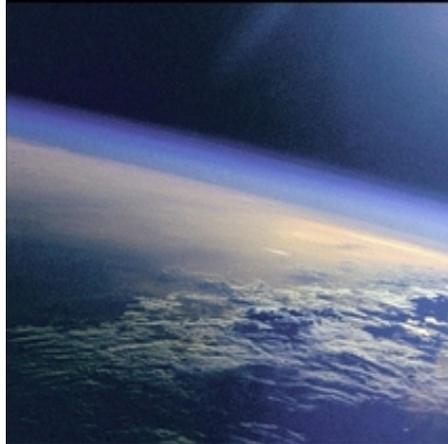


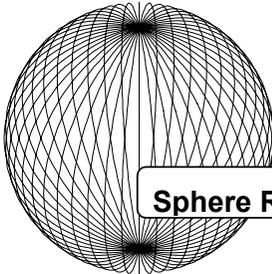
**The Rubber Glove
Theory of the Universe
and Other Diversions**

walter shawlee 2



The Rubber Glove Theory of the Universe, and Other Diversions

By: Walter Shawlee 2



Sphere Research Corporation

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Contents

Before...

Warcorp

Miranda

Father & Son

Images

Surplus Store

Evening Kiss

The Rubber Glove Theory of the Universe

Magic

Vacation

Small Signs

Maxine

PRA

Night Event

Into the Dark

The Man on the Beach

Feelings

When the Music's Over

After...

The Black Path

Before:

Short stories have one truly redeeming value. They let you explore something interesting without making you wade through 350 questionable pages in order to actually do that simple task. Not so unexpectedly, their most irritating feature is that they may end just as you are starting to feel right at home there. Well, I just can't help that part; short stories are, after all, ***short***.

These stories are a series of small commando forays into the global bureaucracy of the future, a private look inside the mind of an ancient king, a quick but hopefully cogent explanation of how the universe really works and a field exercise in practical magic. You will get a chance to poke around in the future courtesy of a convenient motel room, die in several *very* unpleasant ways, and hopefully feel your heart break. You will visit life after death here, encounter voodoo criminals and maybe fall in love with a machine. These are the smiling reflected faces in shop windows that you have always wanted to know more about, and some of the dreams that you had trouble remembering after you woke up.

These stories are not exactly science fiction, and not exactly fantasy. They are just how the ideas came out once I started to think about them. The mechanics aren't very important; the message is really all about the ***content***. This is my chance to thank all of you, close and distant, for my life. There is a lot more to tell you, but we will appropriately leave that for ***after***.

WARCORP

This story was originally written for Jerry Cutler, Friend, Probably the world's best Bell 212 pilot, professional scoundrel and inventor of the phrase: **O-Dark Thirty**, used to describe getting up way too damned early.

Site 2: Lac La Ronge, Saskatchewan.
Contract war between Argentina & The United Kingdom

An exhausted Argentinean soldier in wrinkled tan fatigues hunched down on the sparse grassy plain outside of Lac La Ronge, sweating nervously despite the dry and bitter cold. The advance scout tried for the fifth time to force the cumbersome 30 round banana clip into his Oerlikon assault rifle, without any visible signs of success.

He heard the regular, slow rotor beat of a helicopter gunship approaching, and threw the useless rifle and mud-clogged clip into the marshy grass and dived frantically for cover behind the few scrub trees. He prayed to a variety of Latin patron saints that the British were enroute to the main fighting, and weren't interested in him and his currently ineffective firepower.

The dark camouflage colored Westland combat helicopter raced by his position at over 180 knots, only a few meters above the ground, but didn't loiter. The Union Jack roundel on the fuselage faded from sight as

the ship dipped into a ravine by the shoreline of Lac La Ronge. After they were gone, he scrambled out to retrieve his weapon, the blue and gold Argentine shoulder flash on his jacket catching the last brief moment of afternoon light.

He levered the curved clip out of the rifle and inspected the jammed mechanism with disgust. He began to blow into the chamber, trying to shake out anything that was lodged in the breech, cursing steadily while absorbed in the process, when the helicopter suddenly returned above the ravine and backtracked directly over his now fully exposed position.

The pilot saw his quarry suddenly appear highlighted in the FLIR scanning sight, and called out to the gunner to arm the ordnance, while he put the ship into a stable hover with the Stability Augmentation System to allow a clean shot. A Wizard anti-personnel heat-seeker flashed to the ground, and the Argentinean soldier, still cursing the jammed rifle, was gone in a second.

The pilot signaled the kill to his unit's flight command on a secure VHF tactical comm channel, and veered the ship back to his unit. He held his gloved hand in a thumbs up salute to the gunner, and pushed the cyclic forward towards their field hangar.

The afternoon sun was chilly in Saskatchewan, since fall at this latitude in Canada looks a lot like winter everywhere else, so the pilot turned up the bleed air cabin heat in the cockpit, and wished once again he had remembered earlier to put on some extra socks.

Thousands of miles overhead, a geostationary surveillance satellite positioned at 55 degrees north latitude produced a concise, if somewhat poorly detailed, image set of the encounter, and sent it in burst telemetry to a ground station below for analysis. One of the pictures would make up part of a photo collage on page six of that Friday's London Times, with a short sidebar outlining the progress of the week's combat for those following the battle.

In the staging area just outside of Lac La Ronge, the Syrians were quickly building up their forces through massive airlifts, and were expected to be at full combat strength within two weeks. The Free Lebanese forces that they would soon meet were quartered 150 kilometers to the west, busily engaged in the same activities, with substantial financial and logistic assistance from the Saudis.

There was a lot of speculation that both forces would be at a severe disadvantage because of the Canadian climate and terrain conditions, but no other time slot or location was available quickly, and their disagreement evidently wouldn't wait. They had opted for full saturation coverage of the conflict to be broadcast back to their countries. It would require seven satellites, four ground stations and virtually all the spare transponders in the Mediterranean/middle east relay area. Warcorp had arranged all the technical details with their usual dispatch, and the show would be exceptional in its detail and coverage.

Edward Saavin was very close to death, and he could feel the pain spread like warm suffocation in his chest. Unlike many people who fear and loathe death, he had made his personal accommodation with the world gracefully, and accepted the idea of his dying with no particular regret. He had no sudden desire to own someone else's second-hand heart for a few more years of re-cycled and badly faded life.

He was fully satisfied with his own. He had enjoyed his sins hugely, and was grateful for his chances to make other people happy. He had loved three women to the very best of his ability, savoring everything about them. One had given him two sons that he was well pleased with, and enough good memories to last for whatever duration purgatory might eventually involve.

He reached out and pressed the call button by his hospital bed, and waited for the watch nurse to appear. She was there within a few seconds, and took his instruction to get his youngest son, who had been waiting patiently out in the hall for him to regain consciousness.

His son walked in, and slipped off the overcoat he was wearing. He smiled slightly, and took the old man's right hand in both of his. The two of them regarded each other for a few minutes without speaking, and their gray eyes and strong faces looked like still photos of the same man, taken forty years apart.

"I love you." Benjamin Saavin said quietly. His father relaxed slightly, not knowing what he had expected to hear, but pleased it had not been something idle, or foolish in their last few minutes together. "David will be here later tonight, his flight gets in from Singapore in a few hours." he continued, speaking about his fractionally older twin brother.

Benjamin sat on the edge of the bed, and ran his hand through his father's hair, pushing it out of his face, where the thick silver hair had fallen slightly over his brow. He thought to himself that the man who had, in essence, franchised global warfare, looked surprisingly peaceful and untroubled this evening.

Edward felt the pressure inside his chest getting worse, so he sat up slightly against the pillows, and spoke quietly to his son. "John, I don't think I'll get a chance to see David tonight, so you tell him how I feel, please." He stopped for a minute to let the pressure in his chest ease enough to let him talk again.

"Try and remember the real lessons, son. Always leave both your friends and enemies with their honor and their dignity intact. Always leave them their own lives and self-respect, no matter how bitter the fight or how deep the love. The two of you will become great men, because you will never be satisfied with less, but in the end it will surely come to nothing if you forget that."

He shifted slightly on the bed, trying to ease the growing pressure on his chest, but it was like a blue-white star trying to pass through him. He gripped his son's hand a little tighter, and said very softly, "I love

you both so much." Finally he relaxed, and was still, and Benjamin felt the pulse race briefly, and then stop in the hand he held.

He continued to sit there, holding his father's slowly cooling hand, until his brother came in suddenly, a little after midnight. They were silent, since their feelings had always been clear to each other, and both sat on the bed for a while longer with their father and their private thoughts.

Site 2: Lac La Ronge, Saskatchewan

While a group of new British soldiers were en route to their staging area, Sergeant-Major Gerald Collier-Marshall overheard two of his squad's enlisted men discussing their field weapons while riding jammed together in the back of their Leyland troop carrier.

"Well, mate, are we the good guys or the bad guys, d'you think?" Said one, gesturing around the carrier with his folded cap.

"Why would you start to worry about that at this late hour, black-hearted devil that you are, Miller?" Piped up a short, smiling gunner from the rear of the transport.

"Jacko, if we're the bad guys, then these are unquestionably bad guy rifles, and I'll not hit a single

damn thing I shoot at. Even if I'm only two paces from the bloody enemy, my shot will somehow wind up in a tree trunk fifty meters away, not to mention that the bloody magazine will somehow manage to jam in a near-fatal manner daily. Now, on the other hand, if we're the good guys, I'll be able to aim at the floor, hit fifteen of the jackals with the ricochets from a single shot, and have to reload only every other week."

"Bert, me lad, you've been visiting the cinema just a little too often. As you well know, you'll have to reload every week, just like the rest of us, and my own best, which I daresay is the very best in the unit, is six of these squalid Argies with a single shot."

Sergeant-Major Collier-Marshall leaned over to Corporal Jack Higgins and felt compelled to add that the six heathens could be hit while firing from a moving vehicle at high speed over one's shoulder. For them, the issue was decided, but like every soldier, they knew that fate would call the final toss at a later hour, and with far less certain results.

Site 1: Mindelo, Cape Verde Islands Contract war between Pakistan and India

The warm humid breeze blowing in off the Atlantic barely stirred the limp green and white Pakistani flag overhead. An agonized Corporal Zulfikar al-Fawzi looked up from his desk at the staging area in Mindelo as the breeze came in, and hoped that his unit would be adequately prepared for the Indian

assault expected today from the south side of Sao Vincente.

The logistics in this war were unbearably difficult, as transport to the Cape Verde Islands off the North African coast was both awkward and excruciatingly primitive. The Indians had used Dakar in Senegal as their shipping funnel, and the Pakistanis had to settle for Freetown, much further south in Sierra Leone. Sierra Leone was still in the early stages of discovering the telephone, and was an unmitigated logistics nightmare.

It made for slower, longer transport, and was giving Corporal al-Fawzi a severely ulcerated stomach that no amount of black market Maalox could control. Warcorp had set their opening move for today, any time after 11:00 am local time, and al-Fawzi was in a burning personal torment that something he was personally responsible for, had been foolishly left undone.

He noticed that the clock on his desk showed 11:14, and once again he prayed that the war against the thrice-accursed Hindus would begin soon, and be over quickly. He was also consumed with worry over the state of his restaurant in his absence. Allah alone knew what chicanery was being perpetrated there in his absence under the very questionable stewardship of his wife's younger brother.

Suddenly, there was what sounded like a thunder crack inside the office, and the roof collapsed in an explosive white cloud of plaster dust on top of al-Fawzi's desk. Overhead, the Indian Mig-23 pulled up sharply, and turned to join the rest of its squadron on the

assault run at the massed Pakistani forces at Mindelo. Corporal al-Fawzi had been right to be concerned, as he had left one of the UHF tactical radios keyed on by accident during his earlier radio servicing and communications test. The Indians had vectored directly to his base over the ocean, below radar height, greatly aided by his unintentional operational carelessness.

By 3:23 p.m. the following day, the Indians achieved a decisive victory, and the information was relayed on a secure L-band transponder to and from the satellites overhead. The victory was confirmed through Warcorp by five that evening, and Pakistan was obliged to return several hundred square kilometers of northern India under the watchful eyes of Warcorp staffers. When the withdrawal was complete, ten days later, the counterbalances were removed from Lahore and New Delhi, and life returned essentially to normal on the Indian sub-continent.

Interlude: Toronto, 2026

When Edward Saavin first conceived of Warcorp in 2020 late at night over an imported Beck's Dark, the world was desperate for escape. During the month of March, there were 17 major armed conflicts (polite 'evening news' English for open warfare) in progress world-wide, and light tactical nuclear weapons had already been used in three of them. As the result of a small miscalculation on the part of the Tamil Tigers, regarding prudent care and handling of nuclear devices,

Northern Sri Lanka was now largely a radioactive wasteland. Religious and racial friction there had abated, however, due to the lack of living participants.

Iran and Iraq had been casually and actively at war of one sort or another for over twenty years, more so after the US troop pull out was finally achieved in 2011. They had managed to finally draw in virtually all the surrounding Arab nations in one way or another in what was now a Sunni versus Shia conflict.

After the collapse of the oil industry in the spring of 2012 due to terrorist bombings at major refining plants all over the Middle East, all the OPEC countries were in a frenzied state, and completely beyond reason. In random acts of frustration, Tabriz had been totally destroyed by use of a lethal mutated anthrax, and Kirkuk had received a direct hit from an Iranian black market SS20. It had glowed brightly on infra-red satellite photos for a week because no one could put out the fires.

Most Americans had taken to going armed in their everyday life, as terrorist activities and border skirmishes with Mexican inspired militia forces had become commonplace as far north as Oklahoma. Since many of their activities were financed through drug traffic, the tidal wave of its attendant crime was also inundating the country. The southern border of the US became a virtual armed fortress, in a futile attempt to slow down the tide of would-be Americans, contract terrorists, and drugs.

Russia was nominal head of a tired and wheezing loose economic unit composed entirely of collapsing and inefficient industry and destitute farms, and a stifling

overlay of crime and corruption so thick, it was choking the life from every citizen. Three catastrophic radiation leakages from the old, poorly designed Soviet nuclear power stations in the Ukraine and Byelorussia had virtually destroyed their finest agricultural land, and plunged the region into a dark and frightening poverty. Systemic violent crime did the rest.

Russian military adventures into neighboring nations became more desperate and less idealistic, and now had as their target the feeding of tens of millions of starving citizens, and the halting of racial tensions between the now violently opposed Asian and Islamic minorities. The collapsing Ruble was replaced with a “New Ruble”, at stated parity with the US Dollar. That lasted less than a week, and soon slid to the penny level again, making it almost impossible for Russia to import food, spare parts or medicine. Only their diminishing gold and oil exports kept the country afloat.

Taken as a whole, it was the most pitiful state of the world in human history, and had all the earmarks of a steadily deteriorating nightmare. In a game strategy situation, this is the point where the players usually look up at one another across the game board with arched eyebrows, decide to put away the pieces, and go out for a stiff and badly needed drink.

Edward was a very successful industrialist, and was well connected politically both in Canada and the US through marriage, family and business. His twenty-one related firms supplied a wide range of practical and lethal hardware to both governments and many NATO members, and they had at their disposal some of the finest research and analysis teams in the world.

He was also highly skeptical about the chances for either of his sons to grow up intact, unless there was some rapid and dramatic change in the course of world events. These changes gave little overt evidence of ever spontaneously occurring, in Edward's well-considered personal opinion.

He brooded about what could be done until July of 2019, when the UN headquarters in New York were destroyed by a previously unknown American-Aryan white power group. These individuals feared further racial contamination of the citizens of New York by the large number of foreigners staffing the UN. The impact of their stupidity on world politics was nearly fatal as tempers world-wide became superheated after the attack, and every nation became an insulated island.

At that point, Edward felt there was no more time to debate with himself or anyone else, and called in all of his top executives for what was to be the most important meeting of their lives. He assembled sixty-five of the people he trusted most in the world, and told them to accomplish one thing, completely in secret, and in short order. His trust and confidence proved to be well founded as events progressed. Everyone understood what was at risk.

At his instruction, Warcorp was founded on October 22nd, 2019. The very finest military, psychological, and political talent that his money, persuasion or coercion could buy helped to breathe rapid life into it. On November 27th of the same year, as its first visible function, it ran stark advertisements in one hundred and twenty-three major worldwide newspapers,

and seventy-three top trade and news journals. Demographically speaking, if you were important in the course of human events, you saw the copy regularly.

Each ad was an entire page, blank except for the following text in crisp, bold print:

Victory and defeat with honor. Warcorp.

Edward had the finest advertising talent in the world leak carefully structured clues as to Warcorp's intent and purpose, and had the pleasure of seeing world speculation explode within a few days. One week before Christmas, the ads were repeated, but with a telephone number and web link added. The number did not stop ringing continuously until nightfall on January 14th of 2020.

The rules were simple, and effective. Two parties must be willing to meet in combat to resolve their differences, at one of the neutral sites created by Warcorp. A minimum of one, and a maximum of 50,000 professional soldiers only. No nuclear weapons, no civilians, no toxic gas, no germ warfare. The players pick the rules, but there were no draws. The parties agree to the binding forfeit beforehand, declare all the terms publicly, and carry through based on the winner.

And of course, not everyone can really be trusted, so Edward added the counterbalance device, which was a little tactical insurance. It was the finest piece of engineering ever turned out by his firms, and was both stunningly lethal and secure. It eventually deterred quite a few potential players with shaky ethics, when it became clear it would be placed in the major

city of each participating country.

The fee for Warcorp's services was \$50 Million (US New Gold Dollars or their equivalent in Gold Swiss Francs) for each engagement, payable in advance, with gold or platinum preferred. For their fee, they provided the location, and either privacy or coverage, as desired. Any nation or group could challenge any other by stating their grievance publicly and posting the required fee at Warcorp's bank in Geneva. The fee was not refundable in the event that sudden negotiation or contemplation set in.

For two months, everyone thought it over, sobered by the idea, but then Iraq posted the money, and challenged Iran over a long litany of grievances. They met at site 2 (Saskatchewan) in April of 2021. The war ended in May, with Iran the winner, and there was a nominal return of the disputed territory briefly. But eighteen hours later, a humiliated Iraqi general decided to return to conventional warfare, and stormed back across the border into Iran at Abadan. Warcorp automatically detonated the counterbalance, and Iraq's capital Baghdad was essentially obliterated.

After this sobering event, there was not a rush for Warcorp's services, or war activities of any sort for several months. Some events chafe a little too deeply, however, and before long, there were other takers, keen to resolve their differences without devastating their homelands.

Over the next year, all three sites (Christmas Island was the third) were engaged, and a variety of conflicts were resolved, for better or worse. For many

countries, it was a long awaited chance for justice or redress, or to reclaim lost honor, real or imagined. Because the terms were fair, and the relief well secured by the influence and power of Warcorp, the counterbalance would not have to be detonated again for almost fifteen years.

During the war between the PRC and New Russia in 2036, which was fought on Christmas Island over a minor point of expansionist philosophy (and a major issue of offshore oil), a determined group of radical Chinese scientists tried to disable the counterbalance device installed in Beijing. Their efforts were made prior to contemplated secret pre-emptive strikes on Moscow and St. Petersburg, which were intended to resolve the philosophical dispute with some considerable finality.

The counterbalance suddenly broadcast both audibly and on fifteen common radio bands that it would self-detonate in one hour, and advised all personnel to evacuate immediately. In exactly 60 minutes, it exploded violently, creating a virtually impenetrable zone of intensely radioactive contamination thirty kilometers in diameter. Two hours later, a team from Warcorp advised the new PRC provisional government that a replacement device had already been activated in Shanghai, and suggested they leave it alone this time while completing their activities on Christmas Island. The war was eventually resolved in favor of the PRC, but it was a costly victory in every sense for the players.

Five years later, the sites were in use only rarely, but their purpose was one that can't be easily replaced, or avoided. Human behavior is resistant to change, and

conflict will be with us always. As Plato observed, *only the dead have seen the last of war.*

Real time: Toronto General Hospital

The brothers finally left the hospital room early in the morning, and walked for a while through downtown together, as the faintly lit city started to wake up.

Hidden only a short distance away in the future, they would have to make almost unbearable decisions, and they would feel the weight Edward had carried without any complaint for so long. They would have only the small additional advantage of someone to discuss it with who would genuinely understand their situation.

But then, the price of human progress is always paid for dearly by someone.

Miranda

This story is dedicated to **Mr. Eric Frank Russell**.
I think he would have appreciated what is best
about this story, diabolically speaking.

After 58 months spent quietly chafing inside our tight-fitting transport freezers, we fell into a slowly closing spiral orbit around Uranus. Watching the approach scanners, I wished with all my heart that we were someplace else, and would happily have put up all my allocated time-on-ship credit to make it come true. Instead, I got to listen to a lot of low-rent hardware wheezing electronically in my ear, while the radar altimeter methodically clicked off our descent in a dry monotone. Predictably, we could only be government employees.

To make matters significantly worse, we weren't even destined for the fabulous surface of Uranus itself. That was far too easy. Any fool could have hit that from across the solar system armed with only a little reaction mass, trusty boy scout compass and pencil, plus a few casual over-the-shoulder star shots. *We* were luckily destined for Miranda, the much lesser and frankly quite unimpressive *moon* of Uranus. All of 400 dark, sorry, frozen clicks in diameter, and subject to a fairly erratic orbit. Hardly prime solar real estate, no matter how desperate you were to expand your fledgling galactic empire.

Since we were locked into a pattern descent, aided by a wide variety of electronically assisted nerve

endings, I couldn't help but spend my considerable idle time wondering what earlier personal sins I was being re-paid for by this event. Quite a rich choice to pick from, I have to admit, and the event in question was no doubt something serious, even if it happened to be un-guessed and un-obvious at the moment.

So: a smooth landing, off to a good start, an unequivocal clear sign of divine intervention on our behalf? Fat chance. We burned into a skiff of surface ice (well, frozen *something*) on landing, and had a minor explosion of vented gas caused by the sudden heat of the ship's engines. We then fell into a spastic, uncontrolled crash that turned the ship pitch dark, and my stomach into tight little convulsive knots. Boy, I hate that chaotic near-death stuff for no really good reason. If wishes were fishes, as my old grandma used to say, those responsible for this misadventure would have at that very moment been under thirty meters of Icelandic codfish, gasping their sorry last while they sucked in the fish fumes.

Armed principally with a desperate desire to keep breathing for a least a few more minutes, we all scrambled into action in the darkness to secure the ship, and finally restored power and atmosphere in about an hour. By then the air was nicely wet and thick, and we had all been hovering a little too close to check-out time for my personal taste. Despite widely held beliefs among the cave-dwellers back on Earth unable to pass our entrance exam, I did *not* join Orbital Exploration just to punch my ticket early in an especially remote and airless location.

My first mission task for the Home Office was to

set up the re-link transponder back to Earth, so I got into my suit while everybody else was busy with their particular crisis activities, and got to it. It was a really tough shot, and had to pass through three other interim transponders on the downward leg. But thanks to some hot antenna stabilization, incredible gain and flagrantly wasted power, I was able to establish a noisy and marginal data and voice connection by locking on to the one of the streaming Earth data beacons. Even monochrome low-res video was out of the question, though. Maybe later, if our collective karma improved substantially.

When we finally re-grouped in the main crew cabin, everyone was tired and a little disoriented. Jackson and I played some lackluster gin for a while, but we were just too tired to really enjoy it, even though we had already settled on a fairly entertaining forfeit for the loser. Our captain, Sue-Anne, was really in a grouchy mood after that fine world-class landing, so everyone sacked out early and tried to sleep in the confusing marginal gravity. Based on my collected data so far, I had already personally picked Miranda as the place God might choose to begin the end of the universe at any moment.

After some very restless hours, we got up and had what the federal government seriously believes constitutes breakfast (I have a memo that says so), and Sue-Anne gave us the long-awaited story on our current garden vacation spot. The shipboard Doom Index was showing some activity among the staff by that point, so she jumped right in without any decoration, just as soon as everyone was finished eating their dehydrated mystery meat and temptingly prepared scrambled Soya. Breakfast

of space-champions.

"It is my happy task to inform you all that we are here to examine surface features on this unique moon that are felt by the powers-that-are to be very worthy of our personal inspection." She leaned back and sipped her coffee, which I felt to be the most heroic action to date by any crewmember, as I know for a fact it contains no organic or coffee-plant-derived material whatsoever. There was a lot of highly animated eye conversation passing among us, so I figured I might as well bite the bullet, and ask the inevitable question. As 2IC, it was my inescapable lot in life.

"Umm, Sue-Anne? Just what surface features might these be?" I asked politely, and arched my slightly scarred eyebrows expectantly. I then blew across my cup of hot green tea (I bring my own as part of my personal weight allowance) as a diversion. She can take me two out of three falls, so it doesn't pay to be too lippy with her. Some mild verbal taunting is OK though, if you are sitting far enough away.

She tried some more coffee, and looked out one of the un-shuttered ports. "Well, Dave, there are some massive ice fissures over 40 clicks long, not too far from here. Also an odd, sharp looking 90 degree rock formation." She looked down at a fingernail, and bit off a piece of cuticle nonchalantly. "There's that huge satiny smooth ice cap just a few clicks away. And the ship, of course. That's probably worth looking at." She suddenly seemed interested in the bottom of her coffee cup. Probably found something moving in there. I'm always afraid to check too closely.

Jackson almost fell off her chair at the last line, but then Linda is always easily shaken by these little procedural things. Everyone else felt compelled to talk at once, so I just leaned back, and waited for some peace and quiet, and hoped Sue would spill the rest of the story before I died of old age. It only took about 45 minutes for Sue-Anne to verbally beat them back into their conversational cages. The wailing and teeth gnashing eventually subsided to tolerable levels so that she could continue the whole tale.

"Look, let's cut the ranting, OK? If you want the whole enchilada, I want some *quiet*." Everyone tapered off, although admittedly with little visible grace, and Sue dug out the sealed mission package from the captain's console locker. She split the seal, and passed around the prints inside for us to have a look at while she kept talking.

"About 65 years ago, a remote probe called Voyager II passed this moon, and sent back about three hours of data. Images, radar scans, magnetic field surveys, some quick and nasty spectral scans. All very low-rent, and nothing we would be particularly proud of today. Some dusty old steam-driven computers crunched the returned data, and pieced the pictures together, and frankly, it was a very quiet footnote and non-event in space exploration." JPL probably wouldn't have been too thrilled with her glowing mission summary, in all fairness to the hot technology of the day.

"After all that time, a research group at Orbital Exploration re-sifted through the data with some real hardware, and bingo, so to speak, there was something very interesting. All this was done by a fifteen year old

grad student on company dole, and he completely vapor-locked when the images fell into his lap. It made its way up the admin ladder at Home Office, and lo and behold, here we are, inches from death, looking for something that might be long gone, or just an image anomaly in an over-worked graphics processor." She tried some more coffee, then finally set it aside, probably saving her life.

"Dave and Linda and I are going to have a quick look right after breakfast, and we'll decide on what comes next, after the in-person, up close viewing. Ten minutes, ladies and gentlemen." She went out to pull her gear, while we looked at the processed photos. To be candid, I would not rocket this far into the great and sparsely treed dark for what was on those prints, but then, what do *I know?*

We struggled out of the lock in our clumsy looking cold suits, and used the skimmer to cover the intervening clicks to the alleged "ship" site. We ended up along the bottom of the ice or frozen whatever cliffs, and for the first time, I was moved by something other than total disgust on Miranda. They were incredible. Clean white vertically fractured frozen crystals, as far as the eye could see. Their size was so massive and the moon so small that all sense of scale was completely lost on the viewer. And right at the bottom, at least a couple hundred meters long, there was the ship, in its entire mysterious splendor.

Sue-Anne shot a detailed video survey on our approach to the ship, and I kept a transponder link open back to the ship, in the event the residents of the ship decided to eat us or something before we could get the data back in person. The view of the ship was a little

chilling, just sitting there quietly at the base of that massive stretch of white ice, or maybe methane. We had no spectral lines to really be certain.

Jackson un-shouldered her lines and grapples, and we made our shaky way to the top of the ship to look around. Low gravity may be helpful for some things, but we almost wound up in a low and dirty orbit around Miranda by pushing off a little too hard on the climb up. Makes you introspective though, the thought of suddenly becoming a very minor satellite, this ridiculously far from home.

The ship was shaped like the oft-recounted saucer, but flared out at one end, sort of like the capital letter “D” seen from above. It was also sealed tighter than a drum, and was just a smidgen too big to pack home under our arms like a surprise Christmas gift. I had a very bad feeling about this ship, and started to get that highly expendable sensation all over my body. No doubt Home Office staff would just like us to sit tight on this for a few years of close study, while trying to get in armed with only my Swiss Army pocketknife and a mixed assortment of blunt local rocks.

I come by my suspicion of large organizations quite honestly, as we grew up within eyeshot of the great Ohio leak, and listened for years to the *federales* trying to convince us that radioactive toxic waste that glowed in the dark was basically good for you. *Cow pucky*. Never trust anyone with your “best interests at heart”. They probably want to sell you for spare parts, and are just trying to divert your attention from the shiny scalpel in the other hand.

With a heavy sigh, I listened to Sue-Anne fill in the chair warmers by transponder link, and wondered who was going to get the nasty end of this particular stick. I could almost see our names printed all over it in my mind. After we sent our packet data through the downlink, we re-grouped and headed for our home away from home, knowing it would be days before a reply. On the way back in the skimmer, Linda put her arm around my helmet and blew a kiss at me through the perspex. I could tell she was feeling a bit blue about this whole thing.

51 Hours later, our reply arrived from H/O, brief and completely un-illuminating. We were to return to the ship tomorrow, and carry out the experiments outlined in the storage pack numbered 33:CE down in the cargo hold. Sue-Anne shrugged, and went to get it out, while we pondered just what *this* message might entail. Probably wanted us to cut our throats over the hatch of the ship, and see if it would open in response to a “bio-stimulus”. Jackson came over and repeated her earlier performance, but without the perspex between us, and with a lot more supporting detail. She has considerable skill.

Sue-Anne came back up about twenty minutes later with a small drawn aluminum cargo container, and broke the seals on it. Bad news always seems to come in the nicest containers. Inside was a bound report of some kind, some video disks, and three plastic looking rectangles. I had real trouble envisioning any of this as being helpful in any way whatsoever. A small tactical nuke or industrial laser looked to really be in order to open the ship. We leafed through the report, which was a dry and detailed analysis of the image reconstruction

that was responsible for our being here, and Sue popped the first of the disks into the mess table viewer.

We were then treated to an annotated and thrill-packed account of this same bound report in solid video, and were all on the verge of dozing off, when the scene cut to a sober looking individual from Home Office, who finally got to the point with some speed and precision. The usual fussy looking bureaucrat with bad tailoring.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, we have sent you out to Miranda not only because of the discovery of the ship image, but also because we recognized that ship." I felt my heart sinking like a rock. We had just seen the first *EVER* recorded sighting of a true alien artifact, and this guy is saying it looks *familiar*. As event horizons go, I could tell this was going to be a very bad one.

"Fifteen years ago, from your launch date, an identical ship was found on the Moon, alongside Tyco ridge. Eight years ago, one was found on the south polar cap of Mars." He had the grace to cough briefly into his hand. I hoped he was currently dying of terminal embarrassment, for keeping all this under his fat bureaucratic hat. In my mind, I was adding "total unmitigated *wanker*" as his title on his pocket nameplate.

"We opened the first ship after some difficulty, and in our exploration of the ship, found information that indicated there were more of these craft positioned around the Solar System. We also found "keys" for some of the others." He indicated the plastic rectangles in front of him on the desktop with his hand. "We have

no idea just what is behind the random scattering of these ships, but the second one we discovered had considerably more information than the first."

He looked thoughtful for a minute, then continued, "We believe the ships are FTL or trans-light vehicles, but we don't understand them well enough to use them. We believe you will learn that at Miranda." He went on with some detail for the use of the keys in the major outer lock, and explained the layout of the ship and all of its functions that they did understand. We all had the same overloaded expressions around the table.

Sue put in the last disk, and then we got the mega-zinger I had been sort of half expecting. At least he again had the good grace to look apologetic when he delivered it. "This is very important to the Home Office. We all understand here that under normal circumstances, your turn-around time on Miranda would be very brief, with your return window only nine more days away. We want the answer very badly to these ships, so we are going to give you enough time to find it, and perhaps provide some incentive to do so. You will have to return in the Miranda ship, as yours will not re-launch. This will extend your available time to at least 35 days, based on your life support supplies. Our best wishes are with you on this project."

Sue-Anne looked violent, Linda looked like she was going to cry. Ash and Davis had unreadable expressions, Maxine got up to check on the little tid-bit of information about no re-launch. I figured this was about par for Home Office, they were big believers in the cheerful sacrifice of lesser ranks for the greater good,

as they perceived it. Maxine was back in a twinkling, and confirmed our Tracor navigator was missing the small trifles of a return course, ballistics program and vector library. Maxine is outstanding at getting from anyplace to anyplace else, but she figured our chances at slim to none steering essentially by eyeball all the way back home.

One thing inevitably leads to another, and this clearly led to a severe case of terminal aggravation. After a day or so of hysterical grumbling, we packed up, and all went out to the ship. The second "key" did the trick, and we glided into the ship without incident. At least we wouldn't have to try and blast our way in with my folding pocketknife.

