celia's affliction and for the brutal alcoholic father's violent departure. Still, the woman was immensely strong, weathering Celia's desperate years of seizures and unforeseeable flesh savageries with uncommon courage and resolution. She grappled with depression by spending afternoons on the front porch, balancing pathos and palette while Celia slept locked away. During these imaginary sittings April painted her daughter in every setting she could concoct, with one proviso—the girl had to be smiling. April would have died to see just one of those painted smiles come alive. Her canvases were hung throughout the house, in obvious spots and in places marred by stubborn blood stains or bashed drywall.

These little hanging squares of artificial happiness became more important, and more strained, as Celia approached puberty. But April's pluck was amazing. For instance, during Celia's biting phase, mother had, after days of heroic soul-searching, resorted to having the girl's mouth wired shut, and still managed to abstain from gin and tonic until Celia discovered the exquisite tortures of manipulating stainless steel on freckled forearms and white, yearning wrists. Once the wires were removed, Celia became ferocious and unmanageable. It was with profound anxiety that April enlisted a most callous dental surgeon to, in strictest confidence, nearly dispatch the girl with anesthesia, that he might grimly extract her front uppers and lowers, leaving only those teeth adapted for grinding, rather than tearing. Little Celia, thus mutilated by another party, withdrew completely, and for a time immediately went into seizure at her mother's approach. The sweetly smiling portraits were now too upsetting for the toothless girl. Again showing her mettle, April overcame her horror daily as she painted out teeth, canvas by canvas, solely for her

disturbed daughter's sake.

Alcoholism is such an ugly, such a harsh and unforgiving word. Yet in April's case it was tantamount to emotional salvation. Through regular and liberal self-medication, she was able to remain all-giving mother first, self-indulgent masochist second. Strange that strength and weakness should cohabit with such balance. April thrived on stresses that would crush a less-adamant individual . . . even during those many long drunken nights with her ex, before he'd blacked her eyes and sent her gushing and convulsing to the emergency room, she had indulged in a form of liquor abuse-gratification common to women of low self-esteem: *The bastard beat her. He ripped her off, he raped her. He used her in ways that are incomprehensible to even the shallowest student of ethics.* But . . . damn it, at least he was *there*.

April fought down these horrors courageously, so that now the past was just a binge; one long, perilously survived stupor. The present was all that mattered. And the present was Celia. For April, loving Celia was the purest form of giving, because Celia didn't—Celia couldn't—*take*. And even a masochist is sobered by rejection.

As to the growing girl's security, April was inflexible. She would not admit visitors, *period*, unless they obeyed a single rule: at no time, under any circumstances, was a sharp object permitted indoors. Pockets were ordered emptied, with heartfelt apologies. Purses and suspicious personal articles were kept outside in a locked strongbox secured to the porch, and only then was adolescent Celia allowed to mingle with her mother's genuinely supportive and sympathetic friends. For a time this method afforded April the semblance of a social life. Then, one Sunday morning, a fellow hospital receptionist unintentionally left behind a simple straight pin that had been lodged in the hidden seam of her recently altered pantsuit. The physical consequences of that single pin were devastating. April entertained no longer; she became a psychological as well as a physical recluse, and changed her work schedule to the graveyard shift to be near Celia during the teenager's waking hours.

It was on this shift that she met Will, an easygoing security guard with an inexhaustible patter. In the wee hours, when it seemed they were the only creatures alive, the two would sit in the hard fluorescent light and chat, and flirt, and the dreary hours would not seem so long. They shared a love of pasta, a lifelong passion for jazz, and a real fondness for star-gazing. And they had something else in common. One black morning, during April's lunch break, Will came by to point out M31 in Andromeda. While so doing he nonchalantly

draped his other arm over her shoulders, reached inside his fur-lined jacket, and slid forth a nearly full pint of Cream of Kentucky bourbon.

After that their working lives were inextricably entwined. They came to the hospital eagerly, and stole away at every opportunity. April now brought her gin and tonic in a plastic thermos, while Will carried a holstered flask of bourbon under his security bomber jacket. They weren't stupid. They were never recklessly drunk, and they were never caught. Week by week the consummation of their passion neared.

The effect of alcohol on Will was to rouse an irrepressible satyr; a beast diametrically opposed to the sober, affable security guard April had fallen for. He couldn't keep his hands off her; any excuse and no excuse were reasons enough to justify a grope here, a pinch there. For her part, April found it increasingly difficult to maintain her half-hearted parries. It had been so long. She giggled and blushed at his touch, and their façade of professionalism gradually crumbled, to the whispered amusement of janitors and orderlies. Alone together, they tore at their drinks.

One peaceful Saturday night there was an unexpected knock on April's door. In the bulb's sallow haze a half-tanked Will stood hunched like a punch-drunk fighter, his primer-gray pickup parked with one wheel on the curb. April hesitated; everything was wrong. This eager event should be taking place at a motel, on a back seat, in the park—anywhere but here. But Will hadn't come to be turned away, and April was still prey to the alcoholic cycle: just the sight of Will drunk and weaving triggered an almost Pavlovian reaction. She experienced a kind of contact high, and her suddenly surging libido just as suddenly *demand*ed she fix herself a drink. This she did, in nervous spurts, while talking to Will through the door; telling him to keep his voice down, asking him to be patient. She threw on a favorite album and gulped down half her drink. The liquor warmed her blood, the music took her mood. Excited, alive again, she peeked into the black womb of her daughter's room. Celia was in her familiar sleeping posture; curled into a fetal position, eyelids fluttering, the orbs rolled back. April tiptoed in, readjusted the covers. Tiptoed out. Gently locked the door.

Will knew all about Celia from their chats at work. So, drunk though he was, he *behaved*; he was expectant, but compliant. He docilely placed his keys and all other loose objects in the strongbox, then proudly displayed the tall unbreakable Tupperware flask that held his liquor. April was brutally thorough in her physical search,

much to Will's delight, and at long last, after snapping shut the combination lock on the box, she ushered him inside.

Only April's greater sobriety enabled her to keep Will at bay. For a while the man seemed indefatigable in his advances, but finally the bourbon began to work against him. He sagged, and allowed her to ease him onto the couch. April sauntered into the kitchen, returning a minute later with paper cups, a teak bowl full of ice, and a plastic pitcher filled with gin and tonic water. In the space of that minute Will had recovered completely, and was randy as ever. Their embrace was immediate. Will hauled her down on the couch, his greedy hands fumbling with her blouse and bra, his breath hot in her ear. Suffocating, April pushed him off, and they both leaned on the sanded-round coffee table with the sanded-round feet, gulping their drinks out of sheer nervousness.

She tried to forestall the inevitable—with chatter, with counter-maneuvers—but Will only grew bolder, scattering pillows and spilling drinks. April, capitalizing on the break, squirmed out of his embrace and made to replenish the pitcher. Will wobbled to his feet and blocked her way meaningfully. For half a minute April was terrified, but Will only grinned, stole a kiss, and staggered off to the bathroom. By the time he'd returned, April had wolfed down a stiff drink and forgotten both the pitcher and her anxiety. The two fell on the couch as the music's final strains were replaced by the rhythmic *hiss-ca-chuk* of the record player's stylus at the label's paper perimeter. Behind this rhythm came a familiar scratch and rattle.

Celia's door cracked open. The girl peeked out timidly.

In a heartbeat April was wholly mother again. She shoved Will away, swayed to her feet, and held out her arms while Celia shuffled over shyly, confused and vulnerable in her floral-print pajamas. The conflicting emotions could produce only one response: April quickly broke the mother-daughter embrace and made for the kitchen and gin.

Celia was fascinated by Will; tugging at his clothes and hair while he glared. He sullenly pulled at his drink, his expression continuing to darken as April stumbled back to the couch, a fresh bowl of ice quaking in her hand. She must have blacked out for a minute, must have tumbled backward onto the couch, for the next thing she knew Will was straddling her with his face buried in her chest. He pinned her like a butterfly. April whipped her head side to side in protest, and Will went right out of his mind with passion. When her head came to rest she was looking straight into Celia's

bright and wondering eyes. April cried out and tried to pull free, only inflaming Will further. He threw all his weight on her, and, so great was his demand, would probably have taken her then and there if not for a haymaker to the tip of his nose. April struggled to her feet and stood reeling in the middle of the room. Will blinked at her stupidly, his right hand gripping her rent and rumpled blouse. His other hand rose slowly, the fingers testing his hot bleeding nose. His eyes darkened.

April retained only vague impressions of the ensuing few minutes. She remembered watching Will lurch to his feet and trip headlong over the coffee table, waving his arms like a drowning man. She recalled seeing him hit the floor in a hail of scattered ice, oscillate and bob to his knees, flail and lurch to his feet.

In slow motion Will lunged, grabbed April by the hair with his left hand, hauled back his right arm, and smashed his fist flush in her face.

The blow sent April backpedaling into the kitchen. She glanced off a cabinet, slammed against the refrigerator, slid to the floor. Through a veil of blood she watched Will stumbling back and forth in the doorway, moving like a ping pong ball jamb to jamb, sinking gradually, at last turning on Celia and dragging her kicking and screaming to the floor. Shrieking right along, April somehow pushed herself to her hands and knees; but that was all she could manage before the combined effects of nearly a fifth of gin and a broken nose sent her reeling into pitch.

April's eyes opened around four in the morning. She rolled onto her stomach, crawled a few feet, and was violently sick. Except for a narrow wedge of bare perceptibility created by streaming moonlight, the house was inky dark—and that one realization was so powerful it overwhelmed all April's physical ills combined: *the front door was ajar*. Overturned shapes projected dimly in the living room. April, fighting for air, ricocheted off those shapes to the doorway, steadied, thrust out her caked, swollen face.

Will lay spreadeagled on the lawn; face-down and unconscious. His truck's passenger door hung open, its wing window smashed. A number of smallish, dully shining objects were scattered about the lawn, leading in a winding trail from Will's body to the porch. A few of these articles showed far away, as though violently tossed.

April's puffy eyes followed the trail back to the porch. At her feet a wide, flat toolbox lay upturned amidst a number of screw-

drivers, spanners, and miscellaneous small parts. Chisels and a hammer lay atop the bashed and battered strongbox—the combination lock had been scored and defaced in a fit of drunken rage. She shook from head to toe. Screwdrivers. Chisels.

April turned back and the room turned right along with her. It kept on turning while she felt her way through the darkness, barking her shins on the jumbled unseen. The black maze became too much. Still drunk out of her mind, she pitched onto her face, striking her chin hard on the naked wood floor. Inches from her eyes, a number of half-melted ice cubes gleamed whitely. But it seemed odd, even in her muddled state, that the cubes hadn't fully melted. April's eyes burned with the strain. Unwilling to believe her heart over her mind, she picked up a cube and rolled it between her forefinger and thumb. It was cold, certainly, and slippery, but April *knew*, without the benefit of direct light, that she was holding one of Celia's bloody severed toes. In a dream she pushed herself to her feet and fell against her daughter's door, kicked it open, fumbled for the light switch.

Celia was seated on the floor with her back propped against the bed. Between her splayed legs lay several articles from Will's tool box, including a small hatchet, a large awl, and a heavy-duty *exacto knife*. The girl had chopped off her toes and fingertips with the hatchet, torn her limbs and torso to ribbons with the blade, and used the awl to make mushy pools of her eyes. Only her mouth was untouched. The same toothless grin that dominated a hundred wall portraits now smiled up at a failed mother in an alcoholic haze. Completely undone, April fell screaming on the little corpse of her love.

Empire

Alura is a planet as lovely as its name.

The air, you would swear, has a sweet bouquet, and among Captain Scott's ground party, sick to the gills of canned air, there was whispered talk of an *aftertaste* upon inhalation—something between caramel fudge and hot buttered rum.

Native Alurans are friendly to a fault. The men are wise and mentoring, the women ample and unabashedly nude. The men can be firm, however, and so for propriety's sake made certain the damson-toned nymphs arranged their flowing blonde tresses strategically in the company of Scott's all-male, cabin-fevered, skin-starved crew.

Alurans are *humanoid*. They are social creatures, prone to lounging and fond of dissertation. The planet Alura, with its bounteous fields of stellarium-rich photocystals, has from Day One provided its denizens with long lives of peace and plenty.

Still, sometimes a prodigious native energy supply can be too much of a good thing.

Aluran males go almost directly from puberty to senescence, fulfilling their reproductive function in a single season, only to linger in decrepitude for decades to come. Aluran women suffer throughout their lives with that exotic and unpleasant condition known as *mammaria vulgaris*, wherein supercharged estrogen causes the mammary

glands to engorge in the company of males, and to spontaneously engage in profoundly mortifying paroxysms of projectile lactation. The ejected product's sugar content is so stellarium-enriched that, upon exposure to air, it leaves a most unbecoming veneer of crystallized threads and filmy residue. Very many Aluran women are also cursed with the stigmata of superfluous breasts on the back, shoulders, and underchin—a humiliating condition that, during this, the first meeting of officials from Earth and Alura, caused the Elders considerable grief and embarrassment.

Stellarium crystals, or *stellaria*, are not all that uncommon in the Milky Way. They can be found carpeting the temperate zones of most planets; absorbing, storing, and concentrating starlight by way of their unique arrangement of stepped internal faces. Some older crystals have been known to power a medium-sized city for a good solar year. Since their discovery by 23rd Century Earth prospectors, they've been the prime energy source in every Solar System project from transportation to military. The natural consequence is, of course, a steady depletion of this hardy but highly exhaustible life form.

Aluran crystals have a paradoxical relationship with their galactic neighborhood. Alura is a remote, recently uncharted, most unpromising candidate for life of any kind. But its crystals' struggle for distant starlight produced a rigorousness, a high field presence, and an unparalleled ability to photosynthesize. The evolutionary result is a robust, self-contained mini-system; warm, steady, and perennially paradisiacal.

It was in this setting, on the crystal-rich bank of a perpetually mild lagoon of the Silken Sea, that the Aluran Elders received the bug-eyed Earth crew. After much apologizing and woman-scolding, White the Eldest brought the small talk down to basics, speaking haltingly in the Universal Tongue.

“There will be no need for the Elders to Counsel, Captain Scott. Your generous offers to purchase stellarium crystals wholesale, as well as to join with Alura in business partnership, are entirely unacceptable. These fields are not only our life-blood, they harbor a deep and timeless spiritual significance. To all Alurans. As you have informed us that you are fully empowered to speak on your home planet's behalf, I feel honored as well as saddened to relate to you personally that, no, regrettably, we will never comply with this request. We are not for sale.”

Scott bowed. “I will inform my world's leader of your feelings in this matter, and return with his thoughts.” He paused as Gray the

Elder wheeled his chair up against White's. The two huddled for a whispered confab. White looked back up.

"And . . . Captain Scott . . . we feel it best you return as sole representative, that your wonderful crewmen not be forced to endure the unsightly spectacle of our hapless women."

A mutinous groan rose from the men.

Eldest White, nodding sympathetically, said with great bearing, "Thank you gentlemen, and a safe and very brief sojourn to you. May time wipe this unbidden, untoward, and disgustingly messy spectacle from your minds."

"How backward can these idiots be?"

The President of Earth zoomed his image up tight, that Scott be irresistibly apprised of his displeasure. "I've given you full powers of emissary, Scott. They've heard our complete offer? What do they want, jangling baubles and party hats?"

"It's like a religious thing," Scott hemmed. "'Spiritual', he called it. Doesn't want to let go of the past, or posterity, or something like that."

"Oh, what a load of crap. Every race has its price. Now you get back down there and you do some fancy talking. You know what's resting on this project, and you know how imperative those crystals are. If the Third Ring catches us with our pants down this time, we won't have enough power to send up a surrender beacon. Money isn't an object—we're already through the roof on this. I'm authorizing your direct military command of all Group Bases if need be, of limitless and instantaneous funding, of total support from every proxy in the Quadrant. Damn you, man—get it done! If I see your pasty face again without a full work order for the immediate export of stellarium crystals, I'll bust you right back down to janitor before your pansy-ass lips are dry. There's an election coming up back at home, in case you've forgotten. Do we have an understanding here, Scott? Now, either you're gonna make me happy or I'm gonna make you history."

"I'm so glad you could make it," Scott whispered, peeking out his quarters while desperately avoiding looking at his guest. He'd leaked word that he needed to meet with the most intelligent of the Aluran women, and she'd tiptoed blushing through the flapping door,

her long hair fluffing all around her gently swelling self. He began gathering the strange metallic marbles into a pile.

The woman plucked one up, turned it before her wide violet eyes. “Pretty!”

“Telefiles,” Scott said, placing it back in the pile. “I’ve been studying some ancient Earth records, looking for ideas. I’m Captain Scott,” he breathed. “And you are?”

She spread her arms and giggled nervously. “*Shela!*”

“Shhh!” Scott couldn’t help breathing her in: a sweet musk emanated from her every distending pore, while he grew clammy at the pits and groin. “Shela, I have very important work for you, a mission of the utmost moment. We have discovered that the Elders of Alura are plotting against us. It is imperative that we learn all we can to spare us from disaster. You can be our eyes and ears. You must eavesdrop on their conversations, you must find out all you can about how they manage and secure stellaria, and report back to me.”

Shela bent nearer, her chest heaving. “Oh, but Captain Scott! Whatever will I tell my friends?”

Scott’s eyes began to wobble and ache; the taste of peaches in cream came to his tongue. His fingertips grew sticky, and a pulsing gossamer web grew about them. “It’s a secret,” he whispered. “It *must* be, do you hear? You *must* come to me here, every night, and report *everything* you hear. No one must ever ever *ever* see you come and go, do you understand?”

The woman’s entire body blushed ripe plum. “But how can I be of both Earth and Alura? In what manner do we merge?”

She was expanding before his eyes. “I,” Scott gasped, “am hereby deputizing you. You are now an agent of our command. Of *my* command.” He scooped his tunic off its hook, raced his eyes across the colorful bits comprising his rows and columns of commendations. Cadet Mentor . . . Stellar Emissary . . . Galactic Commander . . . and peeled off the flexy starburst medal for Best Ship’s Hygiene.

“What are *those*, Captain Scott?”

“*These*,” Scott maundered, “are breast badges. They’re the proofs of all my manly endeavors. They’re awards: what Earth’s elite, political and military, give to officers of merit upon the successful completion of missions great and small.” He demonstrated the badges’ attachment and removal. “They’re just latex suction pads, what we call ‘Peel and Paste’.”

Shela's eyes swelled in their sockets, her lips plumping as he stared. "*Breast*," she hissed prettily, "badges! But why do they call them that?"

"Well," Scott said reasonably, "because they're worn on the breast. Flashing one of these babies is a great honor."

Shela's eyes sparkled, following the badge in Scott's rocking fingers. "For me?"

"Remember—" Scott panted, "*our* secret."

She looked down; left, right, and supernumerary. "But where will I wear it?"

Scott reached out his shaking hand, his breath hot and moist in his throat. "Right . . . *here*."

"I bear grave news."

They were in the Aluran's command Circle, overlooking the Silken Sea. Scott studied his clenched hands. "It grieves me even to speak it in this fine and lovely place."

White the Eldest gripped his armrests and leaned forward, the veins throbbing in his forehead. Immediately his harem gushed to his sides, fanning him with their endless tresses while blushing furiously at their flashing pendulous fantasies. "Speak it," White urged, "Friend Captain Scott."

Scott rose and began to pace, hands clasped behind his back. "Your world, Eldest White, is under the scrutiny of a devious and relentless species." He raised a hand. "This race, the Klingons, has engaged an assault upon Alura under the auspices of their wicked ruler Kal-El of Oz." He whirled. "Make no mistake! They seek only your stellarium crystals, and will stop at nothing to get them! No ruse too shallow, no ploy too obtuse . . ." He wagged his head sadly while raising a hopeful forefinger. "I am ambivalent. First: I, like all good men of Earth, am weighed down by this terrible turn of events in the life-cycle of a great and generous planet. But second, and far more important: I am overjoyed that we have arrived in time to protect you." He bowed to the waist. "If you will permit us."

Gray the Elder placed a hand on White's forearm. "Surely we must Counsel!"

"The moment is urgent," Scott said. "Proof of this threat, alas, is presently at hand." He triggered his vocalizer. "Ensign Manson. Do it." A second later the skies over Alura were erupting with pyrotechnic rage: Roman Candles, skyrockets, podloads of sparklers and

Sneaky Petes. The women jiggled in terror while the Elders gasped and wheeled in erratic circles. The spectacle ceased.

“That should hold those awful Klingons for a while,” Scott said.

“Bless you!” White panted. “And bless all you fine men of Earth. Our stellaria are saved!”

“Only temporarily,” Scott reminded him. “We can’t hold them off forever. I suggest a peace offering; a few carriers of your richest stellaria to keep them at bay while my selfless colleagues desperately attempt to work something out.”

“Never!” White vowed, and with surprising passion. “We deeply appreciate your kind Earthling concern for our security, Captain Scott, but understand that under no circumstances will we ever relinquish a single rod of our beloved crystals! We are bound by ancient promises—to the beaming fields above and the chiseled roots below. None of this sacred growth shall *ever* leave our world!” He shakily raised himself half out of his chair, waving his bobbing nursers away. “Never! Do you hear me, sir? Not ever!”

“But surely, a—”

White clutched his chest and fell back in his chair. For a minute all was confusion. Presently Gray the Elder freed himself from White’s supporting fleshy tangle and looked over gravely. “I suggest you remove yourself, *sir*, and with the utmost haste.” There was no doubting his savvy, nor his hostility. “While it may be true that Eldest White’s advancement in years may have made him slow and over-trusting, and while the word of the Eldest is final, be advised that,” and his eyes burned across the Circle while he tapped a forefinger on his temple, “his true friends *know* things, and are a force to be reckoned with.”

Shela quietly slipped round the flap, her chest beating hard.

“What took you?” Scott whispered. “What have you learned?”

She huddled there, vainly attempting to contain herself. “It is Gray you must fear. He is inciting the Elders to retaliation. Nothing will change him.”

Scott gripped her passionately. “Shela! You must understand—Gray is a wicked man, bent only on destruction. His one course is pure selfishness—he *must* be destroyed!”

She began helplessly sprouting and exuding, so great was her consternation. “But what can we *do*, Captain Scott? I cannot keep The Secret from my friends much longer.”

“Take a deep breath,” Scott advised. “Relax.” Peaches in cream. “Now take another deep breath. Relax, relax. Breathe deeper, *deeper*; oh *Shela*, Shela, *breathe!* That’s a good girl. Now, there’s an old Earth saying: if you can’t bribe ’em, enlist ’em. So I want you to bring *all* the girls here, the whole gang, every night, and I’m gonna make sure *each* and *every* one is deputized with a breast badge!” Her eyes welled. Shela’s shoulders fell and she slowly began to deflate. “No, no, no!” Scott said hurriedly. “They’ll just be your *deputies*. You’re so smart, agent Shela; you’re smarter than all the rest put together. That’s why I’m promoting you.” He snatched his tunic from the wall and peeled off the Second Place, Three-legged Sack Race badge. Scott leaned forward in a crystallizing haze. “Let’s just see if we can find some more room in there.”

Captain Scott strode purposefully into the Circle, flanked by Military Police. The Aluran sky was choking with hovering Earth craft, an awesome and intimidating sight since long before dawn. Every few minutes another carrier landed in a brilliant splash of gravity repellent.

“What,” White tottered, “is the *meaning* of this, Captain Scott? And why have we been confined to the Circle these many hours?”

“For your own safety, sir. The situation is far worse than our original reports led us to believe. It now appears that the Romulans have sided with the Klingons, and are gearing up for a Trump maneuver even as we speak.”

“These words you use,” Gray said darkly, “are of no meaning to us. By what authority do you impose your military upon our neutral world?”

Scott met him eye to eye. “By authority of the Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts, Elder Gray. And it is not an imposition. The United Federation Of Planets has declared *this* planet a protectorate of the Borg Confederacy, and ordered Battleship Earth to her defense. It is *we* who bear the onus of this venture! Not *you*, we!”

“And bless you, son,” White rasped. “And bless your fine people all.”

“Cease!” barked Gray. “You use these terms, alien and obtuse, to divert us from actuality! What are these things, sir, and what do they imply?”

A tic worked in Scott’s eye. “You’ll have plenty of time to learn, Gray, in the comfort of our brig. Men, remove this scoundrel.”

The MPs immediately grasped Gray’s handgrips and wheeled him away.

Scott turned to White. “It pains me to inform you, Eldest, but Elder Gray is actually an Ent working for the Dark Lord.”

White paled further. “No . . . I . . .”

“Yes. I’m afraid you’ve been confiding in a traitor and informant. We Earthlings come from a long tradition of wheeling and dealing with just such rascals.” Scott turned to the cap of Crystal Hill, where the Terran Blue & Green was being raised in a mild breeze. “Look to the future, Eldest! See the Aluran flag replaced by the Terran, so those cruel invaders are made visually aware of their formidable foe. A major battle will be won, perhaps without a single shot fired! Our President has even brainstormed a replacement name for this glorious planet—so that all potential villains know they are one step behind in the game.” He made a frame of his hands and peered through. “Think of it, Eldest White! A grand name, an imposing name, a name feared by all—a name that will give even the Death Star pause.” His eyes grew misty as he genuflected by the chair. “Try it out for yourself, Eldest. Give it a shot.” Captain Scott articulated broadly, running an arm over the gleaming panorama: “*New . . .*” he enunciated “. . . *Earth . . .*”

“*New . . .*” White mumbled, “. . . *New . . .*” His sunken eyes rose Scottward. “And this strategy will preserve our precious stellaria?”

“Absolutely. Our precious stellaria will be unapproachable! Even now drillers are tearing up fields. Loaders are stocking carriers, carriers are unloading in cargo ships. Tons and tons and *tons* of stellarium are ready to be transported to Earth for safekeeping. I want to *guarantee* you, Eldest White, that no foreign power will ever get their greedy mitts on these crystals!”

“I, sir,” White breathed, “am impressed.” He impulsively kissed the Captain’s hand. “Nay, I am in awe! You will forgive my physical impertinence, but your ways of thinking are far beyond we simple Alurans. Please accept our tears of gratitude, and let us know how best we may assist.”

“It’s all worked out, Eldest; you won’t have to do a thing. Aluran males are even now being rounded up en masse. And since you are civilians in a military arena, we are sworn to protect you in the grand Terran tradition. So all males will be safely ensconced on a special parcel of land in the Deader Desert, where no Orc or Oprah would think of searching. Aluran women will be transported to Earth for protective housing in some of our politicians’ finest mansions, and thereby inducted into the illustrious Great Chambermaids Society. Graduates are highly prized. Who knows—one day an Aluran woman may even bear the coveted Golden Chamberpot.”

“No . . .” White’s eyes were brimming. “But, Captain Scott . . . the Deader Desert?”

“No longer, sir. The area has been renamed the Aluran Reservation, in your honor. A ‘reservation’ is a place we Earthmen use to house our noblest peoples. All Elders will be preserved therein with complete security, and provided unlimited supplies of a popular Earth elixir known as ‘vodka’.” He unholstered a flask and had the Eldest sip.

“It is . . .” White gasped, “fire on the tongue.”

“Don’t worry, Eldest, you’ll get used to it.” He placed a comforting hand on the old man’s shoulder. “Someday, my friend, this fire will certainly be your dearest and most trusted companion.”

“Folks—” the reporter gushed, addressing the hovering cameras while backpedaling up the walk “—you’ve heard about her, you’ve read about her, you’ve seen her wise and beaming face shining as the brightest star in the galaxy—the Woman of the Future, the symbol of success, the highest inspiration for all those yearning young girls, now viewing from home and dreaming of all they can be. So, with the whole Solar System watching, we give you that Stellar Sacagawea, that Purple Pocahontas: Senator Scott’s Mystery Princess, the Fabulous Aluran Muse who brought us our life-saving stellaria—Earth’s unparalleled Heroine—ladies and gentlemen . . . *Shela!*”

The camera zoomed right in. Almost overwhelmed by all the excitement, Shela promptly popped off her breast badges, held them high overhead, and smiled into the bespattered lens.

“Latex!” she bubbled, “Peel and Paste!”

Yogi

Alleys can be spooky places at night, especially if you're twelve years old with a vivid imagination. Robert knew the overgrown way between Pace and Hereford by heart, of course, but he wasn't supposed to be kicking around the weeds and bins in the dark—it was dangerous, immature, and just plain wrong: perfect. Light from carports produced uneven blocks of light, though for the most part it was all bleak and crawly bliss. A whining behind leaning trash cans got his heart pounding. What was it—a roof rat, a gnarly old possum, a feral cat? Irresistible. He picked up a branch and crept over carefully, every sense perked.

What Robert found behind the cans was so gut-wrenching he almost swooned.

A horribly mangled German Shepherd lay crushed and torn, crusted blood on its muzzle and ears, flies and ants in its eyes and mouth, pus and foam clinging to its gums and nostrils. Pathetic little whining pants rocked its lungs. The boy froze with the branch clenched in his fist, trembling all over. Finally he leaned in, and said in a hoarse and cracking voice:

“Boy? *Boy?* Oh . . . boy, what can I do?”

Caked lids peeled apart. One glazed eye worked its way open and the animal began scraping and thrashing fitfully. The whining became a heavy gasping, a gargling rumble, a profound wheezing.

“Oh no!” Robert cried. “Oh no, boy, stay! *Stay!* Don’t move, don’t move—”

The dog forced itself a foot off the ground on its forepaws, emitting little panting cries. Its back was broken, the jaw shattered, most of the teeth missing. Foam puffed and spewed.

“No!” Robert screamed. “No, please!” But the dog kept trying to rise. Light came on in a window in the next building. “*No!*”

And the boy just freaked. He threw up his arms and raced the two blocks home, burst in the back door and huddled trembling by the washer and dryer. His parents were hollering back and forth as usual; his mother coldly demanding, the old man shitfaced drunk. As usual. Robert grabbed a plate and bowl off the sink, a pound of bologna and a pint of bottled water from the refrigerator, and ran back down the alley.

He came up on the trash cans shaking, half-praying the dog would be gone. Or dead . . . or anything other than that whimpering, gasping horror.

It must have heard him coming, must have felt his footsteps, for it commenced hyperventilating and attempting to stand. Robert set down the plate and bowl, laid on the meat and poured in the water. He shoved the plate and bowl forward an inch at a time, really scared now, but no less heartbroken.

The Shepherd sniffed and bit at the meat, then threw its head side to side with little agonized yelps. A terrified Robert nevertheless splashed his hand in the water and dribbled some in the dog’s arching mouth. It yelped and hacked, staring at him with one frosted eye.

“Please,” Robert begged, dangling a slice of bologna. The dog pushed itself up on its forepaws and, with a savage effort, began heaving itself from behind the cans.

“No!” Robert gasped, backing away. Out of its mind with pain, the snarling Shepherd hauled its smashed hindquarters even as Robert continued to backpedal. The dog dragged along a few yards, snapping and crying, at last making it to all fours.

“Stay!” Robert cried. “Stop!” But it kept coming on, and when the boy broke and ran it fought its way into an awkward leaning gallop, flopping in and out of the shadows, snarling and yelping with the rising agony. It followed him that way, down walks between buildings, in and out of carports, between cars—all the way home,

where it collapsed in the backyard with a withering series of little screaming convulsions.

Robert blew in around the rear screen door, slammed the back door hard, and locked it against the night.

“I don’t give a good holy crap what he says.” The old man kicked over a kitchen chair. “There’s no fucking dog out there!”

An abbreviated retort from his mother, a strong woman accustomed to abuse. Then the old man again:

“I looked everywhere with the goddamned flashlight; the whole yard, okay? No . . . fucking . . . *dog!*”

“Well, *something* scared the boy. He’s terrified. If you can’t find anything I’m calling animal control. I don’t feel safe for him.”

“Ah, Jesus. *Robert!*”

“Howard, don’t you bring that bottle in there. If you strike that boy again—”

“Let me guess. You’ll pack up and head back to Elsie’s? *Robert!*”

Hard yellow light cut into the room and Howard nearly fell in, using the swinging door for support.

There came a harsh word from Robert’s mother. Howard rocked his head out into the hall, slapped the whiskey bottle down on the nightstand. “There: you fucking happy now? No bottle in the room.” He plunged a leg back in and, walking like a man on the moon, made his way around the bed.

Robert peeked from above the raised sheet.

“Hi, son.” The old man’s whiskey-breath was nauseating. He plopped down on the mattress. “I’m not mad; I’m not gonna hit you. I just want to say thanks for the wild goose chase, that’s all.” He sighed more of the same. “There’s nothing out there, boy. Nothing at all. No blood, no body, no nothing. Mom says you told her it was bad-injured, and she says too it followed you into the yard. Don’t you think we’d see some sign of it, son? Don’t you think?” The effort wore him down. After a minute he raised his head and forced a pacifying smile. “A boy *should* have a dog . . . deserves one . . . man’s best friend. Maybe he’ll come back when he feels better.” He winked boozily. “What should I call him? Duke? Fido?”

Robert pulled up the sheet, trying to survive those hated, ever-present fumes.

“Well, he’s got a name, don’t he? What’s his name?”

An anxious voice from the hall: "Is he okay?"

Howard forced his head around. "He's all right!"

"Let me just talk to him for a minute."

"*I said he's fucking all right!* God damn it, June, there's stuff only a man can talk about with his boy. Now close the door."

"No way, Howard. I'll be waiting right here."

"I said close the fucking door!"

"And I said no."

Howard swung his fright-mask back around, got right in the boy's face. "*What's the dog's name!*" He huffed like a straining locomotive, then straightened as best he could. In a moment a kind of bilious humor rearranged the lines of tension on his brow. "Let's see now. How's about Hondo—you like cowboys, don't you? Or maybe Frodo; you know, those little puppet people all the kids is so crazy about." His eyes swam in his skull. "Got to have two syllables. For a dog, I mean. Cats are different. Football . . . baseball . . ." A lopsided grin cracked his face. "What about Yogi? You know, that old Yankees catcher. That's perfect." He rocked back and sighed. "Yogi it is, then."

"Howard?"

"*Shut the fuck up, woman!* You wanna know *why* I yell? This is *exactly* why! A man can't have a private minute with his son." He swayed to his feet.

"You've *had* your minute! Now it's my turn."

Howard staggered round in a half-circle, his fists balled. "Oh, you'll get your turn, all right!" He threw a series of punches.

"I'm taking this bottle, right now! If you want it back you'll come out of there."

"God *damn* you!" One of those random punches took out Robert's desk lamp, another shattered a square foot of plasterboard. Howard turned to the bed with hellfire in his eyes. "*What's the fucking dog's name?*" His son whimpered and pulled the sheets higher. "It's Yogi, boy! It's fucking Yogi. Say it! It's your dog—*say his name*. Say fucking Yogi!" He reached down and yanked him clear out of bed. "Say it!" Robert choked from the knuckles in his windpipe. "Say it, you ugly dummy bastard, *say* it!" He hauled back his fist and sent it crashing into his son's forehead. The impetus of his own roundhouse threw him stumbling against the door.

June screamed and tried to force her way in, succeeding only in nudging her husband back a foot or two.

“*Fuck you!*” Howard howled, and yanked the door wide. Robert had time only to see his father lurch out into the hall before the blow to his skull sent him spinning into unconsciousness.