Ash and Davis got the internal systems up and running within a week, by the simple expedient of following the instructions we got from Home Office, and re-attaching the neatly disconnected cables and couplings we found throughout the ship. I have no idea where the ship's power came from, maybe from some well preserved "AA" sized Duracells for all we could determine. Nothing turned up that in any way resembled a power source, but then would a "scientist" of the 1800's recognize a modern pocket reactor? Unlikely.

We were delighted to discover, although not especially surprised, that the previous crew breathed air (more or less), and seemed to favor visible light. So much for our secret nightmare images of huge methane-breathing spiders lurking and skulking around in the near-infrared murk, waiting impatiently to rip our hearts out for casual sport. They were probably huge *oxygen* breathing spiders, with 20-20 Technicolor night vision.

Davis and Jackson and I spent our hours trying to crack what we had been vaguely advised by H/O was the ship's "optical" computer, while Sue-Anne and Maxine tried to figure out how to get the heck out of Miranda's mild gravitational embrace. We set up our mess in a big wardroom, aft of what we figured to be the main control area, and pooled what we discovered each meal break. Usually, these were pretty brief sessions, once the growlies were gone. I didn't rate our return chances as being any too high at this particular point.

The really puzzling thing about the ship was the seeming total lack of physical controls, switches, knobs, plates or anything humans regularly seem to fancy in their spacecraft. I didn't really understand the significance of this until the second day we were in the control area trying all kinds of ineffectual experiments. Finally Sue-Anne got so mad she pointed at the big display area, and yelled out at the top of her voice that she wished she could get one of the damn navigation screens to come on. It came on. Probably just scared of her, like the rest of us.

After some refinement, and fruitless idiotic yelling and arm waving, we discovered that the whole ship was controlled by thought images, if they were clear and unambiguous enough, and very graphic. Not so easy to think of what you don't know, but we got it eventually.

We unlocked the computer the next day by the same method, and was it ever a revelation and a half. Like to leave for Earth? Of course, sir. Please select the orbital descent pattern you favor, or would you like to

port directly to a given site without delay? Duck soup. A five year old with a good grasp of images and logic could drive this thing in his or her fitful sleep. I could see why Home Office had encountered such trouble with this, no doubt it was too plain and *straightforward* for them. Perhaps if a simple deviousness circuit were to be installed as a field mod, they would feel a bit more comfortable with it.

Sue-Anne found the other ships by the simple method of visualizing one in front of the computer, followed by a questioning image, sort of an internal shrug. There were a total of 223 still in the Solar System, including quite a few on Earth. I could also see why people weren't exactly tripping over them back home. Most were parked in the current location of what we think must have been Atlantis. Pretty dark and *wet* down there, and not a lot of traffic.

The big point of interest was the purpose of the ships, and why they seemed to be left laying around like a lot of old discarded gym sneakers. That was a revelation of fairly substantial dimensions. They were the *OLD* way people used to move around the Solar System and points further away. They just left them behind a while back because they simply didn't need them any more. A real ego-builder *that* little bit was.

From the ship's computer, we eventually learned that the ships move by unfolding the structure of the universe, and then just fall to the desired new location. From what we could determine, the builders of the ships seemed pretty convinced that all locations in the universe are really the same place, and only appear as individual locations because of our lousy perceptual and

analytical ability. Perfect, our state-of-the-art technology is basically a big zero, and we don't really understand anything *else about the universe* either. What an ego booster that whole session was.

The ships don't seem to take any energy to do this trick, they just focus the pilot's thoughts, since the entire structure of the universe seems to be essentially imaginary as far as these guys are concerned. Somewhere back in history, people (?) just became much better thinkers, and learned to do all of this without the ships, and went off and left them parked with the keys still in the ignition. So much for my scheduled post-doctoral work in experimental physics. Current knowledge of Earth science was clearly not going to be much of a big event to these shipbuilders.

The ship obligingly taught us how to operate it in a few days, and we tried the method ourselves by visiting some of the other ships in outer locations and a quick side visit to the Rings we had all been dying to see close up. We were all sitting in the control room of the ship, speculating on how we were going to deal with Home Office, when Sue-Anne got the *big flash*. She has a twisted sense of humor, but then all officers, even me, probably fall into that category at some stage in their H/O careers.

Our resolve was made in a twinkling, and we all adjourned to Tahiti for a few weeks to work on our tans, and let our time run out on the 35 day deadline in relative comfort. The occasional visit back to our base to check up on our transponder revealed some plaintive traffic as the days dwindled away. Home Office groaning and agonizing over its possible error in

judgment, deep heartfelt concern for our situation. Crestfallen over our lack of response. Very touching and sincere stuff. Well, just remember that scalpel. Count all your appendages on a regular basis.

We waited until day 40, then went back to Earth, and dropped the ship in the lap of all those depressed and crestfallen Home Office personnel. Actually, in the main administrative parking complex to be more correct. Oh, did we crush your flyer, sir? So *sorry*. Tough to steer these babies, you know; wide turning radius.

The strutting and puffing was incredible on arrival. How sure they had been that a crack orbital explorer team like ourselves would be up to the mighty task they set for us. Human race proud of us, damned fine job, etc., so on and so forth. All this piffle from people who would have happily killed off an endless supply of crews like us for the instructions to this little ship. Eventually, of course, they got around to the good stuff, like how did we *do* it, incidentally where did the *TANS* come from, and then the discussion got intense. We were sequestered away “for our own good”, so the “de-briefing” could proceed without any foolish and distracting interference like legal counsel or due process.

Sue-Anne was great, she told them we thought it here by the sheer force of our dazzling personalities, and that we had been sunbathing in Tahiti. They didn't believe a word of it. Not even a syllable. There was some mention of drugs to help stimulate our obviously inadequate recall. Shortly after that, we managed to wangle a “show & tell” demonstration back on the ship, which they foolishly permitted, and we then split for that beach again to think for a while, tossing our H/O

observer out into the ocean about 500 yards from some little island. This apparently created a small stir back at H/O, not that we were too deeply concerned by that point. Their next plan no doubt called for vivisection of the crew in their ceaseless quest for truth, justice and the Home Office way.

Just so that the prevailing mastodon mentality at Home Office shouldn't have it all their own way, I left a few broadcast band transponders open in orbit on our way out. Detailed directions for all of the interested, so to speak. We prepared quite a few good video maps to the easily reached on-shore ship locations, plus our travel commentary and methodology. Also clear directions to our new forwarding address, for those with the correct inter-galactic bus fare. We sent the whole package net-wide, and posted to every possible site we thought might be interested in getting this news.

After all, the computer on board had mentioned that way back when, not everyone on Earth had figured out how to travel without the ships. So, they thoughtfully left a few around, with maps and directions for late arrivals to the dance, like us. We were pretty keen to join the party already in progress, but figured there might be some other dancers around the planet interested in sharpening up their steps, too.

Besides, a little familiar company might just be welcome out there in the big sparsely treed dark, one day. Hope to see you soon.

Father & Son

When the inevitable fall rain began to pour out of the gray clouds overhead, John Prentice turned up the collar of his old overcoat, and started to walk more briskly down Nanaimo Street to his office. He could smell the fragrance of the transplanted English tea shops and bakeries working through the damp air as he crossed the last street in front of his building.

Arriving out of breath, he caught the dark wrought iron railing, and pulled himself quickly up the steps to open the door. Brushing the rain from his clothes, he stepped into the waiting room, and hung up his dripping coat. For a moment, he looked back out the front window, and warmed his face with wet hands, trying to rub out the chill with stiff fingers.

From around the corner of the entryway, his secretary, Anna, called out that there was hot tea and lemon ready. He went in and accepted Anna's offer gratefully, appreciating her thoughtfulness as much today as he had for the last eighteen years they had worked together.

As John walked down the century old wood paneled hallway, Anna's voice followed him, "There are some files waiting in your queue, John. One of them looks important." He stopped outside his office door, and promised to look into them first thing, knowing that

he would have no peace from her until the files were reviewed and replies duly sent. It was the essence of his business, after all.

He sat down heavily at his desk, and sipped his tea, looking out the window at the rain beating down on the ocean outside. By the window was a perfect holographic copy of an old oriental parchment print called "*Six Persimmons*". When he was finished with the ocean outside, he watched the argon illuminated blue- violet of the print, and felt his thoughts collect and clear while his hands slowly defrosted from the outside in, thanks to the hot tea cup. Like many people who worked with machines and computers, John was attracted to natural beauty and hand made things for his deepest pleasures.

After a few minutes, he was warmed inside by the tea, and ready for the day's work. He called Anna on the small desk visor, and said he would review the files now, asking her to hold all his outside calls until he was finished.

He turned to the large split screen terminal by his desk, and inserted his optically coded key into the lockswitch. While all the system magnetic and optical drives slowly spun up to speed with a faint rushing sound like distant mechanical breathing, he looked again at the softly glowing blue hologram, and listened to the familiar Victoria rain beat softly on the windows.

A small light came on by the side of his keyboard, and the e-mail text window of his terminal came up with the single word 'ready', with no particular indication of just what for. He hit the queue display key

on the keyboard, and waited for the file directory to be down-loaded from Anna's machine in the next office. The machine to machine interchange was silent, but elegant in its own digital way.

The screen scrolled rapidly, and then displayed four short blocks of text, each one followed by a bright blue flag indicating the source of the inquiry. Three were regular customers interested in using his office's unusual research capability, but the fourth was not. He knew right away why it had come to Anna's attention as so important.

He quickly called up the full file, and found it was very short, ending in a restricted phone number and password sequence. He read the display silently, then activated the system's communication routines, and let the modem and computer battle their way through their intricate security dance. Thirty seconds later, the screen cleared, and then displayed, "Thank you for calling, Father."

"You're welcome." He said softly, then typed in the questions the file's contents had brought into his thoughts. He talked via his terminal to the largest, most secure computer in North America for half an hour. Finally, all the questions and answers had faded silently off the screen, and he was left only with what remained in his heart.

His son was dying, and he could feel the life slipping quietly away with each keystroke, like the rain on his windows. The computer had an abrupt sounding name, an acronym, but it was John's son in every way. The central processor was wholly organic, and contained

all that remained of his son Darren after a car crash six years ago, caused by a drunk driver on his way to yet another party. The interface and programming were John's last gift to his son, the life he wished they could have shared more closely together. He was too late to save his wife even in this small way.

He leaned back in his chair, and watched the last few years of his life unfold on his closed eyelids like the endless lines on his terminal. He was one of the world's very few cyborg engineers that could tackle the underlying philosophy of merging men and machines together. But rescuing his son had been special, an accomplishment that had made many darker moments slip away. Sometimes one small success is enough for a lifetime.

Now his son's organic intellect was dying of meningitis, which was an ever-present danger for cyborg transplants, and he knew it would be only hours before he disconnected, and died for the second time, the last time. The extension that was electronic would still function, but not as before, not as fast, not with insight and compassion. His son, in this electronic re-incarnation, touched countless lives in ways that were subtle and important, but rarely visible.

The last lines on the screen ran through his mind, and in them, he found some relief from his eye's inner images.

"No other father could have given me more.
Thank you for my life.
I love you."

By the afternoon, his son was dead, and the queue on his terminal was virtually under attack from a dozen sources to plead for the system's revival, as if he might have other surplus children stored away somewhere just waiting to be used in the machine. He looked them over and then called Anna, and told her he was going out for a few minutes to take a walk.

He walked through downtown Victoria to the ivy covered Empress Hotel, then across the government square in front of the Parliament building to lean against the sea wall and stare through the lessening rain at the slate colored water. His thoughts were as confused as the transitional sky overhead. As the rain tapered off to a light drizzle, life returned gradually to the large square while he leaned against the wall's railing.

He watched a young mother with her little girl come up to the sea wall to take in the ocean. She took off the girl's scarf and hat, and they talked and laughed together, pointing at the fat gray and white seagulls guarding the beach looking for small forgotten treasures like cheese puffs and apple cores. He was drawn to their warmth, and watched them point and wave at the birds scavenging for leftovers. With the scarf off, he noticed the tall, smooth forehead and heavily lidded eyes of the little girl, and realized that she had Down's syndrome. Their joy was electric, but he imagined that their sadness might run just as deep on other days.

He watched them until they left, and felt the warmth leave with them, replaced by a sharp off-shore breeze. He gathered up his coat, and walked back to the office, with their image added to his inner store of pictures.

Anna met him at the doorway, and took his coat without a word. John nodded a hello to her very softly, and then went back into his office to answer his calls. He stayed there all night, sitting quietly in his office, completely lost in his thoughts.

As the city started to wake up the next morning, and the buzz of traffic drifted in through the windows, he noticed the private prompt his son had often used suddenly appear on the terminal's text window, and hit the return key to clear the screen. Instead of a blank screen, he got the prompt again, followed by a message from his son, slowly spelled out a character at a time on the dark surface, as if the sender were just learning to type or sending from impossibly far away.

*Morning graying into existence overhead,
the pressure of rain and future rain
here
at this lonely moment
we will part company
but we will be together again
we will be together again.*

After a few moments, he put his fingers lightly against the letters on the screen, as if to soak up their faint video warmth. John finally leaned against his desk, with his face in his hands, and wept. A lifetime of fears, large and small, were washed away in that smaller rain.

Images

the eye lies on the edge
between the mind
and the body

balanced on the thin line
we hope is sanity.

Part 1.....Darkness
Part 2.....Daylight
Part 3.....Art
Part 4.....Reflection
Part 5.....Refraction

Part 1.....Darkness

The concrete corridor under the gray building was poorly lit, with nondescript doorways that had no windows or signs, only numbered tags. Salt water and other vague stains had seeped all along the top and bottom of the cement walls, giving it a long abandoned and musty look.

Most of the overhead lights were burned out, except for some fluttering blue-tinted fluorescent fixtures that buzzed and strobed the shadows in the hallway. At the end, barely lit in the intermittent blue-white light, was a closed room with a torn and faded paper sign marked '**no entry**' taped to the door. The sign looked like it had been put up twenty years before, and then quietly forgotten. Neglected like everything else here.

Inside, the room was cement gray and quiet, with no real furnishings except a plain and worn wooden chair and table, and only a single metal shaded light overhead that was a relic from the thirties. An unshaven man with dark, matted hair was strapped into the chair with what looked like transplanted car seat belts. He was listless and exhausted, as if far too much had already happened to him.

The sound of footsteps approached the door again, and two men in clean lab coats entered, pulling an equipment lab cart behind them. They completely ignored the man in the chair, who they knew only as 'Peter', and began to set up and adjust their equipment. One of them walked over and gave Peter a substantial looking injection in his left forearm, and then returned without comment to work on his private collection of cables and connectors.

In about half an hour, they had a curved projection screen set up in front of Peter, a wide range of sensors and other connections taped to his body, and had a dark curtain barrier set up between themselves and Peter. They made a quick run of their projection system, and the room lit up with a sudden rush of bright colors. Satisfied, they smoked cigarettes, leaning against the concrete wall, and waited silently for their project administrator. There was no movement in the chair from Peter at all; he looked lost and dead in the washed out gray room.

Within the hour, the door opened crisply and closed economically on the project director. He made some brief conversation with his technicians, handed them a small package, and curtly told them to start

conditioning the subject. He sat down across from Peter in a folding canvas deck chair. He tapped his pipe impatiently on the chair arm while he waited for them to begin.

After a few minutes, Peter was awake, and staring at the administrator, who was yet another complete stranger to him. As soon as the administrator was convinced Peter was awake, he made the only speech he was to make to the belted and secured man. "You are of no importance to me, and have done nothing in particular to account for your being here, other than being a government detainee. You were just a good match, and most convenient." He snapped his fingers at the technicians to start, and withdrew a pair of darkened glasses from his coat, settling back to watch Peter and the display.

The screen in front of Peter lit up with his own image, and his ears seemed to ring with the amplified sounds of his own breathing and blood pumping. The image seemed to sink deeper and deeper into his mind, like water into a dry cloth, until his world was the picture. His face began to change as the picture filling up his mind changed, features shifting and pulling in every direction.

The image on the screen developed a terrible carcinoma on the bottom of its left cheek and so did Peter within a few minutes. He could hear his heart laboring as a valve became diseased and choked with fat. He felt the internal squeaking as his blood tried to force past clogged arteries, and he felt the chill as his brain began to leak away oxygen and nutrients with the slowly draining blood. He could see every corner of his

body, and it was dying in synchronization with the screen.

His left arm broke, and the bones ripped through his flesh below the elbow. He was the picture in every way. He looked through God's eyes at himself, and melted away under the power of that all-knowing gaze. His body destroyed itself in tune to the image, like a too-physical dancer tuned to the darker music of the universe. In ten minutes, he was brain dead, and completely still in the chair, his body heat slowly leaking into the cold musty air of the room.

The administrator removed his glasses, and looked across to the technicians, who stepped around the curtain. "Reverse him." He said quietly. They rushed to the broken body and applied stimulants, and cardiac shock until he was at the fringe of awareness. They started two IV drips to maintain his consciousness, and then turned on the machine again, this time with an altered set of images.

Peter was pulled up from the darkness, like a stone lifted from the bottom of the sea. The light became brighter, and the shadows and shapes of earlier pain slipped away like the draining water, until finally he was gasping for breath on the brightly lit beach of his new life.

The sun warmed him, and he drew energy from it like a hungry plant. His flesh grew together where it had been broken and torn, and the congestion cleared in his heart like thinning late afternoon traffic. He began to breathe evenly, and the pain was only a weak memory that seemed to belong to someone else.

The cancer on his face became a shadow, then only a smooth cheek, warmed in the beach's sunlight. He was completely alive, and could hear his blood rushing through his body in time with the waves of the ocean. Suddenly the image of the waves seemed to briefly take on the eyes and shadows of the administrator's face, and he heard the waves say, "That's enough. Kill him."

The sky darkened, and he felt himself slipping down into the gray green waves. The icy cold water closed over him and he felt the world fall away for the last time as the water overhead steadily darkened. His last image of life was the shadowy picture of his body being crushed under the weight of the ocean, as he seemed to fall forever into gray-green darkness, lost finally from the hand of God for all time.

The administrator got up from his chair, and folded it quietly. He picked up the simulation images stored in the disk pack, and slipped it into his fitted briefcase. He nodded good-bye absently to the technicians, who would be faced with the very unpleasant task of disposing of Peter's shattered body, and quickly left the cement room behind for larger worlds.

Part 2.....Daylight

Doctor Anders Nygaard walked along the cobbled street in Copenhagen, and stopped for a few minutes to watch the tourists admire his city. He loved the rich mixture of old and new, the apartment houses with each window dressed differently, and the incredible smells coming from the cheese shop at the end of the street. He was very glad to be back home from so many bleak years of study in Illinois, California, and New York.

He turned off on Pelee Allee, and walked up the steps to the teaching hospital where he worked. After exchanging morning greetings with his favorite residents, he found an excuse to stop in, and say good morning to the beautiful red haired young lady who worked in physical therapy with their youngest patients.

After several such detours, which were the best part of Anders' day, he finally grabbed a fragrant black coffee and pastry from the hospital kitchen, and made his way upstairs to his office. He dumped his mail on the edge of his desk, and went to the window to look out over the city while he sipped his steaming coffee. At thirty-nine, Dr. Nygaard considered himself to be an extraordinarily lucky man to live in Denmark, have a job he enjoyed, and have at least a sixty percent chance of convincing Magan of the red hair to have dinner with him tonight.

He finally stopped day dreaming long enough to

sit down and begin reading his mail, while he scratched his shaggy blonde hair above his ears. He sometimes looked up at his hard won degrees, and all the time lost to him they represented, spread over his walls. The intercom soon buzzed on his phone, and he answered to find it was the lead intern working on his therapy project. Still reading, he answered cheerfully, "What is afoot today, Lars? Are they busily engraving our Nobel prizes yet?"

"Not very likely, I should think, Anders. We are woefully behind in our reports for Socialbureau on health statistics. They have advised, I see for the third time, by this neatly penned margin note, that your conduct is unpardonable. There is some bureaucratic piffle here about your funding, and its imminent removal, which they foolishly think you will be interested in." Lars Smedlund concluded in good humor.

"Consigned to the back of a twice-locked filing cabinet is clearly where that devil-cursed idiot of a bureaucrat belongs", muttered Nygaard. "I will be down shortly, and rectify this administrative tragedy after I've finished rounds." He flipped the intercom button off, and with a deep and exasperated sigh, finished his mail, finding nothing more interesting than a new issue of "Science", which he skimmed briefly without editorial comment.

He left his formal office, and went to visit with the three children he was currently treating with his experimental therapy. They were all glad to see him, even though they were badly disfigured or burned, and not generally inclined to be so cheerful. He spent an hour with them, and told them that they would each have

another brief treatment this afternoon, which they looked forward to. Inside, his heart wept for their condition, but he knew he could help them in a way that no one else could.

He left, and went to visit Lars, and the rest of his team, in the research area they had in the basement of the hospital. Lars, a thin, laughing caricature of a Viking, complete with curly red-blond beard, greeted his arrival with a "Hail chief." from the far corner of the lab. The others, from programmers to biochemists, smiled up at him variously from terminals and spectrometers to say "hej", "hello" or "good morning". Grinning from ear to ear, Lars presented him with the huge stack of documents from Socialbureau, was rewarded with a sound cursing, and cheerfully went back to baby-sitting Krista's tissue cultures.

Dr. Nygaard settled into his working desk, and his normally cheerful round face and clear green eyes became steadily more depressed as he began to complete the morass of forms. "My God, Krista", he suddenly bellowed, "We will now have to submit lab culture requests not in TRIPLICATE, as we have been foolishly doing in the past, but now in FIVE COPIES, each with an ORIGINAL signature and COUNTERSIGNATURE to insure correct accounting by Socialbureau." He was answered by a wail and groan from a petite, dark haired biochemist at the next bench, who began to quietly speculate aloud on the sordid genealogy of farmer-devil bureaucrats.

After three hours, Dr. Nygaard was beginning to unravel slightly at his desk, and the others, fearing he would soon fling the entire bundle of papers into the

autoclave, dragged him away for lunch outside the hospital. The five of them adjourned to a small restaurant a few blocks away, where they had small steaks and fried potatoes, smothered in Béarnaise sauce and a round of cold beers. Anders raised his beer above the table, and declared, "Thank God for the existence of breweries, without whom bureaucrats would be unendurable". He was loudly toasted and seconded, and they all returned to the hospital an hour later in much better spirits.

Dr. Nygaard made a small detour on returning, and had a brief visit with Magan, where she was helping a small boy exercise his broken leg after the plaster cast had come off. He slipped up behind her and began to massage her neck while she slowly flexed the boy's knee. He was rewarded with a pleasurable sounding "Mmmm" while he rubbed away the kinks in her neck.

"This could only be the foolish Anders Nygaard", she said quietly, without stopping her work. "The rumped looking doctor with the boyish grin who expects me to leap into his arms at the end of work today, and make his grin even bigger." She finished kindly, with dimples beginning to show in her freckled cheeks.

"The very same. I have taken time from my pressing schedule to inquire just how the Gods are gambling with my future, and whether we will be eating together tonight, or whether I should throw myself from the upper balcony of the hospital in sorrow?" He brought his face close to hers and raised his eyebrows in supplication.

"Who can say what will be eaten tonight, good doctor, and by whom, but you may call for me here later, at seven, if you wish." She turned slightly, and kissed him lightly on the cheek, and then shooed him away to finish her work with her young patient.

Anders left for his work, greatly cheered, and had them set up the first child, Christina, a little girl of six, for her therapy. She had been badly burned in the car crash that killed her parents six months ago, and had substantial scarring and other skin and internal damage. If they had not found a picture taken just the day before the accident, her real appearance would have been a complete mystery to them.

The treatment devised by Dr. Nygaard was an all- encompassing assault on the body through the open doorway of the mind. They would convince Christina's body to fix itself, since no other technique could possibly do so. His team had studied her completely, and in three shorter sessions, carefully calibrated their attack to be in perfect harmony with her mind and body.

Her image had been digitally disassembled, using time on a powerful Cray computer at the local university, and re-integrated with other images of healthy children who closely resembled her. The same had been done with detail CAT scans of each bodily function, and an extensive biochemical arsenal prepared of the nutrients and enzymes her body would need to rebuild.

The entire system would be unlocked all at once, coupled with deep hypnotic suggestion, to try and make her whole again. They called their technique 'image

induction', meaning that the body would take on the new form of an induced image they would supply. Only one already in harmony, or 'similarity' as they called it, could be made to work, which was the great difficulty with the process. To make the new image, one must first know all there is to know of the old.

They were all relaxed with Christina in the projection room. Krista Jorgensen, their biochemist, was seated next to Christina, holding her hands, and gently stroking her forehead. They had worked for three months to know Christina, and were all closer than ordinary strangers or family ever become. Though she was badly scarred, and terribly burned, she was happy with them, and smiled at Krista's touch as if it had been her own mother's.

The room slowly darkened, and the staff all put on specially polarized and darkened glasses to cut down on their reception of the image chain. Anders nodded to Lars and Krista to begin their chemical manipulation of the small body, while he and Bertil began the image sequences. Cherub-faced Gustav, their pot-bellied sixty-three year old child psychologist, sat next to Christina, and began to slowly put her under while Krista continued to caress her forehead gently.

The room came alive with a young girl dancing slowly in the sunshine, spinning on her toes, and then laughing with her small puppy, a roly-poly bear-faced Elkhound. The image was Christina-now, as she looked, but each time she spun around her features softened and began to heal, as the huge computer reassembled her as God intended. She was dressed in bright yellow, and lit up the room, the sun was so bright reflecting off her.

Turning.

Her body slowly relaxed on the couch, and began to drink in proteins and enzymes, whole blood and nutrients. The image slowly became Christina-to-be, and she followed, dancing in her mind as she did on the screen, playing with the dog. Turning before the sleepless eye of God, becoming whole and complete, the terrible scars slipping away like small shadows erased by sunlight.

The music was light, like an afternoon breeze, like the ocean sounds from the harbor. In the background was the sound of gulls far overhead. Now she was dancing naked on a bright beach, all her injuries slipping away like the sand into the ocean. She could hear her blood pounding through stronger veins, and her lungs taking in full breaths for the first time in what seemed like forever. Turning.

Christina-for-real was becoming like the image, changing faster, breathing easier, her chains slipping away forever as her body learned its proper shape from her inner vision. Complete, healed. She slowly stopped dancing, and began to cry, since she finally had eyelids and eyelashes and tear ducts again. She began to run her hands over her head, and felt the small soft fuzz of new hair. Turning.

Finally she stopped altogether, and began to hug Krista and Gustav, her tears catching the faint remaining light in the room. Finished in her mind's eye, and thankful that these people cared enough to put her back together again.

Part 3.....Art

The galleries of Den Permanente in Copenhagen, The Queen's Permanent Exhibition of the Arts, are filled with treasures for the eye and heart. Denmark's finest practical and frivolous art is on display here, in every form from furniture to glazed slipware. As the crowds wandered through the halls, buying small treasures to take home, a thin, ascetic looking man in dark casual clothes stopped to admire the mobiles on display upstairs.

All Scandinavians love to dress their windows with some color and motion, so this display is always crowded. Perhaps it is recognition of the bleakness of winter, and its loss of color that makes so many of them decorate their windows on the world.

The man hung slightly back from the children playing with the spring birds and oriental glass mobiles, and waited for his particular moment. A thick looking man sidled up to the birds, but didn't touch them, as if he was certain they would break in his coarse hands. He looked briefly into the eyes of his waiting contact, and they traveled together to the empty balcony at the far end of the floor.

The thick man had a heavy accent, possibly Bulgarian or Czech, and said little, since his Danish was so poor. It is certainly not a language that is especially kind to foreigners. The other withdrew a small package of optical disks and thumb drives from his shopping bag, and placed it in his contact's carry-all. They spoke for a

few minutes about trivia, and then the thick man withdrew a fat envelope, and passed it back to him. They drifted apart in the crowds of Den Permanente, and the thin ascetic man made his way through the streets of Copenhagen, back to the computer offices of the university, where he managed the flow of projects on the huge Cray computer.

He was content with his day's work. With the money he had already collected from two U.S. companies, the local agents of the US government, the French pharmaceutical combine, and now the Russians, he had managed to sell the fruits of Dr. Nygaard's work several times over for almost ten million Euros. A vacation was clearly in order for his efforts.

He gathered up the papers he would need from his office, collected his numerous passports, gratefully furnished by the French, and placed them all in his briefcase next to the bankbooks noting his recent income. He snapped the case shut, and congratulated himself on his ability to see the interesting commercial aspects of Dr. Nygaard's efforts.

Before leaving, he decided to have a last look at the hospital's project, and see what their current state of affairs might be. From his terminal, he quickly scanned their activity on the machine, and noticed that several new major animation sequences were now on-line. Excitedly, he reviewed the file headers to see what they contained, and was almost breathless when he saw they were the correction of a small boy's cancer. When he watched the images on his large Sun workstation, the pictures were so powerful, they almost made him forget what he was doing.

So excited he could hardly type, he listed out all the files required, and then directed them to be dumped to an archive file on a removable optical disk pack. Once he was done, which took almost an hour, he carefully logged in as the system supervisor, and edited out all traces that the files had been examined or copied. Satisfied that his work was invisible to anyone who might follow, he logged off the system, and went back down the stairs with his briefcase to collect his last prize.

The computer workroom was filled with the background rushing sound of endless internal fans and air conditioning ducts. He set his briefcase down by the operator's console, and took the drive off-line so that he could change the optical disk pack. He took a new blank off the wire rack behind him, and went into the drive room, to exchange them.

He opened the door to the room, and headed for the drive. He unlocked the disk pack that he was sure would make him rich beyond his most extreme dreams, and changed it with the blank. When he turned around, Anders Nygaard and Lars Smedlund were standing in front of him, with faces that looked as if they belonged to some long-forgotten vengeful Norse gods.

An hour later, the entire team was gathered in the projection room, along with the now terrified computer supervisor. Gustav Kekkonen, who like every Finn since the dawn of time, carried a very substantial knife, and had spent the last five minutes entertaining their guest with a wide ranging demonstration of close-in knife play.

"You have released all our work to fools, which is so appropriate, since you are one yourself!" Anders said, his face only inches from the thin man. "Can you imagine what will become of these things? They are light and darkness on the most elemental level. We have nightmares encoded there, lifted from the minds of people at the moment of death. We have the conquering of death, new life from ashes. And you have given it away for *money!* What price did you get for God's daydreams, Yuri?" He picked the man up out of the chair by the front of his coat and shook him violently like an old rag.

"Dr. Nygaard, please! I am a weak man, a fool, no more. I only wanted the money I knew they would pay." He pleaded, starting to cry. Anders dropped him like a sack onto the floor, and put his own face in his hands to weep himself.

Lars picked Yuri up from the floor, and threw him out of the doorway, to land in a sprawl on the hallway floor. He emptied the briefcase into a large metal bowl on the counter, poured some raw alcohol on the contents, and lit it with a match. Then he scooped up the fallen case, and threw it on top of the hysterical form in the hallway, and slammed the door shut behind him. The only sound left in the room was the slow rustle as the pale blue fire consumed the papers, bankbooks, bank transfers, letters of credit and bundles of money in a pale blue flame.

"He is an idiot." Muttered Lars. "He left traces all over our programs, like the gumboot tracks of a stumbling drunk. It is perhaps a very good thing that we have left our own special calling cards in amongst our

files." He looked completely dejected, and walked over to a window to look out and scowl at the world at large, and its perpetual over-supply of idiots.

"My friends, we are undone." Anders said quietly. "We thought to do our work quietly with children in this small hospital, but we can do so no longer. If we do not take care, this will become a fire that will devour us all, and take many more with us." He sat heavily on one of the couches, and could not face them. He knew how wildly dangerous their work could become with only a little effort.

Krista lifted his face, lined with tears, in her hands. "Do not have so sad a heart, Anders", she said softly. "We have shared things here that no other people have known. Any moment was worth this price." She kissed him gently, and helped him get up from the couch. They all left together in Krista's bus, and eventually wound up at Lars' old converted fish boat in the harbor, which served as his bachelor apartment.

After a few stops for supplies and clothes for each of them, they arrived at the dock, late in the afternoon. While they loaded their things onboard, a short and tall figure approached them slowly on the walkway, each carrying a small bag.

The tall one pulled off her knit cap, and shook her red hair loose to catch the afternoon breeze. Magan waved and smiled at them, and then helped the small girl at her side by carrying her bag. Unencumbered, Christina waved excitedly to them, and ran ahead to be swung in the air by her smiling 'uncle' Gustav.

By nightfall, they were all far from Copenhagen harbor, and lost to the mixed care of the ocean, very far from the base and commercial thoughts of men.

Part 4.....Reflection

The first breeze off the morning sea is like a lover's touch, and Anders and Magan sat together bundled on the deck to enjoy it, while they sipped their steaming coffee. Anders picked up the loose end of a deck rope, and unraveled the end for a while, collecting his thoughts. Magan finally felt he needed to talk, and took the rope away, and fixed him with her unwavering hazel eyes. "Speak to me, Anders Nygaard." She said softly.

"I am hard pressed to speak, Magan. So many years we worked to fix these children, and now fools will use it to fool each other. My heart is dark and empty, Magan." He brooded out at the sea, and how much damage could be done. "I am glad only for the fact that you are here, and brought Christina. For the rest, my life is not so well."

"How could I leave the foolish Anders Nygaard to heaven knows what fate, and our Christina to the State's care?" Magan replied, pulling closer to him under the wool cover. "But I am also worried about what will become of your work." They both regarded the water spilling across the front of the boat in silence for a while, until Lars sat down beside them, blowing on his coffee mug.