“It’s going to stop,” June whispered. “I promise you, baby, I promise.” The two sported matching black eyes. She kissed him tenderly, then gently massaged the whole area of impact with an ice pack, kissed him again. She pulled her face away to keep from crying, and sat up straight on the bed. “You’re staying home from school tomorrow; I’m going to . . . I’ve *got* to . . . talk to somebody.” She smoothed the boy’s hair. “He’s asleep now. You go to sleep too, Robert.”

But he couldn’t sleep, not after the day’s events. Once she was gone he found his good eye tracing shadows on the ceiling. The night was pleasantly cool. There was a breath of autumn through the open window, and a peculiar, yet vaguely familiar, sound in the garden. Robert crept to the window and leaned over the sill. The avocado’s branches were right in his face, but after a minute he could see something large flopping about in the flower bed. A sickening whining wound up and passed.

Terror ran down his spine like freezing water, crimping his neck, locking his hands. The boy genuflected so he could just peer over the sill. Now the wretched animal was obvious, rolling on its broken back, kicking its forepaws. For one horrifying moment it stopped, its battered head half-in, half-out of shadow, and an ice-cold eye returned his stare.

Robert instinctively yanked the curtains together and dropped to his knees. The thrashing picked up in the flower bed, punctuated by hisses and snarls of agony. The boy ran on all fours to the door, tore it open, and scrambled out into the hall.

“All right,” Howard sighed. “The doors are locked and the windows closed. Nothin’ can get in or out of this house, not without getting past me. You hear?” He leaned this way and that on the bed, fighting for balance, but his center of gravity inevitably made him weigh on his son, who could only scrunch deeper into the mattress. “So I don’t wanna hear any more crap about some goddamned imagined dog, either from you or from—” and he spat the word “—*that* woman.” Howard attempted to scoop up the boy, almost sliding off

the bed in the process. “She ain’t my wife no more, hear? She’s just your fucking mother.” He crushed Robert’s face in his chest: stinking BO, drunk-breath, filthy crotch-smelling slob.

Dad.

“I’m sorry I hit you, boy, I really am. And I’m gonna make it up to you.” Howard began to weep softly—selfish tears as cheap as his word. “Whatever you want.” He rocked side to side. “Whatever you need.” A hideous smile half-lit his face, and at that moment Robert didn’t know which was worse: the suffocating breath or the image his father now presented:

“It’ll just be me and you from now on, boy. No more of that bitch, I promise. Me and you’ll take up on our own somewheres; oh, don’t you just know she’ll get the house. It’s what she’s been after all the while.” He sniffed back the tears. “I don’t care if we have to live in a tent in the goddamned woods, I don’t care if we have to live in the fucking car. Just me and you, boy. Just me and you for ever and ever.” He kissed his son stickily and repeatedly. “I’ll never let you out of my sight, Robert. I promise you, boy. *Never!*” He pulled himself away and wobbled to his feet. “As God is my witness, son, I’ll never let you go.” He snuffled up the snot and tears and staggered to the door. “Now go to fucking sleep.”

After that he dreamed. He dreamt of exploring strange places, with no home to return to, no family to endure. In this private world he picked through abandoned houses and climbed jetties, free as a boy can be. But, somewhere in there, an odd feature of dreams took a hazy but relentless hold—he felt, he *knew* that he had a companion, a faithful dog sharing his adventures just at his heels. But this dog wasn’t sniffing and cavorting; it was dragging itself room to room and rock to rock. Furthermore, it proved unshakable; worse, far worse, it was impossible to turn and confront it—this the dream would never allow. Now it had him by the ankles; a terrifying living anchor, dragging him down, making awful little gasps and yelps of growing intensity, painful to hear and horrible to anticipate, until they took on a frenzied and hounding feel, and the dream descended into a silently screaming, slow-motion nightmare.

Robert woke absolutely rigid. Every sense told him to not make a move or sound. The nightmare’s source was right at the foot of his bed, resting between his ankles. Panting whimpers caused the mattress to tremble; he felt the nails of one paw digging into his calf.

He squeezed his eyes shut tight, as though to slip back into the false security of complete darkness. The whimpering was torn by a terrible, abbreviated cry, followed by more panting. Robert opened his eyes to find the dog staring at him fixedly, its mangled body frightfully bent and its muzzle a mess of dried blood.

“Yogi,” he whispered, his mouth dry. “No, boy, no. You go away, Yogi. Go away.”

The dog whined from its bowels. It began to hyperventilate, and, still staring as though mesmerized, commenced pulling itself forward inch by inch, its nails catching in the boy’s thighs. When Robert couldn’t take it any longer he cried out, and in seconds there was an answering cry from his mother. The door burst open. Seeing the dog upon her son, June screamed for all she was worth. Yogi turned and snarled.

Howard, hard-drunk on the front room couch, yelled groggily, “What the fuck?” and came lurching down the hall. When he entered the room the dog went right for his throat, but, unable to coordinate movements, was easily beaten back. June went running to dial 9-1-1, Howard went reeling down the hall. He kicked open a wide cabinet and tore out a shotgun and shells, still so drunk that, upon loading, he put one shell through a window and another through the roof.

Robert reached under his little desk and pulled out a hard rubber door wedge, a hush-hush gift from his mother for just such an emergency. He kicked it into place, sobbing all the while, and bundled up Yogi in his arms. The dog, as big and heavy as the boy, gnashed wildly as it was half-carried, half-dragged to the window.

Another shotgun blast rang in the hall, just outside. With his mother’s screams still muffled by the door, Robert forced up his window, lifted Yogi onto the sill, and climbed out onto the shingles.

He wept as he fought the convulsing dog onto a main limb. This was his old escape route; he knew every hold and knothole, but the awkward load of the dog, his great fear and hurry, and the godawful kicking-in of his bedroom door caused him to miss a beat and grasp only air. Robert plunged the twenty feet to earth and cement all wrapped up in Yogi.

The shock of impact was a heartbeat’s flam: butt and shoulders, followed by an accent to the skull. After that he felt nothing. A minute later he was roused by a blast and bellowing. He looked up to see Howard hanging half-out the window, waving the shotgun with his free hand. The boy struggled to his feet. Bent like an arthritic old man, he limped to the avocado, seized the handle of his

little red wagon, and dragged it over to Yogi. He had to turn it on its side, and it required an astounding effort to push in the howling dog, and to lever the wagon back upright. Sobbing with the exertion, Robert hobbled through the yard and out the back gate, the bouncing dog yelping pathetically at each bump and crash.

They swerved and jerked down the alley, a quirky compound shadow surrounded by scrambling homeowners and running pedestrians, everybody jacked out of whack by the shriek of sirens, the whipping lights, and the memory of Howard's shotgun blasts. Robert had no inkling of what or why; he was following instincts, hauling his snarling and howling cargo back to its source. He wept like a baby as he shoved the wagon behind the cans and tenderly laid page after page of yellowing newspaper on the panting animal.

From somewhere up the alley came the sound of Howard staggering along, cursing the planet's every aspect, continually smacking his shotgun's butt on a caving pine fence.

The smacking stopped; Howard had knelt and was now inspecting the wagon's tracks. Robert clamped a hand over Yogi's thrashing muzzle as the footfalls approached.

Howard grunted. His flashlight's beam swung erratically, at last falling on his son and the wagon. The old man's eyes gleamed. He grinned and held the flashlight against his chest with the lens pointing up, so that his face was lit like some kind of psychotic jack o'lantern.

"Out of the way, dummy! I'm putting that ugly motherfucker to sleep." Howard seized his son by the collar and yanked. There was a squeal beneath them—with a lurch and snarl the dog sprang half-out of the wagon and clamped his jaws around the old man's throat. Howard screamed and flailed furiously, dragging the dog and boy into a heads-butting embrace.

A siren's wail approached at one end of the alley, headlights tore in from the other. A spotlight played over the scene and an officer raced in even as a hubbub of neighbors blew down the walk.

Unwilling to fire into the tangle, the officer first clubbed Yogi with his baton, then used Howard's shotgun to repeatedly bludgeon the skull, but the dog would not release its death grip. Robert, rocked with each blow, found his face shoved into Yogi's muzzle and his father's face until all three were eye-to-eye. Blood spewed from Howard's wracked mouth and nostrils, his expression grew impossibly contorted, and he gagged one final time. The crashing shotgun became a flagging piston, a throbbing spike, a cotton-soft

Yogi

jackhammer. And Yogi's eye burned into Robert's, grew opaque to the tungsten and halogen spears, and was lost like a wraith in the night.

ScanElite

“Yeah, yeah, Ernie, I got a good one here. Says he spent twenty years on the damn thing; can you believe it!” The Beamer leaned back, receiver locked in shoulder and chin, hands free to rattle the keyboard. “Calls it *Search And Rescue*, and claims it’s mystery, adventure, and psychological suspense all rolled up into one beautifully polished package. No, I’m not kidding. Nine-freaking-hundred and seventy-two pages, man! I’ve got it right here. It’s on a floppy, straight off his hard drive. And get this, get this, get this . . . the guy—are you listening, Ernie? Yeah, well, he inserts a copyright symbol, right under his name! Uh-oh, it’s Superman! Boy, when I seen that I just knew he was serious . . . sure, sure . . . I copied the whole thing straight onto our drive. So what do you think? I’m hearing you, Ernie. ScanElite’s just the ticket for this fish. How’s about Norway? They love ‘psychological suspense.’ *What* better market? Spain? Espanol’s almost too easy. Whatever. Sure I’ve got the code.”

The Beamer rocked side to side in his chair. It was a lovely gray L.A. day; even the graffiti appeared to sparkle in the mist. He leaned over, squished and smeared a spider on the pane. “Then give me one he’ll appreciate, Ernie. That’s almost a thousand pages, for Christ’s sake. Ten-four; here it comes now.” The Beamer adjusted the

zoom on his screen. “Let’s see. The William Morass Literary Agency, Agency To The Stars appreciates your contacting us . . . blah blah blah . . . overwhelming number of submissions . . . impossible to judge every manuscript on an individual basis . . . considers your work of the highest quality—good, good; I like that part . . . hopes you will continue to submit your manuscripts on a regular basis—you got that right—and, of course, will never accept a cent in payment for any service or subjective evaluation. Et-freaking-*cetera*. This one’s a goer, Ernie. Right away. I’ll get back to you on it. How’d that casting call go? No! She did it how many times? Okay, okay, my lips are sealed. Too bad hers weren’t. Just joshing you, big fella! All right; I’ve gotta get on this Search And Rescue guy anyway. Ciao, baby.”

The Beamer replaced the receiver and bent to his work. *Dear Author*, he typed. He copied and pasted the rejection, and under this typed *The Very Best Of Luck, W. Morass, William Morass Literary Agency, Agency To The Stars*. The Beamer then opened the ScanElite program on his drive, peeking round the room as he typed in the pass: an old literary agent habit; he was the building’s sole occupant. The screen showed symmetric halves. The Beamer loaded Search And Rescue. The text appeared running down the left side. Above this he typed *English*, and above the opposing column *Spanish*. The Beamer hit Connect, and the right-hand side immediately translated Search And Rescue. The Beamer now hit Indigenous.

The beauty of ScanElite is that it doesn’t just translate verbatim. It’s loaded with idiomatic guides, thesauri, map features, governmental agencies, histories, cuisines . . . when the Beamer hit Indigenous the program introduced samples of locales similar to those in Search And Rescue, altered dishes to those popular in contemporary Spain, overlaid rural maps matching the square mileage of entered sites while adjusting street names accordingly, altered weather patterns, host affiliations, slang phrases . . . the Beamer shook his head admiringly. Search And Rescue was now a novel written by a Spaniard, in a mode and tense only a Spaniard could appreciate. While the original author continued to beat his head on agency doors, his novel would be on the imports carousel, finding its way to airports, gift shops, and candy stores before finding its way to permanent obscurity. By that time a hundred others would be hard on its heels. The Beamer hit Send and wagged his head once more. Technology is a beautiful thing.

Instantly an email icon appeared on his screen. The Beamer looked around the room again. If Ernie'd changed his mind it was too late now. He opened the message and squinted thoughtfully.

Please take heed. The ScanElite program has a bug that can be traced to senders and associates. I have developed a con-program that will not only disable electronic eavesdroppers, but will enable users to increase profits exponentially by automatically cross-referencing to desaturated global links. This message is new, and if you are reading it now you are the first to view. If you do not respond, the message will migrate to every literary agent in the book. Beat the feeding frenzy. I am willing to take you on as an equal partner, no questions asked. Click on the link below. Now.

The Beamer's forefinger was an epee. The link opened on a phone number; very near, same area code, same prefix. He picked up the receiver and dialed, his eyes glued to the screen.

"Go ahead."

"I got your message," the Beamer whispered, "and I must say I'm impressed with your enthusiasm. However, the William Morass Literary Agency, Agency To The Stars is a perfectly upright organization, and we do not engage in practices that are not one hundred percent aboveboard." He licked his lips. "And, of course, we never accept a cent in payment for any service or subjective evaluation."

"You got to the phone fast enough. Come now, Mr. Morass, we're both men of the world, or we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"Of course, of course. But you weren't all that generous with the details in your message."

"We obviously can't discuss business over the phone. You're familiar with Chez le Encountre?"

"Sure, I lunch there all the time. You're pretty close by?"

"On the patio. I can't sit here forever without looking suspicious. It's starting to rain."

"I'm on my way. I'll tell my secretary to send the staff home early." The Beamer gently replaced the receiver, grabbed an umbrella, and sprinted for the door. It was starting to pour. The *Chez* waited only three blocks down. He couldn't afford to fire up the Ol' Lexer and make a stately showing; time was running against him. The Beamer hopped puddles until he saw the familiar wrought iron rail. He turned up his collar, righted the umbrella, and paced the slurping cement steps with decorum.

At a storefront table, under an anodized steel umbrella, hunched a raincoated man, gloved hands folded on the glass. The Beamer couldn't tell anything about him, other than that he was thin and Caucasian, due to the coat's floppy drawn hood. The Beamer shook rain off his umbrella as he took the facing seat.

"Pardon me, sir. I believe we have an appointment here."

The stranger didn't raise his head. "I prefer to keep my identity secret, at least for the time being. The business we are about to discuss, you understand, carries certain extralegal ramifications."

"Certainly, certainly." The Beamer scooted forward; out of the rain, out of the security cameras, and intuitively lowered his voice. "You mentioned something over the phone about a collaboration. Of sorts—you weren't definite either way. I'd like to hear more."

"SEG: the ScanElite Guard. I'm the inventor. I'm also a handyman, investor, programmer—I've a long and quilted history. At one point I ran a very successful literary agency, making good money on editing services, promo packages, quickie covers, fonts and letterheads, bylines and boondoggles."

The Beamer fidgeted defensively. "We got those too."

"The Guard simply functions as the next-generation Elite. It not only outperforms ScanElite, it seeks out sources incidentally encrypted by what I call misnomers. In other words, there are literally hundreds of thousands of potential sucke—clients—open to Internet voyeurism . . . but only when a sophisticated program culls incidentals. Okay? Every author wannabe isn't wooing Herman or Literary Marketplace; the genuine novices are purchasing learner programs, taking classes over the Internet, peeking in on conventions . . . these are the ones we go after; the ones who've yet to feel the sting. SEG can smoke 'em out."

"Brilliant! But where do I come in?"

"Fifty-fifty. I've burned all my bridges. You've got the connects, the name, the network, the clientele. We do this together. If it busts, we slip out of the light and swear we've never met. If it flies, and I know it will, we buy an island and sell watered-down Margaritas to the tourist rubes."

The Beamer's initial trepidation was now fully replaced by awe. "Mister, you are one savvy customer." He offered his hand.

"I'm using my cell phone." The stranger faced it toward the Beamer. "That, Mr. Morass, is the power of the Internet. A man can send and receive messages electronically, anywhere over the globe. He can send text and graphics as attachments; even whole manu-

scripts. A smart man can even encrypt those messages with tracers; microscopic munchers that will tell him, instantly, if his stuff goes anywhere it's not supposed to go. Not only that, his encryption can run on a floppy and thereby infect another's hard drive, exporting a trace signal the original sender can monitor. And not just at home, Mr. Morass; this kind of activity can also be transmitted to and from a properly outfitted cell phone."

"No kidding," the Beamer mumbled. "And I need to know all that to sell Margaritas?"

"Not everything. But if a signal should get lost, somehow, we might have to perform a search and rescue operation before the authorities catch on."

"Huh. You think we could be traced over the Internet?"

"Not readily. There's just too much traffic. Any kind of search and rescue would leave one of us hanging, and I'd sure hate to be that guy."

"You don't say." The Beamer backed his seat a foot or two. "I can't say I feel all that comfortable with the operation as you lay it out. Maybe there's still some bugs."

"No problem. We just do a search and rescue and stomp the little creeps before they run."

"Look, I gotta go," the Beamer said. "Lit. Convention; all the biggies . . . Harris . . . Fine . . . Herman . . . Gooder Books . . . Agents R Us . . . Flybi Nite's . . . Auther's Junkchun. Maybe we'll pick up this little talk some other time."

"You're not going anywhere."

The Beamer rose. "I don't think I have to take that kind of behavior, Mister. I have friends in this town."

"I'm sure you do." The stranger rose also.

"What's your problem, buddy?" The Beamer moved off, looking over his shoulder as he walked. The stranger snapped shut his cell phone and stepped off in pursuit.

"Jesus!" There was no one around; the rain was coming down too hard. The Beamer ducked between shops, saw the figure picking up pace. The Beamer raced awkwardly down the dreary aisles between stores, twice nearly falling in puddles, hearing the splashes coming on hard to his rear. He stretched out flat behind a trestled planter, half-submerged, and listened as the splashes approached, paused a few feet away, and slowly moved along. He was shivering like a dog as he snuck around the building. His mind was halting, his pulse stumbling. The Beamer pasted himself in a haberdasher's door-

well, wiped the rain from his face. Gradually he grew aware of another presence. That second party, not at all mysterious, morphed by degrees from an amber lamp-generated shadow; looming brick by brick on a facing wall, the frame and demeanor fully anticipated, the coat and hood, even in the transparent, absolutely unmistakable. The hand was rising with deadly certainty; slowly, slowly, the swelling shadow seeming to bear down until it all but grazed the Beamer's cringing own. The ballooning shape topped the wall and the Beamer's heart stopped. Funny thing about nature: even at the very jaws of death, the cornered animal may refuse to turn and face its stalker—that long-suppressed image can be so mortifying as to dwarf the moment itself. Yet just as the horror was upon him, the Beamer managed to catch his breath and whirl.

It was a gummy old bum in a trench coat, bonnet, and shades, whacked out on speed and booze and God knows what. He thrust that determining hand in the Beamer's trembling face. "Take the blue pill and the story ends. You wake in your bed and be—"

"Christ!" The Beamer rammed him aside. "I'm a literary agent!" He found himself stumbling in circles; well as he knew the mall, his self-preservation instinct had produced a profound sense of disorientation. He slunk shop to shop for perhaps fifteen minutes, retracing his steps half a dozen times before passing headlights gave him a fix.

The Beamer scrambled slipping and sliding on the slick cement, barking his shins on cast iron table legs, breaking his nails on the shops' gray brick walls. The street was deserted, the rain pounding. He stumbled off the curb and almost lost it in the street; but a streamlined, medium-sized moving truckvan was barreling his way. Very high-tech, ultramodern; an imported job, eggshell-white, super-smooth lines. Wipers accelerated, high beams flashed twice. The truck stopped six feet shy, on hydro-grooved tires, barely having to swerve. The Beamer staggered up to the passenger side and the window hissed a crack. He clung to the pane's lip, his breath fogging the glass.

"Help me out, buddy! Be a pal! There's some nut chasing me down, man, and I think he's trying to kill me."

It was impossible to make out features in the dark cab. The voice was gravel and phlegm. "Well then, call a cop! Jesus, man, *I* coulda killed you! You oughta have more sense than to jump out in front of a moving truck."

"I'm desperate, friend. Really! I'll make it good to you. Promise. But for Christ's sake, let me in!"

The click of an electrically triggered catch. The window hissed back up. The Beamer yanked the door and squeezed inside. "Bless you, friend." He slammed the door. "Let's get the hell out of here!" The truck moved off.

The Beamer ran a sleeve over the glass. "Anywhere you're going. Just get me away from that kook." He leaned back, gulping the A/C. "Oh, mama." The Beamer rolled his head. "You're a life saver. I mean that literally, and I'm a literary agent." He extended a hand. "William Morass, Agent To The Stars."

"I'm using the gearshift."

"Right, right. You just go ahead and do the driving; we're both cool here." The Beamer looked the cab over appreciatively. "This is some vehicle, cousin. The works. What you got in the back?"

"Just stuff. Go ahead and take a gander. Door's unlocked. Lift the latch and give her a shove."

"Yeah." The Beamer pushed the door wide. Heavy as it was, it slid soundlessly and almost without effort. The driver flicked a dash switch and the rear was brilliantly illuminated.

"Wow!" The Beamer's eyes were alive. "It's like a hospital back there! Sink, tools; everything stainless steel. And what's that big goober you got hanging in the rear? Looks like a meat hook." The Beamer grinned at the driver. "What are you, friend? Some kind of a mobile butcher?"

The door latches locked with resounding clicks. "Something like that."

This part is kind of difficult to describe for readers who may be, understandably, more sensitive to the gut, rather than the psychological, accounts of a written narrative—but it wasn't the actual *pain* of the trapezius-ripping hook that brought the Beamer screaming into consciousness. It was the *horror*. The horror of *knowing* what his flickering subconscious had been *insisting* was all a dream.

The driver stood just before him, dressed head to toe for surgery; cap, mask, sterile gloves . . . the truck wasn't moving, and only the immediate area was lit, lending the place a morbid, suffocating mien.

“Sorry about the medical getup, but I’ve a feeling things are about to get a tad on the messy side.” The Beamer screamed some more. “Please feel free to articulate most vociferously. While you were sawing logs we were on our way to a remote part of town. Your complaints would only prove music to the ghetto’s ears, and anyway the walls of this truck are completely soundproof.”

“Please, friend,” the Beamer gurgled. “All a mistake. We don’t gotta do this.”

“I see. You just *accidentally* took my life’s work, my heart and soul, and zipped it off to Barcelona for a few quick bucks. You raped my muse, asshole. But maybe you’re right. Maybe she was ‘just asking for it’.”

The Beamer whipped his head side to side with outrage, sweat and foam glancing in the light. “I’m a literary agent, for God’s sake! We do this all day long. Countless submissions. You’re special, is that it? *Christ!*” Comprehension dawned in his working iris. “You’ll get your damned money, okay? All profits are digitally tabbed through Paymaster!” A shudder of hope. “Reach in my left pocket, friend. Grab my cell and let me make a call. We’ll get cash in your hand pronto, and I’ll make sure to slip in something nice on the side for your trouble.”

“Gee, I’m sorry, but your phone’s been confiscated, along with your I.D., keys, and address book. Wink-wink, Mr. Morass. I think you understand: we’re both men of the world.”

“Keep ’em! Take my Lexus and my credit cards. They’re yours, guy! Just let me go!”

The stranger nodded wistfully. He folded his hands at the waist and raised his eyes in the shadows. “Just before you so abruptly encountered slumber, you voiced a curiosity as to the particulars of this truck’s cargo bay modifications. Now, I’ve always admired men of an analytical bent, so it’s with some pride I hereupon share our most interesting arena.” He disengaged a rolling office chair from a wall clamp and moved it directly before his squirming guest, leaned pensively against the sculpted leather back, and, with his free hand, tenderly removed from an arm fixture a rectangular steel contraption. It was about the size of a videocassette. “This is a remote control unit.” He got comfortable in the chair. “It instigates, and regulates, the various equipment and paraphernalia about us.”

The flick of a switch, and scores of colored lights popped out of the darkness like the eyes of ever-patient predators. The Beamer

had never witnessed an environment so patched and daisy-chained anywhere outside of Metro-Oscar-Mayer Studios.

“This little lever,” and the speaker tilted his device for inspection’s sake, “controls the vertical inclination of your pointy spooning friend. It can be nudged up” —the Beamer shrieked as the hook raised his heels— “and just as gently lowered.” His soles returned to the floor. The Beamer’s host slipped on a pair of noise-canceling headphones and bent over his remote control. “Up. And down. Up. And down. Up and down and up and down and up—”

“Son,” frowned the Vice Principal, “we’ve been over and over these occupational evaluations, and I’m frankly stumped. According to the State’s best experts, you have the morals of a child molester, the spiritual leanings of a Worm occultist, the ethics of a special education bully, and the IQ of a kumquat picked out of season. And, according to your mother here, you show zero familial aptitude and nil ambition.” He thumbed the pages irritably. “Based on everything we have to go by, the only careers open to you are auto mechanic, Tupperware hostess, literary agent, gay porno actor, and petting zoo rodeo clown.”

“He ain’t got no carwork sperience,” Ma chimed in, “he don’t look good in a skirt, he’s pony-shy, can’t never get it up less he diddles first, and never could read or write worth a damn.”

The VP signed the top page with a flourish. “That settles it then.”

Oh, Jesus: a donkey had him cornholed and a lamprey had him by the weenie. Worse, worse; it was way worse. The lamprey was going all the way, its electric lips a red-hot vise round his beebies. And the darned donkey—well, he just didn’t know when to quit. The Beamer flapped and foamed with the agony and ecstasy, and now Ma had him by the spine, had smashed her paw right through the skin to work him like a puppet. Wake up. She had him jangling this way and that, had him hopping and popping and peeing in time. Wake up. He was on fire; his eyes were coals, his tickle-tank a furnace, his dinky dork a fat purple poker.

WAKE UP!

Never rouse a sleeper in REM. Consciousness is an ungraspable balloon, sensation merely novocaine’s initial blush. But the

Beamer did have real sensation, and very focused at that. Eyes, back, ballsack, and butthole: that just-dreamt fire would not abate. Or is consciousness really an extension of dreaming, or the other way around . . . his eyelids burned, but not only from waking. With a tearing of tenderest flesh, the Beamer hit reality screaming.

“Remain perfectly still.” The voice was a therapist’s monotone. “Struggling only makes it worse.” The Beamer watched his host through a crimson veil. “The pain at your eyes is produced by a pair of fish hooks, one inserted in each upper lid. These hooks, attached to fishing line, are also controlled vertically by the remote unit. Observe.” The Beamer squealed and shrieked like a Campfire Girl. “This way I am assured of your continued attention. We have much to discuss.” He depressed a lever and the hooks’ tension diminished. “Fishing line is also very useful anywhere finesse is required. For example, line is securely wound about your scrotum, just where it meets the abdomen. That line is made taut by a ring affixed between your feet, and this arrangement produces a *squeezing*, rather than a tearing, effect.” He wagged his head. “I do so want to apologize for taking liberties with your apparel, but there was no other way to get you all prim and proper. And you were very messy. Plus, I’m absolutely certain you’re aware of a profound sense of rectal invasion. This can be attributed to an upright steel rod, bolted to the floor and terminating at waist-level, resting squarely in the most-becoming recesses of your dorsal region. The cap on this projection contains cross-terminals for producing mild electrical stimulation. Again, observe.”

The Beamer almost hit the truck’s roof with the pain. All that stopped him was a tightening line round his nethers. Halfway to a eunuch, he trembled and danced against opposing forces.

“Anything, man! I’ll do anything! Let me go! What do you want? Name it! Oh please let me down!”

“In the mood for a chat, are we? Well, why don’t we start with a heartfelt discussion on ethics? I’ll go first. Let me present you with a scenario. In this example, a decent, creative man has labored a decade to produce a work of real literature, only to be ambushed by one of those marketing maggots known as literary agents. Having dealt with their caliber before, he encrypts data which makes his work traceable, records copies with the Library Of Congress, and organizes a Watch group databank. But, as a genuinely creative and therefore essentially virtuous individual, he finds himself utterly incapable of dealing with abject venality, at least not in a manner our spoonfed

society would term rational behavior. He realizes the ponderous and indifferent legal course is no recourse: no course at all—there is no justice for a victim; the very existence of victimhood obviates, if not downright negates, the very notion of justice. Mutual exclusivity aside, this hypothetical individual decides to take matters into his own hands. To wit: vengeance and heroism are synonymous. As a literary agent you are surely aware of this. For a hero to exist at all, it is imperative the villain get his just deserts. Your rebuttal?”

“God I’ll do anything! I agree! You’re right and I’m wrong! I’m sorry! I’m sorry, sorry, sorry!”

“Wrong answer.” Levers were moved like fades on an equalizer. The Beamer, butt up and balls down, became an electric marionette screaming bloody murder. The levers were returned to zero. “Why did you do this to me? How could you do this to a man’s work?”

“I’m a freaking literary agent, I told you! It’s what we do! Mouths to feed, bills to pay! Mommy! Let me go, let me go!”

“How could you do this to me!”

“Oh, God! Oh God, oh God oh God! I’m dying here. My confession! Forgive me! I do take the holy Jesus into my chest place. I repent, I tell ya, I repent!”

“Talk to me!”

“Mama Mary! Mother Jesus! Oh let me into your heavenly halo . . . I . . . Kee-rist! I’m spewing here, God. He’s making me bleed like Jesus all over—take me up to your cloud home, O savior me. Mommy, I’m dying, dying, dying . . . forgive me if I done any sins but we all done some, Ma, dear Jesus God, let me go, let me down, oh mama I’m sorry, so help me God, help me Jesus, help me mommy, oh Mary Martin, oh Luther and John, oh Moses, Manny, Moe, and Jack, I confess; all of it, I’m sorry, man, I’m sorrysorrysorry, pass the hat and crucify the choir, oh God it hurts, it hurts but I love you Jesus, the kids, the little woman, all of ya, the Beamer done his best, fellas, and he never squealed a once, oh Jesus, God, Mary, Christjesus, mama-mercy, oh please oh please oh pleaseohpleaseohplease . . .”

“Enough already!” The Beamer’s host killed the remote’s master switch and the whole apparatus collapsed. The Beamer, squealing, hopped free of his anal pal. The smocked man reached to the stainless counter and brought back a pair of shears. While the Beamer slouched weeping, he carefully snipped the fishing line, high and low, and reached around to gently disengage the meat hook.

In one move the Beamer was on him. He grabbed the throat, tore the shears from the hand, went absolutely ape on the man, shrieking and shouting, cussing and cutting, slicing and hacking and chopping and stabbing until there was only a bloody pile. The Beamer tore through the man's clothes. Wallet, pen and pad, Juicy Fruit, penlight, miscellaneous papers . . . but no car keys. The Beamer tore out the cash, unlatched the door, tumbled up front. No keys in the ignition. Frantic, not thinking, he leaped naked out the passenger side and ran off into the rain.

It was the black ghetto, all right. He recognized it from last year's Morass-sponsored Irish Limerick Competition. The money stuck out of his fist like a swollen green thumb. The Beamer bent at the waist and inserted it in the one place no sane man would visit. He then ran flapping up the street until he saw a long black limousine easing out of a tenement's drive. The Beamer puffed on with a passion, and when the limo attempted to swerve he deliberately leaped in its path. The car stopped with a squeal and splatter. The Beamer stumbled round to the rear window. The pane hissed down a crack. Inside was an immaculately-dressed black man, looking more amazed than frightened.

"Lord, son! What happened to you!"

"Long story," the Beamer panted. "Help me out, friend. Drive me somewhere, anywhere. I can pay you. Cash." He proffered his backside, took a deep breath and pushed.

"That's all right! We can settle later. Who did this to you?"

"Crazy guy. Didn't like me selling his story."

"No! So you're telling me he actually *physically accosted* you?"

"Look at me!"

A beetling of brows. "We just may be talking lawsuit here. Do you have any inside friends? And where is this individual? I would like to interview him."

The naked man's eyes slunk to the asphalt. "Oh . . . around. You know, I been thinking maybe I *could* use some legal help."

The rider drummed his nails on the glass. "I'm going to be perfectly frank with you here, son. You impress me as a man with the wit and wisdom of a salamander, the scruples of a penitentiary snitch, and the moral restraint of a hooker during shore leave. You wouldn't, by any chance, have ever worked in a petting zoo?"

"Are you kidding? I'm a literary agent!"

“Saints!” The latch was released and the door swung open. The dark figure extended a sticky hand. “Johnny Cockrun, Defense Attorney To The Stars.”

Elaine

There were worms in her mug.

Tiny white maggoty swimmers that peeked through the steam before diving back in her brew. Elaine blew them away and sipped without savor, more out of habit than desire. Her morose brown eye, rippling on the coffee's face, stared back, steamed over, dissolved.

A trained observer would note Elaine performed this ritual, as a regular break from her street-watching, approximately once every ninety seconds. To an untrained observer, she would appear intent and impatient, perhaps waiting on a tardy acquaintance.

That untrained observer now looked down at his own eggs and coffee, feeling Elaine lift her eyes.

It was one of those quirky events falling awkwardly into the norm; a square moment in a round day, a sentimental misstep in a routine dance of nods and evasions.

The elderly man looked back up. Their eyes met and held. It wasn't kismet; he found nothing attractive in the frumpish and pasty, rotund little woman with the bland expression. And Elaine, for her part, was not drawn to the spindly gray gentleman.

They both smiled.

Sun didn't break through clouds, or anything like that. It was a snapshot, dingy with caffeine, phlegm, and emotional disuse.

They looked back down.

Elaine caught herself peeking. The elderly man's eyes worked their way back up.

They smiled again, this time out of good old-fashioned nervousness.

Now it was more than uncomfortable. Though in adjacent booths, the two were only six feet apart, and situated dead-on: Crazy Dinah's All-Day Diner featured notoriously narrow tabletops, forcing facing customers to sit diagonally with their personal plates and silver.

The old man's voice was like cellophane. "Forgive me." His fluttering hands were lame pigeons, desperately side-stepping his mug, silver, and plate. "I didn't mean to make you nervous."

"That's okay," Elaine mumbled.

The gentleman coughed delicately. "Well, I guess I'm what you'd call a people person." His eyes searched the sidewalk. "I couldn't help noticing how you enjoy staring out this big old window." He smiled crookedly. "I guess that makes us both people people."

Elaine studied her coffee mug. "People—" she felt herself blushing, "people are . . . good."

The man, still smiling awkwardly, stuck his hand across the table. Long as his arms were, it was a gap too deep. He swung around to his table's facing bench, leaned over the back and tried again. "I'm Joe. Or Joseph, actually. Joseph Carten."

Elaine blushed until it burned. "Elaine Bushnelkopf." She shook hands timidly, immediately stuffing the unpracticed paw back in her lap.

He cocked an eyebrow. "Unusual last name, Lainey."

"From . . . from the Pennsylvania Bushnelkopfs. The family was in fertilizers."

"Can never get enough fertilizer. Umm . . . the Cartens, far as I know, were never into anything." He shrugged. "My dad was a serviceman. Air Force. He went down in Iwo."

"Oh!" Elaine blurted. "I'm just *so* sorry."

"Don't be. I never actually met the guy. No bridges built, no bridges burned."

"Then your mom must have been, well, very strong. Very dedicated."

He smiled engagingly. "That's what they say on the boulevard." That crooked old grin collapsed at her look of confusion. "I'm

just kidding, Elaine. Just being, well, you know, sarcastic about the whole family thing.”

“People shouldn’t talk about their parents that way,” Elaine muttered. She looked up quickly. “Not *you*, Joseph. I don’t mean to be critical.”

“Joe,” he said, drumming his palms on the seat’s greasy upholstery. “Look, I’m sorry, Elaine. You must have had super parents. Anyway, you’re probably right. I should know enough to keep my big mouth shut.” His eyes lit fractionally. “I’ve got to run, Lainey. It’s been great jawing with you. Maybe we’ll slam into each other again.”