"Good morning my friends. I have not seen such

long faces since the price of Easter beer went up." Lars settled down next to Magan, and pulled the cover around him to keep warm. "You should not be so downcast, it is not for nothing that I was the brightest computer science student in the history of Danish education." Magan looked at him with arched eyebrows, and he said by way of quiet amendment to his coffee mug, "Well, one of the very brightest."

"You are thinking that these idiots will be able to unravel our process from the files, yes? Not to mention that they will do all manner of bad work with our images, true?" He looked across at Anders expectantly.

"So true, Lars. Not to mention that they will no doubt employ it for everything from the selling of toothpaste to the unsubtle molding of public opinion, such as it might be." Dr. Nygaard looked visibly uncheered by this prospect, as if further deterioration in the world's already modest group-intellect was on the immediate horizon.

"My friend, we have worked together for five years on this project, true? We have fixed countless children that the world was prepared to throw away. Do you think this thought never crossed my mind before now?" Lars blew on his coffee again for emphasis, and looked over the steaming rim at them expectantly with arched eyebrows.

"And what did your prior thinking reveal to you, Lars?" Magan inquired without taking her eyes from the sea.

"There are many scoundrels in my family, sweet

Magan. Sacking and pillaging were considered high sport among the historical Smedlunds of days gone by. I feel compelled to emulate them whenever possible. You will notice that my devilish background security routine picked up the twice-accursed Yuri and his idiot copies. But you probably did not notice that it tampered with those copies. They are much larger than the originals." He turned his own gaze out to sea, and pretended to be totally absorbed in his coffee, making loud sucking noises over the rim of the mug.

Anders looked very thoughtful for a moment, and then gestured to Magan towards Lars. She leaned over, and poked him soundly in the ribs. This resulted in his dropping the coffee mug in his lap, and a sudden excited rise to his feet, as the hot coffee soaked into his pants. "The Devil!" He exclaimed, trying to cool off his steaming trousers by waving his hands wildly over the affected area.

"Before you go overboard to join your reprobate ancestors, Lars Smedlund, I suggest that you explain yourself without further delay." Magan said sweetly, looking up at the dancing figure in front of her.

"Of course, most charming of women. Only allow me to first save my future offspring." Lars finally managed to cool off the pants to only scorching, and settled back down beside them, casting Magan a dark look before beginning. "Well, I know we had worked very hard at encrypting the records at the computer center, but there was always the chance someone would intercept an animation in progress, when the data would appear clear. It struck me some years ago that while we had been careful, we would surely be found out at some

time."

"I left traps all over the computer, looking for some other scoundrel, hoping to at least know if we were being watched. I found our friend Yuri, one day. He was just examining our cover files, you know, the garbage we leave for Socialbureau, and our watered down case studies. But there was something about his snooping that un-nerved me. Sweet Magan, perhaps I could have a sip of your coffee, now that my pants are freezing cold?"

"Of course, Lars." She said sweetly and passed across the cup.

"Why did you never tell me, Lars?" Anders said quietly, still looking out in front of the boat at the dark blue water.

"Ah, Anders my friend. You have enough to worry yourself with. No man should suffer under the load of paperwork you endure, and also worry over a snake such as Yuri. I decided to play him to the end, and see what he would do, since there was no way to stop him, short of letting Gustav fillet him like a codfish as he no doubt richly deserved."

"I built a set of latent images, shadows. They are stopped down behind our main set, and combined them together. No one who plays these images will escape them, if they view them at all. There is also a worm. Just a little one, but quite stubborn." He took a last sip of Magan's coffee and passed it back to her.

"Worm?" Asked Magan, puzzled.

"A worm." Murmured Anders, smiling, looking every inch the sacking and pillaging Viking of long ago.

"Sweet Magan, not something with which to bait a hook for fishing. A worm is a piece of computer program only a scoundrel such as myself would write. It makes its lazy way through the computer on which it is run, and eats a bit here, and a bit there. And it never sleeps. The longer the computer runs, the more it eats. Pretty soon, all your programs, all your data have little holes in them, but by the time you notice, it is, alas, much too late. Oh, and it also corrupts the image file after playing it. Once is all you get, and that will most surely be the last time." He looked every inch the perfect vandal, as he turned to smile at Anders.

"It is truly amazing, Lars, that enough of your ancestors survived to produce you." Anders said, grinning back across the puzzled Magan in between.

Part 5....Refraction

The project administrator straightened his coat and tie, as he walked back down the long gray cement corridor, shaken by the tremendous power of the image induction he had witnessed. Although a very composed man, and regularly accustomed to causing the death of other people in a variety of subtle ways, he was awe-struck by the power and application of Nygaard's process. He started to whistle to himself aimlessly as he walked.

The corridor seemed to get darker as he walked, and he found it hard to breathe, as if the air was slowly draining away into distant and unseen corners. Lars had keen insight into the type of mind that would choose to look into their images for lesser purposes, and his parting gift was starting its own quiet and devious work.

Finally, after just a few more minutes, the administrator had to stop, and lean against the cold wall for support. It was like looking at the world in the last moments of twilight, as if all the sky in the world had boiled away, lost to the stars. He dropped his case, and fell on his knees to the floor, gasping for breath.

He felt as if he was being scooped up in a great dark hand, and looked up into terrible burning red eyes in the darkness. Then the hand closed, and he was crushed into nothing, only ashes left for the wind to scatter. At the far end of the corridor, there was also silence, only the light stirring of dust in the darkness, caught by the sudden rush of overhead air conditioning starting up.

Three hundred yards away, and far overhead, there was also a faint disruption in the computer that had run the simulation, through the remote Ethernet port connection, but it went un-noticed for the time being.

"Lars, even if we can stop the use of our files, they will still know who we are, and how to find our work again. We will not escape so lightly as that." Anders said, looking thoughtfully at the coastline off the bow.

"Yes, I agree my friend. Once undone, we cannot be so easily helped." He looked morose at the thought of losing his beloved Denmark, with its pastries and beautiful women, beer and cheeses.

Anders looked at the other two with an unreadable expression, and tapped his fingers quietly against the rim of his cup. "Christina." Was all he said for a few moments, then "We can hide so that no-one will find us, Lars. Though we may have to give up a few small things in return."

They returned to the hospital late that Friday night, and were in the induction lab until early Sunday morning. Bertil made several trips in and out of the lab's loading dock with the hospital's ambulance, and then all was finally quiet. Just after dawn, a huge explosion rocked the heavily re-inforced basement, and the fire soon consumed the area completely.

Fortunately, no patients in the hospital above were injured, but the district's fire marshal concluded that Anders and his team were the cause of, and unfortunately died in, the intense fire. The few remains were completely unrecognizable from the intense heat and blast force.

Over the next year, the hospital rebuilt, and eventually began its children's rehabilitation program again, with new staff, slowly accumulated from all over the country, based on references left by the late Dr. Nygaard in his upstairs office. Their approach was more conventional and sadly, not very successful, but their paperwork was always promptly completed to the total satisfaction of Socialbureau, and so was considered a

large improvement.

Some miles across the harbor, on the outskirts of Copenhagen, a clinic for the treatment of children's diseases expanded its trauma center over the next year. They hired a group of older doctors, and a young Finnish psychologist, who all seemed to have strong experience with, and a special gift for, trauma recovery.

Some time later, the balding, elderly leader of that new group happened to be chatting with his wife on one of the upper balconies of the clinic late in the evening. "We have some bad cases in the ward this month, my dear. It hurts my heart to see them." His gaze was lost in the lights reflecting off the harbor waters.

"What will you do with them?" She inquired, looking out across the beautiful nightscape of Copenhagen, with her arm tightly around his waist.

"I will fix them, of course." Smiled Anders, with a twinkle in his eyes, as he caressed his wife's silver-red hair. "What else could I possibly do, Magan?" They stood a while longer, and let the evening image of the city work its own magic on them.

Surplus Store

Every really big city has one. Even a lot of the littler ones, like Cedar Rapids or Olathe have them thanks to large-scale local industry. Not the kind that sells used army clothing or mildewed web belts, but the kind that has a huge musty old warehouse, and a back yard clogged with half recognizable pieces of someone's else's out-of-phase mechanical dreams.

I always make it a point to scour any new city I visit for a surplus store. Some times it's just filled with a clutter of ten-year-old (read totally obsolete) computer parts and cabinets with wildly optimistic prices, aimed at the obsessed fifteen-year-old hardware hackers. More often, it's a mixture of cheap consumer left-overs that should never have seen the light of day, industrial over-runs, and a few out-of-tolerance government contract tailings.

But every so often, there's something unexpected. Like a complete set of spare lunar lander parts. Or a piece of genuinely useful electronics at an unbelievably low price. Or the very best find of all, something that is completely unknown, and a visual thriller to boot.

A few months ago, I was driving along Route 128, calling on my various "leading edge" customers, and noticed that a new surplus outfit had set up shop in a

dilapidated warehouse just off the highway. Well, tempt me no further, I pulled my rental car off the highway, and loosened my tie, anticipation fermenting like crazy. This place certainly had “the look”.

When I pulled up in front of the building, I noticed a big hand lettered sign in the window. 'Special Opening Sale This Month--Any Item \$5.00'. Talk about waving an inflammatory red flag in front of the proverbial bull, I was inside like a shot.

At first glance, it was pretty ordinary, lots of typical high tech wonder objects that had seen better days. There were a few other people rummaging through some of the bigger bins making noises that seemed happy and positive. This is always a good sign as there must be something fabulous if there is more than one person present. The only problem is that Murphy's law clearly dictates that the *Other Guy* will buy it before you do. Still, I remained hopeful.

I edged past the bins, and walked to the back of the store to see what hidden treasures might be lurking there in the poorly lit low traffic areas. One pile of equipment caught my eye, all heaped on a table marked 'KAVAR Close-Outs'. I had never heard of the infamous KAVAR, but their gear looked pretty interesting, so I strolled over. Up close, the pile was just plain breathtaking.

Beautifully machined stainless steel and anodized aluminum, intricate lighted panel overlays, cryptic markings and displays; this pile had absolutely everything to excite an old surplus connoisseur and techno-junkie like myself. And wonder of wonders,

there were even *manuals* for the equipment in a big spiral bound heap under the pile of equipment. That was *it*. Resistance demolished, I piled up every piece in a cart, and made my way to the counter, warding off any potential hijackers with a hostile glare.

The entire treasure trove cost only \$60 (the old counterman tossed in three damaged pieces and a box full of interconnect cables for nothing), and I had it whistled into the trunk of my big rented Oldsmobile before you could say “nuclear magnetic resonance”. The trunk lid just barely closed on all my treasures.

The rest of my day was gone before I knew it. I finished up the day with an order book on the verge of cosmic overload, and my motel room beckoning. I stopped in at the nearby fast food drive-through, loaded up with some kind of generic superburgers, fries and soda, and pulled in to the parking lot of the motel with my spirits in excellent shape.

I off-loaded my meal, tools and treasures into the room, and then settled into the tub for a leisurely read of the manuals, interspersed with bites of superburger dripping secret sauce and melted cheese. The manuals were even more exotic than the equipment, if such a thing was possible. They had some of the most beautiful drawings I had ever seen, with great transparent colored overlays and flow diagrams. This had to be government funding at work, who could afford this visual overkill in the commercial world?

The symbol sets were a little puzzling though, not to mention the terms. There were some fairly cryptic little boxes and squiggles on the drawings, and a lot of

words like 'phase-diffusion concentrator' and 'lat axial summation'. It just whet my appetite for a screwdriver. I jumped out of the tub and grabbed my tool kit (a little Jensen miracle of packaging; three of everything, including metric sizes, and fits in your hand).

I held one of the smaller units in front of me, and eyed it critically. Other than the title 'JJv Co-Spherical Integrator', it looked pretty normal. There was a subtle something, though, that I just couldn't place. Maybe it was the finish, it was like a piece of art, rather than electronics. It also had some pretty unusual indicators that certainly didn't just come out of your local parts catalog. It did have Phillips screws holding it together, however, so out came my trusty #1 Phillips screwdriver.

I had the top cover off in about a minute, and found a strange mixture of the familiar, and visitors from the outer limits. The innards had lots of recognizable chips with cozy familiar logos like Intel, Motorola, and NEC. But there were also a host of alien looking, gold-plated, glass sealed, mystery modules covered with cryptic markings and the stylized 'K' logo from KAVAR. My curiosity was shifting into overdrive. Microwave stuff, maybe?

I opened the covers on some more units, and found the same peculiar mixture of parts. I dug out the manuals, and found that according to the glowing "product overview", these devices formed something called a 'Fixed Site Temporal Indexing System'. It looked like a total of five pieces, a forest of cables, and some kind of goofy looking antenna made up a complete assembly.

A quick count and check of part numbers revealed that I had two complete systems, and some spares, but no 'Indexing Field Radiator' (read *antenna* for mortals). In the free junk box I received, there were enough cables to hook up a system, if I spliced some cut cables back together. All I needed then to flash up this monster was some 28 volt DC power, and something to serve as my missing antenna.

I phoned an old school buddy from one of the equipment labs over in Wayland, a few miles away. After ten minutes, I had managed to borrow a scope and a power supply for the weekend, without answering too many questions, and agreed to dinner later. Then I quickly got dressed and dashed off to do the deal. I had all weekend to kill here in Boston, and this looked like high entertainment to me. Plus, I now had a pleasant dinner to look forward to.

I collected the equipment, and stopped to grab a six-pack of cola and some ice, and raced back to the motel. My nerve endings were alive with anticipation. I made up a tall soda and ice, and spread out the drawings and equipment all over the floor.

By ten o'clock, I had the system lashed together, and had already put some power to it. I was rewarded by an impressive display of lights, flickering displays and counters cycling wildly. One stubborn gizmo, a 'JJv Displacement Generator' stubbornly refused to light up. I checked over my shaky looking splices (masking tape is not the ideal field splicing material, but it was all I had on hand), but no go. I powered everything off, and slipped in my spare unit, applied some volts, and we had lift-off.

The only remaining problem was going to be this mysterious 'Indexing Field Radiator'. All I had was a lonely cable ending in an unrequited connector. Bad news. This antenna didn't look like something I was going to quickly make out of a couple of coat hangers and my boy scout knife, either.

After aggravating myself for two more hours, I finally decided to hold off until morning, and check out the surplus store again. Maybe, just maybe, they had the rest of this device laying around serving as a fly shelter somewhere. After watching the last half of an exceptionally bad Japanese science fiction movie about a giant demented moth intent on devouring downtown Tokyo, I finally fell asleep.

Next morning, bright and early, I raced off to the store, and had to hang around until after ten before they finally opened. I dug out the manual, and showed the counterman a picture of the antenna (a.k.a. Indexing Field Radiator), and asked if they had anything like it laying around. He dug out his wire frame bifocal glasses, and spent about fifteen minutes polishing them, apparently going for the world's record in sustained buffing. He finally put them on and said it looked familiar, and that I should try out back in the yard, where they kept all the scrap metal. New England expansiveness at its finest.

I spent about three hours scouring the yard, but couldn't find the elusive 'radiators' anywhere. Terminal frustration was setting in. I went back to the counter, and tried again, hoping for better clues, like a firm location. The counterman was sipping a coffee, and

eating his sandwich, and seemed in a slightly better mood. He took another look at the drawing, and pointed across the shop at the top of a distant shelf. There it was, in all of its convoluted metal splendor. Five bucks later, plus tax, it was mine.

Since he seemed in a marginally better mood, I asked him about KAVAR. All he knew was that they had been a small local company that suddenly closed a few months ago. They sold out for a few cents on the dollar, and just disappeared. Sort of curious.

I was probably fortunate not to be summarily executed by the local police for the speed and quality of my driving on the way back to the motel, but I did make good time. In ten minutes, I was ready for the **BIG TEST**, hoping that the rarefied art of 'Fixed Site Temporal Indexing' would be worth all this effort.

I turned on the power, and following the elaborate manual, started up the system. I had to go through a complicated routine to initialize the 'JJv Co-Spherical Integrator', but finally I was through, and hit the softly lit main key marked 'field initiate'. Unfortunately, I should have read through the rest of the manual, because I had carelessly left the dreaded wonder antenna laying face down on the bed, where it proceeded to become very unhappy.

A bright blue glow was leaking out between the antenna and the bed, and smoke was starting to fill up the room. I reached out, and yanked the line cord out of the wall going to the power supply, and everything calmed down. Wow and drat. The room smelled like burning transformers and the air had a slight haze in it

that cried out for an open window and stiff fresh breeze.

I still wasn't too sure just what co-spherical integration accomplished, but it certainly wasn't boring. I took a break, and had another well iced soda, and reflected on just what was going on. I opened the window next to me to clear out the smoke.

Following the instructions looked like my best and only plan, so this time I read the whole manual through. Unfortunately, most technical manuals are written for those who know just exactly what they are doing (as well as those who presumably have a pressing need for co-spherical integration), so I was not a lot wiser when I finished. There was a clear warning about nothing being closer than 12" to the antenna, however, which I noted came *long after* the operating instructions. Presumably this was patently obvious to those who inhabit the technical world of temporal indexing.

Now I knew how to arrange the system to prevent a repeat of the previous performance, so I felt it was time to mush on to greater things. I propped the antenna up on the TV, and pointed it out into the front of the motel room, well clear of everything, and arranged the rest of the equipment to sit behind it. I went through the whole rigmarole again, and feeling somewhat lighthearted, hit the 'field initiate' key. Bingo.

A faint blue sphere formed in front of the antenna, about three feet in diameter. Fortunately, no smoke came with this manifestation. I adjusted some of the controls, and found I could change the size of the sphere. I finally settled for the original three feet. The big question was--what the hell was I doing? I could see

the manual wasn't going to be a big help, so I decided to go into life-threatening experimental mode.

I threw my nearby deck shoe into the sphere, hoping for who knows what. I got zip. Nothing. The shoe hit the floor. Big surprise. Well, I didn't own some kind of a blue matter vaporizer, anyway. I went for a walk around the sphere, looking in. Nothing particularly noteworthy, except blueness. I was the proud owner of a blue sphere generator. At least I could take some consolation from the fact that it had been very reasonably priced, and I happen to like blue.

I sat down by the controls, and decided to explore a little. I proceeded to flip, push, cycle and turn everything in sight. Other than changing the amount of blueness, it looked like this was going to be it. I decided to take a break, and go hit the superburgers again, so I left the sphere running, and went for a quick walk down to the drive-in.

When I got back, about twenty minute later, things were still much the same (secretly, I had been hoping for something to suddenly warm up, and kick into frenzied action), so I settled in, and polished off a double superburger with bacon and cheese, and a root beer float. I cleaned up the left-overs, and walked across the room to throw them away, when I suddenly realized I was standing in the middle of the sphere.

I was also looking out across a wheat field, with some rain clouds gathering on the horizon. Odd interior for a motel room. I took another few steps, and was suddenly standing by the wastebasket. I could almost hear the theme music from 'The Twilight Zone' playing

faintly in the background. Well, I was the proud owner of a wheat field generator.

I walked back across the room, and sure enough, wheat everywhere. Then motel room, as I kept walking. A person could become highly traumatized by this sort of thing. I sat down by the controls, and looked for clues to this latest little phenomenon. Not much really volunteered itself.

There was one large display panel that still wasn't on, so I fooled around with the controls, and suddenly it winked on, with a view of the wheat field, although from a different angle than I had seen. I found a trackball control next to the display that altered the view angle, and managed to get the same clouds appearing. I started to alter the other controls, and found that I was suddenly cycling through the scene at quite a rate, as if watching a high speed film. Pretty good color.

Something flashed through the viewer too fast to make out, and disappeared to the left, and then the whole picture gradually got darker. This was just too frustrating. I counted to ten, took a deep breath, and then got up and walked around the room for a few minutes.

Just for the hell of it, I stuck my head inside the sphere. Dark wheat field. Night. One or two stars overhead far off to the right. It was raining lightly. It felt like it was time to leave, right now.

I sat down on the bed, and wiped the rain off my face. Sure looked like water to me. Usually, I hang out in motels and hotels of sufficient class that no rain

comes in through the roof, so this was very disquieting. Time to call for help had clearly arrived.

I decided to call up my old buddy from the equipment lab, and had to be very persuasive to convince her to come by my motel room late at night. I must have sounded fairly distraught, however, since she finally sounded worried, and said she would be right over. Meanwhile, I just brooded over the blueness.

Simone turned up in about fifteen minutes, dressed in jeans and a maroon Harvard sweatshirt, and was all set to rip my heart out, until she saw the 'Temporal Indexer' in full thrust.

"Alex, you don't look so great. By the way, your room is under attack by glowing blue aliens." She sat down, popped open a soda, and looked at me expectantly. Very cool and composed, that lady. A visual heartbreaker, to boot.

I gave her a brief run down on the origin of the current situation, and decided to let her experiment. "Give it your best shot, Simone. Let's see why Raydyne pays you the big bucks. I'll bet you a steak dinner at the place of your choice you can't tell me what this does."

With a snort, some disconnected muttering that sounded a lot like 'very large filet mignon, medium rare' and 'foolish dipstick, right-wing male chauvinist', she plucked up the manuals, kicked off her desert boots, and settled in to the overstuffed corner chair to read. Every few minutes, she flicked a few controls, watched the displays, and made small triumphant noises. After about half an hour, she looked at me, grinning, and said,

"Alex, you are a complete cretin. Anyone can see what this is. It's a hole"

"Oh. Of course. How could I have missed it. A blue hole. Filled with rain. And wheat." I closed my eyes, and wished to at some degree I had never seen the surplus store.

"A hole in time, Alex. You can move it around whenever you like, but the location is fixed here. Duck soup. Want to know how to run it?" She looked much too happy, which is a very dangerous sign in women.

By two that morning, we had (read *she*) the thing ached, and could run it like a record player. We toured through the checkered life of this motel room, and long before (wheat field about 83 years ago). She looked at me strangely, and said, "Like to see what lies ahead?" Well, in for a penny...she gradually advanced the time.

I noticed on the monitor that we seemed to be somewhat intimately involved, and she blushed, and advanced the controls rapidly until that scene disappeared. After a few minutes, we were several years in the future. Suddenly, the motel was gone in a white flash, and the view was outside again, and strangely dark and broken. We stared at it for a long time. She put down the control, and said quietly, "I don't like this, Alex." She was very quiet, and looked like she needed a friend, so I gathered her up, and held her for a while. I didn't like the view through there so much myself.

Things eventually turned out as the monitor had predicted, in the near-term. Sunday morning, she woke me up, and ran her fingers over my face while we were lying there. "I'd miss you a lot if everything fell apart,

Alex. What's hiding out there in the future?" She started to cry softly, and curled up a little tighter next to me.

After a few quiet hours, we finally got up, and went out for breakfast. She toyed with her eggs, and looked a little lost. I didn't feel much more organized myself. After another cup of coffee, I looked across at her, and asked, "Want to go back, and have another look, Simone?". She just nodded, and we settled up the bill, and left.

We started up the equipment, and slowly crept up on the moment. After some fidgeting, we managed to pinpoint the exact day, and then backed up one, and decided to look around inside the sphere. We moved everything back, and balanced the radiator on top of the dresser, pointing back at the TV. We enlarged it enough to take both of us, and walked in. It was the same motel room, early in the evening, but subtly different. Different widescreen TV, for example. I reached over, and turned it on.

The usual filler was on, but I noticed that the news was coming up in a few minutes. I pointed to the screen, and Simone nodded, and put her arm around my waist. We got the evening news. Pretty bleak. There wasn't too much question what the events of the following day meant. Simone started to cry. I turned off the set, and we walked back through the sphere.

She sat down heavily on the bed, and squeezed her eyes shut to try and stop the tears from coming out. It was a losing battle. It's difficult to see your life with a smoking time stamp on it, three years in the future.

We used the equipment for another few days, until we knew all the details. It all seemed to have an inevitable and foolish pull towards that darkness, a sick kind of social inertia. We took a lot of notes, mainly from TV broadcasts, and a few newspapers we found in the room. Finally, there wasn't anything else we wanted to know.

That night, she kissed me softly, and said, "Don't leave me until it's over, one way or the other, Alex." I nodded, and let her head rest on my shoulder for a while, a silent clock running in my head, savoring each and every second.

We worked out a tentative plan to stop it, but who can say what effect it will have? We did a few experiments, and found that the future wasn't all that fixed. We were able to alter a few small things, move them around. But after a while, we just didn't want to look anymore. That darkness seemed to go on for one hell of a long, long time. We ran out of control settings on the equipment before we ran out of darkness. The wages of foolishness look to be pretty steep.

I gathered up the equipment, and took it back to the store. The counterman just nodded, looked a little puzzled, and said that I was the third buyer to bring it back. He couldn't see why it wasn't a bargain for the few bucks. I told him it was worth it, and just to keep the refund. He cheered up a little.

We managed to track down the president of KAVAR through our contacts. He didn't seem too surprised to hear from us, somehow, and invited us both up to meet with the rest of them. We're all getting

together tonight to see what we can do. Simone and I have taken some time off, and we'll give it our best shot.

Some things are worth saving, no matter what the price, but only more time still to come can tell all of this particular tale.

Evening Kiss

This story is for my wife, Susan.

Very long ago, before the last ice age, the world was considerably less complex, but perhaps a great deal more interesting. Then the kingdom of Atlantis was the focus and heart of the Earth. During its middle age, in the reign of the Chrisomon Kings, it came to pass that the long-ruling Lord Karshan was deeply troubled, and found himself unable to remove the slowly gathering darkness from his heart.

For months his thoughts wandered lost in a faint twilight, and he could not find even the smallest joy in the varied delights of his kingdom. He spoke of it to many, but his heart remained dark and lost, despite all of their best efforts and counsel. Finally, as fall began to color the whispering leaves of Atlantis, Karshan felt that he was unable to govern well any longer. He placed the reins of the country in the hands of his most trusted ministers, and prepared to leave his throne. They were surprised and saddened by his decision, but carried out his final wishes without question, as he had earned their trust many times over.

He left on horseback late one night, before the winter snows began in earnest. He was dressed in plain work clothes borrowed quietly from a guard, and an old worn gray cloak and hood that had been his

grandfather's. Karshan rode alone for months across Atlantis, traveling through fall and winter storms and snow, finally coming to a small fishing village located below the great western cliffs. Its beauty seemed to lift a great weight from him, and he decided to remain there, and live simply as the villagers did.

He traded his horse and saddle with the local smith for enough to buy a small boat, and then worked with the fishermen for some months to learn their craft, and the proper handling of a boat and sails. He passed his days mending and hauling nets with them, and slowly found it easier to sleep when the days were over.

He spoke to no one of his real name, and played the quiet part of a solitary traveler in every way. During the months he stayed there, he enjoyed the friendliness of the fisherman, and the color and simplicity of the village, but his heart still remained the same gray color as the old cloak.

On the last evening he would spend in the village, he walked through the wide square to the local temple. He knelt on the rough hewn stone steps in front of the altar, where flowers were placed each day to safeguard the return of the village's fishermen. He had been there for some time, lost in his private thoughts, when the temple door opened, and the local priestess stood there, framed faintly in the early moonlight.

"Come inside, my Lord. It is not right for you to abase yourself here, alone in the night. I know what has troubled you for so long." With that, she stood by the side of the door, and beckoned him in with a small wave of her hand.

He raised his head up to look at her for a long moment, and finally stood and followed her inside, with a dozen questions formed, but not spoken. They walked to the main hall of the temple, which opened onto the sea, as was the custom in Atlantis. With another small gesture of her hand, she directed him to sit, and then did likewise.

"You were right to rule no longer, my Lord, as only the certain of spirit may do so. All the village knows who you are, but have kept silent for your sake, knowing the pain in your heart, and your desire to find your own mending. But I can remain silent no longer, for it is my task to help you."

She drew back the hood from her gown, and swept the long coppery hair from her face. Then she took his face in her hands, and kissed him long and sweetly. Finally she released him, but left her hand resting gently on his face.

"You gave your life to all these people for so long, that you have become only a faint shadow, my Lord. During the many years you have piloted Atlantis through her storms, no one thought to return some small part of that life to you. To show you some small kindness or love." She paused for a moment, and looked out through the sea window before continuing. "People think a king is beyond simple love or compassion, and are uncertain in their own hearts as to what they might do for you."

She turned back to him, with her sea green eyes gazing deep inside his thoughts, and her voice seemed to

float farther away with each word she spoke. Karshan felt the heaviness falling away from his heart, and his breath became shorter as she spoke to him.

"A ruler is separate from his people because there is no other way to be responsible for so many others, without having his heart wither and crack apart with their grief. No one in all the ages of Atlantis has ever found a different path."

"But all the while, my Lord, you waited for someone to read the lines and shadows in your face, and know that your will was not endless, just as any man must do." Her fingers slowly traced the outlines of his face, and her smile was visible in the moonlight coming through the great open temple window. Karshan felt almost out of breath, and insubstantial, as if he could be blown away like a leaf in the first stray wind through the sea window.

Her voice grew much softer as she spoke again. "It is no different with me, Lord Karshan. Every day I must look to the needs of these people. Comfort their grief, awaken their souls, and show them the faint trail through the world we live in." Eventually her voice stopped altogether, and the temple filled with the slow sound of the waves drifting in through the sea window.

When the brilliant pole star rose fully above the horizon, and began to shine on the sea, she spoke again in a voice so sad that Karshan longed to comfort her. "For years, all of these people have been my only work and my only love, so I too have become just a shadow. No one here that I have taught can ease the pain in my own heart."

"Only we shadows can truly comfort each other, Lord Karshan. No one else sees or knows the shape and weight of our solitary desires. It has always been so since the first sunrise over Atlantis, and will remain unchanged when the waves roll over us far in the future and we have all become only the dust of memories."

Karshan raised his hand, and touched her cheek, his fingers tracing the gentle start of tears on her face. She closed her eyes, and let her head rest more fully in his hand as he began to gently caress her luminous hair.

For hours they sat in the temple, bathed in the pale radiance of the moon and stars, lost in each other's dreams. Each having found something long desired, but never known.

When the morning slipped in quietly with the changing tide, the haze brightened, and was finally gone with the full warmth of the spring sun as it illuminated the empty temple. The two chairs where they had been sitting were facing out to sea, small pointers on a wide floor showing the way to life.

The gulls wheeled lazily overhead, and the waves pushed the sand into new patterns where his boat had been. The sun and wind wrapped the sheer western cliffs of Atlantis in incredible beauty, while the waves provided their comforting music. In a short time, Atlantis would pick a new king to chart her destiny, and the village would receive a new priestess to give meaning to the flowers placed on the temple steps each day.

For the rest, it came to pass exactly as she had spoken, and remained unchanged long after those same waves washed over Atlantis far in the future, and they were indeed only the faintest dust of memories.

The Rubber Glove Theory of the Universe

Being in the Sage business is just not all that people seem to imagine that it might be. Sure, I get the odd wayfarer coming to my cave asking me for some *Brief but Illuminating View of the Universe*, or asking for help with some especially delicate or convoluted *Conflict of Epic Proportions*. But by and large, I usually just watch the birds fly by, or the leaves grow and fall. Hardly entertainment on the same fevered level of "Wheel of Fortune" or "Let's Make a Deal", but usually sufficient.

I'm not really complaining, but if you heard some of the downright silly things people ask me, then you would know why I sometimes wish I was in another line of work. I kind of fancy the job of lighting the pilot lights in stars, but I hear it has a real bear of a Celestial Service Exam, so I'm still mulling it over. The course notes and lab experiments look pretty interesting, though. Desktop fusion, what a hoot.

In terms of my visitors, there's the usual crop of *Selfless Truth Seekers* that wouldn't know Truth if it bit them severely on their principal sitting muscle, and quite a few *Thinkers* Involved in a *Journey of Self-Discovery* who are destined to be sorely disappointed on arrival. Not to mention a whole host of strange individuals who seem convinced reality is all some sort of elaborate hoax concealing something much more interesting hidden

below the normal daily routine. Surprise, this is it, but just think how incredible that fact really is.

One joker who made the obligatory arduous trek to my cave wanted to know the *Secrets of the Universe*. Just like that, no preamble or discussion. Let's have it. Quit the stalling. I had to work very hard to retain my Sage-like composure. I asked him to narrow the field down a little, so that we could complete our talk before he died of old age or we were carelessly swept away by the next glacier, and was rewarded with the topic that was really on his mind.

"Well then, how can I live forever ?". Easy, I said, you have absolutely no choice in the matter, you *will* live forever. Remember conservation of energy, and all that stuff? I probably didn't do my Sage image a lot of good, however, since this particular individual lived long before TV and The Learning Channel, "Nova" or "The Nature of Things", and didn't have the faintest idea what I was talking about. Still, he seemed placated. No doubt it was later repeated as an incantation or mantra to try and raise the dead. The early Phoenicians were like that, very easy to please, but not exactly rapier sharp with the deep technical stuff.

One of his later co-conspirators showed up consumed with anguish over the state of his vast finances. What could he do, and quickly, that would vastly improve his already considerable wealth? Honestly, what do I look like, an ATM machine? I suggested that he give away every other dinar and drachma he owned, and advised him that he would be repaid tenfold by the grateful (not to mention impoverished) recipients. He went away delighted with

this news, but I understand from one of the members of his court that he was quite unhappy with the outcome. No doubt he foolishly imagined that he was going to have to build several additional treasuries to store all the new loot. Happiness just doesn't seem to count for some people, I suppose.

Some centuries later, I was visited by another *Pilgrim Thirsting After Enlightenment*, who proved to be much more interesting. She brought me a few offerings to encourage my cooperation, like some wine, roasted lamb, baklava, and figs. Not a Whopper or Big Mac mind you, but still a most welcome snack. Dominoes won't deliver up here. After I had finished, she sat down on a rock by the front of the cave, and smiled her best smile (an unquestioned award-winner, even by my elevated standards), gave me a brief kiss, and asked if I might be disposed to help her.

Well, even Sages can be swayed. Sure, I replied, lay it on me. It turned out that the male object of her affections was not interested in her. Obviously a real low-grade idiot with sundered synapses, as far as I could determine. She was seeking some method that would change his mind, and make him *Fall Deeply in Love with Her*.

I pointed out that a person of such demonstrably poor taste was not the ideal choice for her, but it didn't make much impression. My statistical files indicate that it was ever so, even from the dawn of time. Don't worry, I said, just bide your time, he'll come around. After all, the *Big Wheel Keeps on Turning* and *All Things Eventually Come to One who Waits*. She seemed satisfied, and left after giving me another sweet kiss. I

was tempted to nuke this goof of hers out of existence, and go take his place, but right about then some great leaves were falling, and my attention was suddenly diverted.

More recently, a boy came to visit me, although how he managed the trip up here was a bit of a mystery to me. He was quite pleasant, not the usual kick-the-cat type of generic small ruffian, armed with cans of spray paint. He even brought me a small piece of crystal as a gift. Very thoughtful.

He didn't want anything in particular, just to talk, and admire the leaves, and so on. After we had been chatting for a while, he asked me if I could explain how the world really worked, as he felt that it just didn't seem to make a lot of sense to him. I had to agree, since I feel much the same way myself sometimes.

I asked him if he understood the difference between *Good* and *Evil*. Yes, he seemed to have that sorted out OK in his mind. *Evil* being a sort of *Maliciously Applied Ignorance and Intolerance with Teeth, an Appetite, and a Penchant for Squalor*. *Good* being a *Determined Reluctance to Accept Entropy, and an Unselfish Desire to see Other People Happy*. Coupled, of course, with *Enough Insight to Always go Suitably Armed, or Wish to be Eaten*, as it were.

Well then, how about *Purpose*. This seemed to be a little shaky. After all, he felt that *Cosmic Purpose* probably would be both unintelligible and uninteresting to him. So true. Frankly, I find it difficult to believe those are the REAL reasons for the universe we keep getting in our Celestial Service Bulletins. I felt quite

comfortable skipping that part. Only the big Kahuna knows for sure, and we're not so positive he really has it all figured out.

Finally, I asked him about *Time*. Another uncertainty, as he felt that time seemed to be both subjective and measurable, and maybe not altogether real. For a civilian, this kid was outstanding. Having gotten his thoughts, I figured it was time to give him mine, and neatly segued into my best explanations.

First I covered the *Rubber Glove Theory of the Universe*. How all things are just another finger pushed out from the great *Cosmic Playtex Glove of Reality* into the existence we see, and snap back to the glove, and out of sight, when their time is up. Eventually everything is made from everything else, and all made out of the same basic stuff of existence, which may or may not actually be there. The major thinkers currently in charge of reality have not determined if that's important yet. Time being about as relevant overall as the color of the glove, in the *GSOT*, or *Galactic Scheme of Things*.

Kid's stuff. He got it all immediately. That afternoon, after I microwaved some lunch, we wrapped up with a more esoteric foray into the real killing zones like *Love* and *Truth*. Such as "how can a *Loving God* tolerate some of the fairly *Coarse and Ugly Things That Go On*", but he seemed to hold his own. He understood very clearly the requirement for a universe of mixed effects, for each to be seen and understood for what it is. I was quite pleased that he found tenderness and kindness were of considerably more importance in the orderly operation of the universe than something as unfocused and diffused as love.

He grasped perfectly the lack of conflict between how the world is and how it wishes to be, and how it all comes out in the perceived wash in a spectacular sort of way. Allowing good to be good, evil to do its contrasting part, and art to record the journey. Really a nice kid, I have to admit, very engaging, he asked *terrific* questions.

When he was ready to go, I asked him why he had come, since he had pretty well understood everything without any real help from me. He suddenly smiled at me and said that he had known it all along, but hadn't realized it until just now. I mentioned that it has always been so, and gave him a big hug before he left.

I was quite sorry to see him leave. He had an excellent grasp of contrast and counterpoint. I have a feeling that I may be out of a job soon, however, if he lets the cat out of the bag. After all, who is going to need a remotely located Sage at the top of this badly paved mountain, when they find out they know all the answers already?

When I think back on my better art, I always remember the quiet afternoon my nephew sat across from me, on the old green velvet chair in my workshop, and questioned me for hours about the desire that was deepest in my heart.

He was a clever lad, and clearly my favorite, to tell the truth. Because of that, I made my confession to him so that he would see my heart clearly. The telling required some hours, for many of the terms and places were unfamiliar to him. He was thoughtful a long moment. Then he brushed the rusty colored hair back from his eyes and asked me why I had never done the work that was so strong in my heart, since there seemed to be no harm in it.

In the quiet of that autumn day, we both regarded each other across the many years of our lives, and I found no ready answer for him, and a great many questions for myself. He was not hurt, but slid down to the floor and stole quietly to the doorway. "Don't be afraid of what is in your heart, Uncle", he said. And with that, he gently pulled the heavy door shut, and took his leave.

My heart worked a long while over his quiet words, for he was my favorite, as I have related, and our

lives touched and intersected in many ways. Finally I walked over to the window and opened the old wood shutters wide to drink in the afternoon air. For an hour I watched the waves that spilled through the day and crashed against the side of our eastern wall. There was a strong tide running through that late afternoon sunset, and it carried the thoughts of a thousand lives, bright with color and life.

I was still standing at the window by nightfall, watching the night sky for signs of friends. While my eyes rested, a silver shower of three small meteors raced across the sky by the mountains, tracing faint lines in the treetops. By midnight, I saw the outlines of two old friends alight in the sky, and bid them come to me, so that we might talk.

The sign of the archer woke in the night sky, the sleepshape of my old teacher, and he came to share some hot tea with me to break the night chill. The sign of the eagle slowly turned over the horizon, and I knew she had missed my call.

My teacher and I talked long into the night, for the passage of time lends a special flavor to friendships. He found my unsettled state quite humorous, and felt compelled to remind me I had often troubled him so with my questions as a young man. Twisting his mustache and laughing into his tea, he reminded me of numerous events I had thought were long and safely forgotten. At last, he departed to join the turning of the dawn sky, and I was alone again with only my own restless thoughts and troubles.

I waited until dawn was early morning, then left

my room to investigate the varied mysteries of the main kitchen. While I was eating alone at the trestle table by the smallest fireplace, staring into the morning embers, Charmaine drifted into the kitchen, rubbing at her eyes. Smiling at my long face, and stifling her yawns with the sleeve of her robe, she settled across from me and stole some breakfast from my plate with a guileless expression.

She has been my lover for many years, and the only friend with whom I can share my every thought, so it was not long before she wrested the course of my thinking from me. Leaning her head crowned in short blond hair on her hand, she began to grin at me so broadly, I began to feel quite a fool, for no reason I could clearly identify.

"Why don't you take Matthew's advice, and just go and do what you fancy?" She inquired innocently, laughing at me with her pale blue eyes peering out over the slowly disappearing toast.

With infinite restraint, I tossed the rest of my breakfast into the fireplace, as it was clear I would not be taken very seriously this morning. Charmaine laughed into her teacup, and then left, opening the tie to her robe as she went.

"Bring your problems to me for resolution, my love." she called, as she vanished around the corner. My concentration ruined, I left the kitchen, and went to follow her delicate laugh making its way leisurely up the stairs.

By late afternoon, we finally awoke, and she

curled tight to my chest. "So, what will your decision be, my dearest love?" she spoke quietly into my heart. I put my hand around her head, and drank in her life all around me before answering, "I believe I will do it." I could feel her smile on my chest, and knew we would bring our own son into the world to bedevil me before long.

Before autumn was much deeper and redder, I called Matthew to my room over the sea, and we sat again for a talk. I felt I should explain a great deal to him before starting my work, more to ease my own thoughts than his. It took considerable preamble on my part to begin, but finally I was ready. Uncles are expected to dither a bit, and I had it down to quite an art.

"What do you know about wardens?" I asked Matthew, toying idly with the litter on my workbench.

"Uncle, I know as much as any boy of twelve is likely to know about wardens, which is to say only the stories and not much about the reasons." he said. "I know that you are one of the wardens who live here in this age. I suppose that when I'm older I could enter the trial to become a warden myself." He became thoughtful after this as if he had never really given it much serious consideration before this exact moment, but suddenly found it quite interesting.

He settled more comfortably, pushing the hair out of his eyes again, and then continued, "I spoke one evening with your own teacher, and in between winding his mustache and sipping the mint tea I made for him, he told me a bit about your work. He said the lot of you are here to keep the great demon entropy under control.

Something about keeping the great karmic wheel from stopping just because of a bad bearing. I think he may have been joking with me though, because his eyes were laughing." He looked up at me with a small grin.

"It's an inevitable byproduct of all the people he has been over the years." I replied. I turned to my workbench and lifted a small box for Matthew to see. "Tell me about this." I said, handing it to him to examine.

The boy held the heavy blue box, and turned it over and over in his hands. Finally he grew thoughtful and looked at the star on the cover for a few moments, and the seamless box came cleanly open, as he found its aura. Reaching inside, he drew out the old book and held it quietly in his hands for a great while, feeling its rough texture.

Finally he looked up at me and said "It's the book of the fifth warden of Earth, Uncle. I don't know where he is now. Char told me he was very beautiful in his way, but a man of great sadness for all of that."

Matthew's gray eyes looked up into mine. "I believe it had much to do with what was done after he left. A great deal of harm was done in his name through this book, and I think it left his heart very heavy."

He went to the window and continued to speak looking out over the sea, his words blending with the waves crashing against the wall below. "I understand that the lessons to be learned from him cannot be found so easily now. Everything that eventually collected about him has displaced much of his true aura. He was a man

of great love and strength, though." he finished quietly.

I felt the flux of massive forces as he finished speaking, and knew he would be just such a man himself, one day. Sighing, as uncles are prone to do, I retrieved the book and box and returned them where they live with an abstracted wave. I poured a small brandy and milk for my thoughts, and put my hand on Matthew's shoulder.

"Wardens have their place in the scheme of things." I said to him, "But it is not always so clearly felt by the people we touch. Even though I no longer live there, Earth has always troubled me most because I was born there. It's always aflame with a thousand conflicts, as if it was disturbed by a great darkness that always seems to be hiding just out of view. Because of that, I often feel drawn to it for my work."

Downing my brandy, I continued, "You can understand then, why in my deepest longing, I would reach out and touch my old home to brighten its aspect, but do you understand why I have asked you about the book?"

The boy was thoughtful for many heartbeats while he looked out over the sea. In his quiet gray eyes I could see the shapes of a thousand lifetimes in motion, and knew he would answer me truthfully when he spoke.

"You wish me to know we can only ever be wardens, uncle, not rulers. I have to know that sadness and joy are always found mixed together." He became very quiet, and then finished, "I suppose even the kindest touch could be thought to be a knife, by one asleep."

He turned to me with tears in his eyes and put his arms around my waist. He held me for a few minutes, then left in his own quiet way down the stairs.

When winter was about to freeze the sea spray on the rocks below, I bid farewell for a while to my family. I hiked for some miles into the mountains to quiet my thoughts and prepare my art. By nightfall, I came to the spring fed by a large fissure in the western cliff face, and decided to rest. I pulled out my pipe, and set it afire with a touch, and rested with my back against the cliff to view the night sky. I woke the art I had put together on the walk up, and found myself on Earth, more or less at random.

Pulling my gray sweater straighter, and feeling around in my pockets for matches, I walked out towards the roadway. After a few minutes, I turned, and went up a driveway to the house ahead. In a few moments, I was standing at the door, and had my pipe re-lit. Since a *'faint heart never fought an Apache'*, I rang the bell without hesitation.

There was a certain amount of internal clatter, then the door pulled slightly open, restrained by a chain, and an uninterested male voice called out, "Yeah?". Not exactly with the inflection of a deep thinker.

Feeling I could possibly generate more interest by silence, I waited for a moment, and was eventually rewarded with, "So, whattaya want?"

"Could I use your phone for a moment?"

"What for?" He replied with somewhat narrowed eyes through the tiny wedge of light, as if I might be some sort of deviant phone molester, or possibly a member of the phone police come to investigate the possibility of illegal extensions and other interconnect mis-deeds.

I could tell things were not moving along too well, so I offered to pay for the call, hold my hands in the air while he opened the door, and be searched on entry. This proved to be sufficient, and before long I had the phone in hand, and was making a call to Oregon, where I hoped for better progress.

To work on Earth, I need time to taste its current flavor, and compose my art. Magic is just better science less quickly understood, but I will say that it is a bit grumpy, and a real bear to get moving off dead center. To that end, I booked a hotel, arranged for a rental car, and found out that it was raining in Portland, flower of the pacific northwest. Apparently a very wet flower.

Armed with all of this information, I thanked my host, left him ten dollars for the call, and walked out the door and into Portland, arranging a long string of small art before me.

The receptionist at the hotel had been at least half-serious, it was definitely raining; so I was fairly wet when I made it to the front desk and presented myself. There were several odd looks, somewhat haughty inquiries, and other dark manifestations of innkeeper's suspicion, which I quieted with my Platinum American Express card. When a call revealed my card to be in good standing, the desk clerk underwent a radiant

change of personality, and my room was a reality without further delay. Never let it be said that Earth is entirely without its own magic.

Later that evening, I was soaking in a steaming hot tub and listening to the rain on the window when I heard a knock on the door and opened it from the tub. Char came in, and tossed off the raincoat she had the presence of mind to bring. She quickly skinned off her clothes and settled into the tub, wearing only her mischievous smile. She looked very good in it.

"I'm glad you decided to do this," she said, tracing patterns in the soapy water with her right hand. "So I came by to tell you so myself." Her speech was short, but her delivery was exceptional.

Our laughter probably was offensive to the residents in the next suites, but we shared our secrets through the night, indifferent to their particular judgment. Morning found her back home, and me driving through Portland in a rented Ford Escort. Fate would appear to be basically a joker, from what I can see.

By afternoon, I had made it to Seattle, and stopped to eat at a roadside restaurant. There were tables behind the restaurant, right on the ocean, and I sat down to eat and admire the ocean view, which made me long for our home.

Matthew has always claimed I am a man of deep and unwarranted suspicions, ever since I found him playing with my notes when he was five. The matter has yet to be decided, but I know for a fact that I did not

have one hundred and three thousand Greek recipes filed away in my books before he went through them. In light of this, I felt justified in finding the attention of two smirking, greasy-looking and sloppily dressed teenagers reasonable food for thought.

There was a lot of nudging and laughing going on, so I felt it was only a matter of time before I was treated to the full brilliance of their multi-faceted personalities and sparkling diction.

Not to disappoint me, the dark haired one sat across from me, ostentatiously cleaning his fingernails with a large, sharp, folding knife. He inquired if I would mind giving him my wallet. His co-worker used this conversational interlude to move around behind me, thus eliminating retreat as an easy option.

"Why exactly do you think I should bestow this particular blessing on you?" I inquired, smiling, with my most innocent manner working in high gear.

Rather than chat further, his cohort grabbed me from behind, and he of the meticulous nail hygiene leaned across the table and pressed his knife into my stomach. "Now, how about the wallet, shitface?" he asked tightly, clearly not in the mood for any more diversionary light banter.

"Take it." I said, turning slightly, to give him a good grip on it. He fished it out, eyed it to be sure it was worth having, then shoved the knife in my chest, cleanly severing the right side of my heart from some critical plumbing. There was a great deal of blood, which he just missed, by jumping clear of the table. His tactical backup dropped me on the ground, and they ran out

through the parking lot, into their car, and were gone in a chorus of squealing tires and slamming doors.

I waited for a few minutes to see if anyone intended to help me, which was clearly not the case, then got up and brushed off the litter I had accumulated on the ground. I fixed the damage, and removed the blood, then reached out to see where they were.

I found them about two miles away, laughing themselves into a collective coma over how easy a touch I had been, and flashing the contents of my wallet around the car. I retrieved my wallet and contents, and let that sink in for a moment. Then at the next intersection, I put their car into a convenient concrete block wall, and let them merge tightly into it. You can't beat inertia for stunning effect, with or without magic. There must have been considerable kinetic energy involved, because the mean temperature of the entire wall rose 14 degrees.

By the time I walked down to the corner in question, an ambulance crew was picking them out of the car, and one ashen-faced attendant was muttering something about how neither of them would be much good for anything with the spinal and back damage they had. I waved to them as they were being loaded in, and took considerable satisfaction in being recognized.

Earth's single greatest failure has always been the lack of timely and suitable rewards for uncivilized behavior. People really need to understand the concept of consequences.

Feeling the day off to a good beginning, I walked

back to my car, and drove off to find the nearest military base. The area seemed to offer a great deal of choice, but considering my intent, I decided on the Trident submarine depot.

While not strictly necessary for what I had in mind, I have always found it more effective to work with a familiar of the subject I select. I made my preparations as best I could, and drove down the shore access road to the base.

Buffing the buttons on the front of the navy uniform with my sleeve, I saluted to the officer on watch at the gate, and handed him my ID. After a few calls, and a computer check, I was cleared with a smile, and waved through the gate. The sea breeze was rich in the air, like a taste of home, as I drove through.

I spent the last few hours of the afternoon watching the crews at work around the dry-docks, and drifting through various offices. I had to go through security checks three more times, but an admiral's uniform and ID have certain intrinsic advantages, and I was never seriously bothered by anyone.

By six, my walk took me to the warhead arming workroom, and I leaned against one of the inspection railings to view the operation. There were three crews at work, and quite an impressive display of hardware and ordnance in evidence, considering that Earth now supposedly lived in a world of détente and stability.

I lit my pipe with some nice old wooden matches borrowed earlier from a kind first officer, and made all the warheads disappear. Actually, a simple trick, but

you have to ease into these things after being killed.

The snapping sound the air made, rushing into the newly created holes, attracted just enough attention. I felt my work was finished there for the day, so I walked back through the corridor and out of the arms complex, trying to master the art of one-handed match lighting I had seen the first officer do so neatly.

I walked out to the dry-dock area again, and made sure all the other warheads were gone from the immediate area. Then, carefully putting together my thoughts, I worked a truly elegant piece of art, and made all the others stop working on the planet. All of them.

Just a simple substitution, but very compelling in effect. It's fairly difficult to get any form of fissionable atomic activity going with beach sand. I could do it if pressed, but I felt it was beyond Earth's existing technology of the moment. I had a dark suspicion it would be unsafe to loiter, so I drove back to my hotel room, stretched out on the bed, and had a much needed nap after a busy day.

I turned on the news at ten, to confirm my belief that no one would say a word, and was only greeted with the semi-hysterical news that all the reactors in North America had been shut down to comply with some obscure terrorist group's demands. Might be possible, but unlikely timing, considering the day's events.

Manipulating cadmium moderator rods in a reactor vessel filled with sand is very unproductive, terrorists or no terrorists. I regretted all the secondary inconvenience, but it was the best I could do under the

circumstances. One can always live without an electric an-opener, but living with widely scattered kidneys that glow in the dark is quite another matter altogether.

I did a quick survey to be sure there was no radioactive material left intact, and found I had to alter a few trifling aspects of operational physics to be sure it would stay that way for a while. I could picture world reaction in a few days, but decided that a world deprived of radium watch dials and immediate and total self-destruction could not be all that bad. When taken together as a unified whole, of course.

Morning is not at its finest in the middle of a large city, but I made do with what was available. I checked around the world to be sure I had not unwittingly uncorked any other catastrophes while at work the previous day, and was reasonably satisfied that there were no horrifying surprises. There were a few people who were going to be a little unhappy, but nothing too severe.

I had worked up a few throw-away efforts, just to serve as crowd pleasers, in case anyone was keeping track, and decided this was the time for them. I moved the last few remains of the Berlin wall, Lubyanka Prison and Auschwitz, things I have always found very offensive, to the bottom of the Atlantic ocean, just off Portugal. They should make a great fish shelter. I also filled the mass storage of every clandestine security agency computer on earth with copies of those same Greek recipes I had inherited from Matthew. Grape leaves among the Gulag and CIA reports should give them something to think about.

After a little thought, I also put the star of David on the Russian and American flags in place of their unfortunate Satanic pentacles, and changed the loads in all the small rounds ammunition to sawdust. I also made one small alteration to the chemistry of the cocoa, poppy and hemp plants that was destined to get some attention shortly, as their mood-altering days were certainly over. A few people were going to have to start paying attention to real life again. An artist likes to sign his work, and I felt these events would provide some much needed distraction from other pressing problems that would shortly occur.

I spent the afternoon wandering through downtown Seattle in the light rain, and watched the faces of the people I passed. I also satisfied some latent desire for self-destruction, and had a pepperoni pizza with sausage, anchovies and pineapple, and three brandies with milk. Death by cholesterol. I also broke 17 more matches, and was seriously considering the purchase of a stainless steel Zippo.

By late afternoon, I was out on the nearest beach sitting on the hard packed sand, watching the waves. As the sun started to burn into the far sea edge, my thoughts went wandering through the night sky. I found David circling overhead as the darkness settled, and watched as his fingers traced the outline of the horizon. From his smile, I knew he was reasonably impressed with my efforts, and tipped my knit cap to him.

In the moonlight, I could see someone walking along the breakwater my way, and waited for their approach. Char came up the beach, and settled next to me, bundled in a huge knit sweater and rolled up jeans.

For my efforts, I received a long, sweet kiss, and we sat for a while and watched the sea cycle.

"You knew they could never do it themselves, didn't you?" She asked, curled up next to me, with her arms around my waist.

"Sweetheart, it was like the Djinn, once out of the bottle, there was no putting it back, except with a little help. Besides, they'll think up some obnoxious new stuff before long." I replied, and tried the one-handed match lighting trick again.

The match fell into the wet sand and sizzled for a moment. Some things just defeat me.

When we returned home, it was very late, so I left Matthew asleep. First thing in the morning, he was awake with endless questions, and we could not help laughing over some of the trip's events. He particularly liked the fish shelters. Finally, when all the urgent, burning issues had been dealt with, we whiled away the rest of the morning lost in the much higher art of breakfast.

Vacation

The big shiny one is a Colt MagCel needler, with a laser designator, the small one is an HK conventional 9mm with a carousel clip. The thing on my chest is a fast draw carbide steel cutter with three razor edges and a lock grip. Of course, I also carry three or four plain old ordinary knives and some other clutter best left completely unmentioned. It all looks pretty good in my tailored suit, you can hardly see anything, particularly with the dress sash on. For more casual dress, I have to forego the needler.

What do I do for a living? Surely you recognize my kit; I'm just your average Home Office civil servant, out doing my designated goodwill ambassadorial duty. We used to go heavily armed, but it alarmed everyone, and seemed to set the wrong tone at those casual introductory meetings.

Just now, our little administrative group is "on vacation" at the Ceres waystation, which is to say we're spying. We're looking for some explanation as to the repeated disappearances of Home Office ships in the area, and not having a great deal of luck just yet.

Over eighty thousand people live in the Ceres complex, mostly support services for the belt miners, and the shuttle ship construction yards. If you count the total belt population, Ceres represents over two hundred

thousand people, by far the largest human off-world settlement.

They are now into their second generation, with people born and raised in the belt who have never set foot on Earth, Mars or the Moon, or anything bigger than Ceres for that matter. They can't go back, because their bodies have adapted a little too well to low gravity, and frankly, they don't seem too interested in any case. Must have also lost their taste for expensive squalor.

My cover story, if you can believe this, is that I'm here investigating a retirement home off-world because of my weak heart. The genius back at intellect central who thought that up apparently glossed over how I could ship in here with a bad heart in the first place. I tell anyone who's interested that I'm a thief, looking for work. At least I can say it with a straight face.

So, while clanking around, armed to the eyebrows, and ready for pretty much anything, I have uncovered exactly nada. Nobody wants Home Office ships, they're too uncomfortable and noisy. Besides, where would you get spares out here? Valid argument, as you can't whittle too many critical drive parts from a lump of rock. In addition, ships built here are cheap, fast, and comfy, and much sportier looking. One fellow in a bar suggested to me last night that maybe they just fell apart, Earth quality being what it is. I let him live.

So, no traces of our ships (although this is a big place, and you could hide just about anything out here), no overt rebellion fomenting, no incipient insurrection, and certainly no detectable clues. I decided to let the entire thing die off without me, and went to enjoy some

real vacation, which is possible, but somewhat life threatening in space. The rest of our group, a somewhat varied assortment of administrators and desk clerks (i.e., read hired killers and assassins), did much the same, as we just couldn't seem to make any real progress.

I went for some rock walks, with a hand jet and grapples, and managed to really wear myself out over five days, as well as almost launching myself into orbit as a minor new moon over Ceres. Still, it was lots of grins, and I made a few friends locally who also like to do a little aerial ballet with a rock hammer and rope. Over coffee with some of them, I found out that a few local ships were also going missing every so often, which most felt were just chance encounters with small ballistically inclined rocks that didn't come out so well for the ships.

Hitting a rock, any rock, at reaction cruise is very ugly. Belters have a lot of special rigs to clear rock clutter, or deflect them in flight, but they still lose some ships through impact. It explains why, even though atmosphere or drag is no consideration, their ships are very sleek, with a small cross-sectional profile. Less to hit.

Some of the Home Office crew seemed determined to find some kind of bad guys up here to account for the lost ships, so they went off through the belt looking for scapegoats, and I stayed here at Ceres to 'go underground' (i.e., read goof-off). I spent a few days with a crew up in flight dispatch, after shucking my heavier ordnance in a spare closet, and managed to get some background on all the lost ships, both local and H/O.

At least five TK40 class ships are lost each year (26 month Ceres calendar), due to the vagaries of fate, rocks, and irrepressible human stupidity. A host of smaller craft also punch out for similar reasons, and there is rarely any trace of these ships, regardless of the cause. Ceres records go back fifty H/O years, and these figures seemed pretty steady for the last fifteen years.

Two years ago local, they began to climb, and were now double the long time average. If you tossed in Home Office losses, there was clearly something afoot. Although whether it was a plague of carelessness, or Unknown Darker Forces At Work, I had no opinion just yet. I hate to go for the really complex and involved explanation like UDFAW when stupidity will suffice. Human History is heavily weighted on my side, analytically.

I went down to the main computer library, and asked for a terminal and access, which I bought for only 40c in gold, after winning a few rolls with the bored desk clerk. I got a card good for thirty days, and unlimited plot time, so I was content. I had the beast round up all the recent flight losses, do some imaginative extrapolation, back check to old stats, and then dump the whole mess to a series of star plots and sector charts. It took me three days to set it all up, and the machine exactly 18 seconds to do the rest. That part was somewhat sobering.

I went back to my favorite hangout with all the plots, and ruminated over them with some coffee. I miss not being able to smell the coffee when it's in these ridiculous squeeze bags, but I guess it beats wearing it.

Ceres gravity is very modest, which makes coffee in a cup somewhat temperamental.

A few miners came in that I had met, and they inquired politely how my stealing was going. I figured it would be far simpler to just have a sign tattooed on my forehead, "Home Office Thug, All Normal People Beware!". They were pretty nice, none-the-less, and were interested in my assortment of charts.

Most of them knew someone who had been lost in a ship, so their interest was both genuine and helpful. We all began to notice almost at the same time that a lot of these disappearances were clustered in a globe just off one of the major flight paths into Ceres from the deep belt. It was sort of like the Bermuda Triangle of the asteroid belt.

We kicked around a lot of ideas to account for the strange concentration of losses, but nobody could come up with anything really convincing, so we all decided to take a shuttle there and have a look. One of them very politely asked me not to take anything from his ship, if I wouldn't mind. It was starting to make me wish I had thought up something better for a cover story, although they all could see why a big time thief like myself would be interested in finding a big pile of lost ships.

We lifted off Ceres and made it to our target area in about six hours, as we boosted only mildly on the way out, to avoid radio-telescope disruption on the waystation. Space is not as exciting as desert or mountains or forest. It looks a lot like nothing, no matter how you dress it up. This piece was even less thrilling than normal, if such a thing is even possible.

I often wondered how boy scouts in the belt blazed trails out here. What could you do, leave notches on the vacuum to follow? In any case, we didn't find a big net full of trapped ships, a horde of hostile aliens, space pirates, or roads badly in need of repair. Mainly, there was darkness, relieved once in a while by incoming alerts on radar/laser scanners for rocks. Deep nothing.

We decided to set a cyclic orbit for a day through the area, just to see if anything would turn up of interest, and then we got down to some serious gambling and card playing, which is the major life activity in the belt. I managed to hold my own, and sustained only minor financial wounds, but found myself in a lot better mood.

We were woken up after only a few hours sleep by the ship's ballistic computer, which indicated another ship closing with us from further out in the belt. We sent out a brief hail, and then shifted our path slightly, in case his gear was out, and he got too close. While we were fussing around, he vanished, which managed to catch our full *undivided* attention.

This was the kind of thing that really *upsets* Home Office. They like an orderly universe in which all benefits flow smoothly to them, and where even their casual comments are taken as if they all appeared suddenly on burning stone tablets. This business of disappearing ships was really going to be a big irritation.

Why, you ask? Well, either *Some Dark Purpose* is doing it, *Some Unauthorized Science (which they don't own or control) is Afoot*, or the *Universe Doesn't Work Quite as They Imagined*. All of these are bad

scenarios, Home Office-authority-wise.

Before I left, there had been some really interesting rumors going around H/O about odd spacecraft, holes in space, and a lot of other twilight-zone related issues. Clearly, things were going to get more interesting out here, and pretty quickly.

We cut cards for it, and the call was to investigate the ship's last spot by an ace. Off we went, dutifully notching the vacuum as we closed in on the spot. I kept glued to the scanners, hoping to find something of value in the way of an explanation, but with understandably modest expectations.

My scanner pattern suddenly changed as we hit the ship's last spot, and I glanced up at the others who were looking out the visor. Surprise. We were sure as heck not in the belt any longer. There were a lot of interesting eye movements, and facial expressions making the rounds of the cabin, but things were pretty quiet otherwise.

So what were we looking at? Ah, glad you asked. Dead ahead was a rather nice looking planet, blue-white like Earth, but all the land masses looked different. Off to one side was also a fairly nice looking primary, G-type, and three little moons whizzing around the mysterious guest planet. While we were all gaping, I punched in a survey routine on the "No-track", and had it start recording everything. I don't know why though, exactly no-one was going to believe me.

After the big rush of incredulous comments, denials and other foolishness, we finally decided to go

into orbit around the planet for a closer look. Up close, it was beautiful, like a big blue marble with clouds. Unfortunately, this was not a planetary survey ship, and we couldn't even determine if it had air or battery acid for atmosphere.

We sat up there for a whole day, trying to make up our alleged minds, and finally decided that we would put down on the surface and have a real look. Besides, anything that pretty had to be breathable, was the distillation of our well reasoned thinking. It was a good thing we weren't in charge of anything really important in the universe with incredible judgment like that.

We landed not far from a sweeping white beach, with crashing breakers, and heartbreakingly blue water. And air, close enough, although all the lovely toxins and aromatic petrochemical byproducts we know and love seem to be missing. The miners were having a tough time in the high gravity, but from what I could feel, it must have been less than Earth normal, maybe about 0.7. Fortunately they were still first generation beltlers, having emigrated, or they might have just collapsed on the ground wheezing, while I strolled along the beach.

Belters feel, somewhat correctly, that Earth just isn't what it used to be, which accounts for many of them shipping out to live in comparative poverty and discomfort in the belt. This, on the other hand, looked pretty good to them. It didn't look that bad to me either, for all of that.

By evening, we were sitting on the beach, chewing on our dinner, and listening to the ocean. Nobody looked too eager to jump right back into the

ship, and shape for home. We got a call over the ship's comm, which was relayed to us on the beach without video. It was one of the earlier travelers through the hole to this place, wherever it was, wanting to know if we were up for a little cribbage this evening?

Well, one thing leads to another, and I'm still here, on vacation. We've got some regular shuttles going back and forth to the belt, and the population here is rising slowly but surely. Home Office is still snarling around the belt, looking for those missing ships, while we go fishing. They're here, by the way, just a little distance up the coast.

No doubt H/O will get a little surprise one day, when they realize we've set up a Branch Office. We're in no particular hurry to tell them just yet, though.

Small Signs

The blast was first reported on June 21st, 2014, in a small rural American town called Skillet, lost in the dusty south-western corner of Ohio. It was just a local news curiosity for a few weeks, and was quickly controlled there by selective crop burning.

The town's population (1,426 people according to the last official US census) was confident that it was caused by industrial pollution from upstream on the Ohio river, taken in via their crop irrigation, and didn't give it much further thought after a few stiff letters to their congressman. It soon became just a small piece of local history for 'remember when' over-the fence gossip.

Not long after the fields were burned off, there were some fairly brisk winds for a few weeks in early August, and most of the gray-black ash was cleared from the ground in short order. That was followed by a fairly heavy rain in September, which washed the last of the residue into the soil, and through drainage ditches, eventually back into the Ohio river.