“I’d . . .” Elaine managed, “I’d like that.”

“Ciao.” Joe grinned and creaked to his feet. He dropped a five on his tab, smiled back at her, and whistled on out the door.

The worms resurfaced.

“So you scared off another one?”

Elaine didn’t have to look up. Cassie was one of those unfriendly friends, functioning as both conscience and bully at the worst of times. Not that the worst of times were all that much worse than the best of times, and not that knowing someone execrable was a hell of a lot worse than knowing no one at all.

“He was in a hurry,” Elaine breezed. “An important man.”

Cassie laughed as she swept up Joseph’s untouched plates, scraping his five off the table as though daubing a smear. “In a hurry? The only thing that’d make that old guy jump is a defibrillator.” Her eyes gleamed. “But I do believe he got it up for you, honey.” She ticked a forefinger side to side. “Don’t tell anybody, but I think little Lainey’s got a fella.”

“Stop it.”

“Seriously, sweetheart. While you were staring out the window ol’ Cassie was on the watch, as always. I think Mr. Hurry’s got googly eyes.”

“He was just being nice.”

“Don’t be so full of yourself. A girl has to take what she can in this world. And I like ‘nice’.” Facing Elaine, Cassie leaned halfway across the table, using her upper arms to meaningfully squeeze forth her very ample breasts. “If you think you can do better than these, sugar, then you just don’t know men.”

Elaine’s eyes burned into her brew. The worms circled concentrically in response, making for the rim. Elaine blew so hard her

coffee sprayed the tabletop. “Joseph’s not like that. He’s a gentleman.”

Cassie cupped Elaine’s free hand in hers. “Give me a break, Lainey. All men, God bless ’em, are ‘like that’.”

“No,” Elaine whispered into her cup. “Not Joseph. Not Joe.”

Elaine brooded all the way home. How could she have been so stupid. Joseph was the first man she’d spoken to, on anything remotely resembling an intimate level in . . . in . . . how *could* she have offended him like that. “Googly eyes.” Absurd or not, the idea grew on her as she waddled across the courtyard to her tiny apartment. Like most of the building’s disability recipients, Elaine’s inability to pursue meaningful employment came from hormonally-triggered chronic despondency. But, unlike the rest of the girls, she was unable to find comfort in medication or company. Elaine was a drifting, stale dreamer, unwilling to focus on anything real.

She prepared her usual bath; lukewarm and not too full, tepid like everything else in her life. But for once she was prey to a forgotten impulse: Elaine exhumed her makeup kit and got liberal with the lipstick and liner. She added a capful of rose to the bath.

The water took her as always, yet with an extra caress. Elaine soaped herself slowly with her left hand while her right slid over a breast and down her tummy. Two fingers made way for the third. But it wasn’t wrong this time; it couldn’t have been more right—that was Joseph down there, that was Joe. And Elaine’s depression was lifting like fog.

That was Joey.

She wasn’t exactly waiting for him, not in the literal sense. He’d never show, not after she’d embarrassed them both. But Elaine was on her fourth cup, and the sidewalk had lost all its appeal. She’d dolled herself up considerably. An ex-beautician neighbor took care of the hair and manicure, another loaned her a somewhat flattering dress. Elaine’s mood shift was all over the building; in a heartbeat the secret was out, and her gentleman admirer the subject of endless gossip and guesswork. Elaine stank of Tabu from five feet away. In her purse was a neatly folded love poem, sealed with a kiss; part heartfelt rain and daybreak, part saccharine Hallmark cliché. Never had she been so nervous; it took the whole building to talk her into

this. Elaine wanted to die. Or to live. It didn't matter. If he laughed, if he turned away, if he gave her one funny look—it didn't matter; she'd die. This was it, and she knew it. Her one and only chance for a man. For happiness, for comfort, for company. For all those things life had denied her, and granted everybody else in spades.

She carefully wiped the lipstick off her mug's porcelain rim. And again. Elaine sobbed and caught herself. She must look a mess. She'd gnawed away half her nail polish, the dress was bunching in all the wrong places, and tears and mascara don't mix. She couldn't breathe. And now she was hyperventilating. Hard to swallow. She took a sip and sobbed again.

The door chimes rang cheerfully, followed by Cassie's girlish squeal. Elaine couldn't believe her ears.

“Joey!”

At the same moment a dark brown step van pulled to the curb. The van's deep color provided a temporary backing for the window's pane, so that Elaine was able to monitor the goings-on behind her by their reflection. The floral delivery van's huge heart-shaped logo formed a frame for the action at the register. Around this logo was set the legend: *Life Is For Lovers*.

Cassie was all over Joseph; kissing and petting and stroking and groping. In his gangly fingers dangled a large box of chocolates with a big pink bow.

Elaine turned, against her will. Cassie had Joseph's face in her chest now, but she swiveled long enough to squeeze her breasts with her arms while giving Elaine a triumphant wink and smile.

Elaine stumbled all the way home. Pedestrians stared curiously as she staggered off curbs, neighbors blanched and retreated into the shadows of their knowing lives.

She carefully plucked the flat packets off her medicine cabinet's bottom shelf, neatly laid out her makeup items round the tub's rim while the basin slowly filled.

Her hands trembled upon submerging. Elaine whimpered against the pain to come.

“*Shhh*,” the razors whispered, “*shhh . . . shhh*.”

It didn't hurt the way she expected. The bath quickly went pink, only gradually turning red. Elaine raised her streaming arms, folded her fouled wrists across her chest. And Joseph appeared as a brooding transparency, waxing almost-real in perfect sync with the

room's slow fade. She could see his mouth struggling to reach hers, could read his slow-motion lips, contorted by guilt and shame:

"I'm . . . Just . . . So . . . So . . . *Sorry* . . ."

"I," Elaine heard her voice reply, "forgive." But the sound was hollow, and leaning whence it came. And the air congealed, and the room dimmed, and Elaine's lips were utterly without sensation as Joey bent at the waist, passed out of passion's way, and kissed her once goodnight.

Home Planet

If you're reading this I have to assume you are of an enquiring disposition, can access basic computing equipment, and are able to open, close, and copy documents.

PLEASE SAVE THIS DISK!

Or make copies, if you can, and send them to any known survivors, and to any agencies—especially those expressly formed to deal with this horror. If you have a printer, print this out and distribute copies to any parties capable of plumbing it for clues. I can't print off this thing, even if I could find an AC source.

I'm not a scientist, I'm not a journalist, I'm not some hot-shot professor able to pull strings and make noise. I'm just a guy with a little solar-powered word processor. I've been retired for some time now, so I've had plenty of opportunity to take notes. Due to my analytical bent, a penchant for hoarding provisions, and a lack of family and social responsibilities, I've been able to ford the tragedies, the death and the madness, and still remain reasonably sane and emotionally cool. Though I'm slipping, goddamn it. I'm slipping.

This entire journal shows exactly as processed, from the first keystroke to the last. What you are now reading is an addendum, cut and pasted to the page's top. If the following seems stupid, it's the stupidity of honesty. If much of it comes off as trite and ignorant,

well, I guess that's the real-time scratch-and-stumble of innocence. I could proof and edit, provide a neat and cogent trail—I've learned enough from just banging away to produce a strong file. But I'm not going to polish this, for one simple reason: I could be unintentionally deleting clues—no matter how homely, clumsy, or seemingly inconsequential; clues that might be needed by some surviving researcher. Also, as I'm not a diarist, I did not include dates. For this I apologize—but who could have predicted, from those first dire whispers, the horrific reduction, the brutal extermination—this impossibly repulsive obliteration of man.

Here is my journal; unadulterated, naked, done with. It's over, you fuckers. I quit.

We pass.

I can't believe it. My first word processor @ Ill get the hang of this thing soon enough. It's just like a typewriter. but it saves onto a disk, Very cool. It's solar powered so I don't need to charge it. Colapsible key

Board. Stores in a fanny pack.

I bought it to record my observations

on the ozone layer issue. Everybody and their mother's running around like chickens. but I don't see anybody else taking notes

Okay. I'm going to hunt-and-peck until I get good. Here's what's happening:

The ozone layer is breaking up into what scientists term Z Pockets. There's that famous one over the Antarctic. But now there's one over New Zealand, a couple over Europe, six more around Africa, and that really big one over the Pacific. The layer is undergoing an effect meteorologists label "tattering." You can see it. Kind of. Here and there the sky shows streaks, or "rifts," as they call them; sort of a burnt umber look, approaching maroon. But they seem to vanish as you stare, though every once in a while something resembling a crack will appear for a bit. I'm talking over great expanses of sky here. Yet from a ground vantage you do get this tectonic effect. We're told the atmosphere is stabilizing, that's all. I sure do hope so.

I'm getting so good with this thing I can make formatting changes on the fly. *Italics*, **bold**, or underlined. Jump to the front or back of a word, line, or paragraph: no big deal. Justification and

smart-hyphenation. I did a whole bunch of practicing in non-saved documents, but it was worth it. Watch dese fingers fly, boys. I gots da mojo. “Quotes”, \$y^b()!\$, numerals; a *snap!* Ellipses . . . and—*em*—dashes: (colon) each just a key/stroke away. *⊆* *u*perguy.

Storms are all the news. I guess that’s what we’d have to expect, what with the atmosphere breaking up the way it is. Hurricanes are common; typhoons out of season. Yesterday there was that tsunami in the Phillipines; thousands dead and nobody even blinks. And we keep getting this “Earth will heal” stuff. Maybe. But it’s pretty obvious the scientific approach is a dead end.

Well, we did it, people: you and I. With our cars, with our factories, with our lousy aerosol. Just had to deodorize that room, didn’t you, homo sapiens? Just had to gun that engine. Go on, sport, have a nice day. Hey, I know! Let’s all take the tires off our cars, put ’em in a gigantic pile in the rain forest, cover the whole mess with gas and let it burn. Maybe sprinkle on some discarded plastic and used batteries for good measure. Then we can all join hands and sing We Are The World. That’s right; just you and I. The Evolved Ones. And afterwards we can all;;////

Whoops. Sorry about that. Spilled my artificially flavored instant coffee with saccharine and MSG and had to stomp the damned styrofoam cup into the dirt. But that’s okay—I dug it down *deep*, and covered it up *good*. That’s because I *care*.

There’re these weird sunsets I catch from the jetty. I’m sure a million shutter bugs are right on it, but I wish I possessed the vocabulary to do them justice. Purplish, instead of fiery . . . how strange is that? The spectral band is shifting, yet in ways I’d have never predicted. It’s like looking through a kaleidoscope on an overcast day, but with breaks in the barrel, and with morbid dayglo stains in the glass. So odd. How can I put it . . . it’s beautiful, because it’s nature, but it’s ugly because it’s . . . wrong. I’m depressed as hell. I want my world back. And when twilight hits, you get these funny spots in the sky—I know I’m not imagining them, because I’m not alone. Even though scientists attribute the phenomenon to residual glow, we lay folk seem to know better. Ghost-specks . . . like miniscule eyes . . . millions of them . . . watching you, wanting you . . . and gone with the night.

I don't like the looks of the ocean. They say the tidal drag is waning. She broods, rather than breathes. Spume left on the sand stands for hours before dissolving—creepy. It has traces of purple, like everything else. I've begun to despise that color.

The sun, with this continuous cloud cover, is perpetually obscured; there's only a bright spot in the brown and violet quilt, moving in a heavy arc every twelve hours. Despite this cover, the world does not grow cool; the air has a sticky tropical *feel*—scientists ascribe this to a kind of greenhouse effect. I heard on the radio that crop plants aren't failing, as one would expect with the dearth of sunshine, but appear to be altering their chemical structure somehow. This is apparently through profound and complex changes in soil minerals, those weird wind currents, and air quality in general; all due to atmospheric “stepping.” We are witnessing our world falling apart: seven billion greedy, shortsighted, extravagant fools in a Petri dish. And now, all over the globe, those crops are being declared inedible: bitter, textureless, covered with purple blotches—as ugly, noxious, and undesirable as we've almost casually made our once-beloved planet.

Ah, this lightning—these tremendous discharges on every horizon—how does this fit in with stratospheric changes? Is the whole phenomenon “stepping” *down*? It's the most awesome spectacle . . . mushrooming bursts of light, as though whole cities were exploding, pyrotechnic pockets that blossom and sag, the sky humming like high-tension wires in fog. At night the erratic displays have this iridescent beauty, with their buggywhip streamers crackling overhead . . . they leave a burnt odor, but odd. I can't put my finger on it. And clouds—how strange to see these familiar puffy lands grow striated and bulbous. They remind me of jigsaw pieces, only expanding, like taffy, gradually closing gaps in the superlayer of fried amber sky. They have a new kind of transparency, an unearthly sub-opacity that both diffuses and mirrors the ghastly purple atmosphere below. It goes to show how indifferent are we vain little bipeds to that high plan of nature. Our sky, our lives' breath, is now a polluted and failing lung. This glorious structure of earth—we tore off its skin, man. We made a wondrous hothouse an outhouse; with our fossil fuels, with our mercury and acids, with our vile refineries. We don't deserve this place, maybe we don't even deserve this existence. Ah but, God in Heaven, it breaks my heart to watch our poor world die.

I've been examining some of these plants. Creepers and other supple varieties in particular show extensive change. But they seem healthy enough—though diseased. Does that make any sense? The coloration invariably leans to mauve and purple; greens and yellows are nearly nonexistent. The smooth-cell feature common to supples is strangely spiny—not woody: scaly. Larger plants droop, giving all the visual impression of dying flora. But why don't they die? I tried bending a stalk, intending to break it for internal study, but it snapped back, as though infused with a vital tension. It scared me in some way. I'm beginning to feel out of place.

The air's very dense, the sun's spectrum's shifting. I don't know if the shift will adversely affect this little word processor's solar charger, but I'm going to hang with the document as long as I can.

I *hate* this air. Everybody does. It makes you angry, embittered somehow; makes you despise your neighbors, makes you want to use foul language—and I'm a pretty genial guy. Biochemists say it's to be expected: the atmosphere's oppressiveness is producing unbecoming, albeit perfectly understandable, mood changes. Don't fight it, they tell us. That only increases the body's tension-factor. Okay. Whatever you assholes say.

I'm getting skin sores. Just like everyone. Boils, rashes, fungal patches. Fingernails are turning black and green. It doesn't hurt. Maybe it'll pass. Sun screen is said to help.

Another change has come to the air.

Tiny particles—those ghost-specks, distended, now not unlike grains of salt in appearance—are just standing about in suspension. Millions of them, glinting high in this heaving damson sky. I'm reminded of those glass snow bubbles we had as kids. Turn them upside down and white flakes would drift throughout the encased water; these particles behave similarly. They disintegrate upon touch, so scientists are only able to investigate at the molecular level. Silicone is the base, and there are traces of barium and bromium, apparently released by the soil as a consequence of organic breakdown.

Other folks—theorists mainly, and they're coming right out of the woodwork—argue that these specks are the result of unusual oceanic evaporation; one physicist states that atmospheric dissolution

has created an arena wherein consequences bizarre to our way of thinking will become the norm. Well, give the fucker a cigar. Has he been living underground all this time? There's a thought. A spokesman at Cal Tech goes so far as to suggest we're witnessing what conditions might be like on another planet. These are typical of the fools and frauds who've always capitalized on catastrophe: anything for your fifteen minutes—even if it's the last fifteen you'll ever see. There are creeps running "safe suit" swindles, hookers making purple-spotted love with sticky old men, parvenu prick preachers with their quickie flocks and stale promises. Where are the poets? Where are the thinkers and visionaries? Same place they've always been: ground under the hooves of the shameless crowd. People will believe anything, so long as it appeals to the viscera. Now there's this video hoax with the granules. Some guy fast-motions a sunup-to-sundown skyframe. Somewhere over Baton Rouge. Yeah, we all fucking see it: granules arcing and combining with a serpentine motion, moving independently and in groups—what the media has the balls-out audacity to call "schools," as if people aren't freaked out enough. Even though a university electronic arts class immediately shows how this video is easily effected using the crudest home equipment, it's too late. People are running around with their heads up their asses. It just makes me sick.

This is a text specimen from *Science And Sentience's* interview with that ubiquitous theorist Dr. Brigham Railer on the Granular-Cluster Theory. I'm omitting a number of technical sidebars, as well as a few snippets that, due to core impertinence on the part of the questioner, were frankly digressive.

S&S—Do you feel the Granular-Cluster Theory adequately explains this peculiar tendency of apparently random colonies to spontaneously diverge? *Is it spontaneous?*

Railer—Well, as many theorists agree, this effect—wherein granules aggregate independently, even as their radial cousins tend to gravitate—is strikingly similar to the Globular Theory, where cells colonized in the primal sea.

S&S—But, Doctor, these are not cells, the atmosphere is not a sea, except in perhaps a metaphorical sense, and you haven't addressed the issue of random divergence. Gravitation, at any level, affects all matter concordantly. What would cause these incongruous splinter clusters? Why wouldn't all granules, since they've been determined virtually identical in mass, behave identically?

Railer—Who knows? There are currents in the air as well as the sea. Radiant energy could be a factor. We need to wait for the data to accumulate (laughs). And no pun intended.

God, the air stinks. It has a putrid smell. I feel I'll swoon.

A totally bizarre thing.

That guy with the video wasn't running a hoax after all. Now that the granules are clumped to the size of golf balls, you can see how they do sort of proceed hurky jerky—what newscasters are calling “attitude.” The biggest reason for this visual factor, though—and I can see it quite clearly from the jetty—is that the process is speeding up as the clusters' mass appreciates. Clumps appear to oscillate for a second before swerving in to impact clusters—“hosts,” they're called. I swear I can see them growing before my eyes. It's awesome.

This is getting beyond ridiculous. Some stupid bitch in South Dakota claims a low level clump attacked her dog, for Christ's sake. It's these lunatics who are driving away what little sanity's left, and it's the fucking media who are supplying the leverage! Everybody knows that dogs, and especially those breeds trained as guards, have been leaping and snapping at these ground clumps all along. It's inevitable the twain should meet, and obvious reports will become more numerous as the phenomenon accelerates.

Oh, so *now* petroleum giants are being forced to curtail the distillation and sales of fossil fuels. So *now* your fucking NATO, SEATO, and goddamned PUTO are clamoring for an international “hiatus” on commercial manufacturing. So *now* microwaves are being taken seriously. GOOD! Put us back in the stone age, when men ate unadulterated food and our children weren't poisoned from birth. Keep your stupid nuclear bombs. The only weapon I'll need is a good solid chunk of basalt. Just make sure I get a scientist or two to try it out on.

This is just godawful sickening; no lesson in biochemistry could be more depressing. It shows how the senses are hard-wired to focus on the *beauty* of nature, instead of that gruesome underbelly usually reserved for a microscope or coffin's interior. The clusters are doing what biochemists call “attaching,” similar to the blind function

of viruses. What this means, as far as I can understand, is that elements in our blood, mainly iodine and calcium, are “marrying” (now scientists are calling *us* the hosts, for the love of God) non-active elements in the clump-colonies, molecule for molecule, so that the hosts’ plasma is bled out the skin surface, or “leeches.”

I positively loathe this reckless use of leading terminology!

It just kindles already inflamed imaginations. And so we get more asinine reports of colony attacks, preposterous rumors of people bled dry, wild stories of “gang clumpings.” As I say, all this nonsense only makes the situation worse. Yet, in another way it’s understandable; I’ve had to dodge a few myself. Some are the size of medicine balls. But that’s just the point: stay out of the way, assholes!

I’ve set the save function to every minute. That way, even if I’m cut off halfway through something, this journal will be very up-to-date, as opposed to the old method of entering a manual save at the close of each

It’s all a mess. A panic. People running this way and that, begging for a solution, screaming for their Maker. The heat’s unbelievable. It lashes at the skin and eyes, strangles the tongue. No one will believe the reports: the temperature dropped an average of three degrees over the last two days—it feels like it rose ten. The air is actually sour; you can taste it. The alkalinity of soil samples is on the wane, the pH all over the place.

Bael Laboratories has come up with a “peel ’n’ toss” disposable protective suit, for Christ’s sake, but what the fuck’s the point. We’re already covered with sores. God, I can’t breathe. They say going out without a suit increases the risk of skin cancer. *Assholes!* Who’s gonna live long enough for it to develop.

This is impossible. Now there’re reports of colonies smashing through picture windows and attaching to homeowners! Idiots! Alert One is ordering all civilians to don those stupid suits: they say the material will mask hemoglobin. We’re one step away from martial law. But nobody gives a crap. People are going nuts with shotguns and flamethrowers. There’s simply too many of those things; and now some are “bonding,” as opposed to just “replicating.” 91Radio reports one the size of a house over Connecticut.

Home Planet

I've had it with scientists and theorists! I'm fed up to here with their one-dimensional explanations about chemical interactions. I'll believe my eyes, not some asshole lecturer.

You fuckers tell me how a mass of "inert silicone-based clumps" can swoop on a lady and carry her off screaming!

You tell me how a couple of colonies can fight over a child like a pair of hammerheads fighting over a surfer.

You tell me how a "secondary osmotic exchange" can leave the streets littered with bloodless corpses.

Fuck you all, fuck you all, fuck you all.

I don't need some goddamned scientist to tell me our Earth's been appropriated.

I don't need a climatologist to tell me the atmosphere's been altered to suit another species, and I don't need some fucking biologist to tell me they've been adjusting plant life all the while.

And I don't need any shitface scientist to tell me that that ugly thing swooping my way is coming to suck me dry.

Fuck you. Right over here. Come and get it. Yeah, *fuck* you! That's right: carbon-based; sweet, pink, and juicy. Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you. FUCK YOU, FUCK YOU, FUCK YOU. FUCK YOU FUCK YOU FUCK YOU *FUCKYOU FUCKYOUFU*

Bill & Charlie (a love story)

William Bergal wasn't exactly a survivalist. Nor was he really an outdoorsman. He had something to prove—to himself, to his God, to his pretend-posterity; he felt it vital to repay, in his own way, the gift of life itself. This urge came from a lifelong disdain for the crowd, for its icons and manifold plastic distractions, and from a very deep affinity for nature in her staggering totality. Bill hurt and he didn't actually know why. He only knew that it was a sweet pain, and nobody's business but his.

But seekers *should* be outdoorsmen, minimally, if their spiritual calling outweighs their good sense to the point they're willing to tackle Washington's Mount Rainier, at the onset of winter, with nothing more than street clothes, a backpack full of trail mix, freeze driers, tin heating cup, notepad and bruising literature, and a fanny pack containing *utter* essentials: compass, disposable lighters, flashlight and extra batteries, multivitamins . . . Bill also brought along a good strong hunting knife, though he'd never used one, and a silly philosophy defining the only real food as that which is self-attained. To support this idea he carried a pouch holding fishing line and hooks: he'd heard fishing was the easy part; throw in your line and relax over instant coffee and Disraeli. Salmon are known to leap right into frying pans.

Odd.

This sure wasn't the cherry-cheeks cold of snowball fights and toboggan races. This weather dug into nerves, stinging them stiff. It tore simultaneously through mouth and nostrils, strangling a man from the inside. Bill was seriously ill on the second night out, and his unexpected staple diet of trail mix and ice water was taking a further toll. The fish must have seen him coming, the salmon had to be hopping into somebody else's pan. But Bill's sights were irrevocably set on a strangely sedate hill—he reckoned three thousand feet up; a soft peaked snowball amidst streaked majestic peaks. The view must be staggering.

Yet it just kept on getting colder; it seemed to drop a degree for every hour he pushed on. And there were dangerous drifts, minor crevasses, lurking stones and roots. The stately white pines were gorgeous, of course, though they appeared to close behind with impenetrable resolve. The third day found him hopping and slapping his thighs, building fires that quickly petered and died, quoting King James, Herman Hesse, and Eul Gibbons. He must have made a most comical impression on the small band swinging up from the northwest.

The lead man strode right up, looking Bill over.

"You see a wounded animal come by here? Brown bear, maybe three feet high at the shoulder. Hit once in the left upper hip."

"Hit?"

"Shot." The man raised his rifle symbolically. "We're hunters. It's season." He swung that rifle in a lazy arc. "I'm Russ Vaden. This is Derrin, there's Sam, and that's Jacques." The mentioned men watched with barely contained amusement. Vaden squinted curiously. "If you're lost, mister, just bear downhill. Always remember that. Folks don't settle in the hills."

"No," Bill returned after a hard moment, "I'm not lost. I'm up here to find myself. There is great beauty in the mountains . . . everywhere."

"Nature boy," Jacques sniggered. Derrin sniggered back. Sam laughed snot out his nose. The huntsmen relaxed.

"Come on," Vaden grinned. "We've got hash and fresh salmon." He rolled his eyes. "You're not a vegetarian, too, are you?"

"No," Bill mumbled. "Not a vegetarian."

"What he *means*," Sam appended as they made for a flat space between trees, "is that sometimes guys who go off on the whole nature thing, well, they go off on the *whole* nature thing. Politics,

womenly rights, ecologeewhiz—save the animals, kiss the babies. Stuff.” He looked like a man retaining a mouthful of castor oil.

“Each to his ever-lovin’ own,” Derrin said, shaking his head.

The salmon and hash were sizzling bliss. Bill swallowed guiltily, but the fire in his hole let him know it was right. He’d probably lost five pounds; not superfluous weight in the wild. The blaze between their feet was shared at a primal level, not to be dismissed by pigheaded valor. The coffee was heaven, the chewed grounds exquisite.

Vaden watched him eat with a twinkle in his eye. “Friend . . .”

“It’s William. Bill.”

“William Bill. I don’t know anything about your leanings and whatnot, but I think, as a man among friends, you just might find that this fulfillment you’re seeking is right back home where you left it. Makes no sense at all for a fellow to be up here suffering if he don’t have to. For profit, sure. For sport, maybe; that depends on the individual.”

“There are things,” Bill tried “. . . deeper.” He knew he was desperately out of place. “Things bigger than me and you. Abstract things. Immortal things.”

Derrin spat grounds in the fire. “So you’re hoping to find God up here, is that it?”

Jacques jumped to his feet, spread his arms, dropped his jaw and rolled his eyes. “There he goes! There he goes! Zhoom!” He flopped back down grinning.

Bill studied him drearily. Jacques was one of those annoying class clowns whose sole claim to friendship was weary tolerance. Six centuries ago he’d be talking his way out of another round in the stocks. “No. Not as you put it. God, nature, beauty, life, death, friendship, this fire, that turkey buzzard—it’s all the same thing. I suppose I just had to get out of the city. Traffic, greed. People running around with their heads up their rectums. The soul wasn’t designed for such an arena.”

Sam sighed. “Sentiment in the mountains . . .” He gave Bill a dour look. “I give you a week, maybe two. It takes a certain constitution, neighbor, to grit your way through another day. A man don’t need God or poetry. He needs to know who he really is, and where he actually stands in the real world.”

“Mountain Law,” Vaden said. His eyes lit. “And I wouldn’t do too much talking about rectums around these guys.”

The men all laughed.

Off to Bill's right, Jacques made a series of obscene movements, his eyes bugged. It wasn't all that subtle. Bill dropped his eyes.

"Nothing wrong," Vaden said, wagging his head, "with a man trying new things, so long as he keeps his mind ordered the way nature intended. We've seen your bright sticky dens, Friend William Bill, and we know exactly what goes on in the cities." Derrin scooted to Bill's far left. Vaden and Sam were anchored at ten and two o'clock.

Bill studied his clasped hands, feeling very locked in. "I'm not gay," he said quietly.

Jacques, batting his lashes, cried, "I'm not gay! I'm just *experimenting!*" Sam laughed and gave him a good manly sock on the bicep.

"Leaning," Vaden said.

Derrin ran his fingers up Bill's calf. "Y'know, Willy, you get less wind resistance when you shave 'em down."

"Cut it out," said Vaden. He rose and, hands cocked aggressively on hips, looked off at the broken crystal skyline. After half a minute he looked back down and kicked Bill's thigh. "You got any ideas about getting friendly with my friends, friend?"

"I am," Bill snarled, "*not* gay!"

"What are you then?" Vaden grabbed him by the hair, yanked him to his feet. Derrin and Jacques took the arms while Sam walked a tight circle, looking menacing.

"Who are you?" Vaden shouted, and delivered a savage kick to the scrotum. "*Answer!*" Before Bill hit the snow he was being mauled by Jacques and Derrin while Sam maneuvered for random kicks to the head. Vaden's demands were furious and spewed without pause for breath. "Who sent you? What are you doing up here? Who do you work for? What you got on us? How much do you know?"

"Nothing!" Bill gasped. "I don't know anything!" He scooped snow between his thighs. Sam and Derrin got to work with the fists while Jacques danced all over him.

Vaden yelled, "Cut!" He dragged Bill a few feet off and slapped his cheeks. "Just to show you we're not the bad guys, I'm provisioning you for the comparatively easy trek back down to your tea rooms and opium dens." He hauled a backpack from the hunters' common pile, heaved Bill to his knees and strapped it on. "There's a good ten pounds of jerky and dried salmon in here. Anything'll keep in this cold; anything except people. Now I want you to march downhill until you get to civilization. You didn't see nothing up here. You

tell your faggot friends this is no place for a soul-searching sissy. Do your searching in the gay bars. If I see you again I'll kill you."

Before he'd descended five hundred feet, Bill knew he was going back up, knew he was pressing on. The human animal was the very thing he was evading; he had to get higher, to that place too desolate for his sick social species. He gave the hunters' site wide berth, and began to watch for tracks and anomalies: this activity gave him a bizarre pride—he was learning the wild. He continued to make for the white hill. And it just kept getting colder. The wind picked up; snow and ice were progressively more treacherous. Bill's hair and beard froze over. His naked hands showed a purple-white gradient fading to blue, his legs and arms stung, went numb, stung some more. He pushed his limits, halting only long enough to realize that to pause was to die. The little hill seemed to beckon. He managed a hundred feet, reeled, managed a dozen more. Bill, forcing each step, sank and recovered, sank and recovered, made the hill's basic slope, pushed himself on.

The cold was unbelievable . . . and now it had stopped being cold. He wasn't just numb; he was—Jesus: Bill stamped his feet and felt nothing. His hands were locking up, his eyes swimming, his breath searing. The whole world went white . . . snowblind, frostbitten, dying in step . . . Bill hopped around, trying to feel his blood, and found only floes. He wheeled his arms, fell in a hollow. No! An ice grave. No. He banged his way out, saw a black recess in the blue-white field. A cave, a hundred feet up, a hundred miles away. And he swam for it, flailing away; hope's madman—a place to lie down, rock instead of snow. The animal instinct was there . . . to crawl . . . a place to die out of the open. A cave, a vault, a tomb, and he reached it, somehow, fell inside, struggled along a surface that did not yield, found a space between facing boulders, and passed.

There came a sibilant, rhythmic noise to his left; very close, very direct. Like a bellows pumping, but faster. Gasping. Bill was too dead for fear; he jacked his torso up with an elbow and came nose to nose with a panting brown bear.

"You," he managed, "startled me." The animal's lids parted and closed. "A pair of stiff," Bill groaned, and again reclined. After a minute he pushed himself back up. The bear was stretched out exactly parallel, on its side, its scarred black nails just grazing his coat. He could see the source of its distress: the bear had taken a shell in the back just above the butt, where the left hip joined the flank proper.

The action of infection was monstrous; a great festering mound rose out of the fur. The bear was battling both terrible pain and massive hunger.

“You don’t need to suffer in stereo, friend.” Bill gnawed some life back into his hand and fought out a huge hunk of jerky, held it before the animal’s peeking eyes. The nostrils quivered. The whiskers trembled, the jaw creaked open, the tongue extended like an unfurling carpet. Bill’s fingers stung from the wet warmth. No sane man would allow any part of his body to loiter between those stiletto teeth, but he knew the animal probably lacked the strength to manipulate the food otherwise, and anyway a frozen corpse with one hand is as good as a frozen corpse with two. He fed the bear one mouthful at a time, and his hand, while gently masticated, was never harmed. The warmth of that mouth kissed his fingers with life; Bill found himself feeding with greater facility . . . pushing the jerky down, reaching into the pack for a new fistful of salmon, pushing the salmon down. When the meal was done Bill whispered, “Thank you,” clasped his hands above his heart, and laid back down to die. He gradually grew conscious of a heaving presence, spreading along his legs and flank, slowly taking his chest . . . the bear was easing on top of him, heavy but not crushing, warming, warming. Bear’s breath in his face, noxious, suffocating . . . warming, warming . . . fur in his hair, paws on his arms. But softly. Warming, warming . . . human nature’s latest victims locked in a long and warming embrace; odd bugs in amber, pinned in a lost, but no-longer-lonely, naturally refrigerated morgue for two. A strange way to die.

Bill dreamt of calving glaciers, melting upon impact. His subconscious sketched fingers and toes that no longer belonged to him; pus-yellow dragging coals fastened by lichen-green ligaments. He dreamed his way into a grayscale grave nestled in stone, and woke in a rank pool of sweat. The bear opened its eyes at the same time. Bill rolled his face from under that heaving muzzle, tried to flex his fingers. There was sensation. He ran his hands through the bear’s warm fur, rubbed them into the hot skin. The fingers began to sting. “Thanks again,” he hissed. He made to wiggle his toes. The feet, smothered in bear over the night, were absolutely numb. But it was the good-numb. He was able to bend his arches and crimp the toes at their bases. The bear moaned. Bill could have kissed it: he’d survived frostbite intact.

He worked his way out by degrees; lifting the bear's arm over his head, sliding out his legs an inch at a time. When his limbs were his again, he gently placed his hands on the bear's side and leaned over the wound. "Listen, girl. I'm not some fancy naturalist or anything, but I can tell from a casual glance that no vital organs are involved." He followed the flank down, inspecting further, and at last blew out a sigh. "I neglected to tell you that I'm also not a biologist, and one thing you're most certainly *not* is a girl." He shook his wet head. "Doesn't it figure . . . here I am, stuck with a pansy panda. Maybe those mountain creeps were right. I was gonna name you Charlotte, or something like that, but—hey, how's about Charles? Can you deal with that?" The bear groaned from the depths. "Charles it is, then. William and Charles." He arched his brows. "Too formal for outcasts? Okay, mon ami. It's Bill and Charlie." He gently ran his hand uphill. The bear's respiration quickened. "Er . . . *listen*, Charlie. There's one other little thing I failed to mention . . . and that's that I'm no veterinarian. But I'm letting you know, right up front and just between friends, that you've one hell of a humongous infection. That's what's causing the pain, not the bullet." He very tenderly worked his hand toward the festering wound. Charlie's groans elongated. "The bullet must come out, Charlie. There's no two ways around it. Kindly remain seated." He limped outside and came back with his arms weighed by virgin snow. "Ice to numb the pain." Bill eased out his hunting knife. "Technology to reverse the damage." Some instinct made him show the blade, made him turn it above the bear's laboring muzzle. Charlie's eye rolled up, rolled back down. Bill made two hills of the ice. Into one he plunged the blade to further the chill. The other mound he scooped onto the hot purple wound. The bear sucked air, relaxed. Bill now sat as for yoga, eyes closed, palms smothered in fur. One hand found the chilled knife's shaft, one eye opened to further its course. Bill bent to his task like a researcher to his lens. "Good boy."