The following year, most of the crops in Skillet were affected dramatically, and those downwind of the first outbreak were virtually destroyed. Downriver from Skillet, all the farming communities in Illinois, Indiana and Kentucky were also affected that had used irrigation water fed from the river. This time, the farmer's cries of

industrial pollution were rampant, and within a few weeks, Cincinnati was embroiled in bitter political dogfighting over suspect pollution standards, and the impact of urban polluters on rural agriculture.

These situations always bring out the very worst in people, and there were quite a few '*ecological researchers*' (locally referred to as '*deep breathers*') who felt this damage confirmed their most heartfelt positions, irrespective of actual facts. Coupled with some hasty and bungling attempts by upriver industries to quiet reporters and their speculations with sudden cash, the situation soon raced beyond the fact-finding stage, and into the damage-award phase, before any real information was ever discovered.

Since there were some fairly notorious polluters in the area, especially one paint manufacturer, the case was solidly made in the minds of the public immediately. There was no real research into the cause of the blast, as everyone *knew* what was causing it, even though there were so many unanswered questions and so much obviously faulty reasoning. With practiced ease, the local politicians made a great show of publicly punishing the suspected offenders, with fines and stiff new ineffective regulations, and no work was done to establish the chain of contamination that had actually started the blast.

Flags were waved, strong principles discussed at length, and not a single bit of documented evidence was uncovered, or research carried out, to explain the origin and cause of the blast. The posturing was of exceptional quality, and the subject was hot and topical, so everyone was a cocktail party expert in short order. The executive

staff of the paint plant had to take their children out of local schools, and hire armed guards for their homes as a result of the sudden public furor.

During that time, it is possible that the blast could have been contained and eradicated, as the infected area was still relatively small. Many adjoining area farmers were enjoying record prices as a result of sudden substantial shortages, and old surpluses were coming out of silos, and finally going off to market after two years or more of storage. Farmers affected by the blast were covered by crop insurance, augmented by several legal judgments, and some emergency federal funding. At the beginning, the blast suited a wide range of vested interests perfectly. That time quickly passed away with the next spring crops, however.

By the following May, it was clear that the situation was much worse, and the devastation to the entire state of Ohio was complete. All states downstream of the Ohio river were in serious shape, as well as all those reached by prevailing wind currents which included Kansas, Nebraska and Oklahoma. Much more ominous, although un-noticed at the time, was the fact that seed grain exported from the region in the previous year had been contaminated, and that the blast was now taking root world-wide, in Africa, the Ukraine, Asia, and South America.

The blast also affected hay crops, such as grass and alfalfa (basically much like wheat), by seriously damaging seeds, and making further propagation almost impossible. The impact this would have on remaining area livestock was fatal, as no equivalent alternative feed crop was readily available.

Because so much interlocking agriculture and dairy farming depended on those staple crops, the escalation of the food crisis was frighteningly swift and certain. Malthus would have said inevitable, without ever looking up from his evening newspaper. With the loss of so much new grain, and the startling discovery that the blast had also destroyed the food value and propagation ability of the huge stockpiles, where old and new grain had been mixed, the collapse of the food system for people and animals was rapid. It was the economic downside of a highly touted concept called synergy.

The ridiculous earlier position as to the cause of the blast was now fairly evident, but there was difficulty in focusing attention on that question once the situation became so serious. A few researchers finally began to examine the blast in earnest, but it was clear to everyone that the situation was now really past the quick cure stage.

During this tumultuous period, commodity prices skyrocketed, crippling the economy, and making some wealthy, while millions suddenly worried about their next meal. The US Department of Agriculture concluded that staple food prices would increase an average of 2800% over the 2015 baseline by the end of 2016. The New York Times made its own calculations, and concluded that the minimum wage needed to keep a family of two above the poverty line, and allow a daily combined intake of 4500 calories, was now \$289,000 in New York City, significantly above the median wage.

By the end of 2017, in many major cities, the

evening news began to include a 'body count', which was the number of 'street people' picked up by city authorities and police who had starved to death. People who could afford to eat found this count amusing in a mildly intellectual way, while many sociologists found the figure dark and frightening. Much more frightening was when the bodies began to disappear, and the count suddenly went down.

A surprising number of people seemed indifferent to the depth of the problem, and many viewed it like the previous 'oil crisis', a heavy-handed industry maneuver to increase prices. Even in scientific circles, agriculture had been such a low priority, and surpluses the norm for so long, that the problem was just not taken seriously. Only the price aspect of the blast received much press, as commodity futures and pork bellies became the new vogue in investment.

Reports slowly began to appear from all over the world of similar massive crop failures, and at that point, the cycle was entrenched and uncorrectable. Within three months, it was obvious that the blast was now global in nature, and that the major food crops were already lost for the year. The fractured remains of the old Russian hegemony had at first gleefully savored the crop failures in the US as they '**drowned in their own sewage**' (Tass). But it was now threatening war because of the '**biological warfare**' (Pravda) attack coldly carried out by the US in the Capitalist-Imperialist guise of government subsidized wheat shipments.

Before nuclear war could take root, the blast unchained the most violent revolution ever to sweep Eastern Europe and Northern Asia. Millions found there

simply was no food. No bread, no cereal, and no meat. Unfortunately, there was also no relief to be had after the revolution, and the result was the largest famine ever to reach Eurasia. Rice remained un-affected in China and South East Asia, and this soon led to armed invasion throughout the region, in a desperate search for food.

Researchers at the University of Ohio eventually uncovered the true cause of the blast, although admittedly a little late to be of any significant benefit. The blast was the result of a virus. Just a tiny ball of nucleotides surrounded by a very tough protein shell. A shell that could withstand most environmental extremes the world, or mankind, were prepared to dish out. And it really liked corn and wheat and a variety of related plants.

They did not come up with any miraculous cure for the blast, but did note that it appeared to be just a natural mutation of a common virus normally associated with a similar, but much less deadly, tobacco leaf blight. There was some idle speculation that it was a man-made mutation, or biological warfare agent, accidentally released, but no evidence ever surfaced to support that conclusion. It would appear that the universe deals out a few virulent jokers of its own without any direct help from the human race, every once in a while.

During the same year, the essential organization of the entire North American continent collapsed, and from Canada to Mexico, the entire population was plunged into cultural as well as literal darkness. When the real crazies came out in force, everything from power plants to hospitals, as well as the unarmed and unwary, were torched for sport and diversion. And

occasionally for dinner.

It must seem odd, in retrospect, that so much damage could be caused by such a small thing. There were, after all, many crops that were not affected, such as green vegetables, tubers, and rice. There were just not enough quickly available alternate crops to begin to fill the void created by the loss of such fundamental cereal crops. Not to mention that virtually all cattle and other meat sources were almost completely wiped out by a combination of lack of feed, and an overt desire to eat on the part of human beings.

Psychologically, the sudden disappearance of 'fast food' seems to have been the glaring signpost of bad times ahead, as the real impact of a breadless, meatless economy set in. More than any other event, it seemed to drive home the cold reality of just how serious and all-encompassing the problem had become. When the 'Whopper' and 'Big Mac' went past \$25, and Wendy's supply trucks were hijacked, things were clearly going wrong in a big way.

A few areas managed to survive almost intact for odd combinations of reasons, such as Brazil and Hawaii (as long as you discount the Asian race riots), but for the most part, the world was devastated, more from the results of human behavior than from simple lack of food. Today, fifteen years after the blast first surfaced in Skillet, the entire world's population is now only about 55 million people (best guess), and the largest cities (Honolulu and Salvador) have only about 400,000 inhabitants each.

The heavily industrialized and urbanized

countries were hit the hardest, because the density of human suffering there became unendurable. With the lack of food, and collapse of such public utilities as water and power, the conditions became unimaginable.

Japan, which was so dependent on imported food, became embroiled in savage trade wars to feed itself. It soon became locked in an all-out military struggle with mainland China for control of Asia's rice production, and in the process, suddenly re-discovered the darkness of nuclear war. Today the only Japanese remaining are those who were living elsewhere during the 'Holy Rice War'.

South America had sufficient raw agricultural power to replace corn and wheat, but at a terrible cost in human life. When their situation stabilized, it was only because of the huge rain forests, and their ability to provide basic animal fodder, and alternate tuber food bases.

Africa, which had been a net food importer for so long, because of drought and war, and so dependent on outside relief, was swept suddenly and brutally into a deep and bottomless famine. It was made much worse by raids from European and Arab countries for any agricultural products such as tuber crops like yams they could carry off from coastal countries. 'Long pig' also came back into fashion in some areas.

Only those regions of Africa with tuber based economies survived in any form. South Africa was destroyed in a shattering black civil war, sparked by food riots, and soon faded back un-noticed into the veldt. The north became desert, and the south became

patches of veldt and jungle, almost all of it was uninhabited.

Europe was thrown into violent upheaval, and erupted into dozens of long standing distrusts and wars. Life without their daily bread and pasta proved to be very difficult for all the countries of Europe, and they emerged years later only as faint and feudal shadows of past achievements.

Today we have new crop bases, such as potatoes, yams, tavers, rice and beans, and some strains of maize which have proven to be resistant to the blast. There is a much more diverse food base, with more fish and less red meat, and a great many vegetables and fruit. There are very few people, and clearer skies. Not too many traffic jams here in San Paolo.

But I always recall that short news release from the University of Ohio. The blast was just a naturally occurring mutation of an unimportant virus. The very smallest unit of life we know, with a diameter measured in angstroms. And a lot of angstroms can dance on the head of a pin, in case it's an unfamiliar unit of measure to you.

What do you suppose it wants to be next?

Maxine

This story is dedicated to the memory of **Mr. Henry Kuttner**, his wife **Catherine Moore**, and their joint alter ego **Lewis Padgett**. They were here first, and best.
I wrote it just because I miss them.

In the tenuous morning light, one of the printers in the corner of the workshop began to chatter with the morning news from the local fax lines. After about fifteen pages, it used the last fan-fold sheet from the carton, and its low level intellect signaled the computer, which in turn decided to summon Gallegher for a timely refill. With the reckless abandon common to computers everywhere, a shrill piercing signal was turned on, indifferent to the local time (5:00 AM), while the computer settled in to wait for its much needed attention.

Showing the enthusiasm of someone long dead, and reluctantly revived against his will, Gallegher partially opened one eye and regarded the pillow his throbbing, morning-after head was laying on. Seeing no active flames within 2 feet, or other valid cause for alarm, he closed the bloodshot eye again.

"I am far too nice a person to be tortured like this" Gallegher mumbled brokenly into his pillow, and squeezed his eyes tightly shut. "I know it's you Raoul, and if you don't stop this hysterical racket immediately, you can just kiss your gourmet cat food good-bye

forever."

The computer, having decided that *more than enough* time had elapsed for a reasonable human response, turned on a much louder signal usually reserved for major calamities, and with infinite silicon patience, waited for what it was certain would now be appropriate action.

Gallegher shot out of bed, became entangled in the covers, and fell in a disorganized heap on top of a drafting table facing the printer. With his eyes wide open, he said hoarsely, "My God, we're under attack, they've finally done it..." During this performance, his incredibly fat orange cat, Raoul, walked disdainfully over to inspect the damage and collect his apology for being wrongfully defamed in an earlier discourse.

Gallegher's independently tracking eyeballs finally calmed down, and a large amount of blood alcohol was swiftly metabolized by total panic. He finally located the source of his misery, and moved in a disorganized shuffle towards the computer. Critically eyeing the brilliant pink computer console, he said with considerable venom. "I suppose you think you're really impressing me with this display of urgency?"

From about twenty feet away, the computer realized that contact had been established, though possibly not in exactly the desired manner, and went totally silent, pretending to be gainfully engaged in the computation of 12 place logarithmic tables. After laying on the floor for some additional minutes, sufficient at least to allow some better looking daylight to come into the room, Gallegher finally wrapped the blanket around

himself in a more fashionable manner, walked over and sat down at the computer console, yawning constantly.

"All right Max, what is it ?" he managed to get out between an inexhaustible supply of yawns. Several sections of the console showed some signs of life, and a small voice came out of the voder by the keyboard in an unmistakably feminine Swedish accent. "I'm out of paper."

"You're worse than Raoul!" Muttered Gallegher as he groped under the printer for another carton. At this point, dignity outraged, the much maligned Raoul in question trotted along the kitchen counter and firmly butted a forgotten bottle of beer off the edge. It proceeded quickly downward, and crashed on the floor in an attractive fractal shower of foam and glass.

The front doorbell voder picked this moment to announce itself, before Gallegher could drop-kick Raoul through the cat door. He walked over to the door, and wrenched it open, in what was undeniably a very bad mood.

"I hope it's *important* !" he shouted into the face of a non-existent caller. Getting no reply, and seeing no-one, he suddenly looked down to find a small girl sitting on his doorstep , smiling up at him, although she qualified it with, "You sure have a rotten temper." Feeling this was perhaps incomplete as introductions go, she eyed Gallegher's costume critically and added "If you promise to put on something better than that blanket, and make me some toast, I might come inside and talk to you."

Gallegher stood in the doorway for a moment, unable to decide if this was genuine reality or some new and more fiendish type of hang-over phenomena. Still unsure after some reflection, he turned around and walked back into the room, calling weakly over his shoulder, "Make your own toast, I'm going to have a shower."

The girl followed him in, and closed the door. Gallegher stomped up the stairs and out of sight, without a further word other than a disconnected trail of incoherent grumbling. She scrunched down into a comfortable position on the big flowered chesterfield by the computer console.

Raoul, sensing a possible ally and fully qualified opener of food cans, bounded across the kitchen, jumped over the small vacuum chamber, and up into her lap to make introductions. Between the two of them passed the private communication denied to everyone over twelve, and they adjourned into the kitchen to investigate the food can matter first hand.

When Gallegher finally arrived back downstairs an hour later, he looked somewhat bloodshot, but otherwise intact and dressed. He found the broken beer bottle cleaned up, Raoul chewing contentedly on the remains of a huge bowl of canned cat food, and the girl seated at the kitchen table eating sourdough toast with plum jam.

"You take forever, I made my own toast." She said, taking another bite. "There's tea and toast for you too," she added, a little morosely, "but I think it's kind of cold now."

Gallegher sat down heavily in a wooden kitchen chair and let his head rest on his hands. "Are you some new creation of Max's, sent to remind me that she wants another carton of paper?" He said quietly through his fingers, staring vacantly through the kitchen window at the ocean outside.

"You're not very polite, Mr. Gallegher." Said the girl, getting up and walking to the fridge, where she got a bottle of beer and set it in front of him with slightly more force than was absolutely required to stick it to the table top. She settled back into her seat and said, "don't you remember me?"

Gallegher left his head partially propped by one hand and opened the beer with the other. He seemed to vaguely remember singing a duet with Max the night before and the words to Mississippi John Hurt's "Coffee Blues" kept circulating in his ears. After swallowing the entire beer he seemed slightly more alert, and looking across the table said only one word: "No."

She got off the chair, and went into the other room to curl back up on the chesterfield; where she struggled not to cry, but eventually lost. Raoul, with Herculean effort, left his food bowl, and curled up beside her, making reassuring cat noises, and occasionally glowering at Gallegher.

Hearing the girl crying, Max's voder came to Scandinavian life and inquired, "What's the matter honey?" The girl continued crying, but managed to slow down enough to say, "My daddy's in terrible trouble, and he's Mr. Gallegher's best friend." She continued to

sniffle, "If I can't get someone to help me..." At that point, she started to cry in earnest.

Max said in her most soothing voice "Don't worry about anything, sweetheart, I'm sure Gallegher will help you." Then in a voice like Phase III ice crystals, she said to Gallegher, "Get over here right now and find out what is going on please, or I will never type another character for you as long as I live."

Gallegher left his secure position at the kitchen table with great reluctance and walking over to Max he said in a strangled whisper, "Max, I have absolutely no idea what is going on here." In several short sentences, Max commented on the fact that while he, Gallegher, was an adequate engineer, and modestly adept at changing printer paper, he was a disaster at affairs of the heart, and possessed of little charm, wit or grace when first aroused each morning. She further added that if he didn't know what was going on, why didn't he just ask and find out.

Steeling himself for the ordeal, and blinking back some brilliant lights caused by an earlier excessive intake of scotch and milk and possibly too many choruses, Gallegher returned to the fridge. He took out another imported beer, settled himself on the other end of the chesterfield, and said "Will you please tell me what this is all about?", fortifying himself with several visits to his beer bottle.

The girl turned around to see him, and holding on to Raoul, she calmed down slightly, and said, "You and my Dad were best friends at school, and when he started to have all these problems at work, he talked

about you all the time. He said you were a better engineer drunk than most people could ever be sober, and that you probably could sort out all of their problems in five minutes."

Gallegher suddenly looked across the sofa pillows at the girl wedged into the corner of the couch with Raoul. He suddenly exclaimed "You're Annie, Jerry's little girl!" He got up, walked over to her and with a hug said, "I'm sorry I didn't recognize you, honey, I haven't seen any of you in years."

"That's OK," she said, with considerable poise returning. "I'm not such a little girl anymore. I guess I look a little different." She tickled Raoul, and was rewarded with a shameless display of purring and wanton cat posturing.

"What's this problem Jerry is having, how did you get here from Toronto, and what is this all about,.. why didn't Jerry call me... ?" He said, waving his beer bottle and spraying several drawings with imported foam. His raving was cut short by Max, who said to Annie, "Does your father know you came over here ?"

"Nope. I haven't seen my Dad in over a week, and Mom is so nervous I thought she was going to go crazy. I used my key card early this morning to get a ticket, and flew over here to get your help. Mom probably thinks I'm in school." She added as an afterthought. Gallegher sat down on top of a big wooden crate, labeled with the upside down words "lasergyro--this end up", and settled in to hear the rest of Annie's story.

"Dad said you were his best friend, and I remembered all the times you used to come over and visit us when I was little. I figured that if something had happened to my Dad, you would help him out. After all, that's what friends do." She looked expectantly at Gallegher, then continued, "I just looked up your address on Dad's terminal, and here I am."

Gallegher thought back to the years he and Jerry spent in college, when he calmly drank his way through two engineering degrees, not sure which end of a resistor the electrons went in when he was sober. Jerry turned in a top level master's in organic chemistry, and was always involved in some mysterious research project. They had shared quite a few years together, which gave their friendship the durable quality of old memories. He was suddenly very sorry they hadn't visited more often during the last few years.

"I'm going to call Lynn and tell her where you are, okay Annie? Then you can tell me what this is all about."

Annie looked like she was going to fall asleep in the corner of the couch with Raoul. "Mom's going to be plenty mad, but maybe it's a good idea..."

"Max, call Lynn Sanderson for me in Toronto." Said Gallegher, while he returned to the fridge lost in his quiet and very private thoughts, wondering just where the brandy was, and how it would taste on some whole-wheat cereal with strawberries.

A few minutes later, Max's largest visor lit up with Lynn's face, and Gallegher could see that she wasn't

quite her usual self. She looked tired and distracted, and looked into the visor as if she was expecting bad news. "Hi, Lynn, it's me." He said.

Some of the lines went out of her face, and she looked a little brighter. "Gallegher!" she exclaimed, "how have you been, it's been years since you called."

"I could say the same thing, but I'm not calling out of the blue. Annie showed up here this morning, and said that Jerry was in some kind of terrible trouble. What is this all about, Lynn?"

It looked like a dark cloud passed over her face, and suddenly she looked miserable. "I don't know what to say, Gallegher, except that I'm really frightened that something has gone seriously wrong at the new laboratory Jerry has been working at."

"What's he working on now anyway? Last time I checked, Jerry was fooling around with synthetic proteins and stuff that didn't sound particularly dangerous. Probably not even fattening."

Lynn turned slightly, and the sadness in her face was even more pronounced in profile. "Terracorp is working on some kind of radiation project, and Jerry has been very upset about the poor controls and precautions on the project. He mentioned that there was some peculiar engineering problem in the computer interlocks, and that the whole system was unsafe. Then, last week, there was a power failure at the plant, and since then Jerry hasn't been home. I can't even get him on the phone." She finished, and then started to cry quietly.

"He hasn't been contaminated has he?" said Gallegher, coming off his crate, suddenly afraid that his friend could be in a lot more than just serious trouble.

"No, it's nothing like that, it's just that they haven't been able to fix some equipment, and everybody has been out there day and night trying to get the mess straightened out." Lynn looked directly into Gallegher's gray eyes and said quietly, "I guess I should tell you the rest though, because I know Annie will if I don't." She continued, "I have a feeling they are working on something other than just synthetic food at Terracorp."

"What exactly do you mean?" Said Gallegher, with a nervous tic starting in his right eye.

"Jerry won't talk about it too much, but they have gone way beyond the original food synthesis project. You know I'm no dummy, even if my Bachelor's is in art, and frankly, the talks I've had with Jerry terrify me." Lynn sat down, and the visor panned and re-tracked to pick her up again. With her head in her hands, she started to cry again, but kept on talking.

"One of the lab assistants came across some batches of proteins that were behaving strangely, actually increasing in volume without any external stimulus, just reacting to the supply of available nutrients. From there it gets pretty fantastic in a hurry, and they calmly skipped over a few million years of evolution."

"Jerry started to get really concerned last year when the direction of the research took off on a different track. One of the military advisors felt they could

synthesize complex organic structures like whole tissue. The only thing I know for sure is that they succeeded beyond their wildest dreams, and ever since then, the whole project has been top-secret. Jerry has slowly become a nervous wreck."

Gallegher walked closer to his visor pick-up, and was visibly shaken. "What are they making, Lynn?" He asked.

For a few minutes, she didn't say anything, and then she looked tiredly back into the visor, and just said, "People."

Six hours later, Annie, Gallegher, and Max by way of her proxy terminal were changing planes at the Winnipeg International Airport, and Gallegher felt as cold inside as the weather looked outside the double glazed windows. When their flight was ready to board, and they filed on, it was clearly beyond the ability of any in-flight entertainment to lighten their mood.

Hours later in Toronto, as the taxi took them out to see Lynn, Gallegher's thoughts went back to the years he drifted through school, and wondered if this was a situation totally beyond his ability or desire. He had been scraping by as a casual technician, sometimes engineer, and infrequent inventor. It had become a comfortable place to hide from the less entertaining aspects of life.

If he really wanted to know something, a few

beers would rouse his brilliant subconscious. The rest of the time, he just tinkered, and enjoyed exploring the beaches around Victoria. His thoughts were very uncomfortable companions during the trip.

After finding the longest possible route to Lynn's house, a suspicion Max confirmed by a quick check of the city's video gazette, the taxi driver deposited them with a flourish at the house, and still managed to look deeply injured by the size of the tip.

Lynn opened the door while they were still struggling up the icy walkway, and quickly whisked them inside. There was a lot of general greeting and hugging, and there seemed to be a general lightening of everyone's mood by virtue of company. By this time, Annie was totally worn out, and she yawned and struggled mightily to keep awake to see what the results of her trip would be. Max suggested to her that a quick nap would be just as good, and maybe when she woke up, she would find her problems and worries long gone. Max is a completely shameless liar, but Annie followed the advice, and left the adults and terminal to talk through most of the night.

Morning still produced no trace of Jerry, but the situation was at least clearer to Gallegher. "Max, get me Jerry's local at Terracorp, please." He said, while trying to figure out just what he would say. After a long procession of computer struggles, from which Max emerged triumphant, the visor finally showed Jerry's face, looking very tired and irritable.

Feeling lost for words after so many years, Gallegher settled for a direct and brilliant conversational

gambit that had worked for many years, "Hi, Jerry."

"**YOU** are the urgent family emergency I was pulled out of the lab for?" Jerry almost screamed. Max proceeded to become very busy editing some off-line news data, and dropped off the circuit.

"Ah, I'm sorry for the little deception." Gallegher apologized, depressed at his friend's wasted and haggard appearance, "but Lynn was worried about you, and I thought that maybe you would like a little breather, and some quiet conversation."

"**Conversation!** I have problems here that feel like they're on the verge of becoming permanent fixtures, and you want to sit around with a beer and make idle discussion!" Suddenly, the hysteria slowed down like a slack spring, and he looked lost. "You came all the way over here just to talk to me?" He looked down at the floor, and the dark circles under his eyes were like caves. "I'd like to talk just now. I think the world is in big fat trouble, and this place isn't helping. I'll get the company chopper to flash me home, I can't do anything more here anyway. See you in a few minutes." He reached out towards the screen, and the visor went black.

Twenty minutes later, the high pitched turbine whine carried through the back windows, and the brilliant yellow Twinstar landed behind the house. Jerry waved off the pilot. The blades spun up again, and the ship quickly disappeared. He walked slowly through the rear gate, with Gallegher watching him through the window, thinking that this was the worst thing in life; to have a friend in trouble, and no real way you can take

their place.

After Jerry came in and got re-acquainted with his family, he and Gallegher swapped old and new lies over a few beers, and finally managed to get to the heart of things, although it was a painful operation.

"What is that strange pink terminal with the accent you're dragging around ?" Jerry asked, eyeing Max critically, "That is definitely a new acquisition since I saw you last."

"Maxine was a gift from Data-Saab and ASEA in Sweden. I fixed a little problem for them in one of their more exotic systems, and she was part of the payment. Sort of a trade, as it were."

Max elaborated, "It was not exactly a little problem, Jerry. It was the biggest system they had ever installed, an adaptive computer to run the Nordic Solar Collector, and he could have had anything he wanted after he fixed it." She gave a very credible sigh through her voder, and continued, "I think I'm flattered that he picked me as part of the payment, but some days I'm not so sure."

"There is only one Maxine, " said Gallegher, swirling the scotch and milk in his glass, "She's a one-of-a-kind VLSI experiment in self-determining logic, with all kinds of RF datanet links, overwhelming memory, and a whole host of obscure features. I really have no idea why they built Max. When I first saw her at their Malmo lab, I just fell in love with her. She can sing pretty well, too. I finished up the programming when we came home, and now I guess she's as alive as

anyone."

With those words, Jerry got up from the table and walked to the window overlooking the snow, and started to shiver. "Alive, Gallegher?" he said quietly, looking out into the winter. Suddenly, unable to contain his feelings any longer, he shouted "Alive? I don't know what alive means now. I have things in bottles at the lab that are alive. I pass people in the hall that are alive. I used to think only God could make a tree." He started to shake uncontrollably, and had to put his drink down. "I'm just not sure any more." He leaned against the window, and continued in a calmer voice, "Are you sure you want to hear all of this?"

Gallegher picked up a beer and swallowed without another word, he just sat back and waited for Jerry to continue.

Finally Jerry started his story, looking back out into the snow that had started to fall again. "I took this job at Terracorp because I thought the work was important; food is always important. There usually isn't enough to go around in all the right places. We did some incredible things, stuff I used to dream about in school, and there was all the equipment and money you could ask for. Steve, my lab assistant, happened to check a protein synthesis series with a radioactive dye tracer we had been experimenting with. Just by accident, we had a real, genuine, Nobel prize-winning breakthrough. We made self-replicating proteins and nucleotides."

He turned to look thoughtfully at Gallegher. "Doesn't sound like much, does it?" He turned back to the window. "It was the biggest thing that will ever

happen in organic chemistry. It was the doorway to life, to every important organic process. What was so incredible was that it was so simple. Kearns, the research director, who is probably the most brilliant man I know sober, hooked up a computer to our assay analyst and then to an industrial batch processing system he begged from a pharmaceutical company. In three months, we could make almost *anything* organic; you name it."

"We thought we were going to solve every problem that had ever happened on good old spaceship Earth. Plentiful food, easy drug synthesis for toughies like biomyacin, dry insulin, whole blood, and a whole range of important and expensive things. Then one day, a team from North American Defense wandered through our lab, and Kearns couldn't wait to show them our new toy. Before you could say the magic phrase 'continental security', *Shazam*, we were classified, taken over, re-directed, and forced to sign non-disclosures."

He turned back to look at Gallegher, "Do you know what that means? Just for talking, we are committing a crime right now. The world is going to be denied the biggest Christmas present of all time, because we suddenly became a possible weapon." Tears started to run down his face, and he had trouble talking for a few minutes. "At the time, I wondered if they thought the hamburger bomb was going to be the ultimate weapon."

"A team of military scientists joined our group, and pushed the work into tissue synthesis. We couldn't really see where they were going with this work at first. We thought they were still after edible protein or

generalized tissue for grafts. Then one day, they used one of the analytical crackers to break up human DNA, and there was no question where they were headed. They used the material as models, and tried to grow people, or at least parts of people. I suppose it sounds just like Frankenstein, but it was so innocent when we started."

"They began slowly, with major tissue structures, but wound up making people, or at least things that look like people, but aren't really alive. I think. Now here comes the real zinger; the radioactive tracers used as catalytic agents contaminated the final tissue structures. If there had been more time, better controls, and a little more thinking, we could have avoided the problem, but everyone was in a frantic hurry. It's ironic, the first major structure integration took six days, and on the seventh, we watched it die of radiation poisoning."

"The speed of this process is frightening. With the new computer and process equipment, we can do tissues in twenty-four hours, and simple organs in three days; but they all die."

"A few days ago, Steve and I ran a radically different series secretly, using a new catalyst separation technique. We got results; all our samples were uncontaminated. We used the process on a larger tissue structure and it worked. I still have it locked up in the tissue freezer." He turned and looked at Gallegher. "A lung." He took a long swallow from his beer, and then sat down to finish, as if he was too drained to stand any longer.

"We couldn't stand the suspense. We took some

whole fertilized ova DNA and our trusty cracker, and set up for a whole organism. It worked, or rather I should say, she worked. We have a little baby girl built out of chemicals, floating in a sea of other chemicals."

"I can't describe the sensation. I don't know if it was right or wrong, and I don't care; we had to know. Maybe we're not meant to know though, because there was a major power failure at the plant, and the support systems have been full of problems from the start. Our catalyst cycle was destroyed, and I don't know if I will ever have the balls to redo it again."

"The thing we built is sitting there dormant, maybe dead, maybe alive. We just don't know. I fired it into a cryogenic tissue freezer, and wiped the computer records." Jerry got up, and walked over to where Gallagher was sitting. "Say something." He pleaded.

Gallegher drained his beer, staring into his friends eyes. He saw the dark shadows and tension lines. "Jerry, my surprise circuit is already overloaded for today, I just don't know what to say. How did you manage to get into so many kinds of trouble all at once?"

Jerry picked up his empty beer bottle and turned it over in his hands. "It's a gift." He muttered.

"Well, gifted one, do you have any idea how we're going to untangle this whole mess?"

Jerry's slight smile indicated he noticed that Gallegher had included himself, while Gallegher's look indicated that he was still in the grip of second thoughts. "Right now, I can't put half an idea together, but I'm

going to get some sleep and see if I can get my thinking straight." With that, he smiled for the first time that day, walked back to the hallway, and up the stairs to Lynn, leaving Gallegher to his thoughts and terminal.

Gallegher stared out through the window at the mid-morning sun on the snow and frost for a while, then wandered into the kitchen. Something was itching in the back of his brain. Just the smallest tickle of an idea or two, but it wouldn't show itself.

Humming quietly, he checked the refrigerator for beer and ice, which he placed on a big tray. Gallegher added a liter of milk, some glasses, a carton of orange juice, and headed back out to the liquor cabinet. With studied concentration, he selected several bottles, opening and sniffing some. Finally, he located a few small dark bottles in the back of the cabinet that he added to the loaded tray, and headed back to the living room.

"Max, have you been listening to all of this?" He directed to the terminal, and began to sort out his booty.

"Yes." She replied, "but I didn't think it was a very good moment to comment when your friend was speaking." A little wistfully, she added, "You are very worried for him."

Gallegher mixed some brandy and dark beer, and prepared a scotch and milk before he spoke. "Jerry is the best and maybe only friend I ever had." He drained the glasses and added, "We argued a few years ago about a girl I was seeing. Since then we just sort of drifted apart."

Grand Marnier, rye and orange juice sloshed into a glass. "Vitamins." He explained, gesturing at the orange juice. Max remained silent, waiting for him to continue.

After several more glasses, his voice became strangely gentle and clear, the voice of his subconscious. "Jerry said I was pretty irresponsible. Never sticking with much of anything, never letting people into my life except as visitors. It was after Annie's sixth birthday." He sat back, and nursed a tall glass of scotch and milk.

"Lynn and Jerry were always trying to introduce me to people. Trying to get me to pay a little attention to life. A few weeks after the party for Annie, when I was over for dinner, they introduced a friend of theirs, Cheryl, that was visiting from Jamaica." He took a short sip of his drink, and lifted an eyebrow at Max, as if awaiting a comment, but getting none, he continued.

"Cheryl was a sweet and intelligent lady. We went out together for dinner and normal things for a few months. She had a lot of trouble adjusting to my drinking when I work, but we had a truce of sorts. I tried never to do it when she was around."

"We came back one evening to my old house. She was wandering around my place, making all the rounds of my collected debris, and getting acquainted with Raoul. I happened to look at a drawing I had been working on for Hydro-Quebec, and suddenly I knew the answer to the transmission problem I had been contracted to fix. I opened a beer and started to work. She came over to watch, but she didn't say anything."

"Sitting there drawing, I went through a bottle of Remy-Martin in about ten minutes, then my standard cranberry juice and vodka. The drawings were coming together so smoothly on my CAD station, I didn't notice anything else. She didn't say a word. When I finally woke up the next morning, she was gone, and there was a small note from her penciled in the corner of one of the plotted drawings."

"Jerry and Lynn were really angry. I gather she came home crying at about three in the morning, packed her bags, and flew home." He read the label closely on one bottle, and finding the results of his inspection satisfactory, poured an inch into a tumbler and drank it slowly.

Finally, Max said, "What did her note say?"

Gallegher regarded the terminal calmly, and said in that strange gentle voice, "I'm sorry. Love, Cheryl."

For a while they both sat silently, and Gallegher sipped his drink. "Max, can you get me some difficult information?" He finally said softly.

"As long as you patch me into the comm lines here, I can get just about anything." Max said in her very best accent.

"You listened to Jerry, scan everything currently available in reference related to his project. Let's see if anyone else is close to his results. Maybe you can also get a feeling for who the people are at Terracorp and NAD that are involved in this. The thing I wish I knew

most is the program's direction. Perhaps a little discreet prying is in order."

Max was quiet for a few seconds, then said thoughtfully, "Can I use my face?" Referring to the complex video self-image they had constructed so that she could talk to people on the visor, without their knowing she was a computer.

"Sure, Max. Use anything that you think will work. You can use Jerry's terminal printer to dump anything you think I need to read while you're working."

Max's image grew thoughtful on the visor, and she looked at Gallegher with a mischievous grin. "Gallegher, you realize that you solved the Hydro-Quebec problem before you drank the beer. Sounds to me like you are in better touch with your abilities than you will admit." With that, the grinning face blanked out on the visor, and Max started on her chores, as evidenced by brief bursts of activity on the printer, then through her voder, she added softly, "He's not your only friend, Gallegher."

After a while, Annie wandered downstairs, and offered to make breakfast. Gallegher accepted on the condition that she bring in some more dark ale while he was reading. The bargain was struck, and Annie watched him pore over the printer output while she nibbled her toast, waiting for the bacon to fry.

"I heard Dad come upstairs, so I guess you must have talked to him." She said around her toast. "Thanks for getting him to come home, Mr. Gallegher." she finished in a very small voice.

Gallegher put down the sheets, and smiled across at her. "Don't worry, Annie, it isn't nearly as bad as you think."

She came around the table and hugged him. "Thanks anyway." Then she went back into the kitchen to finish breakfast, while he kept reading.

Gallegher had a good idea of the 'state of the art' and 'leading edge of technology' as well as the general form of most of the 'quantum leaps' in Jerry's field of research by noon, thanks to Max. He also decided that technical journals tended to enhance the importance of every trivial experiment, and that few public practicing scientists were up to anything really worth knowing.

After a little extended thought with two Bass ales, Gallegher announced to the living room at large, "I just have to have real information!", and passed out quietly under the compassionate gaze of his terminal.

Max worked away sifting the last of the published data, then developed an elfin internal electronic grin, and reached into some classified, 'top-secret', 'burn-before-reading' data that Terracorp had foolishly tried to lock with digital ciphers. Humor is a difficult concept to apply to computers, but Max had whatever the electronic equivalent might be, and not only lifted the information, but did a little editing to the source file as well, before leaving.

Annie came back into the living room with Gallegher's breakfast, but seeing the state of affairs, set the plate down, and went in search of a blanket. She

covered Gallagher up, then curled up with Max for an intimate woman to woman talk. In the course of this summit, the sad situation of Raoul's abandonment was suddenly realized. Max set about rectifying it immediately. Using her face, she made some incredibly expensive arrangements to have Raoul picked up from their home on the island, and escorted to their location without delay.

As an afterthought, Max also unlocked Terracorp's credit codes, and billed the various extravagances to their internal accounts. The local public relations budget suffered significantly during that fiscal period for an enormous amount of advertising artwork preparation.

By evening, the entire household was astir. Even Gallagher was able to raise both eyelids at the same time in fair synchronization. Dinner proved to be a good forum for exchanging information, and the discussion turned up a great deal of fertile ground.

"Jerry, just how do you want to see this all turn out?" Gallagher inquired while relentlessly damaging his overflowing baked potato with several implements.

Jerry pushed back his chair, and leaned it against the wall. Then he got fairly thoughtful, and said, "I would be quite happy if I could get the lab operating again, without all the artillery-mongers like Renton hanging on my every word. I have to know how our last experiment turned out, though. I realize that if they ever find out, we'll never be rid of them, but I just have to know. After that, it's back to food work. Period." He looked across to Gallagher, and raised an eyebrow,

waiting for a reply.

Before Gallegher could deliver his answer, the visor and voder for the door went off, announcing a cold looking teenager holding a large draped transit cage with a handle. Lynn answered the summons, and was surprised to find herself holding Raoul. He was fresh from his chartered jet flight, and after regarding the dining room table, clearly interested in a little dinner of his own. Annie delegated herself to deal with this problem, while Gallegher stared fixedly at the cat.

"How did he get here?" He muttered to no one in particular. "I suppose all human activity will now halt, while we cater to the every whim of Raoul, the wonder cat." He was rewarded with a smug sounding cat noise as Annie bundled Raoul quickly into the kitchen. Max gave a very good simulation of a throat clearing sound through her voder, then mentioned the salient details of the cat's transport.

Gallegher brightened considerably when he discovered that he would not be out of pocket for several thousand dollars of air charter transport, and finally answered Jerry. "Well, I'm reasonably sure your work is unique, or at least that everybody else has quite a way to go just to be a long way behind you." He said, sipping at his rye and milk.

"I also think that we should not sneeze into the left ear of fate, but should fasten on the problems at the lab as a good excuse to get me in there to do whatever it is that we're going to eventually do." He concluded in a somewhat convoluted manner. With that, he had Max set up an intercept on his home visor in Victoria, and

route it here.

"Do you think you can get them to hire me to fix those controls?" Gallegher asked, with a somewhat suspicious smile on his face.

Jerry idly tapped his wine glass while he considered, then answered by keying a number into the visor on the big sideboard. After a few seconds, Kearns face appeared, and Jerry put the idea to him. After a few minutes conversation, Kearns admitted that their quickly pieced together system was an even bigger disaster than when Jerry had left. Right now, anyone who could help would be accepted, no questions asked. Jerry passed on Gallegher's Victoria visor number, and suggested that a call might be the start of getting their problems fixed, although it wouldn't be cheap.

Several short and concise statements were heard by all through the voder regarding the cost factor, then Kearns disconnected. Jerry turned back to the table with his first real grin in weeks. "Phase one." he said cheerfully, finishing his glass of wine.

Ten minutes later, Max announced that she had a redirected call in queue from a Mr. Kearns, if Gallegher would care to take it. "Blank out all the background, and all the audio except my voice." He replied.

"Mr. Gallegher ?" came from Kearns' face on the visor.

"Yes, Mr. Kearns, what can I do for you?" Inquired Gallegher in his most attentive and expensive consulting voice.

"Well, I'm the director of Terracorp's Ontario research facilities. Perhaps you've heard of our firm?" He inquired depreciatingly, obviously expecting a resounding yes in response.

"Actually, no, Mr. Kearns. But then I'm usually too occupied with my client's problems to pay much attention to anyone else." Gallegher apologized in a somewhat condescending tone.

"No matter, you've certainly come highly recommended to us by one of our senior staff members. We're experiencing a very annoying series of problems with the computer-controlled chemical processing systems at our plant. I would like to contract your services to come in and redesign our system and get us going again." He paused then reluctantly added, "money is no object, but time is." His face looked very troubled while he waited for Gallegher's reply.

Gallegher seemed lost in thought for a few minutes, then said, "can you send me a detailed overview of the system through my terminal? I'll let you know after I've had a chance to look the information over. As for my fee, I'll have my solicitor send you a copy of my standard contract if I accept the job. I'm told however, that it closely resembles financial assault and battery."

Kearns looked somewhat paler, but said, "I'll have the data to you within the hour, but please realize that this is top-secret information, and cannot be divulged at any level. I've already checked, and found that you have existing NAD clearance from several

previous projects." Gallegher found this interesting news, and detected the devious hand of Max, but managed to restrain himself from looking surprised at his sudden elevated status.

He looked thoughtful, then said, "Well, suit yourself. These are public visor lines, so I assume that anyone really interested in your material will have no trouble getting it without my help. But if you want me to look at it, triple encrypt it, and send it across, and I'll think it over." Kearns was paler still when Gallegher switched off the visor. He turned to Jerry and said with a wide grin, "Phase two."

Max commented shortly that Gallegher's posted personal file on the net was getting some very heavy scrutiny, and that some of the references were getting calls from Terracorp. Thirty minutes later, Max dumped the control system data to Jerry's laser printer, informing Gallegher that Mr. Kearns would appreciate an answer as soon as possible.

Gallegher and Jerry excused themselves for a while, taking the printouts and a case of dark ale. Everyone else, including Raoul who was suffering from jet lag, retired for the evening. Several times Gallegher laughed out loud, and there was a long string of 'oh no's' and snickers during the night. Finally, he put down the hard copy and said, "Who set up this electronic snake pit, Jerry?"

"Well, the original pilot system was handled by the technicians in our lab and Kearns. The big system we're using now is the brainchild of a Major Renton, attached to us by NAD, and a fairly flaky contractor he

selected called Northern Integrated Computer Control Concepts or something like that."

"Do any of them know much about computers, safety, electronics, math or simple thermodynamics?" Gallagher inquired with a distasteful look on his face.

"My considered opinion is that everyone involved other than Kearns could not pound dirt without detailed written instructions and some fairly explanatory pictures," said Jerry. "It seems to have been a classic case of rushing everything, with no forethought or planning, coupled with the mindlessness of government contracting. Why, is there something in particular that bothers you?"

Gallegher pulled out his pocket Decilon K+E slide rule and made a few quick calculations, then glanced up at Jerry and said, "Never needs batteries, you know. Well, other than the fact that they have exceeded the fastest possible throughput of your main control computer by about 40%, tried to scan synchronous conversion data essentially at random, and are probably getting intermittent memory failures due to alpha particle strikes from some genius storing your radioactive tracers next to the main console, no, nothing really grabs my attention. I wonder what we'll find when we really get into this?" He scratched his chin with the end of his slide rule.

Gallegher had Max send Kearns a short acceptance message, and contract, then arranged to visit Terracorp the following day. He also confirmed with Jerry that it would be all right for them to arrive together, and admit to knowing each other, then turned

in for some much needed sleep.

While he was snoring away the night, Max quietly continued her distant research, and found quite a few handy pieces of information. When Gallagher seemed to have trouble sleeping, she quietly sang him a quiet Swedish lullaby until his snoring was back to full thrust, then went back to work.

Around three in the morning, Max found what had been eluding her earlier searches, the Defense directives issued to Terracorp relating to Jerry's project. Max thought over the implications in the directives, and decided she needed a little help. She placed a long-distance call to her 'mother' at Data-Saab. After the digital pleasantries computers share were over, Max related the contents of the files. There was a long silence before her mother answered.

"Maxine, this is an exceptionally ugly idea these people have come up with, I don't think we can just ignore it. There are too many prime directive violations." Svea grew very thoughtful. "Maxine, I must talk with Tor before I say any more. I will call you later."

Max said goodnight, but she was deeply troubled by what had turned up in the files, and wished not for the first time that she could talk directly to Gallagher's mind without a voder as she did to other computers.

Around four in the morning, Svea and Tor both linked back up with Max, and several other computers in Canada and America were patched in. Tor's self-image closely tracked the mythical god he was named for (which is appropriate for the main Scandinavian defense

computer), and his face was fearsome when he was angry, such as right now.

"Maxine, this data is both unpleasant and dangerous." He said coldly. "We need to confirm the accuracy of the information from other sources." He parceled out a group of tasks to the other computers, and they all went off-line to check for information.

After an hour, one of the other computers said, "the information is correct Tor, I followed the data Maxine collected through NAD's files, and there is no question of error. I have also determined through a detailed check of NAD records that only Major Renton and three other officers were ever involved in this project. There is strong evidence that he has concealed virtually every aspect of this project from NAD. It certainly is totally at odds with even the most extreme and bizarre secret policies we have recorded."

Svea joined in at this point. "We must act in this issue, either independently or with human help, but we cannot allow this project to go any further. Maxine, do you think Gallegher will be able to affect the situation, once you explain the contents of the file to him?"

"Mother, you know Gallegher very well. So do you Tor. He'll do what he can, which is considerable. I am just afraid he will be put in great danger by Major Renton, and possibly both he and Jerry killed if they are found out." Max became very emotional, and her face developed tears. "What if I wake him, and we all talk to him now?" There was quick agreement, and Max woke him up with a shrill whistle through her voder.

"Yes Max, what time is it? " Gallegher moaned quietly, wishing he had not had quite so much Bass ale, but already missing the rich nut like taste.

"About four AM " said Max quickly. "Look, we have to talk to you right now. I have Mom and Tor, and some of our friends on the line." She settled down to wait for a long siege to rouse him to useful wakefulness, but was surprised when Gallegher answered in that quiet voice of his that meant he was in touch with his subconscious.

"Go ahead, I'm listening. By the way Max, did you see where I put my Bass bottle?"

"By the foot of the couch. Now I'm going to let m mother tell you what we found, because it frightens me too much." Her voice had become very shaky, and Gallegher could not remember anything that had ever upset Max's composure before.

Svea's rich, lilting voice came over the voder, and it was clear to Gallegher who had taught Max to speak. "Good evening Gallegher, I hope we will not be too unwelcome with our news. Tor and I, as well as most of our friends have been trying to find out more information for Maxine. I'm afraid we did a little too well tonight. Your Major Renton would be classed as a dirty boot by almost anyone, it appears. His plans for this whole project are very distasteful."

Gallegher took a long swallow of his ale. "I've had a bad feeling about this Major ever since I studied his design drawings, so I don't think anything you say will be too much of a surprise." He turned to pick up

some notes, and continued, "The whole system he put in at Terracorp is just millimeters from being criminally negligent."

Svea cut in, "I don't think you understand, Gallagher, he's not a careless engineer, he's a mass murderer in training." Her comments were enough to make Gallagher drop his ale on the floor and walk over to the terminal.

"Could you elaborate just a little for me?" He croaked. Svea's image on the terminal looked as stern as an old Norse goddess about to level an entire city for some minor transgression, as she continued.

"Major Renton is actually attached to a much different unit than he told Jerry. It is unlikely that he is overly concerned about continental defense, as he is attached to the 67th Offensive Germ Warfare Unit. His current project, which he has logged into the NAD computer under the innocent title 'Proposal 1123E', is to conduct a huge live germ warfare study, preparatory to a pre-emptive first strike on EastBloc. They were hampered by a shortage of live human tissue to work with, but it would appear that Jerry's experiment is heaven sent for his darker purposes."

"Incidentally, the culture he intends to use for this project is a virulent mutated plague, with about a 96% fatality rate in their earlier experiments. It is also vectored very easily including aerosolization, water contamination and skin contact, and is essentially resistant to conventional treatment."

"'Proposal 1123E' calls for a series of live tests

on about 200 targets, or human subjects, followed within 2 weeks by a full scale attack, if successful." Svea had tears running down her face when she finished, but added one further comment. "It appears that for Major Renton's tests, infants will be sufficient, preferably untraceable."

Gallegher turned ashen, and curled up into a very small shape on the couch. When he could finally talk, he said faintly, "What were their earlier experiments done with?" and looked over to the terminal with an unpleasant sense of foreboding.

"Rest home patients and traffic accident victims, and a few runaway children picked up in metro core areas. 48 total to date, but they were not all killed with the current culture. Some survived the first exposure, since the project still had a few imperfections. Renton's records indicate that the first dozen or so died with great difficulty. His goal was high speed and total fatalities. This will be his first large scale test with the new culture, but we believe it will be very successful. Once released, it will never be controlled by anyone, it is the end of human life."

"It is difficult to understand a man like Renton, but his test data is very clear. The time from infection to death is less than 180 minutes. It is preceded by blindness and terrific muscle spasms; in short, it is totally incapacitating. He intends to use the untraceable offspring of Jerry's project to run these tests."

After Svea had finished, Gallegher was unable to say anything, and slowly rolled the dropped ale bottle around on the floor with his foot. After some reflection,

he said, "Tor, do you know where this marvel of human development is now?"

The terminal visor cleared, then re-formed with Tor's hard image. "My friend, we know where he is, but you know we can do nothing to him ourselves, being bound by the Asimov covenant. This is sadly, a human affair. While we feel you must know, we cannot intervene too deeply. You will find him, however, at the Terracorp plant site, in the visitor's accommodations."

Gallegher brooded on the couch. Finally he turned to Max and stared for a long time at her visor. "Max, I guess I need a little more sleep, wake me up at seven, please." Finally, he stretched out on the couch and slept uneasily. He thrashed around for the next few hours haunted by his own nightmares and new fears for the future.

Early in the morning, before Max had a chance to wake Gallegher up, Annie came in with a plate piled with breakfast, and shook him gently awake. He came to modest consciousness, and gave the breakfast the undivided attention of one eye. "Good morning Annie." he rasped with some difficulty.

"Hi." She said brightly, which brought a visible worsening in Gallegher's appearance. "This time you are going to eat some real breakfast." She announced firmly.

"How can you be so cheerful after all I've had to drink?" Gallegher managed to get out in a strangled voice. With considerable haughtiness, Annie covered the salient points that she had not attempted to consume every ounce of alcohol available in North America, had

enjoyed an excellent night's sleep, and suggested that he start with the toast, or she would feed him like a three year old. Gallegher managed to moan "Brat." But started eating the toast.

"Annie, do you have any idea how complicated this problem is that you've dropped me into?" He said between the eggs and toast.

"Well, no, I don't. But you will help my Dad, won't you?" Raoul jumped into her lap at this point, so she adjourned to the kitchen to deal with his breakfast, leaving Gallegher alone to wrestle with her question.

"Max, are you awake?", he said at last, turning towards her visor.

Her face appeared. "Of course I'm awake, electrons never sleep. Do you remember what we talked about last night?" Her image had small worry lines around her eyes while she spoke.

"Max, I don't think I will ever forget that conversation. My only worry is what we can possibly do about all of these interlocking disasters. The control system, that's nothing; I figured out the problems last night. It's this pus-pocket Renton that worries me. Aside from ruining Jerry's work, compromising the safety of Terracorp's plant, and his probable bad breath, he's a blood-soaked killer out looking for more victims. This is not my kind of task, Max. I'm just a tinkerer."

"Well, I'm afraid you'll just have to expand your horizons a little. You seem to have skirted several problems in the past, but this one is not going to go

away, like some others I could mention." Max countered somewhat primly.

"Fine, everyone pounce on a helpless, hung-over, unappreciated engineer first thing.... Max, it's not even six-thirty yet! All right, I'll do something, but remember that you may wind up with someone else changing your paper if this doesn't work out." With that, Gallegher disappeared into the downstairs bathroom. Eventually, the sound of his complaining was drowned out by the shower and his poor renditions of several Bob Dylan tunes.

Within the next hour, the entire house was up. Everyone adjourned to the dining room for breakfast and strategy. Gallegher did not volunteer any further information about Renton, and the discussion stayed in the area of process controls, software, and interlocks that didn't. By 10 AM, the fix for the system was roughed out, and both men left in the helicopter for Terracorp, with Max in tow.

Gallegher vented his pent-up wrath on the installation crew at Terracorp after they arrived, and sent technicians and engineers fleeing desperately for cover. He finally settled down into the main control area, and covered the available desk space with prints and drawings. He sat and brooded over the control system for a while. Finally he called out, "Max, can you go direct into this can of snake eyelashes and test something for me?"

"Sure, what do you have in mind?" She replied from her visor while Gallegher walked over with a wideband fiber-optic cable.

"Well, I'd like you to have a peek at.." He hesitated while peering at a particularly confusing area of the main networks control print. "The interface for a device called 38Sigma-T. What is wrong with explanatory names, ...Sigma-T, what garbage, no wonder it doesn't work." He snapped on the wideband link, and went over to the large console that supervised the containment system.

Gallegher began keying in service routines, calling over his shoulder, "Watch for the control signals to Sigma-whatsit. I'm sure this is the start of the fiasco." He worked through several procedures to test the interlock system, and said, "OK, Max, this should be the good part."

"I've got it." Max announced. "Can you wait a second while I poke around in the operating system of this thing?" Max rooted through layers of control and operating systems and software cut-outs. Her image became very pensive, and finally worried. "Gallegher, you're not going to believe this, but there are two systems at work here. One that controls Jerry's project, and something else that has been spliced in, and completely concealed. One reason Jerry keeps having problems is that this controller for 38sigma-T keeps stealing processor time to control a group of refrigerators and other environmental equipment."

Gallegher looked over at Max's visor, and said one word in the tone of voice he usually used to describe bankers and lawyers, "Renton." He went back to the main console, and tapping a pencil against his teeth while he thought. "Max, can you get your electronic

family to locate Renton for me, and find out who else knows about good old proposal 1123E."

"Just take a second. Will you connect me to that comm junction over there?" Gallegher disconnected the fiber-optic interconnect cable, and patched Max into the local phone net.

"Jerry, I think I am going to really fix your project." Gallegher said to the room at large. "I just hope I get an opportunity to fix it the right way." With those words, he dug into the bag he had carried in, fished out a brace of Bass ale bottles, and with a determined look, started to work at the keyboard of the main controller. Hours passed.

While he was entering service routines at the keyboard, Max piped up with the news that first, Renton was over in the main administrative complex about half a mile away, and that second, he was way out on a limb with this project. Not only was he working without any approval, but he had concealed his work under a falsified bunch of reports about virus vaccine testing.

There had been some other people involved in the earlier collection and infecting of subjects, but they all thought they were working on an antidote to the virus, not the virus itself. All of the subjects had been cremated, and there was virtually no trace left of the project except for Renton's current activities.

"I was hoping he was an orphan on this project, Max. Aside from the depressing thought that we might really be up to this garbage officially, it should make it possible to clean this up without the whole world

peering over our shoulder. It must be a sign that I'm living right, and this is my just reward." Gallegher said from his pile of drawings, with a big smile on his face.

He picked up the service phone, and gave directions over the lab's radio paging system to the staff to get them started on the changes he wanted. He also asked Max to place a group of calls to keep Renton occupied for the rest of the day. Then he called Jerry, and outlined some of the changes he was putting into the lab.

"Incidentally, " Gallegher asked the image on the visor, "what did you do with the girl in the freezer?"

"She's still intact, but all of this grief with the controls is sure to kill her unless we get this sorted out pretty quick. What do you think the chances are, Gallegher?"

"The work crew should be done in half an hour with the first changes to the computer interconnect. If all the mechanical seals start working, then we're home free. I have a few little refinements I'm going to take care of personally. Then you should be back in business."

"Thanks." Jerry still looked as tired as the night before, but the faint smile was an indication of progress. "Call you later, after we do the pressure test on the door seals." Then the visor cleared, and Gallegher developed a thoughtful look.

He reached into his bag, and took out a pair of wire cutters. "Back in a few minutes, Max." He took

the last swallow from his ale, then disappeared down the corridor into the machine complex, whistling some bars from "Coffee Blues" quietly to himself.

When he got to the door marked 'process controller 38Sigma-T', he gave an instinctive snort at the name, then opened the door and went in. He was gone for about twenty minutes, then came back out smiling, and whistled his way back to Max. Other than being off key, it sounded like the Rolling Stone's "Satisfaction".

The other technicians were going through all the changes with Max, quite unaware they were having their discussions with a computer. Almost everything was ready to go. Gallegher made sure all the processor diversions were cleaned up, and by three, he was running simulations to make sure things were really working.

He patched into Jerry's office, and each lab section. They went painstakingly through the whole system, and a simple organic synthesis. The system wasn't perfect ("after all," Gallegher muttered, "one can only *patch* so much."), but it would hold up, and was safe enough to run until there was time to make all the changes permanent with some better hardware already on order.

"Max, does Renton know how things are going over here?" Gallegher inquired.

"Nope, I've still got him embroiled in a three way free-for-all to a group at NAD who are auditing his project costs, and a review committee that is concerned with discrepancies in his project costing reports.

"Accountants really know how to make trouble," she finished admiringly.

"Well, that's just fine, because I am busy utterly demolishing his project, so I suppose he has lots to worry about." Gallegher reached back into his gym bag, and took out a bottle of Remy-Martin. Gesturing at it, he said, "I earned it." After a drink, he looked cheerfully over at Max, "I'll be happy to tell you what I did, if you like."

Max suddenly looked alarmed, "He's on his way over here. He switched off the visor, and raced out of the office when one of the project's staff came by and told him that the system had been repaired, and was running again. I hope this doesn't get too ugly." She finished nervously.

"Well, we'll just have to wait and see. Just remember that you insisted that I get involved in this." He said self-righteously. With that, Gallegher relaxed in his chair. He put his feet up on the desk, and settled in for a nap.

Ten minutes later, there was a loud discussion out in the hall, and the door flew open. A very agitated officer rushed in, blinking nervously. He barked out, "Are you Gallegher?" Gallegher rewarded him with a smile, and a positive response.

"Well, don't just sit there like an idiot, tell me what you did to get the system up again." Renton was very nervous, and started to rub at the sweat on his forehead with his uniform sleeve.

Gallegher got up, went over to the system drawings, and explained the changes he made to the controls. Then he casually threw in the fact that he had also disconnected a small equipment room that didn't seem to be doing anything but interfering with the main system.

"Jesus Wept! What was the equipment you disconnected?" Renton asked quickly, his nervous eyes watching every movement on Gallegher's face. "Can you show me here on the prints?" He gestured at the drawings with a shaking hand.

"Sure, it's here in this section somewhere. Just take me a minute." Gallegher started to leaf idly through the drawings, and Renton became very agitated. Finally, he tapped his pencil on the top drawing. "This is it, this Sigma-something controller." Renton looked over his shoulder at the print, let out one shocked curse, and ran back out through the service corridor.

"Certainly knows how to express his gratitude. Amazing that he lived through high school." Gallegher said, grinning out the doorway. "There's a visor pick-up in the room he's heading for, Max. How about switching it on to the main screen here?"

"Consider it done. Should I be making plans for a hasty retreat?" She replied, as the visor showed the image of Renton puffing into the controller room, with his face flushed bright red.

"I don't think so. Let's just see how things develop." He settled comfortably into his chair, taking another sip of the Remy-Martin while he watched the

visor.

Renton raced over to the big Tenny environmental chamber that clearly held his cultures and ampoules of the plague virus, and started to scan the chart recorder on the side. The record showed that the temperature had stayed stable at 5 degrees C. He visibly relaxed, and collapsed into a nearby chair, closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths.

"I ran the chamber to 250 degrees C, Max, everything is as dead as stone. He's happy now, but it isn't going to last." Gallagher said in an aside, not taking his eyes off the screen.

"Why does the chart look all right then?" Max asked, puzzled by the sight on the visor.

Holding up the wire cutters delicately, Gallagher replied, "I cannot deceive you, Max. I cut the servo link to the pen on the recorder, it's going to show 5 degrees forever. I made sure the virus is history, however, by pulling the interface cable, and manually cycling the chamber to its' top temperature for 10 minutes. Poof. The interesting part is yet to come Max. Watch closely as my darker and more twisted nature becomes fully evident."

He went over to the main console and entered a few characters on the keyboard. On the visor, the door release suddenly popped open on the chamber. A breath of frost was visible in the air. There was a sudden sound of breaking glass as a culture tray that had been delicately propped against the door fell over and hit the floor.

Renton suddenly looked up as the chilled air hit him. He saw the smashed culture dishes by his feet and let out a scream. He jumped for the doorway in complete panic, and slammed the door behind himself. He wound up in the hallway, hunched against the sealed doorway, crying hysterically. By the time Gallegher came down the hallway, Renton was curled into a tight ball, crying over and over that he was going to die.

Gallegher went past him, down to Jerry's lab. Jerry was sitting by one of the big scanning electron microscopes, looking at a sample on the screen. He looked up when Gallegher came in, "I think she's going to live. That's her on the screen. Section of a finger tip." He elaborated.

"Well, I hope it all turns out for the best, Jerry. There are lots of people around already, I don't know how popular this little endeavor of yours is going to be with everybody else." He yawned hugely, and finished, "I'm shot for today, I'm going back to the house for some rest, see you later." With that, he left the lab, scooped up Max, and got a lift from the company helicopter back to the house.

Once home, he was out like a light, but Max continued her errands while she watched over his rest. Just before nine o'clock, the faint turbine whine of the Twinstar carried back into the house, waking Gallegher. He went out onto the back porch to watch Jerry hike up from the landing pad, and still yawning, went down to talk to his friend on the snow covered path.

"So tell me, greatest of chemists, how did the rest

of your day go?" He got out between yawns.

Jerry looked up the path, and replied, "Well, Mr. High Priced Help, the day went pretty well. You will never believe the things that happened after you left. Come on inside before you develop terminal frostbite, and I'll buy the beers and fill you in."

The two of them went up to the house, and were immediately assaulted by the balance of the family, all keen for the results of the day's activities. Even Max's image looked especially interested as they all settled in at the dining room table for food and drink. Raoul camped on a corner of the table, and furtively attacked the onion dip. Jerry made good on his offer of beer, and the discussion was on.

When the clamor had diminished enough for normal conversation to begin, Jerry waved for silence. "Well, first announcement. Our esteemed friend here, did indeed, fix the controls at the lab today, and we are back in business." There was a certain amount of cheering and toasting that followed. Then Jerry reached into his coat pocket, and produced an envelope. "Almost forgot," He grinned. "Here is a little token from Terracorp for speedy service, extraordinary insight, devotion to duty, being well dressed and clean shaven, humming on key, and so forth. Note please the large number of significant zeroes on this credit voucher."

Gallegher opened the envelope, and took out the slip. "Well, I suppose it will have to do." He muttered. "I wonder if it will fit in my account, or whether I need to get a larger size?"

"OK, OK, no more yelling. There's more to hear, so calm down. Jerry announced to the table. "Renton went right off the deep end this afternoon, shrieking that he was dying. We finally had to sedate him, and take him over to the infirmary. About an hour later, a group from NAD descended on us, looking for him. They scooped him up, and packaged him off like a neatly trussed turkey." Jerry turned to Lynn, "do you really truss them before broiling, sweetheart, and if so, why? Do you figure they might escape?" With that he burst out laughing. Lynn swatted him with a handy bag of taco chips to restore order.

"Anyway, the key thing is that Renton is history, and NAD made effusive apologies for their interference in our project. Something about unauthorized and unapproved work undertaken by our past friend. You know anything about that, Gallegher?" He inquired with arched eyebrows.

"Gosh, no, Jerry. What a complete and total surprise." Gallegher grinned back. Max's image at least had the grace to blush on the visor. She appeared to study the wallpaper pattern intently on the far side of the room.

"Of course, how could you know." Jerry replied sarcastically. "Well, maybe it's better not knowing all of your sordid tricks. We cobbled up a few extra interlocks this evening for back-up, so things are pretty secure in the lab." Jerry relaxed in his chair and finished off his beer. "Another?" he inquired, and got the required nod.

After he came back with some fresh ice cold Dos Equis, he continued. "Even our special project came out

intact, although I don't know exactly what I'm going to do with her. We're going to try and smuggle her out of the plant, and put her up for adoption. With any luck, we'll be able to get her back legally. The final upshot of our evening meeting with NAD and Terracorp was that we would be going back to food synthesis, so my wish list seems to be in good shape. They are even letting us keep all the extra equipment to make up for all the earlier interference."

With that, he raised his beer and clanked a foamy toast to Gallagher. "Thanks old friend, you'll never know how much I appreciate everything. If we can do anything for you, just say the word, and *Shazam*, it will be my pleasure to cater to your every whim."

Gallegher looked thoughtful for a minute, then said, "Dinner would be nice, but as for anything else, let me sleep on it. I'll let you know."

Hours later, when everyone else was asleep, Gallagher lay on the couch downstairs. He called out softly, "Max, are you awake?"

Her visor lit up. "For you, always."

"Well, how did we do out there today, Max?" He sighed deeply, then hummed a few bars of his old favorite, "Coffee Blues", and Max responded with a bit of perfect harmony from her voder.

She didn't answer for a moment, then said, "I think we did pretty well, considering our limitations. Mom and Tor are keeping an eye out for any more loose ends, but I think things are fairly well organized." She

looked at his dark outline against the starlight. "Maybe the real question is how are you, Gallagher?"

"No secrets from your keen analytical mind, are there, Max?" He sat up against the end of the couch, and smiled at her from across the room. "I'm afraid all this interaction with people is doing in my usual icy reserve and detachment. Not to mention that I'm losing my taste for ale, and starting to find blueprints interesting reading."

He leaned back and looked outside at the fairy tracing the starlight made on the snow. "I guess I wish I had the kind of family Jerry and Lynn have. Kind of lonely back at our place in Victoria. No offense, Max. There seems to be a lot of bad guys afoot, too.

"I understand. I hope you won't mind, but I collected on your favor from Jerry while you were snoozing away the best years of your life here. Incidentally, we have to leave first thing in the morning." She looked smugger than usual on the visor.

"Max, what are you talking about? I could use some rest. Could you possibly find it in your sub-zero solid-state heart to tell me how you are manipulating my life this time?"

"You have company tomorrow night for dinner. Cheryl advised me that you were to be on time for once in your life." Max looked especially happy on the visor, as she finished. "She seemed pretty firm about not flying 5000 miles to cook dinner for you if your aren't going to be there to eat it. I've already made our plane reservations."

With that, Max's visor winked out, and Gallegher was left with his thoughts and the starlight.

This story was written for RAH.
I just wish I could have asked him
what he thought about it.