January was much harsher, rarely climbing above 5°F. Sometimes the wind-chill factor made sedentary activity life-threatening. But Bill recovered from his ordeal, and Charlie from his wound. One irony of the wild: hardship makes a steady physician—the single-minded pursuit of day-to-day brute existence causes the entire system to perform at peak levels, regardless of the patients' resolve. And *genuine* cold heats the blood. A healthy animal keeps moving or dies.

Bill & Charlie

Bill and Charlie turned the little cave into a home as well as a survival chamber. Bill insulated the rock walls with dirt and dead branches, Charlie showed Bill where to fish for the fattest salmon. Charlie did the rounds as watchdog, Bill demonstrated the fine art of fire building, and even constructed a highly efficient flued hearth. Charlie, habituated to snoozing right in front, was ever loth to give up his spot, though Bill made it plain that room need be made when cooking. Bill liked to tell long boring stories of his childhood; Charlie followed as best he could, prone as he was to nodding. They had songfests; Bill took lead while Charlie harmonized, sounding more like a drunken sea lion than a rightful accompanist. The hard winter was much less so at Bill's & Charlie's.

They took hikes in the afternoons. Charlie knew just where to find the best berries; Bill dreamed of yeast. And it was on one of these brief walks—a pair doesn't dare loiter in sub-zero weather—that Bill, fighting to build a baby fire, grew increasingly annoyed at Charlie's typical whining dissertations on the high-scented outdoors. He tried a snowball or two, but that didn't work; Charlie only became more vociferous, and somehow Bill wasn't really surprised when Vaden's voice poked out of the pines:

“Anybody for beans and weenies?”

Somebody laughed—it may have been Sam—and then they were all oozing into the clearing. They came from four corners: bear and man were surrounded.

Bill quickly stepped to Charlie's side, ran a quieting arm around his neck. “We don't want any more trouble.”

A bullet almost took off Bill's hand. He stared aghast, every cell in his body cringing. Charlie lay bleeding, half-buried in snow. Vaden tucked the pistol back under his belt.

“We don't either.”

Vaden, looming against the false dusk, stirred the small fire with a branch, sporadically watching his bound and seated prisoner. Maybe twenty yards away, three silhouetted ghouls were busy round a larger blaze.

“You know, to be perfectly honest, I have to admire a man with the gumption to come out here all on his lonesome, at this time of year, with nothing more than the grits God gave a gopher.”

“Let the bear go, mister.”

“Russ.”

“He’ll live if he gets a chance to recuperate. I sincerely do not give a good damn what you do with me. I’ve seen enough.”

“That’s a shame. But we’re hunters. And that’s a bear, not a waif.” Vaden looked off pensively, aurorae in his eyes. “So did you find Him out here? God, I mean.”

“I think it’s pretty obvious what I found out here. Let the bear go.”

“You sound like a guy talking to his son’s kidnappers.” Vaden rocked the rifle on his thighs. “Tell me something, Friend William Bill. How can a fella have the guts of a man and the stomach of a sissy? How does a man, armed with the iron gonads forged by fifty thousand years of goddamned evolution, end up playing canasta with a brute capable of chewing his oh-so civilized heart out?”

“That’s a mammal. It will respond to compassion as well as to maltreatment.”

“That’s a wild animal.” Vaden, rifle in hand, criss-crossed his arms over his head. His friends whooped and hunched over Charlie.

Bill’s voice caught in his throat: “Listen, sir, I didn’t see anything and I don’t work for anybody. I don’t know or care what you’re doing up here. It’s none of my mortal business. Tell them to let the bear go. I’ll head back home like you want and wipe this whole scene from memory. I swear. I don’t care what you guys are up to. Just let the bear go.”

Vaden stared hard. Determined to try again, he came down in a hunching crouch; forearm resting on extended left knee, right leg facing out at an angle. He looked inward, at peaks locked in solid by winter, and said, meditatively, “You know, you shouldn’t be all that surprised by those boys’ behavior. It’s not only unnatural, it’s downright *wrong* for a fellow to carry on about a dumb animal. You don’t act like a man; why do you expect to be treated like one?”

“Get it over with, then. Kill us both, but be quick about it. You talk about men—what kind of man torments a helpless creature?”

Vaden cocked his head. “What kind of man treats a varmint like a damned woman?”

“Get it over with, you bastard.”

Vaden pushed himself back up. “Don’t be in such a hurry. What kind of man executes another without first giving him a last supper?” His expression was odd; not vindictive, not humored, not angry or sad.

Indifferent.

“You like bear?”

Bill screamed each time Charlie roared in agony. The torturers weren't laughing any more; that was only at the start, in response to Bill's bellowing pleas for mercy. The prisoner's screaming took all the fun out of it. But not the thrill, and certainly not the camaraderie. They'd laughed hysterically while jabbing out the bear's eyes, hooted and howled with each application of torch to fur. Now the clubbings and stabbings were waning in response to Charlie's abbreviated calls. The party was closing down. Vaden, standing midway between the action and his captive, swung his rifle side to side to indicate a halt.

Bill wasn't only screaming with horror. He'd used his feet to scoop a large ember from the fire, and managed, through a herculean effort of contortion, to jam this ember up between his wrists and their hide binding. The leather and his flesh were breaking up at roughly the same rate; he could smell his skin burning through the tears.

Vaden walked up casually, a liling figure made spectral by firelight before and behind. He let the rifle swing down until the bore was positioned directly between Bill's streaming eyes.

"I told you once, friend, that if I saw you again I'd kill you." He nodded, more to himself than to Bill. "Mountain Law." He scrunched up his nose and looked around. "Something stinks something awful."

In a heartbeat Bill was on his feet. He tore the rifle from Vaden's hand, clubbed his skull with the butt.

Shouts of surprise from the men. Bill saw Derrin and Sam go for their rifles and dropped them flat. Jacques stood splayed, torch in one hand, air in the other. Bill was just getting a bead when a grunt from Vaden caught his ear. He whirled and shot the man in the throat even as the pistol was rising.

Jacques yelped and bounded into the drifts. Bill grabbed Vaden's ammo pouch, stalked across the clearing, clenched his fist, stopped. He stood over Charlie without looking down, the breath gurgling in his throat. The bear whined pathetically. "Oh God," Bill said, and let the barrel descend until it snagged in the fur above Charlie's ear. "Oh God, oh God. Oh God oh God oh God." He wept like a baby. "Oh God oh God oh God ohGod ohGodoh—" Bill squeezed the trigger and stepped over. In a trance, he watched the world quaking round him.

But there was a bug floundering in white. Bill shook away his tears. The bug cried out at a turned ankle. Bill took his time reloading. "Whatsoever a man soweth . . ." he puffed, and raised the rifle like a

torch bearer closing in on the finish, “. . . that shall he also reap.” Closing his mind to it all, he gripped his coat against the weather and began to march.

It was tough going; far tougher for Jacques than for Bill, for this was dead-familiar turf. Every time Jacques stopped to get his bearings or wave surrender, Bill got off a shot or two. And if passion could afford room for self-analysis, Bill would have had to admit that he was aiming more to inspire terror than to kill. Yet the shots kept getting closer, and his blood brought him focus despite the cold. The course was relentlessly uphill: Jacques’s fear caused him to mindlessly recede from the steadily stalking automaton—his entire mentality was blind to anything resembling an intelligent retreat. He scrambled and thrashed like a drowning man, trading the obvious proximate hazards for a long snowy grade offering sporadic cover round a friendlier keel. But this particular slope was intimately familiar to Bill; he’d traversed it, in good company, a hundred times and more. He took a shot at Jacques’s head. His aim was wide; he followed up with a trio, then with a volley. Jacques screamed at the dusk-bound figure pausing to reload. He stared at the graying hilltop, squealed once, took a terrible breath and scampered up insanely.

Bill was weeping as he fought the grade; he could tell by the quick bite of new ice on his cheeks. Jacques lost his footing in a drift and clambered out, close enough to exchange looks. There was genuine horror in his eyes. “Mister . . . no! Mister . . . *mister* . . . *NO!*”

Bill wasn’t taking real aim now. He cocked and fired with one hand, cocked again. A white nova appeared a foot from Jacques’s shoulder and passed. The man shrieked and kicked frantically, waving his arms as though to ward off a blow. A cracking report preceded a puff of snow between his feet, and another, eighteen inches higher. “*No!*”

Bill’s whole face was contorted by ice. He couldn’t stop the tears, couldn’t keep his mouth from shivering. Jacques disappeared behind a bank of glistening boulders and Bill stopped to shake the rifle. “Mountain Law!” he bellowed. He plunged the rifle’s stock into the snow, using it for leverage as he clung to stunted branches with the other hand. Up to his waist in white, Bill nevertheless stormed the dimming hill, saw Jacques thrashing above, saw him look around desperately, saw him scramble into the cave.

A strange quiet came over the hill. Bill could hear his heart beating; he’d never heard it before. Animal business was at hand: his senses were sharpening in direct relation to the cave’s proximity. At

the entrance an extrawordly echo escaped into the chill. He could sense things he'd never felt, feel things he'd never sensed. Bill smelled prey. How better was he, then, than the basest of animals; in what secret way did this very private experience rightly become an evolved man; a man of intellect, of spirit, of self-analysis and compassion. Bill listened some more. Inside were a scuttling, a whimpering, a stifled cough. He cocked the rifle, mumbled, "Father, forgive me, for I know not what I do," and kicked his way inside.

The Book Of Ron

(Being a Highly Authorized clarification of events surrounding the
Creation and early development of man)

—By Way Of Introduction—

I am one of the few lucid individuals to have actually seen and heard God—an honor He no longer bestows lightly.

He is not particularly ravenous for company—embarrassed as He is by the blunder of humanity—and now limits His interviews to those possessing a certain stolidity of constitution. The bungling-humans Headache has persisted for thousands of years now (thanks a bunch, scribes, for a convoluted spirituality, an ever-splintering credo, and a mangled and incomprehensible testament), so I was approached with caution.

Here was the Great and Wonderful God's dilemma: The most important, meaningful, and profound document in the universe—the Word, the History of all that Is—was set down millennia ago in a turgid, incredibly overdrawn, wholly unreadable style. How in the world was He to win over an endless stream of increasingly sophisticated seekers while saddled with a work that guaranteed the rapid zoning-out of even the most avid reader?

What God needed was a contemporary writer—someone attuned to the easygoing, near-gluttonous appetites of modern Americans—but one with an attitude. What He needed was a cynic, a thinking man; someone not so susceptible to the emotional pitfalls of faith as to immediately revert to ecumenical gobbledegook; *you* know, all that outdated stuff that makes the Old Bible so hard to get into.

But man, was I a tough nut to crack.

In the first place, I've never bought into magic, metaphysics, or mysticism. The universe works according to physical laws that cannot be undone by our pathetic imaginings—and, highly desirable as an afterlife may be to we vainglorious little mortals, a whole cosmosful of parroting adherents doth not a mutable reality make. As a matter of fact, *it makes no f---ing difference* what one knows, believes, or wants . . . erase sentience from the picture entirely and the universe will proceed as-is.

So imagine my surprise when I learned there really *is* an Omnipotent, Magnanimous, and All-loving God!

Talk about having Egg on your face!

All my life I'd been disgusted by a perceived intellectual cowardice on the part of virtually every encountered human being, and here I'd suddenly become a fellow babbling weenie.

But, as I said, my soul didn't come easy.

—As to profane images and descriptions—

First, let me make it *amply* clear that God is *not* some silly caricature or phantasmagorical personification! He is most certainly *not* a kindly old man with a long, flowing, snow-white beard. Nor is he plump, rosy-skinned, and obsessed with jollification. In no way does he resemble incendiary shrubbery.

Even attempting to describe Him, in all His Wonderfulness, brings on a play of reverent emotions which absolutely befuddle the process. Already my quill quivers. Console yourselves, then, in knowing you'll find out soon enough . . . *maybe!*

Now, I realize a lot of this will come off as blasphemous to those of you still adhering to antiquated beliefs. Worse, it will sound like malignant untruth, sick issue, antisocial heresy . . . and I offer my apologies in advance. Be all that as it may very well be, it's the truth. Swear to God. It's no fun writing all this down under the pressure of

such a mighty Taskmaster, for the sake of a posterity that will no doubt blast it as lies and the ravings of a deranged mind.

So be it.

You opinionated gophers, you oh-so fabulous conformists—*you think you know it all!* But you're laboring under an illusion.

You *think* you think.

All your smarmy conclusions are merely worldly wisdom, and God and I spitteth upon you. Go ahead, hang onto your smug and hypocritical heresies, wallow in your fornicating, sacrilegious lifestyles while you can . . . boy, do you have a comeuppance waiting for you! But I digress.

Your worldly wrongheadedness is really the residue of one of God's early projects. As He explains it, intelligence was something that, like gravity, at first didn't occur to Him, and a truly working brain seemed like so much supercargo on a paradise of a planet where sexual reproduction is a perfect perpetual motion machine. However, intelligence—before The Lord realized how it could backfire—seemed *such* a clever idea. What *would* these creatures do with such a gift? That's what fascinated Him. It was no fun watching the "lower" animals slurp, gallop, and reproduce all day. These new beings couldn't even gallop. They were damned good reproducers, however. Apparently the brain's installation had an unpredicted side-effect: humanity was in heat all year-round. Only one thing to do: leave their played-out carcasses to rot and refurbish the soil, and take the souls, which are very light and compact, and store them up in Heaven. He can't leave our souls "down here" because we are, after all, His children, and you don't keep up a reputation of being Wise, Witty, and Wonderful without a long-term benefits package. But after thousands of years even souls can take up a lot of room, and Heaven's better acreage is already grossly overpopulated. And old souls never die. They just hang around. Naughty ol' Satan, confined as he is to the interior of this embarrassing little rock, has solved the problem. He fries the souls until they resemble crunchy little pork rinds, puts them on a diet of coal dust and bat dung, and makes them listen to Jesse Jackson discourses throughout all eternity. Just for the Hell of it.

—But still the question remains: why *me?*—

Why, out of McBillions of far more likely prospects, did the Good Lord God Almighty pick a stubborn atheist to revise this greatest of books? According to The Lord, there was an unwavering pattern in His interviews, so reliable He considers it a rule: *the feebler the belief, the milder the reaction*, or, inversely, *the more devout the subject, the more hysterical the response*. His past attempts invariably brought on reactions ranging from hysteria to heart attack, making accurate communication impossible. It took The Lord a nerve-racking night of cajoling, conjuring, and outright bullying to make a believer of me—consequently, when I finally came to my senses and saw The Truth, the typical frenzied reaction was considerably dampened. But at least I was doable—the reaction of all previous candidates was so wild they on the instant became monomaniacal zombies. You’re skeptical? Ignore the impotent tracings of my pen. Witness, instead, a planet crawling with visionaries, prophets, and messiahs—all stricken failures of The Lord in His frustrating campaign . . . and here I sit with my quills, my earplugs, and my Tylenol . . . quite an honor you think? To be The Lord’s personal scribe . . . but I tell you, the pleasure is most assuredly not mine. The Lord beats a mighty Drum, and I can row only so hard. And His rages are tempestuous, His moods mercurial and infectious. And now another goose-stepping headache is on the way, an all-too familiar sign announcing the Dictator is, once again, getting Impatient. This fate, mine, I wouldn’t wish on the lowest sinner, not on the meanest fool.

But it’s back to work. Let’s see now . . .

—In the beginning—

Right from the start of the Old Bible The Lord has grounds to be upset with humanity’s early poor performance at dictation-taking. There *was* no beginning, He points out, and if there had been, it surely would have been His conception that *was* the beginning, for He couldn’t have created all this if He Himself hadn’t already been in operation, unless of course, He concedes, the original authors meant in the beginning of His activity, which, He notes irritably, would imply a sort of vegetative Deityship activated simply for the future gratification of egotistical little men. “In the beginning,” in short, is too vulnerable to misinterpretation, so God has ordered The Book Of

Ron to have a better opening; an opening that will more clearly set the pace for what theology is all about:

—Once upon a time God created the heaven and the earth, and the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep—

All this about jumping right to work on this remote hunk of rock really infuriates The Lord. Typical of the mad vanity of our species, to allot our insignificant planet priority in the sequence of universal events. Is it possible that a couple thousand years ago men were so backward? The general tone of the Old Bible is heavily patriarchal, and suggests the pontification of a hard-nosed old Bastard in His mid-fifties given to random acts of sadistic violence, but the mental content of the work brings to mind the slapdash constructs of a bright six year-old with a wild imagination. In actuality, according to God, Earth is one of His more recent projects, and certainly one of His least successful. First on the agenda was some light to see what was going on, and where He was. He recalls “Just sort of floating there” for a “Real long time” with nothing much to do and no one to talk to. Then getting “Kind of paranoid” and wanting to “Do something about it.” As anyone who has lived totally alone for an extended period realizes, eventually you get to the point where you begin to vocalize your thoughts.

—And God said, Let There Be Light—

He wishes it could have been that easy. In the absolute vacuum of space no sound was generated, for there was no medium to carry waves. But God found that by twirling a Forefinger He was able to create a spiral that generated both heat and light. This first nebula was formed (to give some perspective on our high and mighty attitude toward Earth) so far beyond our present scrutiny of the heavens that it will take our technology, even at its headlong pace, another thirty-two thousand years to develop instruments sophisticated enough to breach the gap. Now, one nebula gave plenty of light, but only enough to See that there really wasn't a whole lot *to* see, and that, wherever He was, it was an awfully big place. So God set about hanging new lights, but no matter where He went it was the same old thing. Pretty soon there

were star clusters all over, and The Lord, bored almost to inertia, sought to amuse Himself by positioning stars and galaxies to play connect-the-dots. These were whimsical designs: a bowman, a bison, a big or little dipper here and there. Just so were the heavens created; a bit at a time, with patience and great expertise, with insight and, yes, with Love.

But there just didn't seem to be an end to the void, and, since The Lord had eternity on His Hands, He threw Himself into His new hobby with truly deific enthusiasm. After a few billion years it became like a mania, and what was born of simple boredom grew to be a desperate endeavor, a passionate attempt to fill up all this emptiness with enough light to See that there was more emptiness needing light to fill up the emptiness so He could See there was more emptiness needing light to See the continuing emptiness. Eventually this got to be rather silly and exhausting. There had to be a nobler way to expend the creative energy of what was obviously a very productive and gifted young God, so He got into *detail*. What He had in Mind was some kind of little orbiting system of planetary bodies around one of the lights, a sort of concentric ring-around-the-rosie. Just what shape these satellites should take was an absorbing and delightful puzzle for The Lord in those ages. God became more than a Dabbler in physics. He found that if He zinged a spark just *so* at the light He'd chosen, that spark would whiz around all on its own. He tried it out in lots of places, and had a whale of a time for a few gazillion years, but there becomes a certain *routine* to whinging sparks that can grow to be unsatisfying and, even to the Mighty Lord, wearisome.

So it came about that God found Himself plodding lonesomely through endless fields of stars, and thinking what a mess He'd made of the place, and wondering just what the heck there was to do *now*.

And slowly formed a glorious Idea, a scheme for building a little working model of a self-perpetuating environment He'd visualized way back when He was still hanging lights. So gung-ho was The Lord on this new project that he managed to finish it in less than a week.

The first couple of days went into thinking up neat new names for light and darkness and so forth.

God then set about creating a firmament to divide the heaven and earth. This was some fancy Doing. What He Did was part the ocean and sort of flip the firmament into a horizontal position so that half the water was above and half below. Then He moved all the nether water around, exposing land above the seas. He confesses to a

certain lapse in Planning here, for He could have saved Himself a lot of Trouble by simply introducing gravity first and allowing the seas to form naturally. The important thing was the thrill of the creative process. God saw that it was Good. But it took all day.

The next step was to give the place a little life and color. He was getting so good at creating He didn't have to use His Hands to whip up any miracles; all He had to do was speak to make it So. He never did quite get the hang of telekinesis . . . but just by Saying He wanted it—*whoosh*—there were grasses and herbs and fruit-bearing trees everywhere! It was wonderful, it was magic, and boy, was it *Good*. But the details took all day.

The Old, pre-Book Of Ron, Bible is confused here, stating that God now began hanging lights, with the implication that He made earth and grasses and whatnot working blind, and that He *saw* how Good everything *was* in the dark. As I've previously recorded, the sky was already riddled with stars, but God decided His little terrestrial experiment needed a couple lights of its own. So He slapped together a sun and moon, and had a deuce of a time setting them in place. It was dizzying work, making the moon zoom around the earth every twenty-eight days while adjusting the earth to travel in a more stately manner around the sun, then having the sun barely drift through the Milky Way, which was in turn configured to revolve in immense light clusters . . . but it sure was Good! Yet it took . . . all . . . effing . . . *day*.

The next morning God decided His handiwork could use some locomotion. So He spake into existence whales and fowl, and blessed them and told them to multiply. It was really Good, man, but it *still* took the whole goldurn day.

On the sixth day The Lord, indefatigable as ever, was whale-and fowl watching when it struck Him that there was lots o'planet still to be filled. Whales can make pretty boring pets, and fowl are noisy and smelly at best. Still, the whales got into some interesting antics caused by slow starvation until The Lord *whooshed* some plankton into the seas—one thing led to another, and The Lord just had a ball creating everything that came to Mind. He made cattle and other beasts, and all kinds of creepy things. It's absolutely mind-boggling to imagine the burst of creative Zeal taking place on that sixth day. The number of species on this planet seems almost uncountable, but God was really on a roll. Man, it was *Good*. He designed the thorax, the pulmonary system, the proboscis, the carapace—faster than you can say *whoosh*. Annelids, insectivora, reptiles, amphibians, primates—it

was a whirlwind of activity. The platypus, the wombat . . . then, in a burst of Vanity, something that, in miniature, would resemble Himself. This creature He called man, and this creature He made top dog over the whole earth. Then He kicked back, exhausted. He looked over His experiment and Saw it was *very* Good.

Modesty is, in this instance, a truly deific virtue.

It was spectacular.

—Man alive—

Next day God was totally bushed. He blessed and sanctified the day, but that was about all He felt like getting Into. He was even too tired to make rain, but fortunately a mist that was hanging around warmed, rose, and fell to wet the ground. This little observation got God's creative Spirit back in gear. The damp dust, He found, could be molded into all kinds of shapes, but the one He really liked working on was a male figure. When finished it just lay there, so God decided He'd try to inflate it.

Talk about Finesse!

The Lord's Lips are wider by far than the largest supergalactic cluster, but He managed to blow life into the dust man's nostrils without even shattering it.

Lord God then planted a garden, called the place Eden, and put His little man, spot-named Adam, in charge of all the luscious trees therein. God told Adam to go ahead and eat from any tree save the tree that bore knowledge of good and evil. Lord God was dead-serious about this, and threatened Adam with certain death if he dared, if he essayed, if he even *thought* of disobeying. God, His Wrath resolved, went back to sculpting wet dust, creating a whole neat menagerie to keep Adam company.

But something was still missing. God put Adam to sleep and looked about. There was plenty of dust around to make another person, or even a whole planetful, but Good Old Lord God, prey to a reckless whimsy, decided to fashion this mate from one of Adam's ribs. So He tore open Adam's side, and He *r-r-r-ripped* out a rib. That woke Adam fast enough. Adam lay there howling while The Lord concentrated on the rib, and God admits the howling got on His Nerves and messed up the whole blessed experiment. This new creation was a laughable failure, all rear end and sagging pectorals.

Whereas Adam had the potential for strength and prowess and a certain animal cunning, this *Eve* couldn't possibly be good for anything. But, since Adam just gawked at her, The Lord decided to forget all about her for the time being and focus on getting Adam to move around and maybe perform some tricks. Here gravity was the real poser. The Lord, intrigued, inflated Adam a little more and was rewarded by the sight of Adam rising arse-upward into the air, where he hovered like a rag doll with a slack jaw and empty eyes. The Lord putt-putted Adam around for Eve's amusement, but after blankly watching Adam bank and circle for a few minutes she slipped into a heavy sleep. So The Lord dropped Adam and tried to Think of another means of locomotion. There was still a whole lot of space between the ears that wasn't being used for anything, yet God was beginning to develop a strange fascination for Adam's legs. He had, after all, created Adam in His own Image, but He Himself had never encountered a solid surface. He had no Idea what His own Legs were for. Once He managed to stand Adam upright, the little dust man could be prodded along quite nicely. It may seem curious that the idea of a snakewise slither didn't occur to Lord God at that time, but He confesses that slithering gives Him an uneasy Feeling. This Feeling gets validated pretty soon, when a famous snake does something really rotten.

Anyhow, now that things were beginning to take shape, The Great Lord God Almighty looked down with Delight on His creatures and saw they were Good.

And Adam somehow attained the ability to utter his thoughts (which were, understandably, pretty vague) through the unlearned, instantaneous use of speech.

Think of that!

Barely out of the dust stage and he's already putting sentences together.

Not only that, he's taking control of his environment. He calls Eve "Woman" and acknowledges himself as "Man." Then he's dictating that man and woman should live as husband and wife. This intellectual upstart and his woman—the dust man and the rib lady—were a peripatetic pair, and naked as jays.

—Enter The Snake—

Let this be a lesson to all you silly, irrational, embarrassingly unrealistic Darwinists out there . . . back when homo sapiens originated, *snakes could already speak as articulately as you and I!*

That's right.

Believe it or not, they were vocal and wily as all get-out.

Nowadays, it's true, snakes haven't gotta whole bunch to say. But back in Edentimes this crafty old viper just slinks right on up to Eve and convinces her to disregard Lord God's edict about avoiding the good and evil tree. The snake tells Eve she and Adam will themselves be gods if they get the inside scoop on good and evil, and won't die at all. The snake was saying, in effect, that The Great and Goodly Lord God Almighty didn't want any competition and so was trying to keep the two in the dark.

So Eve ate of the fruit of the tree and turned Adam on to a piece.

Apparently the fruit caused them to see their nudity as evil, for they were abashed enough to sew aprons out of fig leaves.

But then they heard God's Voice somehow walking in the garden, and had to hide in the trees.

God busted Adam semi-nude.

Adam fessed right up, ashamed as he was with the image of God.

Then, after a quick grilling by The Lord, Adam narked on his mate, setting a precedent for all humanity to come. He fingered Eve, hoping to save his own skin. Eve, catching on quick, pointed her fruit-spattered finger at the snake, who didn't have a finger to point.

God blew it.

He cursed the snake up and down, damned Eve to woeful childbirth, and doomed Adam to hard labor and easy death.

You don't mess with The Great and Goodly Lord God Almighty.

Then God made them suffer the further humiliation of wearing skincoats as He kicked them out of the garden. Realizing the snake was the only genuinely guilty party, The Lord decided to let him hang out, and even *whooshed* in some rather tacky ornamentation—your basic whirling flaming-sword-and-chubby-angels display—to add a little life to the arboretum.

—The Duo Incurrible—

Once they were out in the real world, the pair went straight from bad to worse. Adam discovered that new people could be produced biologically, which was not only a lot of fun, but a tremendous relief. The last thing he wanted was to lose another rib.

And they named their love child Cain.

Child-making was so much fun the pair got right to work producing another; a boy they named Abel. This Abel grew to be a shepherd, while brother Cain worked the soil.

Eventually the boys decided to get on The Great Lord God's Good Side, so they agreed to bring Him gifts. Abel brought sheep fat, but all Cain could manage was veggies.

Lord God was more than happy with Abel's homage, but fit to be tied over Cain's humble offering. Where was the fat?

Cain was crestfallen.

The boys went into a field and had it out.

When the dust had settled, Abel lay dead and Cain stood vindicated. The phenomenon of sibling rivalry was off to a murderous start.

But God's rage over Abel's death, and over Cain's pathetic gift of all he had, was undiminished. Lord God heaped unbearable punishments upon poor Cain.

Cain was stunned. The Great Good Lord God Almighty had just doomed him to the life of a fugitive and vagabond, with no crops to tend and a price on his head. God then marked Cain for easy assassination, and booted him out into the cold, hard, unforgiving world.

Cain then took a wife, which is pretty strange, since the only woman on the planet was his mom. The oedipal insinuation here is too delicate to broach, but suffice it to say that things began to get a tad on the kinky side, culminating in polygamous doings by Lamech, Cain's great-great-great-great grandson.

—Noah—

Life expectancy was like, *super* high back then. Adam died at 930, while Seth, his third son, lasted until he was 911. Lives this long gave folks the opportunity to reproduce a'plenty; the trend to overpopulation was well on its way.

Lamech was another of the multacentennarian heavyweights proliferating so widely in those days. He lived to the ripe old age of 777, but sired a boy when he was only 182. This boy—who was to play such an important role in the global shenanigans to follow— young Lamech named Noah, prophesying the boy would comfort humanity, even though The Lord had cursed the ground and was in no mood to parlay.

Now Noah was in his prime, scarcely five centuries old, when Lamech finally passed away, and Noah decided it was time to concentrate on a brood of his own. The result was Shem, Ham, and Japheth (a.k.a. Larry).

Anyway, about this time God's sense of humor was nearing depletion, and He was really sorry He'd ever begun the whole project. So He decided to destroy the works; not only that demented poser man, but the innocent beasts in the fields, the inoffensive winging birds, and all the creepy things. Especially the creepy things.

But God liked Noah. So God gave old Noah ample forewarning of the Calamity He'd dreamed up, and iterated explicit instructions for building an enormous Ark out of wooden gophers. This was to house not only Noah and his family, but a pair of every living creature on the earth, one male and one female. This was because The Lord, like all artists, couldn't bear to see all His Handiwork destroyed.

Noah was a rather simple fellow, and didn't pause to consider the magnitude of his task, but just got the Mrs. and kids packing and set to work. It took poor Noah almost a hundred years to get the job done, but by the time he was finished he appeared to have aged a thousand years.

He caught malaria and various spotted fevers sweet-talking alligators and king snakes into his clever swamp traps, went half-blind one day luring a squirrel out of a tree, got mauled wrestling a brown bear into captivity. Noah, indeed, was in poor humor after a hundred years of butterfly chasing, grunion hunting, and peeking under various tails. But somehow he got them all together and crammed into the Ark.

What a zoo! As if the stench of the place wasn't bad enough, Noah was soon to discover that hungry tigers and wolves, for instance, don't cohabit well at all with fat yummy ducks, for instance. Also, rabbits and rats and many of the lower animals were very fruitful and *multiplificate*, though not quite so proliferate as the fleas, flies, mites, ticks, tapeworms, and mosquitoes. Giraffes, even in dry

dock, were seasick around the clock. Poor Noah's manifest included a hypertensive sloth with the hots for a spider monkey, a hyena with insomnia, and a Tasmanian Devil whose idea of a good time was to sneak up and scare the daylights out of him.

For a whole week the Ark remained grounded while The Lord aggregated hydrogen and oxygen molecules into a great liquid atmosphere. Making rain is no quick trick, and God was beginning to think it would be just as tough to destroy life as create it, when the seventh day passed and the deluge began.

—Captain Noah—

For forty days and forty nights it rained cats and dogs, and everybody was perfectly miserable, what with the cold and damp and the howling and braying. Noah, who was a ripe 600 years old, suffered through the constant sniffing and aching joints with the quiet humility of a willing dupe.

And still it rained. And rained and rained. The sodden Ark was borne up and drifted out on the face of the waters; up, up, fully fifteen cubits above the land. Naturally, every living thing on dwindling terra was exterminated, and for weeks the water was littered with the carnage of fowl and cattle and creepy things. But old Noah and his brood just drifted on, week after week, month after month, futilely searching the horizon while resolutely accepting their dreary fate.

Meanwhile The Lord was busy hanging new lights in the firmament of the heavens, amusing Himself by flicking away bits of energy to create comets, playing a sort of cosmic tiddly-winks with galactic matter.

After tooling around the heavens for a few months He remembered Noah and Co. bobbing around down here, so He turned off the tap and blew away the clouds to see if anything was left.

Sure enough, there was Noah, soaked to the bone and still scraping the Ark's rank mushy deck; a creaky old codger given to mumbling and grumbling and the scratching of imaginary bites.

The Lord got busy right away, but it took Him over ten months to blot up most of the mess. The Ark got stuck on Mount Ararat when the earth finally dried to its present paradisaical state.

Seeing His work *was* Good, The Lord told everybody to pile out and multiply.

And the entire menagerie wobbled, pitched, and staggered off the Ark, old Noah and his dung-crust-ed spade dragging the rear.

Noah, half-crazed, built an altar to God, then flipped out completely. He ran amok with his spade and barrow, slaughtering the clean beasts and fowl and barbecuing them on the altar.

“That does it,” said The Lord. “Here I’m stuck with nothing but dirty beasts and some old nut who’s a pain in the Holy Neck. But I can See what good it does trying to straighten things out. This time,” vowed the Great and All-forgiving God Almighty, “I won’t curse the ground or pick on these puny living things. Noah, I bless you and your boys and grant you the right to eat anything you want, excluding relatives.”

With The Lord’s blessing, Shem, Ham, and Larry took their wives to town and started bonking like crazy.

—Noah Ties One On—

Meanwhile Noah, with time on his hands and grieving his lost occupation, husbanded the first vineyard. He mastered the art of wine-making and whooped it up by himself in his tent all night. There is some uncertainty about Noah’s activities during that night-long bacchanalia, but in the morning a shocked Ham found his father naked and out like a light. Shem and Larry then put a cloak over their father, for a buck-naked 601 years-old man in a drunken coma is not a pretty sight. Noah woke hung over and in a terrible mood. Since Canannan, his grandchild by Ham, had absolutely nothing to do with covering him up and enraging him so, Noah put a curse on the boy and doomed him to familial servitude. The Lord was delighted to see that old Noah still had his sense of humor, and left him alone in his tent with his booze and his funky spade. The common ancestor of all winos, Noah clung to his shattered existence for another 350 years, finally passing away in withered, sniveling ignominy.

The generations passed rapidly, and it became pretty obvious that man was here to stay. Already he could postulate sillily, dance like the dickens, and carry on rudimentary conversations. And boy, could he come up with some wild names for his kids! Some of Larry's children were stuck with real doozies, like *Magog*, *Dodanim*, *Ashkenaz*, and *Togarmah*—Yeah!—while Ham, not to be outdone, was responsible for beauties such as *Phut*, *Cush*, and *Mizraim* (and of course poor *Canannan*, the family fall guy), and indirectly responsible for gems like *Asshur* and *Rehoboth*.

—SRO—

Now, coprolalia is no laughing matter, but in practically no time the whole planet was inundated, and this phonetic awkwardness had evolved to a fine art. And everybody journeyed to the east and settled in Shinar.

Why?

That old, obsolete Bible doesn't tell us why, but The Great And Marvelous Lord God Almighty demands it be noted in The Book Of Ron that, when He sincerely tried to fine tune the aimlessly milling multitude in Shinar, everybody at noon abruptly stopped and said to one another in unison: "*Go to, let us make brick and burn them thoroughly.*" God wanted to be sick.

And everybody suddenly had the same bright idea: they would build a tower to heaven, which was a mere 205,000⁶⁵⁵ light years distant. God came down to check out this latest act of mortal lunacy and, Almightily embarrassed, scattered 'em all right back out of Shinar and splintered their common language.

—One More Try—

Now, it's true that everybody so far had turned out to be a holy flop, but The Lord was a Diehard at Heart, and firm in His belief that *someone* out there wasn't beyond help. So it was that, after

glumly watching a few more generations of humans breed, The Lord started looking about for a ripe pigeon. He picked Abram, son of Terah, and promised him celebrity and protection if he would only ditch his family, country, and home.

That all sounded pretty good to Abram. So Abram took his nephew Lot and his shapely wife Sarai and they headed for Canaan.

In Canaan Abram built an altar to God, then traveled to a mountain east of Bethel, where he built another. Abram had the situation pegged. The Lord was crazy about altars. Sensing he was on a roll, Abram continued south, but ran into a famine which forced him to cool it on the altar-building and head for Egypt.

This posed a huge problem for wayfaring Abram.

He was about to confront one of the great trials that hit men who marry for looks.

You see, Sarai was a real corker. And Abram was hip enough to the Egyptian brand of testosterone to realize that, once they got a gander, his goose would be cooked.

Abram managed to pass off sweet Sarai as his sister, which meant Pharaoh could get his greasy elite paws on her common luscious beauties without having to disembowel wily egocentric Abram first. The plan worked out *perfectly*. Abram got the royal treatment in exchange for his toots: servants, sheep, oxen, and even asses!

The sly old fox! He comes into Egypt a vagabond, pawns off his hot little honey to the high muckety-muck, and next thing you know he's related to the richest guy in town. Lord knows, literally speaking, which of the many feminine plagues lovely Sarai brought upon the house of Pharaoh, but Pharaoh did what any obscenely rich guy would do and sent her packing, Abram and Lot in tow.

—The Continuing Adventures Of Abram—

Now Abram was *loaded*. He'd come out of the Egyptian affair a rich man; with cattle, with gold and silver.

He, Lot, and the oh-so comely Sarai returned to Abram's mountain altar.

Both Abram and Lot had so many tents, flocks, and herds that there wasn't enough land to support them all, which caused their respective herdsmen to have a falling-out. Abram and Lot decided to

divvy the place up between them—Lot taking the Sodom side and Abram taking the Canaan side.

Abram knew which side his bread was buttered on.

Seeing a touch of mortal competition, he wasted no time. He settled in the plain of Mamre and built an altar *pronto*.

—Slimepits And Shoelatchets—

Worse even than to want is to have. Abram was finding out that, just as the Egyptians coveted Sarai's gorgeous goodies, so his new neighbors had an eye on his garish goods. Smiters smote, folks got carried away, arrogant little humans set precedents everywhere. After the dust had settled, Abram was richer than ever and the friend of kings. God was certainly making good on His end of the deal.

—After The Lovin'—

But time was catching up with Abram, who now found himself in the grip of some pretty wild hallucinations. He went star-tripping with God, Who, ever the Showman, got off on tearing live animals in half for His and Abram's amusement. This went on all day long until the night came and Abram crashed, for some reason paranoid of the dark. Somebody must have slipped him Something. He dreamt of God talking to him about what great good buddies they were, and about all the blessings that were to come to the progeny of God's favorite little altar builder. Abram woke to more hallucinations, this time to some supercreepy visions of smoking furnaces and burning lamps. He was in no mood for altars.

—The Old And The Restless—

Things were swinging in the house of Abram. With Sarai's blessing he got it on with her Egyptian handmaid Hagar. Everybody got bent out of shape when Hagar got knocked up, and Hagar felt horrible. She took off into the wilderness. So Good Old God of course

put a curse on her. It was a doozie. Hagar was doomed to perpetual childbirth and to submission to kinky Sarai. So it came to pass that, at the age of 86, virile but burnt-out Abram had Hagar bear him a wild young boy. This was Ishmael.

—The Agony And The Agony—

Thirteen years passed.

Now Abram, even though he was only 99, was no spring chicken. He tended to laugh at inappropriate times, and was constantly falling on his face. God was not amused. He made poor Abram walk in front of Him, demanding perfection every step of the way. But down went Abram again, flat on his face. The Lord took umbrage. There was just no way to get the bugs out of these recalcitrant little humans, no matter how hard you trained them, no matter how well they were rewarded. So God decided to make an example of Abram. He picked him up and dusted him off, renamed him Abraham, and cursed the old man into stud service. Abraham just laughed and fell on his face. God's rage was Immense, but His sense of Humor was indomitable. He had to come up with something really, really, *really* good. And He did! He decided—now get this—to order every boy be—it's difficult to be delicate here—every boy have his . . . that is to say, have his member, if you can believe it . . . *sliced away around the head!* Old Abraham just fell on his face, laughing insanely. But he wasn't so senile he didn't fear The Great And Kindly Lord's wrath. Abraham got his blade and went to town, slicing like the Devil was after him. He even went under the knife himself. These were some pretty gory times, and God was pleased.

—XXX—

Incest, drunkenness, and a general good time were had by all. Sarai, renamed Sarah, caught Abraham's laughing disease, but was still canny enough to appreciate the power of denial. The couple were now senior citizens, and Abraham was way too far gone to fulfill God's stud curse. He did, however, love his wine. So The Lord sent a couple of Lot's horny daughters into Abraham's tent to get him

wasted and laid and give Sarah a giggle or two. I won't go into details (you can read it yourself!) but, man, those were the days.

—The Sucker Trade—

Abraham now pulled the old Pharaoh trick again. He went south and passed Sarah off as his sister to king Abimelech (no kidding) of Gerar (no kidding!). Even though the king didn't score, cunning Abraham got sheep, oxen, a thousand pieces of silver, servants, *and* Sarah back! You don't have to teach an old dog new tricks.

—Gall In The Family—

At an even 100 years old, with a little help from God, Sarah birthed another boy, named Isaac, by Abraham. Eight days later, slipping in and out of reality, old Abe pulled out his trusty mutilation knife and got to business while Sarah watched, shrieking with hilarity. But she stopped laughing soon enough. Once little Isaac was weaned, he began mocking her for not being his true mom; Isaac, you'll remember, was a product of Abe's and Hagar's whoopee-making. Sarah, seeing red, made Abraham kick out Hagar and their love child. Fearing he'd be seen as a bad provider, Abraham rummaged through all his gold and silver and masses of wealth, finally settling on good old, practical bread and water. He heaped kid, bread, and water on poor Hagar's shoulders, and kicked her out into the wilderness.

—The Ghoulies—

Sarah finally died at well over a hundred; Abe hung on until the big one-seven-five. Even so, after he'd buried Sarah, he still had enough in him to remarry and sire six more kids! When at last he croaked, Isaac and brother Ishmael buried him in a cave, then dug him up and buried him in a field next to Sarah.

The Book Of Ron

The gazillion-year spate of boredom was irrevocably dissolved: God had created an insane and irrepressibly horny playground for generations to come. He foresaw cell phones and low riders, televangelists and garage bands, tailgate jocks and shamelessly-public pregnant soccer moms in spandex and heels. Fatcats and posers and pop stars and pinheads and oh God, oh God, was it ever *Goo-oo-ood!*

—Thus Endeth The Book Of Ron—

He hath an almighty headache, and his Merciful God doth grant him a break. So he riseth now, layeth down his quill, and slammeth shut The goddamn Book Of Ron. Unto The Lord's people he goeth, that they may worship his Master's Word. Fall flat on thine faces, ye sheep, and bless yourselves, your loved ones, and the innumerable sons of all your crucifix-hawkers to be: it can only get deeper, for the slaughterhouse is boundless, the worm is on the rise, and our Wise, Witty, and Wonderful Shepherd hath all the time in the world.

More

Symbiosis is a beautiful thing.

Photosynthesis is another.

Now, when these two natural processes are *contemporaneous*—that is, when they develop in sync—the organic and inorganic are *bridged*, becoming, in effect, a single collaborative force. And on MW-9 this beautiful marriage resulted in that rarest of planetary phenomena, the *sympathetic bridge*.

The planet itself isn't exactly alive, of course, at least not in the sense we appreciate life back home. But it can respond to its internal ecosystem, is capable of a rude vivacity when stimulated, and shows every indication of being sentimentally attached to the funky lichenous algae and brackish mauve gazillipedes it eats and eliminates on a perpetual basis. It can spontaneously rearrange its gooey veneer into grasping appendages and absorbant fields, and exude a sticky mucus-like substance for breaking down proteins. The planet can *appreciate*, *memorize*, and *adapt*—at the basest of levels, and, like any source of awareness, once prodded *must grow*.

For countless ages MW-9's perception, lacking any other stimuli, plodded along in tandem with its slimy inhabitants, cataloguing only patterns and portions. But when the first Earth prospectors came hacking into the planet's ore-rich dermis, MW-9 was treated to

not only a lush banquet of exotic plump tissues, savory fat deposits, and tender basal ganglia—but to an ever-broadening feast of fresh thoughts and feelings.

That original party of eleven dissolved only moderately well—the prospectors, much bulkier than MW-9's steady diet of bugs and slime, had to be assimilated molecule by molecule . . . so those prospectors died very, very slowly—standing gummed to the cave walls for days, some for a week and more, while their diminishing screams sang through the main tunnel and half-completed shafts. In fact, so ponderous is the dissolution of, say, a two hundred pound Earthling, that the majority were still pasted there less than fifty percent absorbed, the smashed organs of each glaringly preserved by the planet's natural secretions, when the investigative crew arrived six months later.

More important: MW-9, in its primitive way, had been studying and categorizing the various elements of higher sentience—frustration, homesickness, competitiveness, camaraderie—during the initial months of setup and shaft-digging. The real breakthrough came when the men were slapped against the wall and the actual sucking, crushing, and shredding began: physical contact, nervous tension, writhing agony—all this was very conducive to MW-9's learning process. Then, upon commencement of the living prospectors' gradual absorption, MW-9 started analyzing thoughts, dreams, and memories.

This was a planetary thrill of almost erotic import. MW-9 accumulated the spectra of human intuitiveness by degrees; puzzling over selfishness, lust, and greed, pondering on loyalty, faith, and love. MW-9 was *self-educating*, and fast, but there was an unforeseeable speed bump: the prospectors' growing delirium resulted in disjointed thought patterns, in hours of unproductive raving, and in thoroughly distracting spells of mindless shrieking, spewing, and weeping. The planet sucked harder, ravenous for abstract consciousness, while the prospectors, approaching death, simultaneously lost all capacity to generate the good stuff. It became a matter of managing their murders: of sucking them down, but not sucking them dry, of backing off, but not too far. With enough practice, the planet was able to clench-and-release in a kind of respiratory maneuver, squeezing the prospectors into the rock just to the point of hemorrhage, then relaxing and transferring needed sustenance into their wracked

mouths via the traction-smashed remains of nuzzling insects and protein-rich slime.

Revelations came fast-and-furious. When the prospectors' initial terror and desperation gave way to mindless horror, MW-9 found the experience so exquisite it started playing the men like exotic instruments; bending and tweaking, measuring pitch and amplitude—trying to get the broadest variation from each bottomless shriek. Eventually a pain threshold was reached, and the men began calling out directions and suggestions. MW-9 was able to match words with actions, and, cross-referencing those words and actions with thoughts and memories, rapidly learn of motive and rebuttal, command and rebellion, resistance and surrender.

Inevitably came death. First to go was the most vociferous: that thin, indefatigable screamer with the retching heaves, the bursting sores, and a tendency to profound bleeding. Next went the fat one; shaking spasmodically, massively sweating into the slime, crying out to relatives and deities unseen . . . then another and another—MW-9 found itself fast losing its learning source to an invisible and incomprehensible interloper; a force far deeper than physical pain and emotional suffering. Puzzling, too, was the prospectors' odd embrace of this final darkness over lingering horror—prior to acceptance and submission it had all been about survival at any cost, as though life, wretched life, held an indescribable significance. The planet felt *cheated*, having acquired the hallowed taste just as the cup went dry. And so it learned *frustration*, and, *challenge*, and, ultimately, *rage*, as it squeezed and released, prodded and peeled, squeezed and released—determined to develop linearly, voracious for understanding . . . and always demanding *more*.

Captain Tulman was first through the airlock. Having picked up no signs of life on the dinghy's inboard computer, he expected something grim. But the scene in that tunnel was so revolting he immediately threw out a restraining arm. The investigative crew of three craned to see.

All eleven prospectors stood spread-eagled against the tunnel walls, the remnants of their vital organs gleaming. Green spittle-like foam clung to the carcasses, catching and passing the airlock's artificial light. Halfway down the main tunnel, to the crew's right upon entering, squatted a dull-white plexiglass-and-steel dome serving as galley, rec room, and barracks. The foamy slime appeared

dependent on the rock itself, for the dome was untouched, as well as the six feet of stainless steel bore on the airlock's tunnel side. A gentle dirt incline led from this bore's lip into the tunnel proper.

Tulman ran his fingertips over the airlock's exterior panel. The site's lights began to glow, and a bellows was triggered behind the dome. When the tunnel was breathable the crew removed their suits. Tulman closed the inner lock and the men professionally moved to their jobs. In a minute forensic analyst Cobbe showed Tulman a digital slide containing a fresh veneer sample.

"This is living matter, Captain. It's dormant—locked up. It's not independent of the rocks or adjoining slime colonies, or, for that matter, what's left of Mr. Erenson here. We can consider this entire scene as analogous to a living body, with its various parts all working in harmony."

"And Erenson?"

"A food source." He gestured at the facing lines of bodies. "One of several."

Tulman leaned in for a closer look. The veneer appeared to withdraw ever so slightly. "So this slime is devouring the cadavers; breaking them down for nutrition."

"Yes and no." Cobbe tweaked his reader. "This material is acting as a go-between for these dissolving bodies and something else."

"Odd." Tulman laid his hand on a shoulder. "Selner, I want you to itemize everything in that dome. Iven, I'd like you to scan the insides so we can match your data with Cobbe's. We're looking for a bridge between the slime and a modifier. Cobbe, come with me."

They strolled down the tunnel, pausing at each cadaver for a sample and dialogue. Tulman was taken by an ineffable sense of tension in the place. "I have this feeling, Cobbe, of another presence. I'm not asking for a physical read. What are your impressions?"

Cobbe inhaled deeply. "Very spooky. Cold, dark, and quiet. Sepulchral. I'd say your reactions are perfectly healthy. I get the same heebies, and I'll wager Iven and Selner aren't yukking it up. Right now I'm probably the wrong guy to recommend you relax."

They walked on. The tunnel narrowed in direct relation to the increasing paucity of ore deposits, at the same time growing darker due to fewer strung lights. When they stopped the creepiness weighed a ton. Tulman and Cobbe shared the strangest anxiety—as though they were being observed at many levels; from all around, from up

close, from on high—with a burning curiosity and barely-contained want. They turned about slowly, their boots ringing against the rock.

At last Tulman muttered, “We’re not alone in here, Cobbe.”

“Just us dancing with our shadows, Captain.”

“Run a scan anyway.”

Cobbe’s fingertips played over a screen. “Life readings are restricted to our party and this slime.” He paused. “However.”

“Go on.”

“There are sentience readings unrelated to we four, yet definitely above the rudimentary level of this tunnel stuff.”

“How high?”

“Something else is alert here, Captain. That’s all I can tell you.”

Tulman’s eyes retraced their steps. “There are eleven prospectors, all accounted for, all stuck to the walls.”

“They’re very dead, Captain.”

“Apparently not.”

They walked back to the nearest. Richard Templeton, plastered into the rock and almost entirely coated in slime, was an unlikely candidate for Cobbe’s reading. His muscles were eaten away, right down to the bone. Orbits and nasal passages were gaping, the mouth chock full of dormant ooze. Cobbe scanned him left and right, ran a probe down the throat, rapped on the caved chest. “No, Captain.”

They proceeded back up the tunnel, carefully studying the remaining ten. “Absolutely nothing,” was Cobbe’s conclusion.

“Okay.” Tulman called out Iven and Selner. “I want you guys to extract and preserve what’s left of these bodies. Cobbe’s going to cull the necessary reads and samples. Whatever’s going on here, it’s not safe for further prospecting. I’m recommending a complete shut-down of operations. Once we’ve disassembled the dome and packed all the contents we’re going to burn out this place.”

There was an immediate change in the tunnel’s ambience. Everybody felt it. It was weird; as though all the shadows had shifted without any corresponding movements from the men.

Selner was first to speak. “Did you guys pick up on that?”

“Something else . . .” Cobbe mumbled, “is in here.”

Tulman nodded and motioned for silence. The men stood absolutely still. It was very cool in the tunnel; new air humped and sighed with the bellows, the strung lights rocked gently with its breath. Shadows skirted over the corpses and along the walls, and a

kind of tautness seemed to narrow the tunnel's bore. The men all became aware of a soft bubbling in the veneer. Tulman locked stares with Iven and gestured repeatedly with his eyes, indicating the dome. But the moment Iven's boot left the ground a nearby patch of slime peaked, zipped across the floor, and latched onto his ankle.

The ceiling and walls came alive. Green limbs formed out of humps and slapped about furiously; froth heaved, spilled, and rolled to the floor. Iven didn't have a prayer: a tentacle had clamped around his throat and slammed back his head. He snarled at the pain of traction, then, as the ooze on his scalp shrank back into the rock, threw open his mouth and screamed.

"Iven!" Tulmen called. "Work with us!" But the harder they tugged, the harder the rock resisted. Now slime raced up Iven's legs and attached to squirming buds on the wall. Under the mounting haul of several g force units, he let go with a wild scream that just went on and on until the tongue compressed. Iven's palate cracked and his eyeballs imploded. As if cued, fat strands came swinging down from the tunnel's roof, slapping forearms, catching in hair and clothes. The men ran for their lives. All around were hanging tendrils, whipping this way and that, snapping at anything moving, lurching along the floor in pursuit. Others lunged side to side until they met the walls, quickly forming a wide sticky web. Cobbe threw open the dome's hatch even as the first bolts came smacking along the sides. Goo plopped onto the roof, showing as deep gray blotches against the artificial light. The men caught their breaths and huddled.

"The room is being sealed," Cobbe breathed. He ran his fingers over the main board's sensors. "Ventilation is confined to outside. The dome won't be able to respire with the tunnel. We'll suffocate."

Tulman nodded. "Everybody head for the Tube." Just overhead, the slime immediately shifted. Tulman said, "Stop!" He held out his hands and slowly rose to his full height. After a minute he enunciated, "Forget the Tube, men. We'll get out the back hatch." The uneven silhouette seemed to bunch before rolling toward the rear exit.

Tulman dropped to his haunches. "An eavesdropper." The investigators crouched around him.

"This living matter," Cobbe observed, "is highly sentient. We now have an answer for those reads. It's hearing and comprehending."

“Impossible,” Selner whispered. “We’re speaking a sophisticated language. Sentience notwithstanding, the broad complexity of English can’t be taught on the spot.”

Tulman rose again. “Those men out there all spoke English. It was the going language around here. That garbage, you guys, has had eleven tutors-in-residence for over half a year.”

Cobbe took a swiveling chair and mused left and right. “Well, I’ll be. A fully aware, self-educating system, feeding on the thoughts of its victims even as it absorbs them.”

“And it’s all over Iven. And it knows our rationale. And it hears us.” His expression was sour. “Without ears?”

Fully one third of Selner’s resume was devoted to acoustics. “Probably via the dome’s skin, which by your own observation is acting as a tympanic membrane.”

Cobbe leaned in and lowered his voice. “It’s sensitive to our movements, too. You saw how it reacted when we took off.”

“Then we’re candy in a jar.” Tulman began to pace, watching the silhouette match his progress. He paused and cocked his head. “But it’s ignorant! How can slime know things intuitively?”

Cobbe dreamily wagged his head. “Not the slime, Captain. We have an unseen host, whoever or whatever it may be. As to ‘hearing’ us, well, a rude form of telepathy is a reasonable guess. After all, what’s thought but unspoken speech?” He rocked his chin on his folded hands. “We’re glued, we’re screwed, we’re food.” In a minute he smiled and looked back up. “Ig-pay atin-Lay.”

The two stared. Finally Selner said: “Ou-yay ean-may?”

Tulman showed a raised thumb. “Es-yay. A foreign tongue.” Speaking in pig Latin, he strongly enunciated instructions for an escape out the front hatch.

Selner and Cobbe nodded, took deep breaths, and tensed.

“On-ay,” Tulman said, “ee-thray,” and raised his voice to the ceiling. “Okay, men. We’re making a dash for the rear hatch, on the count of three. One . . .” the silhouette rolled across the roof, “two . . .” slabs and limbs streamed up the sides and joined the rearward flow, “. . . *three!*”

The men blew out the front hatch and raced for the airlock. The ruse was only good for a few seconds—before they’d run ten yards the tendrils were on them. Selner was caught first; grabbed around the waist and dragged halfway up the tunnel wall. Cobbe was clamped at the scalp and shoulders, Tulman struck round the lower chest. The captain kept going. The planet’s low-grav pull, along with

his natural athleticism, allowed him to capitalize on that momentum—to leap off the floor’s incline, to perform a complete upside-down kick in the air, and to crush the lash with his boot while simultaneously pushing himself onto the airlock’s outer lip. He turned on his hands and knees in time to see Cobbe pinned like a starfish against the wall.

This is what it was all about; MW-9 was rapt . . . loyalty in the presence of fear—powerful instincts put to the test. Tulman grabbed Cobbe’s jerking hand. The planet tugged harder. Tulman ran his forearm under the handhold and hauled with all his might.

The truth hit him like a fist, and in that instant Tulman became oddly empathic. One moment he was fighting the natural resistance of a living substance, the next he was caught in a primitive tug-of-war with something beyond the senses.

Percolating ooze worked its way around Cobbe’s eyes. “Please . . .” His head was drawn back until the Adam’s apple protruded. The flesh at his mouth tore away, his whole face began stretching back into the rock. Tulman threw all his weight into his right shoulder while the tendrils slapped and slid off the smooth steel casing.

The limb around Cobbe’s throat unraveled, and in a heartbeat latched onto the captain’s wrist. Tulman immediately pushed off. Using his momentum, he was able to twist around and trigger the airlock with his free hand.

In the sudden blast of light the tunnel became a surreal, nauseating horror; a rotting intestinal tract, an infested sewer, bounded by writhing tentacles and rearing spume. Cobbe and Selner were being torn into the rock, their contorted, slime-coated faces glistening green against the shadows.

And a black presence swooped up from the tunnel’s bowels, ever so slightly dimming the swinging lights. It hovered before Tulman with a bitterness too deep to fathom.

The captain stood mesmerized. Finally he muttered, “And fuck *you*,” and stepped into his suit. When it was fully pressurized he activated the belt’s electromagnet. Tulman was instantly slammed against the curved steel wall. He grabbed a handhold, said, “Goodbye, Cobbe,” and triggered the outer airlock.

The explosion of escaping air almost separated his shoulder. Bits and pieces of the tunnel’s innards—tendrils, lights, miscellaneous body parts—were sucked out in a great wheezing rush. Tulman waited for the gale to pass before deactivating the magnet. He slowly drifted out into space.

The blast had disrupted the airlock's internal lighting; unlit, the tunnel was a dead follicle. Tendrils waved languidly, crystallizing as he stared, breaking off in chunks that disintegrated on impact.

A fluctuating shadow rose to the airlock's rim, throbbing in perfect time with the captain's pulse. It took a minute for Tulman to realize he was being channeled. He released a distress flare and allowed it to drift. In the bright white halo the shadow quickly waxed opaque.

"We'll return," he said, "and when we do we'll blow you clean back to the planetesimal stage." He hung in the sentient field like a fly in a web. "If you can feel anger, you can feel fear. You think you got ripped off? You think you understand rage? You don't know the meaning . . . reach deep into my mind—read the memories of my species. See what we do to our own kind, all in the name of whatever cause is most convenient, and then just *know* we'll be back." He signaled the dinghy and watched as the buoy redirected. "So until that hour, you just make damned sure you remember the name *Human*." Once the hull had identified his signature, Tulman punched out a sequence that engaged the rockets. He tweaked his pad. The dinghy came up gently, looking like it was moving in slow motion, and turned perpendicular to the planet so that its rockets were burning quietly just above the airlock. It was a near fit; the dinghy could have descended into the tunnel without scraping its sides. The captain fired all rockets, producing a dazzling, silent storm.

"Now dwell on that."

Piety

Old Malachi raced down the grade like the Devil was after him. Halfway to Piety he whirled and posed menacingly, all fang and fire, but the big staghound's glory days were history. He stood panting on trembling legs, his eyes glazing, and for a moment seemed hypnotized by the rising moon. In his imagination he snapped back at those pink staring eyes, reared at that gray hairy frame, bristled at that odd, not-quite human smell. Hacking ferociously, old Mal continued his skid in a flurry of tumbling pebbles and rising dust.

Abel's eyes popped open.

There it was again. All that racket could only be Job's squeamish hound. Still fully dressed against the cold, the boy hopped out of bed and threw open his window to another crystal clear West Virginia morning. Abel saw what appeared to be a pack of lanky ghosts moving dreamily up the pine-lined grade connecting Piety with the Shepherd's Mound valley overlook. The ghosts were lost in trees, reappeared writhing in moonlight, were lost again. The sound of hounds after prey was just beginning to carry when Malachi staggered into the settlement making enough noise to raise the dead. In seconds light was streaming from every window. Abel pulled on his heaviest coat and gloves, tiptoed downstairs, and gently disengaged his father's Winchester from above the mantel. He would have stepped

outside but for a hairy hand on his shoulder.

Saul spun his son around, slowly unclenched his poised fist. He ran the hand up and down his face, gradually washing the fury from his expression. His eyes, still puffy with sleep, swept the faces gathering outside his door. "You maybe fixin on runnin off with the only rifle I got, boy?" He snatched the Winchester, grabbed the jamb and leaned out. "*Somebody shut that animal up!*" Malachi was heard gagging in a chokehold.

Saul would have reached for a lamp, but the full moon was tearing up the black morning sky. He studied his neighbors from the doorway's hollow, spat, and called, "*Boy!*" Abel's older brother limped through the crowd, fighting to keep tall.

"Dogs treed a bear, sir." Gabriel had to force his voice above a whisper. Saul's first-born lived in a ramshackle shed behind the house, out of view of healthy men and women. Piety's patriarch made certain, long ago, that the settlement's forty-odd residents were perfectly clear on genetics: blame for the young man's condition fell solely on the mother's side. Gabriel raised a deformed arm against the inferno in Saul's eyes; his father could whip his sons like dogs in public.

Saul swatted the arm away and shook the Winchester in Abel's face. "Next time you try that, boy, you'd best not let go so easy." He waited. "*Hear?*"

Abel looked away. "I hear you."

"Then, damn your eyes, *don't forget it!*"

As Saul tromped into the night the crowd immediately halved, leaving him plenty of room to stride. A muscle worked convulsively in Abel's jaw. He stepped outside with his heart in his fists.

Saul paused in a dirty pool of moonlight. He took his time filling and tamping a pipe, smoked thoughtfully for a while. There was very little eye contact. Aaron and Matthew, as always, were armed with family Bibles. Saul smiled back coldly, his nod almost imperceptible in the bowl's gentle flare. In this lull Gabriel slipped around the house and reappeared almost immediately, a pitchfork in one hand and a five-pound sledge in the other. He thrust the tines against Abel's chest. Abel snatched the handle and stared hard at his father's back.

Saul commenced a measured assault on the grade, flanked by his sons. Neighbors gathered in a loose trailing mob. The distant wailing of hounds was fading, but it was hard to tell whether they were receding in relation to the men or had been cut off by the pines.

As the pace picked up, Saul cocked the Winchester and fired a single round. The hounds, recognizing the report, quieted immediately.

In less than a minute the first brown shape came whimpering downhill, quickly followed by four others. The dogs swam miserably around Saul while he tramped, snapping at one another and gnashing the air. No additional commands would be necessary.

That one blast dramatically increased the party's excitement. Men bunched into a hard driving line, their breaths puffing out like the steam plumes of racing locomotives. Saul pushed the pace harder still, the sides of his opened greatcoat swinging back and forth as he marched.

Something pale passed between the trees. The men and dogs swung around a stand of sage, and so came upon a bare patch of hillside. Now Abel was certain he saw a ghostly shape hurrying through a copse of immature pines. There was a reddish double flash as it turned back its head. The apparition vanished.

"Git!" Saul spat.

The hounds broke uphill and disappeared in the trees. A minute later the men stormed the copse and burst upon a rocky alcove nestled in pines. There the hounds had cornered their prey.

The body of men automatically fanned out in a crescent, sealing off the alcove. Although the hounds lunged ferociously, they were in no mood to attack. Whatever they'd pinned had them too confounded to leap.

It certainly wasn't a bear, though it was broad enough, and furry enough, to give that impression. The coat was a dull gray, covering everything except the mask, feet, and palms. Abel thought it behaved a lot like a man; in the way it stood upright without rearing, and in the way it swung its arms as it paced. But its hunched carriage and small head were absolutely unlike any human he'd encountered. As he watched the milling hounds he was reminded of the biblical Daniel, complacent in a den of lions.

Saul's impression couldn't have been more to the contrary. He was picturing himself as the central figure in a swirling display; a fearless superior in complete command. From this vantage he looked down on the scene, saw himself raise the rifle and draw a bead. When he cocked the Winchester the creature started. Every man expected it to rear or bolt, so there was complete surprise when it looked passively into Saul's face and meekly lowered its head.

Not a man imagined Saul had the guts to arbitrarily perform what amounted to an execution without provocation. But there he

was, stepping forward deliberately, each pace marked by a blast from the Winchester.

Abel caught up before the echoes had died. “What’d you go and shoot it for, Pa?” He’d never seen such a coldhearted act.

“So help me, boy . . .” Saul lowered the rifle as the hounds bellied up, sniffing and crying oddly.

A voice in the crowd called, “Still kickin.” Saul jabbed it twice, noting critically how it squirmed. Three shots had penetrated the chest, yet the escape of vital juices was mild.

Abel went down on one knee and sniffed. He closely studied the pink frothing mask. “What in the name of God *is* it?”

“Old Man,” Gabriel whispered. “The Old Man of the Woods.”

Saul’s shook his head sardonically. “If my guess is any good it ain’t nothin made in the name of God.” He turned on the pressing bodies. “Now, you all get back. I *mean* it!” Curious white faces, moonlit crucifixes, brandished Bibles. Saul said with condescension, “Now, now, now—we all seen what we seen. This Thing creepin about. Good dogs actin like a bunch of women.” He poked it with his rifle and snorted, “Name of God . . .”

“But it wasn’t *doin* nothin!” Abel protested. “Didn’t come at us, didn’t try to run.”

Gabriel shook his head bravely. “You listen to Pa.” He raised the sledge like a blacksmith and cocked his head. “You aim to finish it off, sir? Or you want me to?”

Saul cocked his head and draped a casual arm over the stunted boy’s shoulders. “You run home, Gabe, and you fetch me a box of rail spikes, just the sharpest you can find.”

“Sir?” Gabriel swallowed, looking from the prone Unknown to that familiar fire in his father’s eyes. He dropped his head miserably and lowered the sledgehammer.

“Well, well,” Saul cooed, “ain’t we all sweet and soft now, little Gabriel? Just like your poor, disappointed Mommy would have wanted.”

“Sir, I—”

“Do it!” Saul spat. “And don’t you be tardy! I’m comin on mighty mean in my old age.”

The Old Man thrashed wildly as the first spike ripped into flesh. Abel and Gabriel, clinging to handfuls of fur, would have been

hurled aside if not for the quick support of half a dozen shouting men. The crowd swirled around the action hungrily, their moon-washed faces passing from bone-white to deep shadow—as Saul *again* raised the hammer, and *again* slammed it down. The final blow drove the spike solidly into wood. The Old Man whipped his head side to side and bowed his back. A shudder ran up his length.

When the crowd piled on he flailed hysterically. A fresh spike was driven through his left calf. The Old Man threw open his mouth in a long, wrenching shriek. The other leg was quickly impaled. He ceased screaming and froze in a wretched arch, favoring the wounded areas. The least move produced unbelievable agony.

Saul stood sweating, slowly clenching and unclenching his fingers, sucking saliva from the corners of his mouth. The primitive thrill passed from his eyes, and he relaxed.

“By God, sir,” Gabriel managed, “that oughta—that *should* oughta show who’s boss!”

“Look;” Abel whispered, as a series of spasms contorted the thing’s pink, pug-like face, “it’s still alive!”

Gabriel clamped a claw on Saul’s hammer arm. “Needs a couple more whacks, sir, is all. Just a couple more.”

Saul slowly turned his head. The full moon made Gabriel’s face a ghastly mask of morbid excitement. Behind him, a dozen others displayed a gamut of expressions; from shock and revulsion to anticipation and bloodlust. By his quick and intuitive appraisal, Saul knew just where his support lay. He addressed those squeamish faces frostily, his heart brimming with contempt. “Lord,” he said evenly, “I don’t make no claim as to knowin everthin what goes on. I’m a simple man, and not above basic corruption. But I knows sin when I sees it, and I hereby grudge all them cowards what defies your bidding.” He shook the hammer, flicked blood from his fingers. “God gimme the strength to do what’s got to be done.”

Saul draped his arms around his sons’ shoulders. “Now I want you boys to stand this critter up in plain sight, so’s everybody can see what I’m doin’s right.” He squeezed their arms affably, a kindly coach trying to drum up a little enthusiasm. “Somethin *special’s* happenin here, boys! Somethin important! The Good Lord is testin us with this wicked monster—no other explanation possible.” He gently steered them to the pine’s rotted base and nudged the pitchfork with

the toe of his boot. "Dig."

Saul relit his pipe and smoked patiently, facing the nervous crowd while Gabriel and Abel dug out a hole to post the pine. A nightmarish scream as his boys stood the tree upright, a round of moans from the neighbors. Saul smoked with affected nonchalance, for the first time in as long as he could remember battling a troubled conscience. It was that damned animal; wilting instead of defending itself, making him look bad in front of everybody. He turned back.

The thing's feet just touched the ground. A series of sobs escaped in irregular spurts, tapering to wet, hacking coughs. Gravity was pulling at the Old Man's length, stretching his wounds. Saul watched, fascinated. But as moonlight played over that flat twisted face, the cinched lids peeled apart and their opposing eyes locked. Saul shook from his widow's peak to his pinched, curling toes. Was this really *It*; that half-seen, scurrying creature of legend . . . sasquatch, troll, bogeyman, troglodyte; the fabled relic caught somewhere between man and subman . . . and would his god have created something so hideous and furtive, so *passive*? His words came back to haunt him—*was* this some sort of test? Just as blind ego was coming to his rescue, the thing's eyes rolled up and it renewed its moaning, but now with depth and continuity.

A hail of rocks battered the creature up and down. When the stoning ceased, Saul picked up Gabriel's hammer and a single spike. He guessed where the animal's heart should be. As he began his slow approach his doubt pursued him relentlessly. *Lord, give me courage. Guide my hand, guide my heart.*

Each new blow brought on a fresh convulsion, until the Old Man's frame crimped in a steady head-to-toe tremor. Eventually there could be no more pain. Nerves relaxed, violent contractions became feeble spasms.

The blows stopped.

Through a veil of blood the Old Man saw Saul step back, saw him grab a Bible from one man and a pitchfork from another. Saul weighed one against the other; the book in his left hand, the weapon in his right. He raised the pitchfork and held it high, hesitated.

The Old Man stared into eyes that glistened with an unfathomable rage. He stiffened and looked away, to where the tops of pines cut a jagged pattern in the false dawn, as Saul aimed the pitchfork for

his throat, and with a grunt drove it home.

Just before sunrise Saul trudged back up the grade, bleary-eyed and uniquely troubled, the Winchester cradled loosely in his arm. Every time he'd begun to drift, the white cramp of conscience rocked him right back up. He needed to face his demon in the flesh, rather than have it stare back meekly in his imagination—and this time without the presence of all those skittish neighbors. More than this, he needed that mocking gray monster as a trophy, was fully prepared to tear it down and drag it back to Piety. With each boot's crunch he grew in confidence, and by the time he stormed round the copse he was his unshakeable old, jerky-tough self again.