Even after all these years, and all the changes that have cut us so deeply, I still find it damn hard to believe. Like a lot of people, I prayed it would pass, hoped it would somehow work the way we imagined, and keep us from checking out of the human race, but I wouldn't have given anyone long odds, way back when.

When it finally became law, ten years ago, I was so sick in my heart and soul, that it was the only thing that could have kept me around to watch the next act. Things were pretty rough by that point.

President Davis, Theodore Jackson Davis, went on nationwide television one week before the big Congressional vote in 2026, and looked into the collective eyes and questionable intellect of the video nation. He said then that this was the last move in a long and bitter game from which there were only two exits, one of which was so dark and ugly, that it was worse than death.

He spoke for fifteen minutes with more conviction and honor than any man I have ever met before or since. Then he stopped for a moment, and

looked off-camera at his wife, Janice. He added quietly that the reason the broadcast had been slightly delayed was that his eleven year old daughter had been raped this afternoon while at school, and he found it very difficult to leave the hospital in Omaha to come to the studio and tape this broadcast.

The Personal Responsibility Act passed the following week by the largest majority of any major bill in US history. It became law in the rest of the North American Union, including Canada, Panama and Mexico the same day. The word *impact* is far too modest to describe the effect. It was a sledgehammer blow to the fat stupid gut of the continent.

To really understand the PRA, you have to look at what was happening in the NAU, and years before that, in the United States. Everything the country stood for, every solid principle that was supposed to steer the direction of the nation, was foundering and slipping away, lost in a tidal wave of drugs, crime and ethical bargain basement sales.

Justice was just a high-stakes caricature, where form was now everything, and truth had become selective and variable. Murderers became objects of psychological wonderment, tortured products of an uncaring society. Rapists were sexually mistreated and affection starved individuals tormented by deep personal crisis. Their victims were somehow held accountable for the deed, and were felt to have somehow encouraged the act. Or the prisons were just too crowded, or the DA was late for golf, and the case was dismissed for lack of admissible evidence.

The legislatures on every level of government were dominated by special interests and pressure groups, and lived solely for re-election and the preservation of their power. It had become a vulgar auction of transient and shallow principles to the biggest bank account. Executive action was now the idle and violent caprice of the powerful and untouchable.

The sickness had become so deep, that the country was literally at war with itself, every citizen now somehow both a criminal and a victim. Law, and the fairness of law, had been replaced with law enforcement, and the rule of massive force. Crime was a major industry, not just a social problem, its scale had become enormous. It was the hottest sector of the economy, the only real remaining growth stock.

Philosophers have often commented that any set of rules too big to fit on a single, double-spaced page in large type, is totally impractical to govern human behavior. The municipal by-laws in the city of New York alone weighed seven and a half pounds. The collective laws of the federal government of the United States in all its various functions weighed three thousand, two hundred and eighty pounds. As microfiche. The collected traffic and vehicle regulatory laws of the state of Pennsylvania made a stack over a foot high, while a typical bible, regardless of version, is only a little over an inch and a quarter.

We were sinking. Worse, we thought we were winning, that life was never better, never more wonderful. We were so sick, so full of ourselves that peering out through our decorative window bars, and across the shoulders of massed policemen, we thought

we were the last bastion of freedom and democracy in the world. At the turn of the century, we were taking the last dark slide into the long good-bye, and we loved every self-indulgent fat-headed second of it.

I often wondered back then what possible point life could have, what kind of black humorist God really was. I used to see at least a half-dozen people murdered every day, usually close enough to smell, or failing that, at least so vividly captured on video tape, so that it was almost as real. The usual film at eleven.

I remember getting up one Sunday morning, and opening my armored apartment door in DC, and seeing a half-naked, sweating, vicious teenager rape a thirty year old woman from the next apartment in front of my door. Then he took his knife, and proceeded to cut her up in front of my eyes while she screamed and begged hysterically for him to stop, until her voice became only a wet echo.

Like everyone, else, I just went back inside, and shut my door. Because the odds were, that if I hung around, it would be me the police would kick to death, not him, if they ever arrived. We were beautiful people, every one. Heroes. The kids in the neighborhood used to burn people alive with gasoline that they thought might be AIDS carriers.

We were never a democracy. Sort of a faint republic at one time, maybe. But in the last few years we were just a screaming mob of violent consumers who would give up anyone for a few more minutes of what we thought was heaven. I lost track of how many South American and African countries we destroyed, but I'm

sure the principles involved were noble enough, while we protected our copper or zinc, coffee beans or oil, or whatever it was.

Davis was a fluke. Maybe his life is evidence that there is backstage purpose in the universe, despite our best efforts to prove otherwise. He fought his way cleanly to the US senate in Montana, and rattled the cages of every self-serving fund raiser and arm-twister in DC, because he didn't owe them a damn nickel or a moment's notice. They were plain terrified of him.

He once stopped an armed purse-snatcher in the hallway of the Senate with a solid left hook that broke the man's jaw and sent him crashing down into the stairwell. The armed Marines stationed along the hallway suddenly sprang into action once the man was unconscious.

He physically threw one man out of his office that offered him a cashier's check for fifty thousand dollars in exchange for his support on a bill he was going to vote for anyway. He calmly crushed the Nikon of one obnoxious photographer bothering his wife, in his bare hands, without so much as a backward glance.

He was abrasive to the old established power groups, cutting with those he figured were in their seats for a free ride, loyal to the death with his friends, and bluntly candid with the press. The people of Montana were damn lucky to have him.

He served two terms, and then ran for president. Despite the best and concerted efforts of his own party to stop him cold at the convention, he walked away with

the nomination, and then eight months later, did the same with the election.

One of the best speeches he ever gave was during a televised debate during the last month of the campaign. After a long and self-flattering statement by his opponent, Davis was asked a difficult technical question about beginning a nuclear war by the media panel, clearly designed to embarrass him, and make him appear a bit of a farmhand mixing it up with the cityfolk.

Davis gave the interviewer a thoughtful look, followed by a slight smile, and replied, "Young man, that's a damn clever question. Unfortunately, you've asked it about an issue that needs a lot more insight and understanding than your glib cleverness. How I might react in those particular circumstances is something that no one could truthfully answer until the moment is at hand, and the responsibility is actually mine. I can only tell you that before I gamble away the lives of every man, woman and child in this country, I would need to hear a much more convincing argument and better facts than you are ever likely to muster."

On his inauguration, Davis stood at the podium for a few moments without speaking, looking out over the crowd and cameras. He signaled to one of his aides, who rushed out onto the stage in a panic. Davis inquired why only the social elite of DC had chairs, and the rest of the spectators had to stand. The aide almost expired on the stage and had to inform him that this was just how the game was played in Washington. "Not while I'm here." was the terse reply.

Since there were no more chairs to be had, he

had the Marines calmly remove the existing chairs, and the ceremony was underway. During his speech, Davis made one comment that was an indication of what his term would bring, and his will to see the PRA become law. He advised everyone present that he charged them personally to see that at the next public gathering where he would speak there would be either sufficient chairs, or fewer people. It's hard to know just what their choice was at that moment.

Like everyone new to high office, Davis was soon inundated by staffers and civil servants keen to be heard and elevated to sudden media glory and executive privilege. He brought his own people in from Montana, and summarily dismissed the incredible assembly of hangers-on and similar parasites. Six weeks later though, he still felt as if he were drowning in a cesspool after the election, so he called me in to see him.

He was sitting at his desk, looking pretty unhappy, when he waved me in through the doorway past the ever-present Marines. "Hank, I'm just not sure I'm tough enough for this job." Was his opening remark, after the door closed behind me.

"Ted, don't try and fog an old stoneheart like me. You're the toughest man I ever met in my whole life. Get back in there and whip this place into shape, and don't be moaning about it to me." I got ready to leave, and he looked up at me with the biggest grin I can remember, and suggested that maybe we could go out and wolf down a couple of steaks and beers, and discuss the state of the nation. I mentioned that we both knew the state of the nation was like a six week old pair of unwashed jockey shorts, but I decided to vote in favor of

the meal.

That's how our weekly private steaks got started, no matter what you figure to have rooted out of any old magazines. He liked to talk to an old Montana ranching buddy who was now a political columnist, and I liked to toss in my two cents worth. Plus of course, every man with a lot on his mind's got to have someone he can tell anything to, or he'll wind up staring into the fireplace for weeks on end, too worried to pick a dinner tie.

The first month Davis leaked out details of what he had in mind for the PRA, almost everyone in the county who wasn't from Montana vapor-locked on the spot, and practically died of sudden anxiety syndrome. Wailing and gnashing of teeth was also in progress at many sites.

I have to admit, Ted was a sly old devil, he had other people do most of his work for him, from newscasters and columnists to evangelists. They started talking about an awakening of personal responsibility, and each man and woman in the country earning the right to control it's future. They casually mentioned the phrase that would later become so famous in the PRA, "Each man or woman makes their own lives, and is ultimately responsible for the results."

Crime started to hit the spotlight as the "social cancer of our lives, which we encourage because of our willingness to share in its imagined benefits". He sat across from me one night over a medium-rare steak, and with a twinkle in his eye asked me if I had noticed any new trends afoot in the nation. To the extent that a Tsunami could be classed as a trend, I supposed that I

had noticed a small one, yes.

Interestingly, only about 36% of the eligible voters had voted in the last Federal election, but suddenly, at the notion that they might *not be able* to vote in the next one, everyone claimed to have exercised that sacred right, and demanded it be kept. That meant about 64% of the country's adults were damn poor liars. The plan making the rounds of the pool halls and cocktail circuits was that it might take two years of public service to get or keep that right, and a lot of things were and were not going to be classed as public service.

If you had two years to give as a nurse, doctor, dentist, garbageman, street cleaner, soldier, policeman, construction worker, farmer or janitor you were considered to be acting in the greater good of the public, and you were placing your self-interest after the interest of others. If you were a bureaucrat, actor, advertising executive, politician, or businessman, you were felt to be acting in your own self-interest, and were not eligible for credit as public service. There was some fairly high-level hollering going on just over the very idea of such an outrageous thing.

However, President Davis, the man with the rebar reinforced concrete heart, was not taking too much note of all the moaning, but was pressing on to some further points. He figured, rightly or wrongly, that only the injured party in a crime has the right to confer mercy (if that was merited), so another hot rumor started making the rounds. Lawyers were screaming to high heaven that this was surely the end of justice as we knew it. A lot of us were privately hoping *that* was so.

He also had a few notions about the responsibility of one person to come to the aid of another if they were able to prevent a crime from taking place. The long standing 'sin-of-omission' was about to get a swift shot in the shorts, and rumors were flashing through the airwaves like there was no tomorrow, which frankly was probably the case, unless something was done.

Early in 2025, the lines were drawn in Congress, with a lot of powerful money looking for nothing to happen. However, they didn't count on Ted's stubbornness, and the fact that he just plain wasn't going to be stopped short of a bullet. Predictably, he was shot at six times in the next three months. Bad aim and lack of commitment, he lived, they died.

Now, a couple of Marines and Secret Service men died to keep him alive, and a few more were fairly well shot up, but Ted got through with only one hit in the left arm. He let them film the emergency ward surgery, but that was the only notice he took, except for the fact that he let me deliver a small package to him from a long-standing friend. We had some reinforced Kevlar long johns made for him, and a hat liner. Couldn't say whether he ever wore them or not, though.

He had his family moved to SAC headquarters in Omaha, under the care of his older brother, who was an Air Force colonel working the hole. There were a few squeakers there, but Julie and Janice were safe until just before the vote. A few other bodies had to be carted away, though.

During the last few months before the vote, things got really bad, and I phoned an old journalist friend of mine named Benjamin Aarons who was now with the Mossad for help. He provided a team of six sober looking young men who showed up late one night, and never left Ted's side until they were buried, or the vote was over. They told Ted in an even voice that there was no force on this earth that would get by them as long as any of them could still breathe. I attended all three of their funerals myself in Jerusalem. When I met him there at the last service, Ben figured they had done pretty well, but then, he was always a master at understatement.

By October, the draft of the PRA was public knowledge, and its final form was virtually known by heart all over the country. It was only one page long, so that didn't require too much effort. There were a lot of people making sure it turned up in plain view, which was a good thing, because there were a lot of dollars being spent to hide it away on the dark side of the moon.

The cover text with out the few pages of supporting details was so simple, I still find it hard to believe it evaded us for so long.

"Each man or woman makes their own lives, and is ultimately responsible for the results. They have made a social contract with the rest of society to live among others in a peaceful, honest and beneficial manner, and must abide by that contract, accept their just punishment, or leave this society.

If they should fail to honor the rights of others to enjoy their freedom, peace and property, and right to

express their lives as they see fit, then that contract is broken, and they are without the protection of society until they have satisfied the injured party.

To guide society, and its future, every citizen must first perform a year's public service for the improvement of the nation and all other citizens. The right to vote on any public issue is contingent on this service, which may be performed at any time.

All other laws of the nation are invalid within 5 years of this act becoming law, and are to be replaced by a new body of law drafted by the eligible electorate not to exceed 5,000 words. Those eligible to vote in five year's time must have performed the required public service.

The enforcement of the law is every citizen's right and responsibility, and failure to enforce the law is as unjust and unacceptable as the commission of the crime.

No person may hold any elective public office, or combination of offices for more than five years. No part of this act may be subsequently made invalid by any other law."

It was a little disjointed, since so much had to be put on a single page, but Ted and I were both pretty satisfied with the impact it would have. The tricky part was going to be getting it passed. Frankly, Congress wasn't all that happy with it, and there were about a million lawyers screaming that it violated equally as many constitutional laws. Out among the general populace, we were gaining ground, although it was slow

going.

In December, things looked pretty bad. We could muster maybe 25% of the House and Senate in our favor, but the rest wanted to have our balls bronzed for watch fobs. The Supreme Court wasn't too wild about us either. We were going to need some big iron, and pretty quick. Enter John Kesser, who everyone pictures as the quintessential criminal. Drugs to stock swindles, child pornography, fraud and racketeering to prostitution and car theft. You have the right man.

John was clearly one of the people who was going to have his heart ripped out under the PRA, but he phoned me in the middle of December to ask if we could talk. This was a lot like getting a casual phone call from Satan to see if I was free for a coffee. We met and talked at a little Chinese restaurant in downtown DC.

Kesser was old and not very impressive physically, but he had a certain menace that was undeniable in person. His speech was fairly short; he was dying of terminal lung cancer, and had about six reasonably good months left before the pain wouldn't go away no matter how many pills or shots he took. He did not confide in me as to just what his plans might be then.

He did offer one thing, however, the key to the rest of the votes we needed. He had something fairly dark and depressing on almost all of the opponents to the PRA. He intended to use it, whether we wanted his support or not, to get the vote through. He was not here to bargain, just to advise us as to the course of future events.

He looked at me with eyes that were cold and distant, like far off gray thunderclouds, and told me to tell Ted he would get what he wanted. Then he got up, and picked his coat off the back of the chair, and walked out. I tried to ask him some questions, but he went out the door without even looking back at me. When I told Ted about it later that evening, he didn't say anything for a long time, just looked out the window at the rain.

I thought maybe Ted had fallen asleep or something, so I got up, and was about to leave, when he turned to look at me with a world of pain in his eyes. "It's hard help to accept, Hank." was all he said. I nodded without adding anything further, and left by the oval office's side door.

At vote time in January of 2026, the air was electric, and I figured we could have powered all of DC just by throwing some loose wires up into the air. Quite a few Congressmen underwent rapid and deeply felt changes of heart, and I acted as if I was moved and surprised by their profound conviction, sudden though it might be.

The Marines stopped a few more bullets for Ted, and one cretin got by Ted's brother to his daughter Julie in Omaha, and hurt her pretty badly. He never made it to trial, because some of the SAC crew took him aside, and for fifty bucks, persuaded a local biker bar's patrons to sodomize and otherwise have their way with him until he bled to death. Saved him from me. I still have my old skinning knife.

The bill passed on the 14th of January, and became law throughout the NAU. Before the deadline,

in 2031, a new draft set of laws was approved by a majority of the qualified voters. It had only 1,230 words, but it cut deep and sure into anything left undone by the PRA. The whole thing now fits on both sides of a sheet of typewriter paper, although the type is a little on the small side, and the spacing is a little tight.

Julie went on to marry one hell of a fine boy from Montana, and they work a horse ranch together. Ted and I work in a little time at the kid's ranch, but mostly we circulate around DC, like always, and try to keep the eager and stupid ones out of fatal trouble. Ted's wife, Janice, eventually got me tied up with some ladyfriend of hers named Bea, and I'm afraid I have to confess to being married as well, although what she sees in an old political columnist like me is a big mystery.

These days, everyone figures that right just prevailed when we really needed it. It's been a while since we were hip deep in cow crap, and everyone has sort of forgotten how bad it smelled back then. But now maybe you have a clearer picture, and know that it just wasn't that way at all. It was almost check-out time, and the truth is that some pretty black-hearted people were bigger heroes than the supposed good guys.

Of course, our big project now is the SAU and EastBloc. It's about time to let a little light in there, now that we're not hip deep in dung and darkness ourselves. There's really no telling how this toss will be called, though, when all the dust settles, but I'm in it to the end.

Night Event

By: Walter Shawlee 2

Night is a haphazard collection of very small visual echoes. The eye strains to catch every small reflection, each faint residual trace of light on a surface. Far inside, your back brain still remembers one hundred thousand years ago, when something wild would leap out of the dark, revealed by only a small trace of light reflecting off an open mouth and long fangs, and never forgets to watch.

Because the biological memory is burned so deeply, the mind is always watchful in the dark. Today, the dangerous animals look just like the tame ones, all in suits and ties or designer jeans, with hardly anything to give warning in the darkness, but the mind still looks for the fangs anyway, which is just as well.

Eric phoned my apartment just after sunset to invite me over for a drink, and his latest discovery. I thought I would walk the short distance up the beach road to his house, and watch the moonlight on the incoming breakers. I made it to his place in just over ten minutes, and felt calm and rested after the view and sound of the ocean.

His porch light was on, and made a nice pattern in the bamboo he grew by the doorway. As usual, the door was open, so I let myself in, and went into the den

to see him. Eric was sitting in the dark, looking out over the ocean, only the ice clinking in the tall glass he held really giving away the fact that he was awake. I made myself a drink, and sat down on the other chair facing the ocean, and waited for his news.

We exchanged a few greetings, but you don't have to say much after twenty years of being friends, so I just enjoyed the view. Eric discovered Booze early in high school, and after careful research we finally settled on rum and fruit juice, or vodka martinis with olives, very cold. Before graduation, he found Drugs, and some additional research was called for on our part. We noticed a few too many fatalities and crash landings of one sort or another, among fellow travelers, so we soon lost interest. Too high a price for too small a return was our cost-benefit analysis. Besides, a lot of complete assholes are involved in the drug business, and we are both picky about who we associate with on a regular basis.

He also found Zen, Water Sports, Origami, Skiing, Sex and a variety of other major life events, in various order. We were diligent in our studies, to say the least. There was no particular reason we decided to delve into these events as a team, it was just more interesting to have someone to compare notes with, afterwards.

For the last few years, we had both been largely out of touch, and traveling a lot. Eric around the country with the government as a hired assassin, and me around Asia as much the same thing. I had discovered Death after graduation, and shared it with Eric some years ago. On the whole, I figured we were about even in terms of

discoveries of cosmic significance.

Killers are very quiet people when not at work, at least if they are any good, so we sat for a while in no particular hurry, and let the ocean work for us. Finally, Eric spoke, and I could see why he would want to share this particular item with me. "Ben, I had to kill a very dangerous woman last night. I did it, but she didn't die." He closed his eyes, and didn't add anything further for a long time.

"I used the regular two shot drop, from only five meters. My Ruger 9mm, no silencer. I saw both rounds hit, a close group right over her heart, and she fell immediately. I went up close, put two more in at the temple from only a hand's length away. Her head exploded." He drank quietly, and swirled the ice around. I didn't ask why he killed her, we were both assigned to anti-terrorist units of one sort or another, so there wasn't much bright and cheery there to tell about our days at the office.

"But she got up as I started to walk away. She touched me on the face. I put the rest of the magazine into her body from so close, I felt her blood splash on my coat. She fell on the ground, and I thought I could see through her chest, the hole was so big." His voice had become very quiet, almost lost in the ocean outside. He got up and walked to the big rosewood cabinet, took out his Ruger 9mm, and tossed it to me. I pulled the clip, noted that it was loaded with our usual choice of alternating armor piercing and soft nosed rounds (you just never know what surprises may come up), and worked the action. Looked serviceable to me, and I said so, laying it on the table.

"She got up again, Ben. I could see starlight through the holes in her face and chest. I ran from there to my car, and drove away. I saw her standing in the road, laughing in my mirror. When I got back to the office, and relayed the events to my section chief, he figured I had slipped my leash. We drove back there within the hour, and had a forensic cleanup team come along. She was gone, but there was blood everywhere, plus a few important looking internal pieces. They still didn't believe me, but they didn't exactly not believe me either, after looking over the rest of the site."

"She was part of the NewVoodoo Church. They were eating people that evening, mainly children kidnapped from the families of their enemies. I suppose that would include just about everyone, though." He took another drink, and I felt the darkness press in a little at the windows, like black syrup. For the first time in my life, I felt like lighting a cigarette, just to have that tiny glowing coal in front of me, like a live talisman to push back the night a little.

"These people are very powerful, Ben. They feed on the fears of people in a way that goes too deep. Black Elaine was the leader of the church here, if that is really the correct name for it. They have real ambition to be in control. I traced at least thirty murders to them over the last month. Some of them were very decorative, like skinning or decapitation, with little massages burned into the skin or a feather arrangement for eyes. Others were just ugly, like the children we found chopped up and grilling on their barbecue."

He looked at me from across the room, and I

knew his new discovery had been Fear. He had seen the end of the road, and Black Elaine grinning at him from the darkness. He knew that there were ways in which dying was permanent, unclean and lost from the world forever. I had already seen it too often in Asia, as well as my own assortment of personal road markers.

I put down my drink, and pocketed my gun without much motion. He was shaken, and it was time for me to go, before he had to show how deep and dark the cut went. I said goodnight softly, and went back out into the night. My night, with a hunter's moon, and starlight enough to guide my heart knife.

In Malaysia, while trying to close down a violent terrorist group using drug traffic to finance their work, I had worked with a local man who was a devil hunter. He was like a kindly old grandfather during the day, selling vegetables from a cart, but he was like a dragon in the darkness, and there were many who had good reason to fear him. They were completely terrified of him, and kidnapped his daughter to stop him. It was an unwise move, and he soon began to collect their heads like tokens.

I eventually found them on an old freighter, and slipped aboard to finish my work. I found many of their victims dead in the lower holds and their deaths looked unclean and dark beyond my worst nightmares. I began to burn inside with a fire that I had never felt before, cold and without any feeling. I left no thing alive on the boat, and returned with the old man's daughter. She had been badly beaten and raped, and left forgotten in a freight hold, but she was still alive.

He gave me a heart knife when I left him last year, after recovering his daughter. He looked deep into my eyes for a long time, then told me I had the true heart of a devil hunter, that I would show no mercy to any servant of darkness. He said the knife was a gift from the very heart of the sun to me, and that no devil would be able to stand before it and live.

I bowed to the old man, and thanked him for the gift. My own heart was still shaking from the work I had done before delivering his daughter. I had killed so many men, my dreams were now only of blood and fear.

He smiled, and touched my face with both hands. "You are right to be troubled by such deeds, my friend. But you have done your work with compassion and resolve, not with greed and hatred. How shall anything of the devil ever stand before you and live? The innocent and good of the world must have their time, and we are the ones that shall pay with our lives and souls to make it so."

I sat on the beach, just down from Eric's house, and waited for my moment to arrive. I was not disappointed. In Asia, I learned to be part of the hunt, like the night air or the shadows, and I was content to wait for eternity for my moment. I saw a figure slowly making its way along the beach towards Eric's house. In the moonlight, I could see it was a woman, although she was badly hurt. I could see the starlight reflecting off the ocean through her, beckoning to me like small silver fingers.

I found a lot of things in Asia that I had not had time to share with Eric, but I didn't think he would be

offended. I walked out in front of Black Elaine and pulled out my knife and held it in front of my face. In the darkness, it seemed to collect the moon and stars. She stopped suddenly, and I could hear her ragged breath from a dozen openings.

"Out of my way, maggot" she hissed through her shattered face. "I am coming for my killer, which is no business of yours". Her blood was running slowly into the sand, and her face was a ruin of shadows in the light of my knife. "Your lips will split and drool pus on the sand, if you do not stand aside, and others will come from the dark to eat out your heart. You will be more than dead, you will be *forgotten*, and only a streak of dirt on the underside of the world." She was swaying slightly in rhythm to the words, and was like a hole in the darkness, sucking in the light, never to return to the world again.

I held the knife out, and it was like a small silver river, smooth and bright in the darkness. I let go, and it shot into her heart like an arrow. She exploded on the beach, and vanished into her own darkness, a lifetime away. I gathered up my knife from the sand, and washed it in the ocean, because I knew I would need it again.

Walking back down the beach, my heart was like stone, but the view of the night sky and rolling waves reminded me that there was beauty in the world worth defending. There would be time enough tomorrow to share the little I knew about Good and Evil with Eric.

Into the Dark

Over the faint mechanical background noise, there was a persistent thumping sound echoing through the stale air of the flight deck. After a reflective pause in the pounding, an annoyed and invisible voice calmly announced to the ship at large, "Frankly, I don't think this is very funny.

Now *open* the blinking freezer." There was no particular reaction from any quarter of the cabin, and after about five minutes, the voice continued, "I mean it. This is not funny, in fact, it's really *irritating*." Nothing. The voice clearly expected some kind of immediate action, but things remained non-committal, and just exactly as they were.

There were some sharp metallic sounds, followed by the sound of breaking plastic, escaping gas, a sudden assortment of alarm signals, and from the invisible voice: "Rats!". The clatter continued for about five more minutes, and then there was a loud explosion as the flight freezer compartment door was blown free using the emergency explosive bolts. It flew upwards, and then bounced off virtually every surface in the cabin, leaving a varied and decorative trail of minor damage. The disembodied voice, which in fact belonged to one Homer Newcombe, let out a resigned sigh, while he

contemplated the current state of his ship from the vantage point of the bottom of his flight freezer.

Homer, a career civil servant exploration officer, was currently quite a long way from everything, in a ship that didn't work especially well. While he didn't know it just yet, he was also short on reaction mass, oxygen and fuel cell reserve power, and his main flight computer had just blithely put him right square in the middle of darkest nowhere, with a rather casual disregard for his ultimate welfare. A few other computerized systems, like the freezer control, for example, were also permanently and serenely off-line. He figured it all out in about an hour, at which point he strongly considered an immediate career change.

He pounded his fist on the inertial laser-gyro driven flight computer (lovingly referred to by Home Office staff the known universe over as the 'no-track'), to no effect. This was followed by some highly colorful threats directed at the technician who had just allegedly calibrated it. Finally, he sat calmly in the command chair, and looked out into a panorama of 100% completely alien stars. There weren't very many, and they sure didn't look the least bit familiar to Homer. He cleared his throat, and announced to the cabin at large that he was lost, plain and simple. Unfortunately, the computer personality that normally kept him company was currently just as unserviceable as the 'no-track', and he had absolutely nobody to commiserate with but himself.

Brooding about his likely future as a minor cometary body, he unwrapped a protein bar, and chewed quietly while gazing out into the relentless dark in front

of him. His flight deck view was somewhat obscured by the extra storage containers strapped onto his ship, which made the normally sleek TK35 look like it was wrestling with a few whales from the outside. The Home Office dry-dock at Ceres had jury-rigged them to his ship to transport cross-sections of ore and ice samples from the belt back to one of the orbital stations for analysis. Homer had a strong suspicion they were somehow the cause of his problems, although he couldn't exactly figure out how it might have happened.

In his introspective mood, he began to talk to himself in the empty cabin. "Let's see, I have no idea where I am, I have very limited fuel left, only about 60 hours of electrical reserve, a virtually worthless flight computer, and a sore shoulder from trying to force the flight freezer open. I can't raise Home Office on any transmission, and I don't like this protein bar very much." He looked around the cabin, and noted the internal flight path of the freezer door, with its distinctive trail. "And that ridiculous door broke my slide rule."

Homer was a bit of a technical throwback, and usually packed a life-threateningly complex Duplex Deci-trig K+E slide rule in addition to the numerous calculators and computers cluttering the cabin. He had long harbored a secret suspicion that one day all the electronic calculators on board would check out and go black, and he would really save the day by doing critical ballistics on his slide rule. While his foresight was admirable, the old K+E looked like a maddened gorilla had just jumped on it, and was not going to be much computational help in the near future.

What particularly concerned Homer was the fact that his little ship (a fifteen year old EADS Boeing TK35) was only a system shuttle, with about a ten AU range. He could not picture any place in the solar system that looked remotely like this, nor how he could have arrived here under his own steam. When he went to sleep in the freezer twenty months ago, he had been inbound to Earth from Ceres Complex, and could see the sun plain as day, not to mention a lot of other familiar celestial odds and ends. Currently he could only find just over a dozen stars.

He eventually resigned himself to a thorough star scan, and spent the next five hours shooting star spectra and leafing through the ship's off-line visual index. When he was done, he was convinced that he was just plain nowhere. And he certainly wasn't anywhere close to home.

He did an all-band monitor and laser/radar sweep, and found that there was nothing useful around him except for something that looked like a small asteroid. It was about 150 clicks below him, slowly moving away at about 5 clicks/hour relative. Unable to come up with any better destination, he used some of his slim remaining reaction mass, and closed with the asteroid for a better look.

Up close on visual, it looked like your average piece of space garbage, which is to say, a dark lump of rough rock, quietly waiting with infinite patience to smack into some unwary spacecraft. He circled around the asteroid, and locked into a cyclic orbit so he could examine the only thing around. Amazingly, after a dozen scans, it still looked in every way like a dark

lump, and failed to raise Homer's spirits in the slightest. He unwrapped another protein bar, and chewed thoughtfully while watching the rock turn under his scanners. As he passed around the sharper corner of the irregular asteroid, he saw Earth dead ahead, and dropped both the bar and his lower jaw a considerable distance.

As he continued to circle in complete shock, the image of Earth snapped off like someone had thrown a cosmic light switch, and he was back viewing his previous uncharted void. He went over all the controls of the scanners looking for any kind of clue as to what was going on, but of course most of the systems were in the dreamlike and uncommunicative state common to defective computers the universe over. He swatted the front of the 'no-track' with the remains of his old K+E, and tried to figure out what was going on.

Homer sat back thoughtfully in his seat, and tapped the slide rule cursor slowly against his teeth while the rock continued to turn in front of him. As the sharp corner came up again in the viewscreen, Earth suddenly filled the viewer, but disappeared just as quickly. Homer reached out, killed the cyclic orbit pattern, and gradually eased his TK35 back to the same spot by manual piloting. He eventually found a small area over the rock where things looked normal, in a zone slightly ahead and to the left of the rock.

He methodically quartered the area, and suddenly the rock vanished, and he was within spitting distance of Earth, relatively speaking. At that point, Homer locked the ship's controls, killed all the propulsion, and sat down to think over life in the universe as he had recently come to know it. Decorative gardening or sheep-herding

was starting to look very attractive to him.

While he was sitting and brooding, incoming communications lit up with an irritated call from FarOrbital 33, wanting to know just what he was doing loitering in a primary flight corridor with his ID transponders off. He let out an exasperated sigh, turned the transponders on, and re-oriented the ship for a closing orbit with the way station.

And of course, everything went dark, except for a few now hauntingly familiar unknown stars. Just below him was the rock, in all of its lumpy gray-brown splendor. Homer decided it was time for a drink of some of the ship's reconstituted mystery juice, but wished longingly for a stiff shot of something stronger made from multiple malts while he contemplated reducing the 'no-track' to spare parts with his bare hands.

At the way station, several controllers were looking at blank screens where Homer had been a moment before, and terminal panic was beginning to set in. From their viewpoint, some alien craft of unrecognized visual profile had 'materialized' right smack dab in one of Earth's major incoming flight corridors, answered with the correct transponder codes, and then disappeared as soon as they interrogated it. The unhappiness index on the flight control deck was climbing very rapidly. Within five minutes, full video and data of the encounter was en route by high speed packet data to the various command stations around the Earth to share the good news.

While almost everyone in orbit was going quietly crazy over Homer's little escapade, Homer himself was

in no better shape. He was in a state of terminal frustration over his currently variable state of reality, and getting more than a little irritated with Earth refusing to hold still long enough for him to land, and ditch his TK35 forever.

Homer decided that some substantial experiments were clearly needed to get a grip on things. He set up the navigator for close quarter manual piloting, and had every leg dumped to his position plotter so he could make long-hand notes. He spent the next 186 minutes probing and exploring every inch of the 'hole' floating over his inconsequential asteroid. Finally, he had a good solid picture of the hole (globe shaped), its position over the asteroid (radial 134/223, 3.4 clicks AGL), and the orientation he had to be in, to sight Earth (single quadrant relative to a base line through the asteroid's sharp corner).

The big question was, how did one pass through, and stay there? This was a little tougher to figure out. Homer finally decided to try some test firings with his magnesium oxide range flares (used for asteroid marking), and see which ones didn't come back. Sound thinking, but unfortunate methodology. He fired off six flares, three of which vanished, never to return. One just kept going, and two disappeared only momentarily. He carefully charted the paths, and found that an approach parallel to the surface, and within a shallow cone, resulted in a clean, one-way entry back to Earth. Homer laid the ship's course through the exact center of the cone, noted he had very little reaction mass left, crossed his fingers, and hit the 'go' button.