Dogs, or some other big carnivores, had made quick work of the intruder, and now there wasn't much left; just a knot of gristly strands still fixed to the pine. The anticlimax was so unfair Saul froze right where he was, reduced to a minor observer in a very dim big picture. And, as he stood nonplussed, dawn's first ray burned down the hills, brilliantly lighting the scene. An unprecedented, overwhelming pang of shame dropped him to his knees.

For a while his mind was blank. Only gradually did he become aware of the stench of his sweat, of the crushing ache in his head, of the oddly sour taste of cold metal. With a most unmanly cry, Saul tore the Winchester's barrel from his mouth and dropped the rifle between his knees. He struggled to his feet. In the warming wash of sun Saul was a tempest of conflicting emotions, at war with himself as much as his environment. The pine's leaning shadow fell across his eyes. He looked up. Black with rage, Saul went ballistic on the affixed remnants; ripping the strands free with his nails, trying to tear out the spike using only his hands. When that failed, he grabbed the Winchester by the barrel and smashed the stock repeatedly against the spike, succeeding only in rocking it aside before shattering the stock completely. Saul collapsed with the effort, one arm clinging to the pine, the other dead at his side. When he again found his feet it was a bright new day. Saul pushed off and, embracing his chest, staggered back down the grade to break the news.

Now!

The first gob was like any other: warm, well-aimed, expressed with certitude and contempt.

The second hit his cheek, just shy of the clogged broken nose. Numbers three and four were almost on top of each other—pat, pat—on his eyelid and beard. Pat, pat, patapat. Pat. Patapata. Pat-pat. Patapatapatapata, and the rain came down for real.

He rolled his swollen eyes—once to the left, once to the right. The lids were so damaged he could manage only a periscopic slice.

He was in a field, on his back, becoming drenched even as his senses became desaturated. The sky was black, gray, and heaving. It had to be winter; late December or early January. Rainwater made him gag, but he was too logy to turn away. The pain was vicious. His mouth had been kicked in: several teeth were missing; the gums clotted and bleeding, the jaw a rusty mangled trap.

He sat up and nearly passed out. But he recognized the signs, and didn't dare: he'd drown in the rain—croak tonight, half-buried in mud, a foul pocket of steam for Starbucks' horizon-searching crossword solvers. Before dawn the rats and possums would come for him, attracted by the blood. Once the field had dried out, the ants would get busy. The gulls and pelicans would show off the harbor, followed by crows and buzzards. A flesh hill for flies; big ones, marsh jumpers,

relentless in their work. The machine would break into full gear at this one sunken, miscellaneous spot, spreading its operation like a rank growing pool, horror to horror. And the flesh would dissolve in mandible and jaw, and the raggedy clothes would gradually fall away, and the innards would rot in the warm California sun until the unrecognizable pile stank so badly someone called a low-level emergency number. Too big to be a dog or cat. Smells something awful.

He lurched to his feet and stood swaying, pressing all available energy into the one vital effort of remaining vertical. His left side hurt so wildly he had to lean right. The giddily revolving field made him stagger, until his skewed equilibrium got him stumbling along, into holes, over roots, down and up the swirling polluted ditch, toward the fence . . . the fence—that collapsed border between the world of crawling, sucking nature and the world of paramedics and dumpster dinners . . . the fence, leaning in the leaning rain, snagging in his old coat, tearing a forearm, giving way that he might pitch over and crawl through the curbside growth, off the curb and into the road.

Cars braked and swerved needlessly, drivers hammered on horn plates, screamed obscenities, hurled miscellaneous refuse. He scrambled across the road and into the mall's parking lot, but the moment he hit the ground he was socked in by pain; he had to keep moving. He stumbled alongside a few storefronts until he reached a facing pair of cast iron benches. One seated a tiny old woman, so white and wizened she looked like she'd just been fished from the harbor. She watched him liting there, hands clamped on the opposing bench.

“You're a dirty man. A dirty, dirty man.”

Footsteps on wet cement; a splat and clacking.

A new voice demanded, “What are you doing here, buddy? Are you bothering this woman?”

A chubby security guard stepped between them, his expression and posture flat-out confrontational.

“Call the police,” the woman said.

“Is he bothering you, ma'am?”

“*Call* the police!”

The guard squirmed. “Well, there's no reason to do anything that radical, ma'am. I'll just escort him off-property. You'll be fine.”

The old woman's jaw fell. “Officer. Did you just hear me? I don't feel safe. He could come back. Now call the police!”

“I . . . ee-yuh . . . ma'am, to be honest, this isn't really an emergency situation. But I'll make absolutely sure that he doesn't—”

“Officer! I said to call the police! Where is your employer, officer? Do I need to talk to him?”

The good arm began to tremble, the knees gave way, and he collapsed supine on the bench; a pile of rags and refuse.

“I-ee-uh . . . oboy.” The guard fumbled out his walkie-talkie. “Yeah, Gopher, it’s Buddy. I’m over here in front of Dimple’s. We got some derelict wandered in off the street, and now he’s all flopped out on one of the benches. Right. Well, there’s a woman here who doesn’t feel safe and she wants we should call a cop . . . I copy that, man, but like I’m just passing it along, okay? What do you want we should do? No, don’t roust Al! It’s not that important, and anyway he said we got to, y’know, use our own initiative. I dunno. I can’t move him, and that’s lawsuit-type action, man; you know that. Whatever you want to do. I guess. Then it ain’t on me, man. Okay. Ten-four.” He stuffed the walkie-talkie in a coat pocket, knocking out a handful of corn chips.

“The police will be here in a scratch, ma’am. I’ll be right beside you all the time, so you don’t have to worry about anything.”

“He’s disgusting.”

“We get them from time to time, ma’am. They come dragging in off the beach or harbor. This one looks like he sleeps in the garbage. But I’ve never heard of ’em actually hurting anybody, you know, biting people or stuff like that. No reason at all to be scared. I carry pepper spray in case one should go off on somebody or something, and the station’s just down the street, so you can count on the police showing up real quick if you need them, ma’am.” Even as the words were leaving his mouth, red and blue roof lights showed at the drive. “And here they are now. See what I mean? No worries at all.”

The car pulled up beside them. A spotlight played for a few seconds. The lone cop stepped around the car. “Who called in the emergency?”

The guard tossed his head. “That would’ve been Gopher, over in the shack by Sauer Dog. I think the situation’s pretty much contained. This guy don’t want to move. I don’t know if he’s wasted or what. This lady here complained about him.”

“I don’t like him. I don’t like him at all. He smells bad and he looks dangerous. He’s a dirty man; a very dirty man.”

“Like I said.”

The cop turned to the other bench. “Sit up.”

He forced himself into a seated slump.

“What’s your name?”

Now!

“Lsr.”

“Loser? What happened to you, sir?” He passed a light eye to eye, gave the mouth a visual once-over. “How’s the other guy? You do some damage?” The eyes flickered. “Do you feel you need medical assistance, sir? Are you having trouble breathing or swallowing?” He tucked the flashlight under an arm and extracted a sterile glove from a pouch on his belt. “Hold still.” He used the gloved hand to examine the ears, mouth, and throat. “Stay put. Don’t move unless I tell you to.” He walked over to the security guard, now huddling beneath an overhang.

“What’s your name, Security?”

“Ernie. But around here I just go by ‘Buddy.’ Sometimes we like to—”

“Security?”

“It’s Ernest William Budd, sir.”

“Do we have an understanding, Security?”

“Look, I didn’t mean to come off—”

“Security. I didn’t ask you if you liked me, I asked you if we understood each other.”

“I was just doin’ my—”

“Security. Are you carrying your guard card? It’s required, you know, on this shift, on this property, on my time.”

“Yeah, well of course I—”

“Present it to me please. Remove it from the wallet; take it out of the little window. Thank you. This card is not well kept, Security. I need to be able to read these characters on the moment, not squint through thumbprints and cookie crumbs. I’d like you to clean, smooth, and file this little paper card very carefully; that’s if you ever get a free minute. Take a good look at it. Now take a real long look at this shiny thing on my chest. See the difference? Thank you. So what am I?”

“You’re a police officer, sir.”

“And what are you?”

“I’m a security guard, sir.”

“Now we’re *going* to have us an understanding, Security.”

“Sir?”

“Security: I like my coffee with one cream and two sugars. Not the other way around.” He grimaced. “Makes me think of mama. But *not* hot. And definitely not cold. There’s a crazy li’l *just right* in there somewhere, and I’m sure we’ll get it *just right* sooner or later. *Right?*”

“Sir!”

“Security? Don’t you have work to do? Patrol the premises, maybe do a little detex here and there so your boss knows you’re not too comfortable? Somebody could be in dire need right now, Security. Maybe some skateboarder’s running amok, maybe the supermarket’s short a boxboy. Or maybe that poor dumb son of a bitch back there needs counseling more than badgering. Maybe you could call the police when someone *needs* the police, instead of dragging me off my fucking lunch break to take down some homeless stiff who only needs a push in the right direction, instead of a bench in the rain. Get him off the property.”

“Sir.”

“I have your name and card number. Get him off the property.”

“Sir!”

“Security?”

“Sir?”

“How many creams?”

“Just the one, sir.”

“Just the one.” The cop stepped back behind the wheel, killed his emergency lights, and cruised away.

The guard came back clenching and unclenching his hands, his eyes on fire. When he reached the old lady he forced himself to relax. “I’m sorry, ma’am, but I . . . I . . .”

“Don’t be too gentle with him, officer.” She raised the umbrella to cover her eyes. “Not on my account.”

“Get the hell out of here! If I see you on my lot again I won’t need a cop, you hear me? I’ll kick your a—excuse me, ma’am—I will eject you with any means at my disposal. Now *Go!*”

He wobbled up and careened the way he’d come, swung left at the sidewalk and staggered to the corner. The rain picked up momentarily, but he was too dazed to worry about shelter. It was all he could do to remain standing.

A man was melting out of the drizzle, crossing the street slowly but purposefully; bent face hidden beneath a rubberized rain cap, slight frame bundled in a trench coat under a clear plastic protector. He skipped a couple of puddles, keeping his head down, his hands clenched in the coat’s pockets. The last few steps were taken with care, that he not appear the aggressor.

“Please don’t be alarmed. I need only a minute of your time. If you’d like a clean bed and some dry clothes, a hot meal and a storage

Now!

locker, I'm the guy to see. There's showers and basic stuff; you know, radio and TV . . . nothing fancy. I can even put a few bucks in your pocket . . . here and there." One eye showed as he skewed his head. Very old, in his seventies. Angular face. Lots of acne scars. A fair Caucasian, Midwest accent. He very slowly removed a cheap pop-up umbrella from under his coat, thumbed it open, and gently tucked the handle behind the filthy coat's lapel, creating a hood against the rain. The umbrella cut out the back-glare of floods and neon, allowing the wasted mug to show in bleak humps and hollows. Deep compassion ran over the stranger's face like passing headlight beams. He breathed, "Oh, my," and squinted up at the heaving mist. "What else? I.D., if you've lost yours. There's a phone to call home . . ." He looked inward, at a bruise too deep to display, and sighed, "What's your name, son?"

"Lr."

"Larry?"

"Ltr."

"Later? Lothar? Luthor?"

"Lsr. Ltr."

"Lester. I have a two-point proposition for you, Lester. Option One is you can come along with us now, and we'll get you all fixed up." He pointed across the street, at a white van idling in anticipation, a long exhaust plume marking its tail. He pulled a business card from a coat pocket. "Option Two is you can dial the number at the bottom of this card and ask for 'Mr. D'. It's a toll-free number; won't cost you a thing. The boys'll drive out straightaway, and pick you up whenever you're ready. I like to throw out this option in case someone is, understandably, trepidatious about the whole affair. But there's no reason to be nervous." Mr. D now cupped both Lester's hands in his. He squeezed those mangled hands with sympathy, with necessity, with poetry. "Look down at our hands, Lester. Look down at our hands." Pinched against the business card was a meticulously folded twenty dollar bill. "Many establishments simply will not serve the homeless; there are hygiene laws and all that. But this money, if used in a timely manner, may help preserve your vital existence—if only for a space. I do not dole out such a sum willy-nilly. But I find a certain potential in you, son; one that has surely gone unnoticed." Mr. D looked down with a kind of jaded embarrassment, pearls dripping from his brim. "There's always that Third, unspoken Option, Lester. We can turn about, go our separate ways, and this little slice of magic

will have never occurred. You may keep the twenty. But I would urge you most emphatically to hang onto that card.”

Lester’s arms worked their way up, out of his control, until the squashed bill and card were nested in his palms. Again Mr. D cupped Lester’s hands, his eyes all but welling.

“Bless you, son. They are yours to keep. Come with me.” He gently led Lester across the street to the van.

Inside were a large, strapping black man behind the wheel, and a small, scrawny white man in the back. They were dressed in hand-me-downs. The black man wore a leather flyer’s cap, the white man a rainbow stocking hat. The small man slid open the cargo door. Mr. D helped Lester climb in.

“Lester,” he said, motioning to the black man, “this is DeeWayne.” DeeWayne grinned chummily. “And this is Andrew.” The little white man nodded and gave an arcing wave of the hand. “Boys, this is Lester. He’s agreed to come along and get cleaned up. He’d like to enjoy our company, and I know we’ll enjoy his.”

“Welcome aboard, Les!” said DeeWayne.

Andrew smiled like a zoning chipmunk. “Good to know you, big guy. Great to have you with us.”

Mr. D folded himself onto an upturned milk crate. Most of the van was taken up by bags and boxes. There was a smell of rain and overripe apples. “I apologize for the inconvenience, Lester, but we use this van more for the transporting of food and material than persons. Please make yourself as comfortable as the circumstances will permit. You are free to leave at any time, but I so want you to see what the compound has to offer. If for any reason you are dissatisfied with our accommodations, we will cheerfully return you to this very spot. But that would be a true tragedy.” He drummed his palms on his thighs. “Now. I need to have a word with the owner of this convenience store. I promise you I shall be but a minute.”

DeeWayne’s smile lit up the interior. “Okey-dokey, Mr. D! I’ll keep ’er revving!”

Mr. D smiled back and hopped out. He sidestepped puddles, flashing that tender grin at everyone he passed. Lester had just time to see him handing a bill to a panhandler before Andrew eased shut the door, leaving a crack to peer out.

DeeWayne spun in his seat. “*Listen, bitch!* I’m telling you once, and once alone, so you clean that fucking shit out of your ears and listen! You *best* not be holding any needles or bringing in any drugs. You got me? You *best* not be having any outstanding warrants,

Now!

you *best* not be having any bugs on you. No sex-communicating diseases, no weapons, and no outlandish fucking mental problems. Do we *understand* each other? *Are you fucking deaf, too?* That's a good man just walked into the store; that's a holy-ass righteous motherfucker, and he saved me, and he saved a whole lot of other sorry assholes who didn't have a prayer or a dollar. I *love* that man, *you hear me, motherfucker?* And I'll whip the shit out of any standout son of a bitch who don't have the grits to do *whatever* he says, *whenever* he says it, for no other good'n'goddamn reason except *because* he says it. I *will* make him come out *right*—if I have to violate parole to do it. *You got me?*”

Andrew laughed musically. “Sound down, Dee. Come on, man. We're all good here; we're cool.” He peeked out the crack. “He's coming back. He's carrying some stuff. Here he comes. Everybody mellow out.” Andrew slid open the door just as Mr. D reached the van. The drizzle was tapering nicely, but he kept his stuffed arms down. He hopped back inside, planting his butt on that same upturned milk crate.

“Merry Christmas, gentlemen!” In his arms were bags of chips, nuts, and jerky. He passed the treats around. “I want you guys to put out the good word on Markey's Quik-Stop. The franchise owner's a scholar and a gentleman. He was at another outlet, but he left these goodies just for us. What a prince!” He turned to Lester with misting eyes. “Eat up, son! Let this be a reminder: the world is full of good, wise, and humane men and women. Nobody has to go hurting.” He raised a trembling hand. “Markey's!”

DeeWayne and Andrew lifted their hands as one, called out “Markey's,” and slapped their palms against that delicate raised hand. Mr. D shook up and down, grabbed Lester's free hand and kissed it over and over, his breath bubbling in his throat.

“Markey's!” DeeWayne cried, and put the van in gear.

“Markey's.”

Mr. D's compound was right alongside the freeway; the offramp was their overlook. It wasn't all that big: half an acre of bare dirt surrounded by caving chain link. They could see a big old warehouse with a broad level roof, positioned forward on the lot and flanked by a number of broken-down office trailers. Behind the warehouse were dusty cars and vans, a few sagging motor homes, an antique converted school bus.

DeeWayne whipped the van off the ramp onto a parallel dirt road. It was an adroit move, but a dangerous one. He said quickly, "I know, Mr. D, I know. I done it again. But did you see that semi bearing down on the left? He was trying to beat me out on the bottleneck. Can you believe it?"

Mr. D hauled himself back up with the hanging end of the passenger-side's broken shoulder strap. He'd been expecting as much. "Last time," he said, "I believe it was a runaway house trailer." He smiled warmly at Lester. "We kid each other sometimes. These boys are like my own sons."

Andrew leaned forward, embraced Mr. D, and kissed him smack on the cheek. "Papa!"

DeeWayne laughed and whacked Andrew upside the head.

"No matter how many times you disown 'em," Mr. D concluded.

The front gate was open on a permanent basis: a smashed-in skeleton made fast by twisted-round coat hangers. DeeWayne turned in with exaggerated care, winking at Mr. D all the while. Andrew slid open the cargo door and they all piled out. DeeWayne and Andrew walked in through the solid front's little side door, while Mr. D vigilantly accompanied the hobbling newcomer.

It was all beds and bunks and sofas and mattresses. A single row of high windows on either side provided plenty of daylight. Ranks of ceiling lights were blazing against the weather. Kitchen, showers, and office were in the rear.

Sixty-seven pairs of eyes coldly watched Lester pass. These were hungry faces, molded by years of guerilla survival in the streets, penitentiaries, and halfway houses; life streams that serve only as spawning grounds for miscreants. Mr. D, genially greeting his charges all the way, led Lester to an old steel motel bed with a scratchy khaki military blanket.

"This is yours, son. This is yours, Lester." The crowd pressed in. A lanky tattooed man on an adjacent bed watched Lester like a snake. Mr. D patted the blanket. "Go ahead, son. Give 'er a test run."

Lester carefully stretched out on his back. It was feathers and clouds. It was new-mown grass. The smell of chili con carne wafted from the kitchen, with an undercurrent of baking bread and hot cocoa. For a silken moment Lester's whole body relaxed; his blood seemed to warm, his eyelids to shiver. The moment passed.

Mr. D was delighted. "And you'll have your own locker, with a combination known only to you! There are games and magazines

Now!

. . . TV and radio . . . lots of stuff. But let me give you the grand tour first. You can rest in a bit. Boys!” Only Andrew accompanied Mr. D and Lester to the back; DeeWayne was hanging with some of the rougher-looking tenants. Lester peripherally watched them huddle and glare.

“Here’s the kitchen; we’ll get some real chow in you in a minute. These are the showers, and I’m afraid I’ll have to insist you give yourself a good hot scrubbing, Les. We’ve had our share of problems with vermin; nobody’s fault, life can be rough. But trans-communication’s a terrible thing, and I would be derelict as head of this household were I to not lay down some ground rules for the good of all. This is my office. Andrew, allow me a minute or two alone with Lester, please. The formalities.”

Mr. D led Lester into his little office. Andrew closed the door behind them. “Please sit here, son.” Lester took the indicated chair across the desk from his host. Mr. D removed his rain cap and wiped his forehead with tissue from a desktop box. His wispy scalp was spotted and creased, his hair so white it was all but transparent. He sniffed, wiped his narrow nose, and donned a pair of bifocals. A clipboard came from an upper drawer, a felt pen from his shirt pocket. He tilted back his head.

“There are certain preliminaries involved, Lester. No organization can long exist without careful planning and the meticulous keeping of records.” He raised his eyes. “You look like you’ve been roughed up. I’ll need to have you examined by a physician. Doctor Glover is a fine man and a good friend. He actually lives quite nearby, and volunteers his services readily. He will be by as soon as I give him a call.” Mr. D winked. “Doesn’t look all that shabby on his résumé, either.” He looked back down. “We’ll get you some fresh clothes from the Hamper. I don’t think you’ll wow the ladies, but you’ll be clean anyway. And it’s our policy all furnished clothing be washed a minimum of twice a week. Machines are in an enclosure out back. I’d like you to shave and have a haircut, at least once. Injuries and infections can go unnoticed under a man’s beard and locks. If Doctor Glover prescribes medication, you are required to follow the prescription. We are well-connected with the wonderful people at Roosevelt Clinic. And I’ve found vitamins to be just as important as good food and exercise. Once we get your health back up, you will be requested, but not required, to assist in food runs, basic cleanup around the property, light errands; you know, stuff like that. Let’s see now. Am I forgetting anything . . .”

“Ahr . . . arru . . . are you Jesus?”

Mr. D’s head cocked. His mouth twisted about: he was uncertain whether to smile or frown. Half a minute later his expression was dead-serious.

“Lester. My name is Mr. Dreir. Mr. Carl Dreir. I made a lot of money over the Internet, both in the stock market and on ebay. These are similar to stores; they’re virtual workplaces you can manipulate through your computer. If you’re a pretty savvy guy, and have a knack for getting in on ground floors—and I’ll be perfectly immodest here: I am and did—you can make a lot of money, very fast and very surreptitiously. I used to be, believe it or not, a terribly poor fellow. I flipped burgers, washed windshields, walked dogs. Then I ran into some people who showed me how a man, with just a computer, a modem, a little luck and a lot of chutzpah, can buy, sell, jump in, back off—well, you get the picture. I was quite wealthy before I knew it. I bought property, I bought titles, I bought on common sense rather than impulse . . . this may sound unreal to you; it sounds unreal to me even now as I speak it—but in the space of three short years I went from near-penury to a state of wealth I’d never dreamed of.”

Mr. Dreir rapped a knuckle on the desk. “Funny thing. All that money had no effect on my ego. Zilch. Instead of feeling more successful, all I felt was guiltier. I started seeing people—people who were hurting—as an investment in something bigger than myself. One day I gave some poor lady a roof and a future, the next day it was a whole little tribe living under an overpass. I bought this compound and some vans, made friends with a couple of store managers—” Mr. Dreir did something that struck Lester as strange: he turned and stared with brimming eyes and a bizarre grin. There were lots of things going on in that smile—confusion, pride, awe, fear. “And you know what, Lester? It felt good; real good. *I* felt good. I was growing in ways that luxury and status can never provide.”

Mr. Dreir now reached across the desk and clasped Lester’s hands in his own. He seemed to be caressing every scar and blister as though they were nubs of exquisite worth. Lester was surprised to see that Mr. Dreir was weeping—not overtly, not shamefully, not with effeminacy. With dignity.

“Lester. When I first purchased this place it was nowhere near as orderly as it appears today. Everything has been picked up, patched up, cleaned up—all except for one little spot. That one little spot is a kind of closet we all jocularly refer to as the Confessional. It’s not really a confessional; there’s no confessing, no guy in a robe behind a

screen, no religious significance whatsoever. It's just a room where people can be alone with their thoughts for a spell, and try to figure what they're really looking for in life. When you ask me these questions about Jesus and whatnot, I feel you're actually addressing your personal spiritual side. That's your space, and nobody belongs in there but you. Not me, not some proselytizer—just you. Okay?" Dreir nodded once, with conviction. "As I was saying, after I'd bought the property and everybody was moving in, I sort of locked myself away in that room and asked myself: Am I crazy? Is what I'm doing making any kind of sense? And I found something in there I'd never found before. And do you know what I found in there, Lester? Do you know what I found?" It looked like internal stress would break Mr. Dreir's face into moist giving pieces. "I found *me* in there, Les." He nodded again. "I found me." Dreir abruptly released Lester's hands. His expression became businesslike. "Ever since, I've asked newcomers to check it out on arrival. Not an obligation, not a rule; just a suggestion. So give it a shot for ten." For a moment Dreir appeared at odds with himself. "I'm going to let you in on something, son." He rapped that gnarly old knuckle rapidly. "The man I bought this place from told me about that little room almost exactly as I am telling you now; sitting across from me at this very desk, looking into my eyes with a depth at that time unfamiliar. And he told me that happiness is only a dream. He said that sentient life, due to its subjective nature, is destined—or, perhaps more accurate, doomed—to pursue the unattainable." He vaguely waved a hand. "Perhaps his leanings were Buddhist, or he might have been an existentialist. Whatever. The point I am attempting to assay here, Lester—and it was merely his theory, mind you—is that this hypothetical state of happiness cannot be contained, cannot be extended. The machinery of being causes a man to strive, rather than loiter. In an otherwise healthy human, a state of enduring happiness would indicate self-delusion, mental retardation . . ." Mr. D's eyes burned into Lester's. "A sleeping man approaches that state of bliss, embraces it for a heartbeat, and—" he snapped his fingers. Brittle and spindly as those old hands were, the report came, in that hushed little office, like the snap of a whip. "And he is once again in the Here and Now. He wakes to the inevitable torment, to the want, to the soul's undoing, to the . . . decay." Dreir's whole frame sank into his chair. "In real-time existence, according to that man's philosophy, a wide-awake individual can undergo a similar process, only so gradually as to be unaware. In other words, he may ride the crest of events, and be washed up on the shore of happiness,

so to speak, only to be just as surely sucked back by the undertow. Forward, peak, reverse. Up, tremble, down. Advance, retreat . . . surrender. As though a man's life were a series of waves—a tide beyond his control. Oh no no no, Lester: that undertow does not necessarily contain the precise elements as the breaking wave—the details can be different, but the process is the same . . . forward and reverse, growth and decay, hope and dismay—the controlling force is the Worm, son, and he is in all things.” Dreir sighed. “Predestination is a difficult concept to accept . . . which only buttresses that fellow's assumption of happiness sought in a vacuum. Free will, blind chance, just desserts . . . forgive me, Lester. I do not mean to bring you disquietude in this loving place. Just an old man rambling at the deaf portal.” He lowered his head, leaned forward, and gripped Lester's hands with useless passion. “Bless you, son. Bless you, bless you, bless you.” Dreir leaned back. “I wish for you to experience that heartbeat, Lester. In our so-called Confessional.” Mr. D now reached under the desk and came up with a shaggy old dog, its newspaper cushion still gripped in its claws. Dreir carefully removed shreds of paper before gently placing the dog on his desk for Lester's inspection. The thing was so faded it could hardly stand.

“This, Lester, is Boy.” He steadied the old dog in the crook of his left arm and used his right hand to wave its forepaw. “Boy, Lester. Lester, Boy.” The dog swayed, dipped, and folded into a mangy pile. Mr. D sighed clear from the grave. “Boy is blind and unable to function healthfully, as he had the misfortune of belonging to a cruel master, who could not appreciate the love of a sweet creature such as this dear and devoted animal. Due to his advanced age he is unable to hear in one ear, slow and prone to crabbiness . . . nature's banes . . . yet, despite his years, he should be able to walk normally, digest properly, sleep in peace . . . he does not deserve to suffer so . . . no . . . not Boy . . .” Mr. Dreir caressed Lester's hand and Boy's curls, his eyes melting in their sockets. “Nevertheless, son, you will encounter so many wonderful souls in this world. In this very compound—you will meet unfortunates as yourself, who are dedicated only to the comfort and succor of their fellow man.” He dropped his head one last time and pushed himself to his feet.

“I've a pick-up to handle over at the Ralph's on Harrison. Andrew will show you the room. See if you can get inside yourself; do a little searching. When I get back maybe we'll be in a better frame for communicating.” He cracked the door. “Andy, show Lester into the Confessional. There's somebody in there he'd like to meet.” Mr.

Now!

Dreir picked up the clipboard. His cell phone rang and he clamped it on an ear. "I'm coming, I'm coming." He carefully placed Boy on the floor, attached a little leash, and slowly walked him to the door. Decrepitude, high and low, passed from the room without looking back.

Andrew took Lester's elbow. "C'mon, Big L. We all gone in, and we all come out none the worse." He moved his head Lester-wise, but backed off at the smell. "I'll let you in on the grits right off: ain't nothin' in there but a man's conscience. Don't let Mr. D spook you none. Just talk to the Man and c'mon back out." They halted outside a little door. "I'll come for you in ten." He grinned and wagged a schoolmarmish forefinger. "No sleepin' now!" Andrew opened the door and switched on the light. Lester shuffled into a room no larger than a motel bathroom. It was as Dreir said: a blank little cubbyhole, unkempt and unresolved. Andrew closed the door.

Lester came to his knees by degrees, the single dusty bulb shivering from stale displaced air. He blew caked blood onto a sleeve. He could breathe. "Sir . . ." The effort at cogency was just too much. Lester swung his bowed head left and right. "Sir . . ." He looked back up. "Sir . . . please help me. Please. No more. I . . . I—please. No." He sobbed for air and hacked, spewing all over his beard and coat. "Sir . . . I can't, sir . . . I can't." His face shook and relaxed, shook and relaxed. Lester raised his two mangy paws as abbreviated fists, the deformed digits unable to clench. "If you care, *help* me," he managed, "*please!* I can't, sir. Please. Show me." Lester coughed, almost retching. "Please, sir . . ." he wheezed. "*Now*. Please."

There was a knock and the door creaked open. "You still awake in there?" Andrew smiled. "Come on, man. Let's go and get you some grub."

DeeWayne stopped them in the hallway. His eyes tore into Lester's. "What'd I tell you? I said if you got any bugs you wasn't to come in here without a proper delousing." He swung his head. "Isn't that what I told him?" Andrew smiled uncertainly.

DeeWayne pulled out a pair of generic plastic surgical gloves, jammed them on up to the wrists. "*C'm'ere!*" He grabbed a handful of Lester's hair and dragged him into the main warehouse. At Lester's bed he pushed until that smashed red nose was almost buried, like a furious master about to toilet-train a diarrheic puppy.

There was nothing to see but linen.

"Deaf *and* blind, huh? Well then, asshole, let me describe it for you. They's called lice, and they transport from man to man, you

dig? Right now they could be anywhere on these-here premises, 'cause if they's on this bed they's anywhere your homeless ass been. That means in the Confessional, that means in the van, that means in Mr. D's own personal clothes for all I know."

He roared like a lion, grabbed Lester's hair in both hands, and hurled him crashing into a bedpost. "Stay out of this, Andy, unless you want a piece of me too." He punched and kicked, savagely, until Lester curled into a shaking fetal ball, then went ballistic; breaking a dustpan, push broom, and waste basket on the forearms and skull. When he ran out of weapons he gave a little shriek and began kicking the face maniacally; slobbering in his passion, falling and whaling from the floor, staggering upright, starting the process all over. Half the compound's occupants cheered from a growing ring, half scrambled for cover. Lester was battered along like a smashed snake, sobbing with fear as he tried to make his feet. When DeeWayne came after him with a lock and chain, Lester pushed himself to his knees and lurched out the door.

"That's right, bitch, get out of here!" DeeWayne was an immensely strong individual. He now grabbed Andrew in one hand and Lester in the other, dragged them, pumping his arms left and right, clear across the lot to the van. "Open the damn door, Andy."

Andrew did. DeeWayne kicked Lester inside, then kicked Andrew in behind him. "Close the damn door, Andy. If he moves, brain him." DeeWayne stomped around to the driver's side, jumped in and fired up the van. He took off like a lunatic, barely able to control the wheel. Lester and Andrew were hurled into a common lump amidst bags and damaged fruit.

DeeWayne swore as he tore onto the freeway, vilely and repeatedly. He cut off cars, lane-hopped wildly, broke every law in the book. Only the stress-relief caused by time and miles saved Lester from a solid tire iron-whooping. When they reached Markey's Quik-Stop he screeched to a halt and composed himself.

"Open the damn door, Andy."

Andrew did. DeeWayne watched Lester in the rear-view mirror. "Get out."

Lester didn't need to be told twice. He scrambled out and pitched onto the sidewalk.

"Close the damn door, Andy."

The door slid shut and the van roared off.

Lester used a bus bench to haul himself up. He collapsed supine on the seat, left arm hanging over the gutter. He could tell at

Now!

least one rib was broken; he had to force shallow breaths, even as every nerve demanded he savage the air. An eardrum was popped or inflamed, the same-side orbit crushed, the mouth locked up—his stomach was . . . twisting, he couldn't hold it, his eyes bulged as he fought against countering life-forces: those dyed-in-the-demon opposers that won't let a wracked-and-ready animal die before it has experienced agony's full measure. Unable to lift his head, Lester puked bloody bile, on his coat, over his face, out and back up his desperately flaring nostrils.

A spotlight made his private hell available to all. An amplified voice snapped, "*You on the bench.*" A car door opened. A flashlight's beam fried his eyes.

"Sir. I need you to sit up for me."

A second voice, farther off: "Medical?"

The first voice. "Sir, do you need a doctor's attention?" Something banged his smashed shoulder. "Sit up."

Lester sat up at an angle, his left arm a straight prop for his shot Pisa-tower frame. He sucked wretched life back up his broken nose. The light moved eye-to-eye. The series of questions were looped sections of the same old nightmare: Drugs? Alcohol? Identification? Address? Employer? Person to contact? General relief? Medi-Cal?

When the list was completed the light fell away. "Sir, I need you to vacate this bench immediately. Benches are not community property; they are provided for the convenience of persons financially capable of purchasing a seat on one of the lines, though frankly I doubt you'd be permitted to board in your present condition. *Do* you have bus money?"

Lester squeezed shut his eyes as another wave threatened.

"Then you have the option of walking away or facing arrest."

That second voice, with feeling: "Not in my car, Terry. I'm serious."

"Get up."

Lester draped his arms over the bench back and rose by walking up his butt. His knees screamed in protest.

"Keep going." The light swung to his feet. Lester stood in a punch-drunk sway. "Get moving. Stay on the sidewalk. Do not cross the street against traffic. Use the crosswalk like everybody else. Push the button until you see the steady green hand. If you're halfway across the street and that hand turns red and starts flashing, I want you to turn around and walk back to the curb. I don't care what the

instructions say on the little box. Do it until you get it right. We hit this corner every hour. I don't want to see you back here again. Do we understand each other?"

"Thnk . . ." Lester managed. "Thkyu."

"Get going."

Lester clung to the pole like a drunk to a rail. He pushed the signal call button with deliberate accuracy and stared at that stern red hand forever. The patrol car cruised off. When the happy hand appeared it took Lester a full thirty seconds to peel himself off the pole, so by the time he was halfway across he was already being warned back. A bitty old lady stood on the island, hanging onto the miniature median call stand with one arm, her purse clutched meaningfully in the other. Her eyes were searing. "Get away from me," she gnashed, "you filthy animal." Lester staggered back to the curb. The old lady began a resolute march, against the light, while left-turning traffic waited patiently and drivers farther back, ignorant of the situation, leaned on their horns. It took two entire series, red through green, for the biddy to make the curb, one baby-step at a time, and by then the intersection was in gridlock. The moment she conquered the curb the whole mess blared past.

She stood glaring for the longest time. The walk hand glowed. The old lady raised hers in imitation, waved it in front of Lester's fractured face. "What are you—dreaming? Wake up! You can go now. *Go!*" He stumbled off the curb and half-ran, half-staggered across the street.

He had to feel his way along the south wall to reach the mall parking lot. Lester collapsed in a doorwell, gripping his side. There was some serious internal damage; the spleen, perhaps, or a section of gut. His mouth had taken a real booting—teeth, tongue, lips. Lester wheezed away the blood. He opened his coat and gingerly lifted the shirt. His left lower quadrant was one massive bruise; just looking at it made him grind his teeth and squeeze shut his eyes. Gradually his head reclined in a whipped animal nod. Bloody saliva rolled into his beard.

His foot was kicked, then the leg. The bad leg. Lester's eyes popped open and he snarled.

A skinny brown security guard was looking down on him, his cap tilted aggressively. "Get out of the doorway, asshole. You ain't supposed to be on this property, and you know it." He kicked harder. "Don't fuck with me, motherfucker! I'll mace your ass in a hurry." Lester's striving hands failed him.

Now!

The guard tore out his walkie-talkie. “Peepers? I got a bum down here at SweePea’s. No, but he’s giving me a hard time. He don’t want to leave. Sure I told him, man; first thing out of my mouth. Can I juice him? But he *is* resisting!” He kicked savagely, just below the bruised quadrant. Lester roared to his knees. “He’s coming at me, Peeps! Didn’t you hear that? I got to protect myself, don’t I? Then how about the stick? *But you heard*, damn it!”

Lester pulled himself to his feet. The guard shoved the walkie-talkie back in its holster.

“Get your nasty ass out of here! Snap out of it, punk—go do your sleeping somewheres else.” Lester staggered past. The guard, attempting to kick Lester’s hindquarters, slipped in a puddle and fell on his own. “*Go!*”

Lester stumbled into the road, hugging his screaming side. Braking cars swerved on the wet asphalt. He stumbled into the undergrowth and pitched over a crushed section of fence, pulled himself past the ditch and went kicking through roots and scrub. Something large darted between his flagging feet. Eyes gleamed in the brush and scattered; some were not so quick. Lester’s legs gave out and he fell on his back to protect his injured vitals. Something moist slapped his forehead; blood from above. Another hit his cheek, and another, his nose. Half a minute later the rain was coming down for real.

Why Did You Kill John Lennon

The rain came down only intermittently, but it seemed every time she stepped out from under a storefront awning she was forced to skip right back under. These streets would never wash clean. The rubbish, the homeless, the graffiti—the whole setup made her cluck as she paced, though she'd seen it all a thousand times and more. Cities are just spawning grounds for sinners. Her sweet nature made her want to adopt every waif and squatter, but her good sense and a lifetime of experience caused her to keep her distance.

Tonight was different, somehow. The rain was playing a tenderer symphony, the brick and asphalt glinted in the stoplights' cherry, lemon, and lime, and her social security payment, just cashed and resting deep in her withered bosom, made her feel guilty, privileged, and unnecessarily insular. So she resolved to assuage that guilt by heaping charity upon the next victim of the streets, and when she finally encountered him he was just made to order: washed up against Ernie's Liquor like so much sewage, hapless and unkempt; a poster child for the area's sprawling human waste.

His poor eyes rolled heavenward when her pittance of a shadow reached him. "Lady," Bimmy croaked, haunch-rolling against the rain-damp wall. "I mean, like, *Ma'am*. I ain't ate in a week, maybe two. You know how it is. Or maybe you don't—I ain't tryin to be

Why Did You Kill John Lennon

personal or nothin here, but I'm like, *starvin*, okay? I really hate to ask, and I know you must think this is all a put-on, and that I'm gonna hump right into this here liquor store and glom me a quick Mickey's, but that ain't the case. I need to eat, and I need to eat bad. Just a dollar, sweetheart; only a buck. That's all I'm askin, okay? Could you help me out, could you please, and God bless you for your kindness. I'm really hurtin here."

She bent at the waist and her dear eyes welled. "Young man." Her gaze fell on the empty malt liquor bottle tucked behind him, on the stinking rags of clothes, on the nicotine and urine stains. She righted herself, hands on hips, and considered. Now it was getting really cold and wet. This particular corner was fractured by a hundred pitiless headlight beams, and the pavement seemed to ooze underfoot. She shivered in neon, huddling her old coat about her. A remonstrative forefinger rose, only to descend in goodly Christian hindsight. The hand dipped into her brassiere and reappeared with a single neatly folded dollar bill. "Young man, each and every act of charity comes from the bidding of our sweet Lord Jesus, not from His sheeps' will. This dollar is an investment in your soul's immortal path. You must treat it not as a gift, but as His staff."

"Oh yes, ma'am. Bless you. And bless him and bless his staff and the whole crew. And most of all bless you for investing in my soul's immoral path. Bless you bless you bless you."

"Now, I mean it; I want you to use this dollar wisely. I want you to promise it won't go for any liquor."

"No booze, ma'am. Swear to god and by all that's good and holy. You got my word."

"No drugs or tobacco."

"Perish the thought. I'm clean, I tell ya; clean as a fresh syringe. Look at my arms; you wanna see my arms? Flea bites, but that's all. God, it's rough, ma'am. Starvin' in the rain and cold and fleas and searchlights, ma'am, but all I ask is that one little bill—just that buck."

"No pornography or firearms."

"I promise promise *promise*. Only a sweet, sweet coal for an old man's cold grateful belly. Something to feed my spirit, ma'am, just a little something for a good Christian soldier, down on his luck and mucking it out as best he can."

It was a heap of work, but bit by bit she made it down to one knee, grasped his icy paws in her own and closed her eyes. "By the

gracious Hand of Jesus,” she breathed, “do I deliver this one paper tear unto His poor broken child.” She rose. “On your promise.”

“I did and do.” Bimmy ticked them off on his good hand. “No booze, dope, smokes, porno, or handguns. You can trust me, angel. May I rot with unholy Hell’s dirty dank dominion if I break my word. Swear to God; on my ailing grandmother, on my grieving wife and mistress, on my parents, on my children, on my miserable, vile, and oh-so pointless existence.”

“Bless you, then,” she breathed, and handed him the dollar.

“Ohbless-ohbless-ohblessyoblessyoutoo.” Bimmy clasped the bill in one fist, her wizened hand in the other, and walked his butt up the wall until they near-embraced in the floodlit mist.

She began, “May you find in Je—” but he was gone, pushing his way inside and through.

Here at Ernie’s Liquor you have to fight to reach the MajikLotto dispenser. It’s a vending machine; the latest thing. Slide in a bill and out slides a ticket—but it was surrounded, as might be expected on a cold wet night, by the area’s top panhandlers and pick-pockets. Open container laws need not be enforced; ever since Majikmania took hold of the city, there wasn’t a drunk standing who’d think of wasting good paper money on alcohol.

“Outta my way!” Bimmy snarled, butting and biting through the mob. He held the dollar high overhead, called out, “This one’s from Jesus!” and shoved it in the billsucker. Bimmy snatched the dispensed ticket and collapsed from the effort. A dozen gnarly paws dragged him to his feet, shoved him staggering to the counter. Bimmy squinted at the 3 on the ticket’s face as he slung it forward. That old biddy was right: a single dollar had brought him three—there really is a . . . Bimmy’s mind was racing. That meant another MajikLotto ticket and a quart of malt liquor . . . or two tickets and a 16-ouncer of bad blue bile . . . or *three* whole freaking tickets and another shot at grace. “Oh, mama!” he gagged, and smashed a fist on the counter. “Just make it three more!”

The clerk’s jaw was hanging. “No sir. That’s not the number 3 followed by a trail of tears. Those are zeroes. You’re our thirty million-dollar winner!” He turned, stunned, and reached for the store phone. Bimmy heard him sputtering: “Channel 5? You won’t believe this, but some guy just cracked Ernie’s thirty mil jackpot. Yeah, he’s here . . .” even as a ton of well-wishers leaned on his back.

Bimmy slowly turned about, supported by the counter. Smothered in newfound love, suffocating in body odor, the truth began to

dawn. He heard the clerk's voice, "Compliments of the house," and found himself the sudden possessor of a brandy liter normally reserved for the pale and snooty. The crowd whooped and danced. Beside himself, Bimmy knocked back half the bottle, and might have happily expired right then and there if not for a flurry of headlights, horns, and screeching rubber outside.

A small army of reporters burst in as a unit, swinging microphones, videocams, and portable spotlights. A sweet young thing in pink tanktop and press badge thrust a mic in his face. "Sir, are you the winner of the big jackpot? What's your method? How often do you buy tickets at this location? What do you plan to do with all that money?"

Before he could reply the mayor blew in, and right behind him a sequined lady holding a cardboard check the size of a pool table. Three cops appeared and quickly cleared a small area for Bimmy, the grinning mayor, and the gleaming check lady, now squeezing behind the winner and mayor to pose like the homecoming queen.

The brandy was already kicking in. Bimmy looked around dazedly, snapping back his head when the videocamera seemed to leap right in his face. The mayor threw an arm over Bimmy's shoulder and leaned in smiling. "Go," said the cameraman.

The reporter wedged herself between them. "Congratulations, sir. On behalf of the mayor and city council, please accept this symbolic check for thirty million dollars!"

The place went nuts. Bimmy reeled, sucking back brandy fumes. Finally he managed, "What the fuck am I supposed to do with a symbolic check? Buy a shitload of symbols?" The stunned silence was broken by laughter from the crowd, then the whole place was jumping with glee. The mayor snuck his face back in, smiling even wider.

"Sir, that check isn't for spending! It's our proud honor," he gushed, nodding and grinning like a bobbletoy chipmunk, "to present you with this combination debit and credit card, enabling you to draw on the Bank Of America, effective immediately, goods and services up to and not exceeding

... " he paused for emphasis ". . . *thirty million dollars!*"

The whole room was rocked by cheers.

Bimmy took the card. It didn't look all that much prettier than the plain old General Relief debit card. "You mean," he wondered, "I can buy me a beer right here and now with this thing?"

"As long as it's before two a.m." the mayor beamed.

“You *mean*,” Bimmy ventured, “I can buy *everybody* here a beer?”

“My friend,” the mayor bubbled, “you can buy everybody here a new car if you so desire.”

Bimmy took a huge gulp and waved the bottle like an Oscar. “What the hell, then,” he cried. “New cars for everybody!”

The petite figure making her way down the aisle couldn’t have weighed more than a child, though she carried herself with an authority traditionally removed from such hallowed turf. But when she saw the man draped in exotic furs and precious stones she approached the stage more like a groupie than an official.

“Sir, I’m from the State Board of Trends And Statistics. I’m not sure you’re aware of it, Mr.—I mean Reverend Joseph—but the average MajikLotto winner grossing over a million dollars has only a 2.7-year shelf life on that sum. Our office is very interested in learning your plans for extending, or even intensifying, your odds, Reverend . . . ?”

Bimmy bowed almost to the floor. “Just ‘Joe’ will do fine, my dear. And I don’t necessarily demand use of the term ‘Reverend’—offstage, backroom, or otherwise. But should using it in any manner make you feel more comfortable, if you get my drift, then . . . please.” He swung an arm expansively. “As to increasing my odds, well, I see this church as a mighty sound investment; tax-free, humanitarian, nifty location—all that stuff. Plus, you gotta understand, since Jesus set me up with this deal, it’s pretty obvious he’s not gonna blow it for me. Then we got bingo on Sundays, Pass The Hat Tuesday, and fire-walking contests for snake handlers and nursing moms all week long. Our up-and-coming House Band *Cloven Tongue* does some mighty fine fire-breathin’ Christian Rock, and this very church holds almost ninety percent of the copyrights.” He raised a hand and flashed his signature gummy grin. “Please . . . you’ll have to take them matters up with our legal team, but just a cautionary word: they don’t do interviews on the links.” He took a massive breath. “Not to mention we’re contracting with *Alcoholics Anonymous*,” and she almost collapsed from the fumes,” for late meetings on these premises.” He rubbed his thumb and contiguous fingers lustily, leaning well into her contours while lowering his voice to a hot phlegmy growl. “We do real well in crucifixes, Bibles, and Christian party trays—so how’s them for increasing the ol’ odds, eh, baby?” Bimmy now spread wide

his wings. “Not to mention you being delivered right into my arms!” He embraced her deeply and with passion, but the combination of mink and ermine with old sweat and cheap cologne was so pungent the poor thing was compelled to extricate herself with a shove no less passionate.

Bimmy turned away sharply. “*Go then!*” Without another word he stormed into his office and made straight for the refrigerator, ripped out a stale quart of Olde English, and slammed himself down at his desk. He glared at the calendar, photos collage, and finally the telephone. As if reading his mind, the little rotary monster jangled the room. Bimmy took a deep draught before picking up the receiver.

“Reverend Joseph,” he said miserably.

It was Papa Bear. Bimmy sat straight up, every nerve cringing. “P.B.!” he managed. “What a surprise!”

“Don’t sweet talk me, Rev’.” Bimmy had to plug his free ear to hear. “You been riding this rail on a bullshit ticket since we first shared a car. I had Accounts audit your sorry setup, and that big ol’ lottery tank just don’t hold water no more.”

The phone went slippery in Bimmy’s grip. “Gimme a break, huh, Papa? That whole payday’s wrapped up in inves—”

“Investments? You been spending like a sailor since the day you first jumped ship. What do I look like, pastor, some kinda harbor hooker? I think it’s about time we send in the MPs.”

“Papa, Papa, Papa! We don’t need to play rough here! You know what’s mine is yours.”

“You got that right, Father. Su casa, mi casa. You better have some mighty big guns in that fat glass fort of yours.” The line went dead.

Bimmy gently replaced the receiver, rose and looked around the room. Inch by inch his jaw dropped; the enormity of his peril weighed him down. He began to pace the table in an ever-widening circle, finally slamming into the far wall.

There. The mighty big gun. Bimmy tore down the stainless steel crucifix, laid it tenderly on the table. He squeezed shut his eyes and rubbed it for all he was worth. “Come on, baby, bring me the good stuff. You chose me, not anyone else. I always knowed I was put on this planet for a purpose, and I’m knowin’ equally sure that you’re just dyin’ to reveal what it’s all about. Then this is it, man; I’m ready as I’ll ever be. So go ahead and show me. Show your Chosen One the way. Let ’em all see what I’m really worth.” He kissed the crucifix a good one, set it down gently, and knocked back his malt

liquor. There was a crash in the chapel. Bimmy wiped his lips. "Shit." He killed the bottle, fluffed his Coat, and swished on out the door.

The whole chapel was crawling with boys from the Backdoor Gang, smashing stained glass, breaking up walls, overturning pews. When they saw Bimmy standing there, his mouth agape, half a dozen leaped from the wings and threw him into a bearhug and headlock.

Papa Bear stepped squarely through the mess, kicking and crushing as he came. "You let me down," he wheezed. "You took me for a lousy ride in a hot Pinto, padre. Now it's time we put on the brakes."

"I can make good!" Bimmy cried. "Just let me cut you a check."

"No dice, bummy. You ain't worth the postage on the UPS box you're about to call home. But the boys are gonna squeeze what they can out of you before they break out the tape and twine. Guys!"

"Oh, mercy!"

Papa Bear's expression went sour. "Never could stand that word."

Bimmy was forced to hunch there while the gang smashed through the building, tearing out everything but the plumbing. Finally he was given a full-body cavity search, losing his pinocle deck, his lucky condom, and his solid gold crucifix bottle opener. "Not my BO!" he wailed.

Papa Bear slung out his switchblade. "A pound of flesh," he snarled. "How much you weigh?"

And the whole gang jumped Bimmy. They beat him down the aisle, beat him across the parking lot, beat him into Papa Bear's sinewy black Lexus. They beat him up the streets, beat him down the boulevard, beat him all the way to Ernie's, where they dumped him on the sidewalk like so much garbage. Bimmy clawed his way to the storefront, finally sagging in a puddle of urine and blood.

"Young man."

He looked up through black swollen eyes.

"You didn't use the gift of Jesus all that wisely, did you?"

Bimmy dropped his head. "He let me down."

The biddy clasped his face in her hands. "The Lord *so* loves his children!" she exulted. "He will never give up on you young man, never!" She pulled a bill from her bra. "Now, do you promise to use this dollar with wisdom this time?"

Bimmy squinted up. "Oh, yes, ma'am. I promise promise *promise* from the bottom of my heart."

Why Did You Kill John Lennon

She placed it in his cupped hands and nodded gladly. “I know the Lord will be pleased.”

Bimmy hauled himself to his feet one brick at a time.

“God bless—” she began, but he was gone.

Bimmy fell through the door and up against a tatterdemalion wall of backs and shoulders, holding the precious dollar high. “Outta my way, you blasphemous sons of bitches! *This* one’s from God!”

The Other Side

The whole gang pressed in when Michael began foaming. His eyes rolled back, flickered a bit, and seemed to squeeze into his skull. A great breath filled his lungs. Sherri and Whiz grabbed the arms, Dale and Cindy the legs. Michael's back arched and his hands clenched. Two seconds later he was thrashing wildly. A long shudder worked up from his toes, tightened his sphincter, and snapped back his head. He lay absolutely still. No one said a word; all eyes were on that wracked face. Slowly a bloody spume formed at each corner of the boy's mouth. A red ooze broke from one nostril and rolled down a cheek, shiny in the amber haze of streetlamps. The gang looked up simultaneously. Their eyes all flashed, and their common sentiment was spontaneous:

"Cool!"

"So tell me what it was like," Sherri prodded. "I mean, tell me what it was really like."

Michael hemmed evasively. But he'd always been shy; a distant boy with a sweet interior. Sherri liked him that way. The other girls went for the jocks and the jerkoffs, but Sherri found it more fun cracking the shell than buffing the surface.

The Other Side

“It was like they say,” Michael mumbled. “‘You’ve never really lived’—”

Sherri completed Morté’s most popular catch phrase, “—‘until you’ve seen the other side.’ So what was it like? The other side. Were you dead?”

Michael turned. “I couldn’t have been, Sher. Or I wouldn’t be here. Nobody comes back.”

“I know, I know. But what was it *like*? Did you *feel* you were dead?” She giggled at her own notion. “Dead people don’t feel.”

“I felt . . .” In the car’s half-light Michael’s face was not unlike that rictus under the streetlamps. “I felt . . . things I wasn’t supposed to feel. I saw things I wasn’t supposed to see.”

“Like *what*?”

“Like . . . things.”

“Okay, Mikey.” At that most unmanly nickname the blue hollows of his face turned purple. “Okay, *Michael*. I’ll just have to find out for myself.”

“No, Sherri. You can’t do that. You mustn’t!”

She gave him her patented peeved look. “Don’t play control-freak with me, Michael. Everybody’s doing Morté. ‘What’s good for the goose,’ right? Why should guys get to have all the fun?”

“It’s not fun! Not fun. Only . . .”

Sherri turned away. “Christ, Michael, you look like something out of George Romero. If it’s no fun, the hell with it.”

“Only . . .”

“Only?”

“I’m going back in.”

“Michael.”

He kept his eyes shut. There was no way to close his ears.

“Michael.”

That was what he hated about life. How do you tell an adult, before he gives you all that crap about having so much to live for, that there’s just so much to die for—

“Michael.”

He opened his eyes. The stupid shrink was watching him as though he were a fish in an aquarium. Stupid pince-nez. Stupid little goatee. Stupid folded hands in a stupid brown suit.

“If these questions are making you uncomfortable, we can start with something fresh. But you should know your father is paying

a lot of money for this session, and will only be that much harder to live with if he feels we didn't make progress."

"I realize that, sir."

"Now, Michael . . . peer pressure can cause youngsters to make decisions that are not in their best interest. This drug, with its ability to temporarily mimic the cessation of life, is achieving notorious popularity among the young." Dr. Vies closed his eyes and drew his sensitive fingers to his lips. He rocked his narrow head and those arched fingers like joined pendula, saying, "Tch, tch, tch." It was an effete move. A stupid move. "Interviewed participants invariably describe an episode of complete darkness, soon followed by a gradual, and most agreeable, return to full consciousness. They claim a profound and powerful sense of resurgence, of being born anew. They claim, too, that this interlude of mock demise is without sensation, and figureless. But you, Michael, according to your father, girlfriend, and two paramedics, claim to have experienced a sort of visitation, which you have difficulty depicting verbally." Vies's Mona Lisa smile fell flat. "Now, I have always found the argument for an afterlife, or an out-of-body experience, intensely provocative. I'm sure you have too; you are an intelligent young man. You need not feel pressured here; not in this private room, not with me. Understand that my profession's ethical code ensures complete confidentiality between doctor and patient, or, as I like to portray the relationship, mentor and friend. So please feel free to be just as forthcoming with me as with your young comrades. Our conversation, I assure you, will not leave this room." He leaned forward, causing Michael to just as levelly lean back. "So what did you experience, son? What did you see or feel? In your own words, please, and take your time."

Michael froze, weighing his options. He could stall, he could lie, he could tell someone what he'd been through. Someone who wouldn't laugh. He licked his lips and leaned forward.

"First I got real sick," he whispered. "Then I felt cold and numb; I couldn't move, sir, not at all."

Vies nodded. "The drug's effects impersonate rigor mortis, but with a semi-conscious twist."

Michael relaxed his shoulders. His voice approached normal volume, and Dr. Vies leaned back. "Everything stopped. I was dead, sir, not 'like dead.' It was over. I stopped being alive."

"Yet you perceived this. You were 'aware' of being dead. Do you not see the contradiction?"

“Of course. But I still died. I mean, the conscious thing you’re talking about was the old me. I left that. Honestly, sir, I couldn’t feel anything, couldn’t see anything, couldn’t smell or taste anything . . . what happened was different. But it was still happening.”

Vies removed his pince-nez and fastidiously polished the lenses with a silk-embroidered kerchief while staring at his knees and nodding apologetically.

Worse than effete. A nancy-boy. A damned fruit was trying to get inside his head. It was obscene; more obscene than the stickiest locker room banter. Good old life, right back in the saddle. It became important to keep talking before that horrible anal-retentive cartoon resumed control of the conversation.

“There was someone else in there . . . over there . . . wherever. Someone who was talking to me—but he wasn’t speaking. It was scary, but it didn’t matter, because I wasn’t there. I mean *it* wasn’t there. Am I making any sense?”

Vies’s nod was encouraging. Michael’s narrative had achieved a monotonic caliber, a quasi-hypnotic state clearly suggestive of catharsis. At this point it’s important an analyst become as motionless as possible, prod only in the affirmative, and fade to black. Teenagers like Michael—insular, diffident, sensitive—are excellent subjects when afforded retreat.

“I knew he—it—was speaking to me, because he called me by name—even though I didn’t actually *hear* him. He didn’t want me to come in. He said—he said when the body dies the consciousness goes on, but it’s not like what everybody says it is.”

Vies was careful. “You were encountering a ‘soul,’ then? An angel, perhaps, come to lead you to the afterworld?”

Michael jerked back to the real. “No! What did I just tell you, doctor? I said he didn’t want me to come in. I said it was different. I’m not talking about some white light at the end of a tunnel.”

Vies sat perfectly still. The room submerged imperceptibly, the air seemed to clot, the tension was gradually replaced by that same low hum of subtly intimate pause.

“Michael. I would like to perform a kind of experiment now. Do not be alarmed. I am going to diminish the amount of visible light in this room. The purpose of this procedure is to reduce distraction, thereby enabling your closer approximation of that state you so urgently wish to recover.” The phrase *urgently wish* was a seed, planted with an almost sultry undertone.

“I’m . . . I . . . I don’t want to be in the dark . . . not with another man.”

“Do not be alarmed,” Vies repeated. “I shall remain seated, and so shall you.” He rose and turned a dimmer behind the bookcase, returned to his chair. “There. The atmosphere is much more amenable to free speaking.” The room was bathed in a sedative drear. Michael could still see, but Vies was more like a ghost than an analyst. Now they were both dead men.

“He said,” Michael went on, in that prior drone, “he said that being on the other side is an elecatro . . . eleckamagnets . . .”

“Electromagnetic?” Vies wondered, one nancy brow arched. “You are a student of physics, then, Michael?”

Michael appeared to wince in the dimness. “No. He said it was that electric magnet jive you just said. A phemomenon, if I got that right, that was the opposite of life—negative activity, he said. I don’t know science junk, sir, I can only tell you what he told me. And that was that when the physical body dies, the electrical stuff that kept it going ends up in another place; a place where regular-life things don’t apply. You have memories, you have feelings, but you don’t have thoughts or goals or anything like that.”

Vies’s voice was soft and even. “This is most understandable, Michael. One would have little use for goals without a corporeal vessel. But you speak of feelings. They were warm? They were peaceful? What did your friend have to say about feelings?”

Michael’s mouth fell open and his face took on a ghastly pall. “Not my . . . friend.”

Vies wanted to kick himself. “This visitor; the apparition. What were its feelings, its impressions?”

“Worms,” Michael intoned. “Worms and maggots, eating you . . . forever. Horror. Pain. Sickness. Screaming all around. But no sound. Worms. Always worms . . .” The youthful contours passing from his face were just as steadily replaced by planes and crags of an indigo hue. The eyes now goring Vies were arid and fixed. The analyst’s nostrils twitched at a nauseating odor.

Vies tore at his collar. He coughed, rose, and stepped to the dimmer. Michael’s body was stiff and scrunched in his chair, his face drawn, his eyes hollow.

“Michael.” The boy didn’t respond. “Michael!” Vies opened his office door and leaned out. “Miss Carter. I would like you to dial 911, please.” He looked back into the room. Michael appeared to be surfacing; the blast of light was calling him back. “Hold that com-

mand, Miss Carter.” Vies reached in and turned the room lights up to full. Michael blinked rapidly. A moment later he was looking all around; a nervous teen unhappy with his surroundings.

Vies stood thoughtfully in the doorway, caught between two worlds.

“Michael.”

The boy looked up.

“Your session is over, Michael. I told your father you would call him at home when we were done. He is understandably anxious. I would like you to make that call now. Miss Carter, will you please buzz the door so Michael may phone home.” He allowed a lot of elbow room for the boy’s exit. “Do not be worried, son. Your father loves you very much, and agrees it is best you have plenty of space after this session. You are free to walk home rather than be picked up. He only wants to hear your voice, and to know you are feeling better. As do I.”

There was a long electrical buzz. Michael hesitated, took a few steps. The buzz was reprised. Michael stepped into the receptionist’s office. Miss Carter looked through the glass. At a nod from Vies she walked into the back room and made for a file cabinet. Vies gave Michael a little nancy smile before sliding into his office. Michael dialed the number and cupped the mouthpiece with his free hand.

“It’s Michael. I know you are. But I can’t talk now. Just be at Cindy’s in ten minutes. I’ll be on foot. Yes. Bring me a hit, man, and I don’t want to get burned. Yes, yes, yes. I’m going back in. Yes.”

Snapdragon

It has always been the curse of our species to miss the forest for the trees.

Our ancestors' natural tendency to demand complexity in all systems made their appreciation of simplicity well-nigh impossible—their rude science could never accept the reality of photosynthesizing single-cell organisms stretching galaxy to galaxy, *producing* life, *consuming* life, and *maintaining* life throughout eternity.

“*But,*” they would cry—reactionaries and thinking men alike—“*there must be a purpose, a Grand Design, some kind of wise and caring Source for the unknowable!*”

When the truth hit them, many found the notion of a deaf-and-dumb genesis—the concept of life-without-meaning, and therefore *life itself*—to be untenable.

The ensuing surge in suicides may have done the world a backhanded favor, if only in reducing the gene pool's incidence of low self-esteem. To these, our hysterical forebears, we can only tip our collective hat and say . . . Good Riddance.

Upon its entropic death throes, that Cell bridging the Canis Major Dwarf and Ursa Minor Dwarf galaxies produced a continuum

cataclysm, a thrust deep enough to rock our own Solar System in ways formerly inexplicable.

21st Century researchers, by then aware of Cells, still clung stubbornly to this concept of universal sentience. They therefore first interpreted the spatial kick as a kind of *plea* for healing.

We now know that these Cell reactions are actually more akin to kneejerk complaints. Nevertheless, Cells *are* organic, and this particular Cell's instinctual attempt to reach a healing source had very real consequences in the local group—the resultant shockwave disrupted timespace, creating slips in the faultline and causing anomalies on our own Earth and elsewhere; anomalies that instantly self-adjusted with bizarre and unpredictable consequences.

The first jolt was the seam-breaker, a major rocker—the after-shocks were comparative trifles, producing erratic continuum shifts of mere hours and miles.

We have pinpointed and cross-referenced that phenomenon.

According to our most precise instruments, the initial wave occurred just outside of Jerusalem in the year 26.

And he hit the garbage face-first; dazed, disoriented, naked, emaciated. The piled material was so unfamiliar he froze on impact: black plastic trash bags, cardboard boxes, aluminum cans. Rather than dirt or desert sand, the ground was some sort of continuous gray brickwork, smooth and cool. Just beyond, a low continuous brick ledge led onto rough asphalt. He dragged himself into a sitting slump, recoiling at the heat and blare of traffic. Rundown buildings, rusted-out vehicles, dirty raggedy people sagging in doorways . . . and a dark woman running up in clopping footwear, shamefully dressed, her face painted, her hair high. Behind her a similarly dressed woman, perhaps a friend, shouting:

“Maggie! You get your ass back here, girl!”

But the first woman ran right up to him and said breathlessly, in a tongue that made no sense at all:

“C’m’on sugar: you can’t just lay here with your privates public!” She giggled musically, her breath fruity sweet. After a quick search she came up with a torn and stained blanket, draped it around him, pulled his arms out from under. She continued rooting, talking incessantly, at last producing a sprung bungee cord with enough play to serve as a belt.

Thus covered, he reached out and laid a hand on her shoulder. The woman trembled. When she looked back up her face was a fluid mask of remorse, the expression falling, caving, melting, tears pouring down her cheeks. He rose and the woman simply dissolved at his feet, kissing the toes and ankles, weeping uncontrollably. “*Talitha cum!*” he commanded, and turned at a shout and bustle.

The other woman stormed over, yelling at the top of her voice: “*Get away from her*, you freak! I’ll call a cop. I’ll mace your nasty ass in a hurry.” She kneeled to embrace the weeping woman. “You all right, honey? What did he do to you?” She looked up with venom in her eyes, but the man was already walking along the curb, staring in amazement at the cars and stoplights.

The ground rocked, *hard*, as though the planet had momentarily ceased its spin. He raised himself on one elbow and blinked at his surroundings.

He was sprawled on a high cement stairway, just outside a stately steel-and-glass building alongside a much cleaner street. Other folks were frozen in similar postures of dismay, on their bellies and knees. Their expressions were identical: startled but unsurprised.

A man tumbled down the steps and helped him to his feet. “Are you okay, sir? Wow! That had to be it: that was the Big One for sure.”

It was a surreal scene: cars, their motion sensors triggered, honking repetitively nearby and in the tapering distance, like calling prairie dogs. Drivers hunching outside paused vehicles, men and women spilling from buildings.

The man looked him up and down. “Do you need medical attention, sir? Can you walk?” He blinked. “*Como esta? Por favor?*” His fingers did a pantomime of a body walking. The answering stare was intense, but of no assistance. The blanketed figure opened his mouth and spoke something that struck the helpful man as merely intelligent gibberish. He shook his head and said with exaggerated clarity. “I am Mister Edmond. Mister John Edmond.” The man nodded, intensifying his stare. At last Edmond ran an arm around his waist and sat him back down. He flipped open his cell, thumbed a number, and said excitedly, “Larry? John here. Yes, of course I felt it. Who didn’t. Look, I’ve got some guy here in shock. He’s not mute; he just spoke a dialect I’ve never heard, but definitely Semitic. Not modern at all. No, I can’t leave him here; there’ll be aftersho—” And on that abbreviated syllable a tremor ran right up his back, shaking out the glass left standing in the bank. “Did you feel *that*? Okay, then.

Meet you at Giggles? Good enough. Bring something this poor fellow can wear; he's just draped in an old blanket. Get going before traffic freaks. Right." Edmond led him down the steps, smiling vigorously. "Don't be frightened. I'm going to introduce you to Professor Baling. He's a linguist at Pepperdine. Practically famous. We'll get you nice and fixed up, and once we're all in communication mode we can learn who you are and maybe get you a job or something." There was another rumble, long and low. Edmond's brows furrowed and he tugged gently, but with urgency. "Please trust me, sir. This is your lucky day."

The lunchtime stampede: Giggles was packed, shire to shire. The man from Nazareth now sported lime-and-purple jogging sweats, ten sizes too large, a gift from the kindly and portly Professor Darian Baling, precariously seated directly opposite and to Edmond's left. The Giggles servers whizzed back and forth on their Star Wars roller skates with the strafing turret sparkle-hubs, wearing enormous Harry Potter eyeglasses, Princess Leia frightwigs, and their signature Jolly-Wally Grab-a-Jabba fanny packs.

At last a server responded to Edmond's wave. She screeched to a halt at their table, the brakes on her skates emitting flurries of canned Gremlins giggles. "Hail thee, fellow Jedis, and may the farce be with you."

"Muggles are morons," Edmond responded. "We're ready for menus."

"Energizing!" She whipped two out of her jetpack. "Right Chewbacca at ya!"

"I think maybe I'll go for a Filet O' Flipper, or else just a Silly Salad with Chuckling Chicken, or maybe, um . . ."

"Oh, yoda, yoda, yoda."

"You're right. I'll have a Bilbo Burger, hold the Magic Mustard, with a side of Funny Fries and a Shimmy-Shimmy Shake."

"Just coffee," said the professor. "How about our friend? He can't have eaten for days."

The server straightened. "Friend? *Friend?* Where's Waldo! *Where's Waldo?*" Then, appearing to notice the little party's third member, she moved her twisting face in close, a hollow Keebler countenance of psychotic glee. "And who's *this* happy hobbit?" The man from Nazareth recoiled, not sure what to make of it all.

Edmond danced his menu side to side, much to their server's delight. Finally he said, "Let's go for the Golly Burger with plenty of Gee Whiz, a Jumbo Jelly Sundae, and a Stupid Soda to wash it all down. StuporDooper." It struck him that the stranger's table etiquette might be less than punctilious. "And please make sure that cup is spielberg-proof." Edmond raised his eyes. "You're not like a vegetarian or anything?" The answering stare was cryptic.

"On me," the professor beamed.

Their server yanked an imaginary handle on her forehead, tittered, "Back in a flush!" and zipped away.

The professor smiled encouragingly, clasped his hands on the table, and spoke a line or two of what Edmond recognized as simple Hebrew. Their guest narrowed his eyes. The professor tried again, then began branching out. After a few minutes of this Edmond felt superfluous to the proceedings. A temblor rang cutlery in the Giggles kitchen. Edmond's eyes were naturally drawn to the in-house television monitor, its frame painted to blend seamlessly with the Frodo's Playground mural over the registers. Ordinarily the broadcast news was enhanced by the Giggles digital FunnyVision program, so that the anchors' hair and facial features automatically received magnetic treatments of superimposed rainbow wigs and rubber noses, but today's news was so important, and so sobering, that the man-oh-manager felt compelled to temporarily squelch the FunnyVision program altogether. Employees all stopped what they were doing, their painted smiles and hobbit hoods surreal in contrast to the sudden mood shift.

Film clips moved by almost too rapidly for the mind to assimilate: a Turkish neighborhood buried in rubble, thousands of Pakistani survivors marching out of a smoking valley, Japanese tsunami victims dragging their belongings down a ragged coastline, aerial films of a Detroit neighborhood consumed by flames.

But the real shocker came from a sweating seismologist at a lonely podium, surrounded by microphones, lights, and anxious faces, speaking in a monotone so contrived it inadvertently raised blood pressure all over the nation. No foci could be located, this man stated; no hypocenters, no epicenters. It appeared that the planet Earth itself was in "sporadic seismic arrest." He had absolutely no idea what those data meant, knew of no protocol for dealing with such a profound phenomenon, and hadn't the foggiest notion of what steps to take. He knew only one thing for sure, and that was that there was absolutely no cause for alarm.

Edmond dazedly turned back to the table. The very act of avoiding the set somehow made it all a dream; there was a palpable reality in these known faces, something down to earth, something almost comical.

Baling seemed to feel Edmond's eyes on him. He lowered his head and studied his clasped hands.

"Well?"

The professor looked up, grinning wryly. "The dialect is ancient Aramaic, and it's flawless. Says he grew up in Galilee as a carpenter. Says he was tried in the court of Pontius Pilate. Says the last thing he remembers was being prepared for crucifixion at Golgotha outside of Jerusalem. Says he felt like his whole body exploded, and that the next thing he knew he was sprawled out in the garbage—by his description the eastside ghetto over on Fourth and Military."

"O-o-o . . . *kay*." Edmond wiped the tabletop. "Look, Larry, I'm really sorry I roused you for nothing. I don't know what it is—I just had the feeling there was something more than meets the eye to this guy."

The professor leaned back. "Oh, you may have been right." Baling clasped his hands behind his head and spoke ruminatively. "It takes a great deal of dedication to create and maintain a messianic delusion at this level. I'll give him credit: he certainly does his homework. He doesn't believe he's Jesus; he's way beyond that. He knows it—in a matter-of-fact way that goes without ego gratification or any self-interest whatsoever. He's lived the illusion so long it's modified his personality. He's Jesus, John; so get used to it. He certainly has."

Their server wobbled back to the table, obviously subdued by the news, her Gandalf's staff limp as a sobered lover. She laid out the gaily patterned platters like a woman packing her final bags. Her Darth Vader cloak appeared to have lost its gleam, her Spock ears looked wilted and pale. Still she gave it her professional best, duly tapping her light saber on the tabletop while performing a truly Tolkienian full-fairy curtsy. But somehow it just wasn't the same. She looked at the professor and her particolored face scrunched and drained. "I'm—I'm just so, so *sorry*," she tried. "My children, my children . . ."

The professor nodded in amazement and the server slowly rolled away, the blinking Harry Potter broom between her legs mournfully swishing side to side across Cap'n Sparrow's Deck.

The man from Nazareth grimly studied his platter. The aroma made his nostrils flare and cinch. He stared uncertainly at his benefactor.

And the whole place seemed to lift off its foundations. He dragged himself to his feet, in a dank alley surrounded by looming, broken-down tenements. Two blocks away a department store's roof collapsed before his eyes, even as a pair of helicopters wheeled in a stark wedge of moonlight between leaning buildings. There were fires leaping here and there, and the startling sounds of the occasional smashed display window. He exited the alley with all senses perked, his eyes hungrily absorbing every new sight, each sudden motion. This side of the street carried the ghosts of the old neighborhood: closed shops and overgrown walkways, abandoned cars and neglected yards. He noted a small group of men loitering on a street corner. Their eyes narrowed and flashed as he passed; after a minute the group began to follow as one. Presently he came across dozens of kneeling citizens outside a sealed antique building, fighting to catch the words of a gesticulating man in an Armani suit. The man from Nazareth had just halted to observe when a disturbance behind almost knocked him off his feet.

"Hey," the offender said angrily, but with more impatience than hostility, "you wanna make a little room here, pal? Jeez." This person then fell to his knees and beatifically raised his eyes.

He continued down the walk, pausing to stare in looted buildings. A dozen yards ahead, a group of four men stepped out of the shadows between shops. One whistled, and there came an answering whistle to the paused man's rear. He turned to see three more striding up purposefully. Their footfalls were echoed; he turned back to find himself trapped.

There was no preamble; the post-riot condition obviated any feeling-out process—the fists clubbed his head, the shoes found his stomach, and he could only lay curled up on the sidewalk while the hands ran through his jogging sweats. But a penniless, helpless victim is just a diversion on a ripe swollen night in a city caught with its pants down; the punks got in their kicks and split.

He had to drag himself into a doorway. When he got his wind back he scraped to his feet and moved along, using the looted storefronts for support. In one display he observed a neglected, still-connected television running the disaster buffet; the orphans, the wasted homes, the collapsed freeway overpasses. But it didn't strike home, didn't feel real—the technology was way too strange.

A groan just off the walk got his attention. He limped over and discovered an old man trapped in an avalanche of fallen bricks. The mortal nature of the injuries was unmistakable; he reached down to place a palm on the forehead.

A very bright light struck him, followed by the urgent sound of rubber meeting curb. An amplified voice said: *“You in the sweats! Remain where you are! Keep your hands where I can see them!”*

Two officers, a man and a woman, stepped around the car with flashlights aimed. The driver pulled out and leveled his gun, holding forth his other hand to indicate complete compliance. The woman, keeping her distance, crept by and crouched near the pile of bricks.

“Talk to me,” said the man.

“Unconscious,” the woman responded. She righted herself, muttered, “This one’s dead,” and swung her gun around.

The male officer immediately threw him into a combination wrist-and headlock, slammed his face up against the car’s hood. “Relax completely,” he grated. “I want you to go absolutely limp. Do we understand each other?” He leaned hard. “Are you holding anything that can hurt me?”

The woman patted him down thoroughly. “Nothing obvious. Pits and crotch clean.”

“I.D.?”

“Nothing.”

“Okay.” He kicked out the legs and pulled both wrists behind the back. The female snapped on cuffs. “I,” the driver grunted in his ear, “don’t know if you’re aware this city’s been placed under martial law. I further don’t know if you’re aware of the implications. Looters can be shot on sight. Muggers—creeps who waylay old men under cover of chaos—can receive some of the harshest sentences on the books. When you’re rotting in that cell, with only your conscience for company, I just want you to thank God it was us who got to you before some decent armed citizen.”

The woman ran her flashlight’s beam back and forth across his eyes. “What’s your name, sir?” He blinked. She shook her head. “Unresponsive.”

“So be it.”

The woman got the door.

The driver pulled the cuffs up to the shoulder blades and shoved down hard on the crown. “Watch your head,” he said.

You had to squeeze and slither to reach the desk, though there was far less processing than usual for that time of night. Fact is, the place was one crisis from anarchy: just too many officers coming and going to make sense of it all. Detectives, Fire, National Guard, even Coast Guard and Parking had occupied center stage at one time or other. And each successive temblor critically wracked the nerves of these men and women, the very men and women trained to hang onto their cool under the direst of circumstances. This was bigger than law enforcement, bigger than crowd control, bigger than major disaster. The families of these officers were in some instances unaccounted for, their homes and valuables left naked to the mob, and there wasn't a damned thing they could do about it. And still the reports came streaming in; over the radio, over the television, over the Internet. The earth was breaking up around them, brimstone was spewing high. The sky was falling, and there wasn't a damned thing they could do about it.

The desk sergeant was in no mood to argue. "He'll have to go straight to Old County. We can't spare placement in this station. If you can get his prints, fine, but I can't guarantee a file. A phone call is out of the question." He turned to glare at the prisoner, his eyes all but bursting in his skull. The pencil gripped between his hands was bent to the breaking point. "You are hereby waiving your rights to counsel, at least temporarily. This city is in a state of martial law. We can guarantee your protection, but that's about all. If you have family and friends worried about you, well, they'll just have to sweat and fret like the rest of us. You have no identification, and according to these arresting officers are entirely uncooperative." The room trembled ever so slightly and the pencil snapped. "For now you are going to be held in protective custody, Old County Jail, Downtown. Any cell we can spare. A public defender will be in contact with you at the earliest opportunity." Another tremor ran through the station. This time the sergeant closed his eyes and controlled his breathing. After a minute he whispered, "I sincerely suggest you be compliant, and take care to not make any enemies."

The quake first slammed them against the rail, then right up against the independent cells. The escorting officer was sweating heavily as he pulled the prisoner out of reach of scrabbling hands. He hollered back at the angry and frightened men in their orange County jumps, but his every word only served to rile them further. He

released a bicep and waved the free hand. The module commander, watching closely, triggered a siren.

The prisoners went nuts. The escorting officer, grimacing, waved the arm again to signal a stop. The siren wound down and the individual voices became evident: pleas for news, pleas for protection, pleas for transfer. The deeper they moved, the deeper became the passion, the anger, the horror-stench of trapped men who know they're about to die. There came a jolt so fierce it almost knocked the officer off his feet. The prisoners wailed and screamed.

The last available cell was right near the end. Directly across stood a giant of a man; black, broad, and intense, the only caged animal not prepared to howl. He just watched, his eyes glinting and his mouth on the verge of a smile.

The officer waved his arm again. A harsh buzz, and the cell door rumbled open. The officer nudged him inside and waved. The door shut. "Move your back up against the door so I can get the cuffs." The man from Nazareth stared ahead uncertainly. The officer reached in and dragged him back, held him firmly as he worked the key. The prisoner turned.

Sweat was pouring off the officer's face. "I know you can hear me." He rolled his eyes. "I know you can hear what's going on around us. Now I want you to sit on your cot and face the wall. Do not allow the prisoner behind me to provoke you. Sleep, do yoga, meditate: whatever. This will all work out somehow. I . . . I have a family to find."

He stumbled back down the walk, and the man from Nazareth found himself eye to eye with the big man across the way.

"Hello, bitch." A tremor shook the module and the prisoners cursed, screamed, bashed their cell bars with anything that would rattle nerves. "Seeing as you're the last person I'm going to see alive, I feel it's beholden on me to make my confession, if that's all right with you." The man from Nazareth stared silently and the big man smiled. "Just what I was hoping for: a good listener." A crack raced across the wall behind him. "I've always been a God-fearing man." He raised his eyes. "Do you believe in God, bitch?" He wagged his head regretfully. "I thought not. You know, God came to see me, right in this very cell. And do you know what He told me? He told me a snitch would come and test me, and that that snitch would be an agent of the Devil. And He said if I really meant to sit at His Right Hand I had to pass that test. I had to slay that agent." He spread his hands. "So there it is. Not much of a confession, you say? Well, you're right.

My hands are cleaner than yours.” He vigorously rubbed his palms, meaningfully clenched the fingers. “For now.” A rumble rose from the old building’s bowels. Bits of ceiling fell around them both. “Agent, meet agent.”

The man from Nazareth turned and stared at his cell, wondered at the stainless steel toilet and sink, made the mental leap to indoor plumbing. In a heartbeat the module’s east wall had collapsed. Excitement replaced fear in the air. There was a scream from the guardhouse and one by one the cell doors buzzed open. The man from Nazareth turned at the sound, found himself staring from one wide-open cell into another.

The big man spread his arms and beamed. “Voila.”

A shotgun blast and emergency siren’s howl. Prisoners came stampeding back into the module, snapping at one another like dogs. “Snitch!” the big man called. “Snitch in the hall!” Within seconds the cell was blocked by furious prisoners. “Save some for me,” the big man said. With howls of excitement the animals in orange jumpsuits came down on the man from Nazareth, beating him with fists and feet, with elbows and knees, with any loose objects they could find. Finally he was dragged to the cell bars and secured at the wrists, ankles, and throat by bloody starched County towels. He sagged there, head fallen and knees crimped, an absolutely broken man. The prisoners filed out and huddled against the rail, grinning and high-fiving. “Leave us,” the big man said quietly. “There is important work to be done.” When the mob had moved away he turned back and lovingly removed from his butt-crack a shiv filed out of a toothbrush. He pressed his big self up against the suspended man, kissed him on the fractured skull and bloody mouth. He dropped back his head. Then, in an act of slow-motion ecstasy, he shoved in the shiv inch by inch, his moans echoing the captive’s. Now the wide black face came in until the lips were just grazing the prisoner’s ear. The voice was low, almost sultry, the breath a hot miasmic pool: “Any last words, snitch?”

The bloody head fell, chin rolling against the chest at an awkward angle. “Eloi, Eloi,” came the glottal whisper, “lema sabachtani . . .”

The big man cocked his head quizzically, his expression rolling round to one of pouting indifference. “Cat got your tongue? Aww, that’s too bad.” He snorted to the bowel and hawked one right in the eyes, ran back to the gate and stood there holding it like an

eager chauffer. A broad smile cut his face in two. "Don't wait up for me, bitch. I'm going to Disneyland!"

This is as far as our instruments will trace in this matter, so many hundreds of years ago. The Cell was revitalized, the tremors quelled. Of the man from Nazareth, we have only speculation. All indications are that the streetwalker, Marilyn "Maggie" Deliano, through persistent and selfless entreaty, was able to procure sums sufficient to have the body interred in a tiny mausoleum outside the city, and that she was persuasive enough to found him a cult following. This following, eventually numbering in the tens of thousands, was permitted daily services until a freak after-effect of the Cell's initial paroxysm caused the cemetery's landfill to shift, resulting in countless sinkholes, collapsed edifices, and sunken statuary. Bodies were exhumed for purposes of relocation, but officials were dismayed to find the man from Nazareth's coffin barren, although there is nil evidence of tampering. As no body existed for the sake of identification, the empty coffin was shipped, at substantial cost to the cult followers, to the man's original homeland, where it is rumored to have been weighted and submerged in a little desert sea. With no physical traces remaining, and only unsubstantiated eyewitness reports, it is deemed meet that we seek no further vestigial evidence, and consider this record sealed.

Thelma

Behind every shop window lies a strange and magical world; a world where half-defined shapes, busily engaged in mysterious transactions, seem to coalesce even as they pass from view. These unstable figures—customer, employee, and proprietor—are *important* people. They are not there to be rudely eyeballed, like so many fish in a bowl. Their business is theirs and theirs alone.

But old Thelma couldn't help staring, no matter how hard she tried, no matter how many times she was punished. Her head would be turning before she knew it, and sometimes, squinting against the mirrored sun, she would catch one or more of those murky shop-dwellers staring back importantly just as her hunched and gnarled reflection rolled by.

Thelma was crazy about people. Whether they pointed and whispered, or rudely laughed out loud, she always smiled in their eyes, resisting with difficulty the urge to reach out and touch. And she loved bustle. People walked this way and that, jealously guarding their personal space, but they invariably parted when she rolled down the sidewalk, as if she were a queen being escorted through a sea of loving subjects.

The sidewalks were bustling now, and Thelma could barely contain her excitement. Her eyes devoured everything. When her chair finally came to a rest she found herself staring at a small box affixed

to a pole. She'd seen this kind of fixture hundreds of times, and was mesmerized by the experience. The fixture poked out right at eye level, and bore a flat white plate with a wonderful little cryptogram of a funny black stick man hovering over a long black arrow. The stick man gave the impression of being in an awful hurry to discover the big secret that long black arrow was about to divulge. For some reason these fixtures always featured a blunt metal button beneath the cryptogram.

Perhaps it was the fascinating way people now all burst off the curb as one. Or maybe it was the intoxicating combination of crisp air and golden sun. But suddenly Thelma just had to solve the mystery, just had to push that stubby little button.

A hand whacked her across the back of her head; not hard enough to really hurt, just hard enough to let her know she'd done wrong. Right behind the sound of the whack came Gary's voice:

"God *damn* you, you ugly old witch. How many times do I have to tell you to keep your fucking paws on the armrests?" The hand grabbed the white bun of her hair and twisted back her head. Gary's eyes were burning. "The next fucking time you try that, retard, you're gonna go to bed without dinner. You got me? You remember what it's like going to bed without dinner? You cried like a baby all night, didn't you? Well, that's what you get when you fuck up, y'hear? So don't press your luck." He pushed her head back down, but not too hard. There were pedestrians everywhere.

Thelma craned her neck to look back remorsefully. "Pleezh no be madda me, Gehr. I be good."

Gary exhaled noisily. "My ass." He shoved the wheelchair across the intersection and rammed it against the curb, then kicked, shook, jerked, and heaved it onto the sidewalk, swearing up and down. But his demeanor changed abruptly as another old biddy, the widow Bender, approached and came to a halt directly in their path.

"Widow Bender! And how are you on this lovely fall day?"

"In the pink," the widow lied. She stooped to smile in Thelma's face. "Hi, Thelma dear! So . . . I see you and your nice young man are out enjoying the day. How's he been treating you? Just like the princess you are, I'll wager."

"Oh yesh," Thelma gushed. "Gehr gooda me. Gehr always gooda Telma."

"That . . . that's wonderful!" the widow grimaced. "I—" she managed, "I've got to go now, dear," for in her passion Thelma had allowed her arthritic old talon to grasp one of the widow's hands. The

widow extracted her hand with difficulty, smiled breezily at Gary and winked. “Well, you just make sure you give him a big long kiss for me, sweetheart.” She looked back down. “Bye now, Thelma!”

“That was rich,” Gary said as they continued down the sidewalk. He snickered. “Gehr always gooda Telma’. You bet your ass I’m good to you, crone. Who else would put up with your goddamned babytalk bullshit. Who else would have the balls to tolerate your shit-hole stench all fucking day long. You gnarly pig. You don’t know—you couldn’t possibly imagine—how many times I’ve dreamed of just walking off and leaving you and your stupid-ass chair in rush hour traffic.”

Thelma looked back fearfully. “Oh no, Gehr! Pleezh no leave me, Gehr. Telma be good.”

“Oh-h-h—you don’t gotta worry about me leaving you, witch. I’ll be pushing your spastic ass around until the day you die. And you wanna know why? I’ll tell you why. Because you’re worth a hell of a lot more alive than dead, that’s why. The state pays good money to keep corpses like you going, and a nice piece of that pie goes into my pocket for taking care of you.” He laughed harshly. “I’m your fucking guardian, you ugly old asshole; I’m your goddamn guardian angel. I’m the one who feeds you and medicates you and makes sure you don’t slobber to death. You didn’t know that, did you—that I’m as close to God as you’ll ever get, that I’m the one who’s responsible for keeping your stinking ass in one piece? Even though I’ve told you a thousand times . . . you don’t know *shit*, do you dimwit? So I’ll be around forever, even though you’re, what, a hundred and fifty years old? Even though you’re ugly as sin and smell like the dead . . . wait a minute! What am I saying? *Like* the dead? You *are* dead. You’re just a rotting old cadaver that some trick of fate keeps running. And you know *what*, you funky old skank? You’ll outlive us all! Great people, *important* people, will pass out of the picture naturally. But not stupid stinking Thelma. She’ll just hang in there, baby. Pissing and whining and waiting for good old Gary to do *everything* for her. Cunt! You’re dirt, that’s all you are. Just plain dirt.”

“I do betta, Gehr,” old Thelma moaned, despising herself. “I sho sharry, Gehr. I be betta, I promiss. Telma be good fum now on, Gehr. Telma be good.”

Her apology was lost on Gary. He leaned forward to whisper in her ear, “And you wanna know *why* you don’t deserve to be alive? Because you’re worthless, y’hear? *Worthless!* You’re not good for anything or anybody. You can’t take care of yourself, you can’t feed

yourself, you can't do squat. When's the last time you did anything constructive, or had even one original thought? When's the last time you made the slightest effort to be of value to anything? I'll tell you when: *never!* 'Cause you're a sick old piece of shit who can't see past her goddamn wheelchair. A cockroach has more value than you. At least a fucking cockroach can get around on its own."

Gary shoved and jerked the wheelchair to make his point. "Don't you understand, shitbrain? Life is *good* to you. But what good are you to life? Where on this fucking planet is there a single life-form, not counting Yours Truly, that benefits from your being here. Name one thing. Can't do it, moron? That's because you're *worthless!* But I'll clue you in on something. When the golden day arrives that your filthy ass expires, tramp, you're gonna make a whole lot of worms real happy. Party time for Ourobouros. *That's* when you're gonna contribute."

Gary abruptly turned the wheelchair to the left, steered it across the street and into the park. "Aw-w-w . . ." he concluded, "what's the use."

This was Thelma's favorite part of the day. Everyone in the park was always so happy, so full of vitality. Children squealed with delight, dogs chased Frisbees, lovers drifted languorously between the elms. And around them all bumped the slowly rolling chair, pushed by the mumbling and incongruously sullen man, his head down.

"*Jesus*, here we go again! Everybody and his mother out having the time of their lives. Every guy in town but me walking along with a hot young babe on his arm. Look what I'm stuck with. Oh man, am I embarrassed! You dumb lump of shit. I'm the laughing-stock of this neighborhood thanks to you."

Gary's mood continued to deteriorate, in stark contrast to the afternoon's waking loveliness. After wheeling her twice through the park he brought her chair to a halt next to a trash bin.

"Okay, Quasimodo. Have a last look around. I'm gonna go take a leak and be right back." He stuck a forefinger in her face. "Now don't you move! I'm warning you. You stay put just where you are. Don't you dare talk to anybody and don't you dare touch anything. I'll be right back." He gave her a hard look and ambled over to a public restroom.

Thelma sat stock-still, determined to be good. But her mind was rocking back and forth, chanting: *Don't be bad, Thelma; don't make Gary mad. Don't be bad, Thelma, don't be bad!* This little mantra went round and round in her head until it ceased to make

sense.

Thelma heard a rustling near her feet, but fought the impulse to look. Gary had told her not to move. If she could only once do what he said maybe he wouldn't be so unhappy all the time. Again came the rustling, followed by a tiny, frightened mewling. Thelma's hands gripped the armrests. The mewling grew in urgency until Thelma could no longer resist the temptation to peek.

The tiny white kitten couldn't have been more than three or four weeks old. It had one brown ear and a large brown spot on its forehead. It was obviously abandoned and extremely hungry.

Thelma fell in love with it right away. Her rheumy old eyes went teary, and her wretched old hand reached down to caress it. The kitten recoiled at her touch, then rubbed against her thumb. Every cell in Thelma's body trembled. "Ghity," she said.

Gary now walked back, looking bored. "Okay, fuckface. Time to wheel your stupid ass home and—*hey!* What you got there?"

Thelma looked up at Gary's frowning face. Her cheeks were covered with tears. "Ghity," she bubbled.

Gary grimaced. "Leave it alone, damn you! What do you want with a fucking cat, anyway? Don't I feed you enough? No! Out of the question." He looked around, picked up a wood slat and swatted at the kitten, trying to scare it away. All he got for his effort was a sizable splinter in his index finger. Gary howled as if he'd been gored, swore and dashed over to a drinking fountain to wash off the wound. In less than a minute he was back, but not before Thelma had managed to reach down, grab the kitten, and bundle it under her sweater.

"Shit!" Gary spat. "Look what you fucking caused, whore. Oh, *mama*, that hurts! I oughta knock your fucking head off, you know that, you old bitch? You're good and goddamned lucky I need you alive."

Thelma withered under Gary's invective as he wheeled her home, occasionally bashing the chair against walls, pushing it hard off curbs. She had been bad again, but it didn't seem to matter. All that mattered was the tender little source of warmth shifting position on her lap. Each small movement jangled her nerves. Under her sweater she gently stroked the tiny creature. The warmth hummed in response. "Ghity," she whispered.

Gary unlocked and kicked open the front door in one move.

He shoved Thelma's chair in roughly. "Jesus, bitch, don't fight me! You know the fucking routine. Sit still!" He kicked the door closed, heaved a sigh. After a moment he wordlessly pushed the chair to the ramp and up to the converted attic. The attic had been partitioned centrally to create a sunroom on one side and a small bedroom on the other. This was Thelma's room. "Here you are, fossil: back in your digs. Enjoy. I'll be downstairs in the real world. Do me a favor. If you need anything, call the undertaker. Stay out of my face." He turned and walked down the stairs abutting the ramp.

Thelma waited until she heard the familiar sound of the television downstairs, then carefully opened her sweater to reveal the kitten's tiny crimped form. The poor thing was trembling in its sleep, and barely responded when Thelma tenderly cradled it in her arms. The old woman and kitten trembled together as the afternoon sun burnished the bedroom's bare wood floor.

"Ghity," Thelma crooned, rocking slowly in her chair. "Ghity, ghity, baby ghity."

Now sunshine began to play upon a corner of the small card table that served as Thelma's desk and dining table. She wheeled over and very gently lifted the kitten onto the warm spot. It wakened and struggled to stand while she supported it with one hand under its belly. Once it was upright it began to urgently rub its cheeks against her other hand, then attempted to suckle a finger. It was starving. Old Thelma kissed it, over and over. It was all she could do.

Without any warning Gary came barging into the room. When he saw the kitten on the table he stopped dead in his tracks. His mouth fell open as he stared from Thelma to the kitten and back again. Finally he breathed, "You *bitch!* What did I tell you? *What did I tell you?*" He took a great step forward and slapped Thelma hard across the face. "I told you 'no fucking cat', didn't I? *Didn't I tell you that?*" He scooped the kitten in his hand, stepped to the window, and screamed, "DIDN'T I TELL YOU NO FUCKING CAT?" Staring hard at her, he threw the kitten out the window as if it was so much garbage. Thelma hugged herself, horrified. Gary stormed over and grabbed her by the hair, began slapping her face back and forth, his passion ascending with each consecutive blow. Finally he caught himself, almost hysterical, but still together enough to realize the stupidest thing he could do would be to leave marks. He stepped back.

"You've crossed me for the last time, cocksucker." He tore her mirror from the wall, smashed it on the floor. He pointed a shaking finger at the shards of glass. "You see that?" he spat, indicating a

piece. "That's you." He jabbed his finger at other pieces. "You see that? You see that? You see that? That's what's gonna happen to you next time you disobey me." He knocked a picture off the wall, moved to the closet and tore Thelma's clothes from their hangers. Then his anger seemed to abate.

He walked to the door and said coldly, almost calmly, "No more privileges. Period. No more trips to the park, no more listening to the radio. This door stays locked, and you stay in." He appeared about to elaborate, but his anger was catching up with him again. Finally he stepped out, screamed, "*Fuck you!*" and slammed the door so hard it shook the walls.

The aftermath was worse than the explosion. Thelma sat in shock, wondering only how she could have been so bad. She wiped away her tears with a deformed and quivering hand. This was the unhappiest she'd ever made Gary, and the first time he'd ever locked her away from him. An exaggerated sense of lonesomeness weighed upon her. She loathed herself. Gary was right. She didn't deserve to live.

Little by little the numbness grew over her. Her thoughts slunk farther from meaningful analysis, and an almost palpable silence enveloped the room. It was in this oppressive silence that she thought she heard a familiar sound.

Thelma's attention refocused, her heart began to pound. There it was again. A tiny sound, frightened and lost, seeming to come from right outside the window. Entranced, old Thelma rolled her chair over.

She leaned out. The white kitten lay straddled over the rain gutter running above the eaves and just under her window, having hit a power line and fallen to its present position. If not for the line the animal, small as it was, would certainly have been killed or seriously injured by an impact with the cement drive below.

Thelma's brows ran oblique. The kitten was perched awkwardly on one of the wide steel clamps securing the rain gutter to the roof, a good seven or eight feet from the window's trim. Thelma gripped the rain gutter, tried to shake it to get the kitten's attention. The gutter was solidly attached and didn't budge at all, but the kitten must have felt the vibrations, for it looked up and wailed pitifully.

"Ghity!" Thelma moaned. She rolled her chair back from the window, trying to think. But she had precious little experience in problem solving. The harder she thought the more confused she became. She must have nodded, must have dozed for an hour or more. The next thing she knew it was getting chilly, and there was the sound

of a key in the lock.

Gary came in with a small blue plastic bowl in one hand and a plastic drinking glass half-full of water in the other.

“Here’s your gruel, ghoul.” He placed the bowl and glass on the card table. “That’s right. All you get is formula. No meat, no vegetables, no sweets. It serves your stupid ass right for being such a sneaky old slut. And that’s *all* you’re gonna get from now on, until I think you’ve learned your lesson.” His face twisted with contempt. “You mangy whore. I’m being way too kind for the likes of you. If I had my druthers you’d starve to death up here. Oh, yeah! I’d crank up the T.V. and you could scream your ugly old head off for all I’d care.” He crashed his fist on the dresser, then swept off Thelma’s little ceramic menagerie. “But I need you *alive*, pigface!” He took a deep breath. “There’s enough nutrition in that slime to keep you going. But that’s all. We’ll see how tough you are after a few days of goop diet.” He turned and walked to the door. Before he slammed it he said icily, “You’ll live. But so help me, bitch, I’ll live to piss on your grave.”

Thelma waited a minute, then pushed herself over to the card table. She inspected the contents of the bowl. “Formula” was a vitamin-rich concoction mass-produced for the elderly, but lately Gary had been saving pennies by preparing his own version; basically a blend of milk, margarine, and sugar.

Thelma anxiously looked around the pigsty of her room. There was trash and filth everywhere. Not only had Gary never once lifted a finger to clean the room, he seemed to take a vicious delight in haphazardly storing junk more properly assigned to the garage or basement.

Now Thelma rooted through a pile next to her bed, looking for something that would extend her reach. After an exhaustive search she settled on a grimy aluminum curtain hanger. It was the retracting kind: two nearly identical lightweight rods that fit one into the other for sliding adjustment. One end of each rod was crooked at a right angle for securing the device to a wall. Thelma found that by forcing the assembled hanger to its greatest length she had a good six feet of extension for her arm.

She had to rest. This had been a tremendous amount of effort for a crippled and sedentary nonagenarian. She was beginning to doze when the kitten’s mewing renewed its tug on her heart. Thelma continued her rooting, fished out a heavy rubber band. The band was an inch and a half wide, perhaps twice that in circumference. It was difficult to stretch.

Thelma wheeled back to the card table and placed these items before her. She was breathing hard. After a minute she drank the water from the plastic glass. The room seemed to revolve, steadied. Thelma forced the rubber band around the base of the glass, then moved it upward an inch at a time. The pressure of the band cracked the plastic in three places. Puffing and wheezing, old Thelma now pushed one end of the curtain hanger under the rubber band until the two parts were secure, making a six-foot-long handle for the glass. Outside, the kitten began to cry continuously.

Thelma lifted the bowl of formula and held it over the glass. Her hands were shaking so badly that this job—the simple act of pouring the contents of one vessel into another—was accomplished only with the greatest difficulty. A good deal of formula oozed out the cracks in the glass. Thelma wiped the bowl clean with her crooked old finger, then smeared this residue around the rim of the glass. She balanced her little device on the wheelchair's armrests and rolled to the window.

Thelma thrust out her head. The white kitten was still straddling the clamp over the rain gutter. When it saw her it began to wail and move its legs ineffectually.

"No, ghity, no," Thelma cooed. "Ghity stay." She maneuvered her contraption out the window so that the base of the glass rested on the floor of the rain gutter, then began to push it slowly toward the kitten. A lot of formula was lost in the process.

All this activity was hard on the old woman, and by the time the glass had reached the kitten Thelma's arms were shaking. Very little formula remained in the glass, but the kitten attacked the nourishment ravenously, licking the inside of the glass clean and lapping up the inch of liquid on the bottom. With the last of her strength, Thelma dragged the device back inside and let her head fall on the sill.

The kitten was still hanging on the clamp, still straining to lap up the spilled drops.

Thelma watched it listlessly, unable to lift her head. An absolutely novel feeling began to grow in the old woman's heart; a sense of worthiness, of responsibility. Something small and vulnerable . . . something *unimportant*—but something very much alive—depended on *her*. Life desperately needed her, contemptible as she surely was, and Thelma found herself weeping uncontrollably while her heavy head lolled on the sill and the afternoon sun gently washed her face.

The next day Thelma slept very late. When at last she rose she became dizzy and weak from the act of sitting upright. The normal procedure of working her misshapen body into the wheelchair was an almost Herculean task.

She struggled over to the window. The kitten was sprawled exactly as she'd seen it last, and her heart skipped a beat. She passionately shook the rain gutter. When the animal finally lifted its head and sluggishly cried out she was so relieved she had to cling to the sill.

All day long she remained at the window, talking as much to herself as to the kitten, her mind slipping in and out of reality.

Gary came in late in the day. He glared and refused to say a word, plopped down the bowl of formula and glass of water. He scowled and slowly shook his head. Thelma was too weak to acknowledge him, so he walked back out and locked the door.

After a few minutes Thelma retrieved her device from under the bed, patiently slopped formula from bowl to glass, forced her chair to the window.

As soon as the glass reached the kitten it came to life. It attacked the mixture eagerly, lapping up even those drops trapped in the cracks. Old Thelma was so exhausted she fell asleep with her head and arms out the window, and didn't wake until it was fully dark and quite chilly. It took a supreme effort to make it back to bed.

That night she came to her senses alternately shivering and sweating. Her room seemed unfamiliar. Thelma pulled a heavy sweater over her flimsy nightdress, covered herself snugly, and let herself drift.

On the third day she remained in bed, her hands and feet freezing. Gary waited until near sunset to bring in her formula. Thelma feigned sleep to avoid him, then woozily fought her way through the steps of boarding her wheelchair, filling the glass, making her way to the window.

The kitten cried frantically when it saw her. Thelma pushed the glass, which seemed a dead weight, to where the kitten could just reach it. Her arms began to shake terribly, but she managed to keep the glass in place until the kitten had finished.

All sensation passed from her left arm.

Thelma gasped. Her upper body jerked. The glass and curtain hanger flipped over the rain gutter and dropped into a hedge below the window.

Thelma's hand reflexively pushed her away from the window, the wheelchair rolling her back a few feet. There she sat quietly, wondering at the lack of feeling in the arm. It might have been made of wood. She lifted the wooden arm with her good hand, placed the arm neatly on its rest, then used the good hand to push those rigid fingers one by one into a semblance of grip.

She watched the day expire, saw the full splendor of its passing face for the final time, while shadows crept along the walls and floor, steadily dabbing up random pools of light.

The sky caught fire. Within the window's frame stray plumes ignited, slowly lost their intensity and glory, then smoldered with a dull and bloody glow. As the fire subsided these plumes turned to smoke in the deepening blue, became vagabond ghosts in the dark, lost their way in the night, and were no more.

Death treads gently on gentle souls.

The end came for Thelma not with abruptness or horror, nor did it bring her any pain. It mirrored twilight's subtle diminuendo; measure by measure muting voice, shading tone.

It was almost an elegant thing.

Night stepped through the window not as a burglar but as a suitor, drawing its endless shroud about her, round and round, claiming her pulse one revolution per beat. It worked its way up her arms, her neck, her face.

Thelma watched the stars writhe prettily above the horizon, burning out their hearts for no one and nothing. She watched them shimmer, languidly, until a breath of cold blew out the light in her eyes.

In the wee hours there came a tiny scuffling at the window. A brown ear appeared, then a white ear, and finally two round eyes peered liquidly into the room. The kitten mewed nervously for a few seconds, then half-jumped, half-fell to the floor.

Thelma

It froze where it landed, questing with its senses. In a minute it squinched and crept to where the two orthopedic shoes stood on the footrest. It climbed awkwardly over the rest and onto a shoe. There it paused to look up uncertainly. It clawed with difficulty up Thelma's leg and onto her lap. The old woman was cold as stone. The little white kitten threw back its head and wailed. It cried on and on and on in the darkness, rocking side to side, rhythmically digging its claws left and right into her cheap cotton nightdress. When it stopped, the room was quiet as a tomb. Slowly the kitten pushed its way under her sweater until it was all but buried. It curled up tightly, began to hum. It closed its eyes and was almost immediately asleep.