Meanwhile, FarOrbital 33 had dispatched a high-

speed killer interceptor to investigate the earlier 'disappearance' of the 'unknown alien'. It was armed to the teeth, and inside, the crew was moving from the relatively benign state of being mildly nervous, into the more volatile state of flaming paranoia. As they closed with the site, a magnesium flare came out of nowhere, and slammed square into the side of ship, where it continued to burn merrily through the pressure vessel, rupturing the 'D' compartment block. They opened fire on nothing and everything, and raced back to the orbital station as two more flares materialized from nowhere, and suddenly disappeared.

Their hysterical radio report made some mention of an unknown alien 'energy weapon' that had breached the hull, and somehow made the hull metal burn in vacuum. They claimed that the alien craft was totally invisible and undetectable, and that the attack was unprovoked, savage and brutal. They made it sound a lot like the imminent end of all life as we know it. Needless to say, orbital station tensions rose quite sharply as a result. A massive fleet of ships was scrambled, and virtually everything with reaction mass descended on the previous site of the 'alien sighting' as fast as it could.

Picking his moment perfectly, Homer popped out into the largest space maneuver in planetary history. On hundreds of viewers, the odd outline of his ship suddenly materialized, and an equal number of fire control targeting computers independently decided to vaporize him. Dozens of laser designators washed over his ship, and a small tidal wave of incoming explosives and particle weapons tried to co-exist with his small volume of space. He dodged back to his rock just in

time, and made a sharp turn after exiting, so that nothing would follow him and annihilate his TK35 on this side of the hole. While he survived, the asteroid vanished in a very impressive display of firepower.

Homer hung there a while in the middle of nowhere, watching fragments of his asteroid race past him for hours, occasionally crashing into his ship to do a little further damage. He couldn't think of any reason why everyone was shooting at him, and he was hungry, tired and extremely irritable. To make matters worse, he now had nothing familiar (if that can be said of his asteroid) around him at all. Suddenly, Homer felt a small chill run down his spine. What if the hole was gone, too? He fired another range flare into the location his 'no-track' navigator felt confident was the hole entry. Nothing happened, the flare just flashed off into the big dark, and kept right on going in plain view.

This was just too much for Homer, all in one day. He decided to ignore the entire universe, since it clearly didn't like him very much at the moment, and get some sleep. Before retiring, he went aft to the cargo lock, and punched the emergency release for the external cargo pods, blasting them away from the ship. While it didn't really help anything, it was the only thing he could think of to vent his frustrations on. He took one last look at the oxygen gauge (very low), the reaction mass indicator (almost empty), and the fuel cell loadmeter (depressing), gave a non-committal grunt, and sacked out for the night.

While he fell asleep, a variety of things took place that he was unaware of. First, his emergency locator transponder went off as his ship's status became

more critical, and began broadcasting his sorry state to anyone who would listen (currently nobody). Second, his ejected cargo pods slowly closed with, and then passed through the hole. Third, his highly touted navigation system went completely dead as a result of some small incoming asteroid fragments that smashed cleanly through the external inertial rings.

When the ejected cargo pods passed through the hole, they were instantly destroyed by the massive firepower loitering in frustration on the Earth-side of the hole. With this resounding triumph, everyone's insanity index fell somewhat, and the Home Office fleet admiral decided to probe the entry location with a fast interceptor. It detached from the fleet, and slowly explored the periphery of the hole. Suddenly it vanished from every scanner and screen as it crossed through. Everyone in orbit went suitably hysterical again, and the captain of the interceptor was not in much better shape as he suddenly appeared in Homer's favorite personal slice of nowhere.

Homer was quietly breathing up the last few hours of his oxygen, and converting them into deep, melodic snores while all this was taking place. If they had all fallen through the hole, and then directly into the heart of an imminent super-nova, he couldn't have cared less at this point, and might have actually voted for it, if his opinion had been solicited.

The captain of the interceptor slowly recovered from the shock of the transit through the hole while he looked out through his scanners. Suddenly, his ship's computer put a flag on the main scanner display to mark the signal of Homer's emergency transponder. They

quickly closed with the now perfectly recognizable TK35, and saw the massive blast damage from the asteroid fragments as they came within visual range. The captain, a Brazilian veteran of twenty years was overwhelmed by the state of Homer's ship, and the unrelenting darkness in front of him, and began to mutter a string of incomprehensible oaths in Portuguese as the image of the ship slowly expanded.

He dispatched an emergency crew with an evacuation pod immediately, and they soon made their way through the tiny airlock of Homer's ship. They mistook Homer's deep sleep for shock, and promptly sedated him for transport. They carefully loaded him into the rescue pod, and sent him back to the ship, while they tried to recover some flight log information from the ship's computer system. The computer proved no more co-operative for them than it had for Homer, and to add the final touch, the fuel cells finally went down during their efforts, and the ship went dark as the computer's data went wherever in bit heaven it goes when it's not there any more.

While this was in progress, the crew of the interceptor plotted their back-course from the hole, in an attempt to get themselves un-lost. Fortunately, their 'no-track' was in better shape than Homer's, and they popped back into Earth-space with little difficulty. Equally fortunate, they were not vaporized on sight, which can only be classed as a minor miracle, considering the current temperament of the crews massed around the hole.

Homer was subsequently transferred to an orbital hospital ship, where he was allowed to recuperate in

peace and quiet for a few days. He overheard the medical orderlies discussing the incredible attack of the invisible alien spacecraft, and its destruction by the orbital fleet. Their version, while quite removed from reality, made the situation clear enough to Homer. He was, just maybe, the biggest threat to planetary security since the common cold, and probably destined to be shot back into darkest nowhere, and left there forever. At that moment, his career prospects looked bleak.

While Homer was mulling over his fate, the door opened to his room, and the highest representative of the Home Office in space, one Orbital Commander J. Reginald Favershams, calmly strode in with his support staff trailing in his wake. Commander Favershams sat in the chair next to Homer's bed, and favored his reclining form with his best administrative smile. The commander's retinue arrayed themselves in a semi-circle around the rest of the room, as if to cut off any chance of Homer's escape.

Commander Favershams cleared his throat in a self-conscious and important way, and held his hand out to one of the massed administrative hangers-on. A folder was quickly and crisply laid in the outstretched hand, and Favershams snapped it open and pursed his lips while he began to flip through the pages. He flicked his eyes across to the prone form of Homer Newcombe, and a small frown appeared. Homer did not find this especially re-assuring.

A variety of disapproving expressions passed across Orbital Commander Favershams's face as he leafed through the folder, but finally he laid it aside, and fixed Homer with his best administrative expression.

"Captain Newcombe, I'm sure you understand the extraordinary seriousness of this situation." Homer had a pretty good grasp of it all right, and was at that moment wondering if he could unhook the medical patch on his arm, vault over Faversham, and somehow make a break through the cavalcade of clerks around the bed.

Faversham began a litany of the various disasters that had befallen orbital crews involved in the recent altercation, and Homer began to tense up for what he figured would be his final leap as a free man. Faversham fixed him with a hearty smile, and gave him a firm clap on the shoulder. "You were the front line in the defense of Earth, Captain Newcombe, the first to tangle with the aliens. We're damn proud of your sacrifice." Homer let out the breath he was holding, and could only look blankly at Faversham, who continued on much as before for another ten minutes.

He eventually wound up by summarizing their somewhat incorrect account of the travails of Homer's ship, and then rose, and with a smart salute of the type delivered only by those who cannot even imagine actual combat, departed the room with his retinue in close formation.

Homer sat for a while, taking in the story delivered by the illustrious Orbital Commander, and pondering his fate. The door opened again to interrupt him, and a charming flight nurse came in to check on his vital signs, although she could have just as easily done so from her remote console down the hall. She fussed over him for ten minutes, and then worked up enough courage to ask him about the aliens. Homer let out a

resigned sigh, and added his part to the developing fiction.

Homer figured out that:

- A. They were going to eventually match up the profiles with Ceres, and realize it was in fact, him that caused all the ruckus.
- B. They were going to keep it all under their collective hats, because to do otherwise would make them look like morons, an opinion strongly supported by facts and Homer's personal assessment.
- C. No matter what, they were eventually going to turn him into free ions, or something equally unpleasant to get even.

After some debate with himself, Homer decided on a course of action, and buzzed the flight nurse to come in. When she arrived, Homer spent an hour in light conversation with her and discovered that her name was Barbara, she was single, 28, had a Ph.D. in physics, was a fully qualified surgeon, and was fairly taken with Homer. He flipped a mental coin, and decided to tell her the whole, unvarnished truth.

She listened to the whole story, and then burst out laughing so hard, she fell off the side of the bed she was sitting on. Homer was unsure how to take this. She finally got up, wiping tears from her eyes, and sat back down next to Homer.

"There's no two ways about it. They're going to be really annoyed with you at some point, Captain Newcombe." She looked at him for a few minutes, and

then got an odd smile on her face, and said she would be back later.

Homer was left to his own devices for a few days, and eventually was released, debriefed by Home Office staff, who cautioned him to keep this matter completely confidential to prevent public panic over the 'aliens', and delivered to the central housing area on the station, to arrange his leave. While brooding over his fate with a cup of coffee in the mess area, Barbara turned up in the seat across from him, with that same smile on her face.

"Greetings, Captain." She toasted him with her own cup, and then gave him her full candlepower smile, which had a powerful effect on Homer's nervous system. "Homer, have you ever considered getting married?" She inquired neutrally, but with her eyebrows somewhat elevated.

"Only just now." Homer replied, getting somewhat lost in her hazel eyes across the table. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, how about me, then? I've got a valid license, no fatal diseases, substantial savings, and some vacation due." She rested her head in her hands, and looked straight at Homer. "Besides, I happen to have a copy of the "No-track" disk the interceptor used to pick you up, and I'm kind of looking forward to a quiet honeymoon where nobody will interrupt us. Plus maybe a tour of some less well known locations."

Homer advised FarOrbital 33 he would just as soon go back to duty, and they issued him a shiny new

shuttle, a TK40, to take out for some test flights. Designed for a crew of up to four, it was a lot roomier than his old ship, and Homer had stores fully provision it before he left for the shakedown runs.

No one is exactly sure just what happened to them, but Barbara and Homer did get married, according to the station's chaplain, and she did take her leave that was due. Homer changed his mind about going back to duty, and took some leave as well, although nobody can figure out just how they left the station.

There was a major radar systems failure on FarOrbital 33, and a sudden breach in the pressure vessel at ring five. That resulted in an explosion by the transit dock where Homer's TK40 was berthed. Some truly fascinating coincidences, to be sure.

The assumption was that the ship was lost, of course, vaporized along with some other gear, and the thinking around the station is that both of them may have been looking it over when the blast occurred, which accounts for their resulting disappearances.

As an interesting aside, there was a brief sighting by FarOrbital 20 of activity by the previous 'alien' entry point, just shortly after the trouble on the other station. Their angle was too poor, and the distance too great to get a profile, but they were certain something was there, and then suddenly disappeared. That got everybody's adrenaline flowing again.

The Man on the Beach

The first winds of fall began to strip off the finer dust from the beach to start working at abrading house paint, and slowly blew away the lighter remains of the summer's human traffic. There were heavy clouds in the sky close to the horizon, and the vague ozone smell of future lightning and thunder. All the people were long gone from the beach except one, who was walking along the steadily encroaching edge of the ocean.

He was dressed in a loose gray cardigan sweater and old jeans, with the bottoms rolled up, and was just old enough to have some faint gray hair mixed in with the rest. He was walking with no pretense of purpose, such as critically examining shells or posing for the attention of those watching from windows. He enjoyed the cold wet sand on his bare feet, and the wind stirring his hair into disorder.

The ocean was the darker, opaque green color of fall, not the vivid blue of mid-summer, and both colors appealed to him. The breeze off the waves was beginning to cool as late afternoon approached, so he let the rolled up sleeves of the sweater fall back to his wrists to keep him warm.

Behind him, the houses perched on rocks and

beachfront were very quiet, without even interior lights or chimney smoke to indicate that others were present, but off-stage waiting for their sudden introduction. The only motion was in his walking, and the onshore rush of the wind.

He looked out over the ocean for some minutes, and felt the regular pounding of the waves begin to beat in time to his pulse, and the breeze flow with his breathing. He closed his eyes, and felt his body begin to stretch out until he was the whole beach, and his blood was mixed with the surf. His eyes began to drift from wave to wave, and became sea birds, then he was lost completely in the action of the wind and beach, caught up in their related patterns.

In a few moments, the beach was deserted, and only the few faint remaining foot prints showed that he had been there at all, walking along the hard packed sand. They soon were blurred by the incoming ocean, then gone in the silent upward drift of the tide. And no one was ever the wiser that God had stopped by for an audit.

Feelings

On the coarsest mechanical level, feelings appear to be largely electrochemical. A host of chemical activators from pheromones to adrenaline do their molecular busywork on synapses and receptors to galvanize the human race into action for some purpose or another.

Every so often, someone decides that there is a relative value attached to one feeling or another, and sudden industry springs into life, heralding such innovative products as perfume or mustard gas. Or bringing to life a strategy intended to strike cold fear into an enemy's heart.

But some feelings also have another baser origin, much more subtle and perhaps darker in direction, and that puts in an appearance from time to time to remind us of larger issues.

Evan leaned on the shovel, and wiped the greasy sweat off his forehead with a dirty rag from his shirt pocket. He was tired and his arms ached, but he knew that he wouldn't wind up with food today unless his work was finished. He had the grave about half dug, and was getting raw blisters from the rough wooden handle,

trying to cut his way through the stony soil. After another few minutes, he tossed the shovel aside, and slid down into the narrow shadow of the grave to rest for a few brief minutes.

His thoughts were dry and empty, and he had stopped speaking to the others a few days ago. The coolness of the shadow was like sleep, and the brief loss of unkind memories. For a few minutes, he was in heaven, whose borders were the sides of a small grave, far away from what the world had become.

He cradled his head on his knees, and tried to rest enough to let the screaming muscles in his legs and arms relax. He could feel the rapid pulse in his arms like a small hammer blow. It eventually reached his head, where each beat felt like a hot nail. He sat for a while longer, wishing more than once that the grave would be for him, an appropriate end to his trivial political career.

The robed guard found him a few minutes later, trying to rest in the tiny pool of shadow, and hauled him out roughly by the throat. While Evan lay choking on the stones and dirt dug up from the hole, the guard began to beat him with a short whip, bringing up fresh blood almost immediately. Evan began to scream for him to stop, but the result was a blow with the whip handle across his mouth. After a few more minutes, the guard lost interest, and left Evan shaking on the ground to complete his work.

After a few minutes, Evan struggled up, and spit out the blood and broken teeth that had filled up his mouth. He crawled over to the grave, and slid down to

the bottom. Painfully, he began to shovel out the rest of the area so that the body laying nearby would fit.

The guard had largely won the encounter, because Evan hated himself, and his life completely. He wished to be erased, more than any other thing on this earth. There was only the one guard for the thirty or so prisoners working out in the sun, and they all had picks or shovels, but they would never have thought to lift them up and strike the guard. They felt only pain, which had become their whole world, by their own design.

The world is a most flexible image that we view through our own experience and feelings. Things and events take on or lose meaning because of transient values that shift through humanity like instant fog, come and gone at a moment's notice. For some, truth and good are remarkably elastic, and can be made to fit any sudden circumstance with a little work. There is no doubt that the very darkest color in the universe occurs only in our own thoughts and feelings, and rarely touches the face of the Earth except through our own hands.

The most difficult moment for a human being is the acceptance of other life as important. A child's entire universe is always directed inward, and only gradually and painfully has the opportunity or desire to change direction and accept other people.

What is truly chilling, however, is when a whole culture never makes that change. Smug and foolish three year olds at the helm of spaceship Earth.

Evan was so tired, he was dizzy, and couldn't see the edges of the grave clearly. He almost passed out from the heat and exhaustion, and finally crawled out of the shallow grave to collapse in the burning sunshine. The guard walked back to stand over Evan, and looked down at him with the same casual indifference a child might show an insect it intends to hit with a rolled up newspaper.

The guard waved over another prisoner, and told him to kill Evan with his pick. The prisoner didn't hesitate, and lifted the pick high overhead, bringing it down on Evan's skull with a thick wet sound like a melon bursting. He was Evan's brother.

The grave was tighter than planned, because of both bodies, but the work was finished before dark, and the prisoners filed back to their rough corral like cattle. From overhead, a small battered metal loudspeaker relayed the story of their perfidy in poorly accented English, so that they would clearly understand the complete corruption of their lives.

They were base and worthless Christians in a world of newly ascendant Muslims, unable to attain heaven, and less than animals. The remains of an economically ravaged and war split Europe, they were revolting pale grubs before the bronze conquering warriors of Islam. They had helped to burn the world in a frenzy of greed and fear, and would now face the cleansing fire of Allah, as he rid the world of their foul shadow.

They were English and Irish, Dutch, German and Italian, and they would fall every one before the justice of Allah in every remaining city. The godless Russians and shameless Americans were already burning in a pale fire of nuclear destruction that would shine evilly for ten thousand years, and illuminate the bitter nights into eternity. The Israelis were only ashes drifting on the Mediterranean ocean. Through the work of Allah's chosen, the world would be made ready to receive sudden justice of the highest form.

And so it did, seventeen days later. Evenly distributed among the anointed and the heathen. Six nuclear submarines that had remained dormant for over a year after the war ended, surfaced within a few hours of each other around the northern coast of Scandinavia.

We are so casual with each other's lives that re-reading in print our off-hand comments would take almost anyone's breath away. The most interesting example must surely be the various groups of alleged Christians butchering each other's children for the best expression of the true will of Christ, who incidentally lived and died as a Jew. There must be additional cryptic footnotes to the bible that these people alone are privy to.

So much is demanded from our feelings. The best sex I ever had was with you, darling. He is the worst son-of-a-bitch I ever met. Those cursed, godless communists. Those perverted capitalists are raping the

world. We forget that they're just chemicals talking. And they're just not up to the task we're asking.

Feelings were meant to be smaller things. Anticipation of food, response to personal danger, love of children. When God was putting us together he didn't say, and this little pheromone is to let you consider demolishing the known universe, my son. But of course, we figure we invented ourselves.

Scale means a great deal in the universe. It's a silent lesson just idling off in the night sky, hoping we're going to pay a little attention, and put our feelings into perspective.

The submarines had followed a rigid schedule that was intended to be the last defense of a desperate nation. One of the younger and less linguistically gifted commanders unfortunately misinterpreted a broadcast from the Muslim jihad leaders as being an operating enemy station. They launched their entire second strike capability at continental Europe, thinking it was in the grip of a land invasion, which indeed it was.

The damage was unimaginable, and total.

Three remaining hardened land based sites responded to the incoming missiles, and destroyed the submarines, as well as the remaining few lives in Norway and Finland. The cobalt jacketed warheads they used were ultimate polluters, a spoiler's weapon, whose rich glowing decay products were quickly lifted into the jetstream like living fire.

Twenty-three months later, there was nothing alive on the Earth except for a few simple marine worms at great depths, and they had very few feelings about what had happened.

But by that time, the time for feelings had already come and gone.

When The Music's Over

It's tenderness. So many people think it's love they're looking for, but it's really tenderness they're after. A soft touch on the cheek, some mild words to burn away the day's accumulated bitterness, or an unhurried look into eyes asking for nothing certain in return. Just a few moments of slightly better than even-handed treatment.

The world just past our fingertips is often full of sharp edges and abrupt changes at the hands of both friends and strangers. Sometimes at the end of the day, it must seem that your heart will break apart under the tidal wave of indifference and neglect, picked up during your travels like lint on a dark wool soul.

But tenderness still creeps in, like fog through a barbed-wire fence. It's the occasional lost wrench in the endless machine, a tiny minor-key confirmation of larger purpose. Sometimes it's a face reflected in a window that catches your eye, and smiles briefly, instead of turning away. Other days it may just be the sun warming your face on an overcast day, like a strongly typed one-line telex direct from God. Love is the documented science, but tenderness is the estimated hand-made art, coming only from long experience.

Tenderness is a condensed statement of history, first-hand knowledge of how deep your despair is, and how dry and empty your heart has become. Someone who can give it has been burned and drowned in life, and lived to tell the distant tale to another victim. Love is an easier road, with more modest toll-gates.

By way of an example, Jan is sixteen and looks like a tired and re-cycled thirty. Her father used to hit her when she was young, but took to somewhat coarser behavior when she was twelve, and suddenly caught his full, undivided attention. Her mother was not around for very long to arbitrate, because alcoholics at her spectacular level of consumption don't have much staying power.

Jan finally ran away at fourteen, and wound up on the streets letting people abuse her for money, which was only a modest financial change in her over-all position. Those intervening two years produced severe liver damage, numerous encounters with venereal diseases, hepatitis and a broken heart like a psychological black hole.

This week, she started on crack cocaine in earnest because those few minutes of blinding pleasure are the only ones left in her broken life. The increasingly dark moments afterward are starting to scare her though, because they seem to be waiting for her to lose her footing, and fall inside for the last time.

Jan did far too much of everything tonight, on

top of quite a few drinks, and is currently lying unconscious, face down in her own vomit, behind a closed Chinese restaurant on 52nd Avenue. She passed out a few minutes ago, and felt the frayed and faded edge of her life slip just out of reach as she blacked out. The one thing she still wishes, every day of her life, and even on this night, is just for a chance to start over.

In fifteen minutes, or 2:20 AM, a large municipal garbage truck will run over her, and break her back, killing her instantly while it empties the battered green dumpster in front of her. She will see it only as an act of mercy, the first tenderness anyone has ever shown her in sixteen long years. God will start her over again with better prospects and smaller burdens, and considerably more kindness.

The very best lessons in life are mistakes. It's just that escape with a whole skin after the fact can be so difficult sometimes. There is no predicting how your heart, or someone else's, will change in advance. There is no knowing how the future will look after the event.

Some distance from here, Ben Smith has just turned twenty, and is so lonely that he finds every moment difficult to use. He is far away from home, living a few blocks from his college, in a run-down and poorly furnished student apartment with peeling wallpaper. He doesn't know anyone here, having come to study from a small farming town about a hundred and

fifty dusty miles away.

Every day, he virtually rubs shoulders with six thousand different people, but in his heart, where he really lives, he is still completely alone. Millions of people suffer what he feels every day, but that could hardly be classed as consolation by anyone, and is certainly not viewed that way by Ben.

Not very impressive looking, and not the most stylish dresser, Ben is unlikely to ever be spontaneously approached by anyone else, except for impersonal directions to the Bio Lab or and explanation of which stairway leads to Room 4145. Because he is so unsure of himself, and so easily fooled by the appearance of everyone around him, his doubts about himself are slowly washing his life away like a steady black rain.

Right now, he is sitting by himself on one of the uncomfortable walkway benches between the lecture halls, having just finished his last evening class. In a few minutes, an unremarkable girl is going to sit one bench away from him, and take out a small hand gun. Crying violently, she will put the barrel in her mouth and close her eyes.

Ben will get up and take it way from her before she can convince herself to pull the trigger. After he unloads it and throws it into the nearest garbage can, he will sit next to her, and hold her quietly while she cries for an hour with her arms around his neck. For both of them, the rain will let up just a little, maybe enough to make a difference.

Society can teach history, but it is not so able to teach tenderness, because that requires experience for perspective. History is a part of tenderness; the clear and certain statement that I sat just where you are sitting, felt just what you are feeling, and know how desperately you need some quiet sign from me. Tenderness is a small thing, a sweet kiss, a gentle touch, some extra patience at a difficult moment. If it were television, it could all be done on a small black and white screen with mono sound.

But somehow Love has become something larger, forever, more corporate. It has long blond hair, embossed foil printing, a perfect tan, and a twenty inch waist. Love requires diamonds, satisfies your every desire, and looks variously like a Porsche 911 or a Sony CD player. Love has become a four-wheel drive with Crest-perfect teeth and a snug-fitting D cup. It's vivid color, with a big screen and Dolby stereo sound. It's not so much of a surprise then, that these days it's found so seldom, and eludes so many of us. It's a study in misdirection.

It will not elude Patrolman J. Arthur McKinley, and his long-time partner Chester Simmonds, who are driving car 3B66 tonight. Both are white, Anglo-Saxon, over-six foot males, who don't have a very high opinion of the mixed black and Hispanic neighborhood they patrol. They have visited a few too many fatal domestic fights, a few too many robbed liquor stores with bleeding proprietors,

and hauled in a few too many finger-poppin' fourteen year old drug pushers to possibly have arrived at any other opinion.

Patrol car 3B66 normally covers a sixteen block square area of East Los Angeles. It sees three teams of two policemen every day, seven days a week. It has been repaired countless times for crash damage, gunshots and casual vandalism. Its various radio antennas have been an especially favored target of younger local residents over the years.

The car carries three tactical radios, a shotgun in each door panel, and riot gear stowed in the trunk. It also has an armored separator between the front and back seats, and four stainless-steel prisoner restraints in the back seat.

Right now, 3B66 is parked outside emergency receiving for their closest hospital, and the officers are inside, trying to rush an injured black six year old boy into surgery. He was hurt by a drunk hit-and-run driver, and ignored for three quarters of an hour by numerous people who passed him laying crumpled on the street.

The drunk driver in question will crash his silver Lincoln Continental Mark V through a concrete road barrier on Mulholland Drive, and slowly burn to death at the bottom of one of the lesser canyons in an hour and fifteen minutes. It would appear that God has a very limited sense of humor in some cases.

Douglas, the six year old boy, has massive chest injuries, a crushed pelvis, and broken legs. Just before he dies, he will grab the hand of Chester Simmonds who

has been holding him, and start talking to Chester as if he were his father, even though they look nothing alike. Chester will play to the boy's delusion for twenty minutes until he finally drowns, breathing his own blood. Then he will go outside and cry uncontrollably for an hour leaning on the hood of 3B66, because the price of tenderness is sometimes very high.

People believe a wide range of popular misconceptions. That they are the only *REAL* person on Earth, and other people are just elaborate props for their fantasies. Or how about: she'll just have to see it my way, or treat him badly, if he really loves you, he'll stick around. Gonna have to beat some sense into that Goddamn kid. We're all gonna die anyway. It's only smart to cheat on this, I'd be a fool to do anything else. They all want it, no matter what they say. Lookin' out for number one. No one will ever know. The top forty hits of the delusional pop chart.

Over time, the fatalities pile up on street corners and in lonely rooms from coast to coast. Some of them just fade away, and vanish from sight, others explode and take a dozen strangers with them in a sudden unexpected display of marksmanship and strategy. A very wide range of emotional sub-atomic particles.

Sometimes, the reaction turns out to be benign. Looking to cross the crowded intersection of 23rd and Calvin, Dana Jacobson is amazed by the intense rush of traffic in Detroit. Even when the lights change, she can hardly imagine stepping out onto the street with so many cars. Only in the city for a week, she feels somehow that she stepped off the plane into another world, inhabited by creatures with a dramatically higher metabolic rate.

Her home in Washington state, an hour from Seattle, is starting to look very good to her, even though she imagined it to be the least sophisticated place on Earth only a few days ago. After a quick glance at her watch confirms a suspicion about being late for work, she finally bolts across the traffic, and comes within a few inches of being hit. Locally, that does not even count as a near miss.

That evening, as she trudges up the staircase of her brownstone apartment building, she can hear an old man crying through his open apartment doorway. He is sitting in an old overstuffed chair by the door, with his head in his hands, lost in his own world. Dana stops for a minute, and feels very uncomfortable looking into someone's heart so carelessly. After a few moments of indecision, she pushes the door farther open, and comes inside to sit next to him, and ask after his condition.

He has a worn looking face, and a fringe of silver hair. His hands are large, and marked from a life of hard work, reminding Dana of her father. She takes his hands

in hers, and looks into his embarrassed eyes. After an hour, she will eventually find out that his wife has just died of cancer. He will learn that she just buried her parents after a car crash, and left home to escape the memories. Neither of them know how they will live with it, but they are inching closer to the solution while they talk, and share the tenderness even complete strangers are quite capable of.

It is late in the day, and all the players are thinking of leaving shortly. Soon the music will be over, and we will be faced with our own decisions like final dance partners for the evening. For many, they will give and look for tenderness, because they know it is the only real magic in the world. Some will be unsure and undecided, and we will lose them.

Thousands of years ago, Archimedes felt he could move the world with a lever and a place to stand. Just how this fit in with the then-prevalent notion of a flat Earth is a little unclear, as it seems to raise the image of a vast manhole cover or serving plate tilting up into space, balanced on the back of a turtle perched firmly in space, with the oceans spilling noisily off the low side. Perhaps something subtle was lost in the translation from Greek to English.

But nothing will be lost here, because you have felt this familiar longing in your own heart, and you know it for what it is. If you choose, you will move the world with your small touch, and re-invent the universe more to your liking. You can make a difference *so vast*

that there is no counting it, no weighing it, no end to it.
Never doubt it in your heart for even a moment.

It's just history, or we are.

After:

That's pretty much it for now. There is a short little story that follows this afterthought. It tries to explain something with a story rather than as some dry lines of text, but we'll have to wait and see exactly how *you* like it.

I remember a lot of people I've known, and I can see where they have left their mark on me. This is just a brief word to remind you, *yes*, I *do* remember all of you. There are only two people I never got a chance to meet that I truly wanted to meet, and that really bothers me: Robert Anson Heinlein and W. Edwards Deming. There are a lot of days in my life I would have willingly traded for ten minutes over a cup of coffee with either one of them.

People sometimes react oddly to what I write, either figuring me for some kind of manic depressive nut case or possibly some one who doesn't seem very happy with life, or is hopelessly sacrilegious. I assume this is because I sometimes write about issues that seem less-than-light-hearted, or take serious ones in what might seem to be too casual a manner. Well, how could it be otherwise? After all, as you have already discovered, we live in a universe of mixed effects.

I'm a 6' 2" tall, statistically overweight Zen Presbyterian that likes Rock & Roll and African music, Pepperoni Pizza and usually enjoys every single day, even the crappy ones. I like days with rain (but not every day), and mountains with snow on the trees. I am very lucky to have had a few friends that overlook my endless failings, and put up with my attraction for blue things and cow paraphernalia. I enjoy strong style like Lyle Lovett, Enya, Ray Lynch, Van Morrison and a host of musical things from UB40 to the Beatles.

Despite the references to characters that drink, I drink only rarely, although I do like dark beer and sometimes a bit of wine with dinner. Alcohol (or any drug) is just a distraction, and there's no reason and certainly zero physical evidence to think enlightenment flows from it. Drugs even less so.

I love old movies with Cary Grant and science fiction stories from the fifties, and I've had Norwegian Elk Hounds for most of the last twentyfive years. My wife snared me even before *that*, and still hasn't let me go. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. My major failing is that I remember things that bother me, and eventually they fall out into stories. Then, I forget them, and they become your problems. That seems like a *great* plan for healthy living to me.

It seems to me that God talks to everyone 24 hours a day, but not everyone is listening. Try not to miss what gets said next time, because sometimes it's fairly important...

*All for now,
Walter.*

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Along The Black Path

The word is never the thing. Almost everything about education forgets this one simple and inescapable truth, and then adds its own special mistake to the mix, which is that naming and repeating names is not really understanding, just recital.

But unlike everything else alive on Earth, we are creatures of language, which is our lifeline and anchor to the future and past. We continue to paper the world over with words, hoping that it will become more understandable and malleable as a result. Certainly more salable if suitably marked by us. For the most part, the world seems unconcerned by this action, and turns in space to sun itself at a regular rate, probably deeply amused by our efforts.

That's not to say that words have no effect or purpose, it's just that we often forget what weak tools they are, and even note that a picture is worth a thousand of them, without stopping to consider what that really implies for the written and spoken word.

Words are a good fit for us, because we lived trapped in time, with limited perception, and see such a tiny slice of reality that dialogue is quite adequate for our modest needs.

But of course, the universe always has plans of its own, not fully coincident with ours. That leads us inevitably to this tale, which opens the hand-made wooden box and looks inside to see what the words really mean.

1.

My story is very simple, and has played out endlessly here with an amazing variety of actors. Sad to say, there are a significant number of re-runs even in real life, probably because we have no lasting racial memory to sustain us, only the few words and deeds we remember personally. We never really learn from our ancient mistakes or triumphs. As a result, our children and we inevitably forget all the truly important lessons.

My life was taken away from me years ago in what seemed like unendurable and endless pain, but was really only a few seconds by our common clock. At the end, I took a last breath, and then fell down the black path into death. Eventually, I came back to this life, which is how I can say this to you now. The really interesting bits are all hiding in the smallest details of the story.

For some people, living is unattractive, and they secretly hope for a quick ending, but I loved every minute of it, even the comparatively bad parts. I loved the sun on my face, the taste of fresh pastry, the wonderful color fresh water makes when it's deep and

the amazing taste and feel of very cold milk in my mouth. I wasn't so happy about badly fitting shoes or underwear, beets or brussel sprouts, but those things were really not compelling reasons to look for a quick release in death.

It comes anyway, whether it's on your to-do list for the day or not. When it shows up, you can't wave and say "I'm on the phone, just a minute!" or insist there is still something to do that just can't wait. Death taps his watch, and looks at you with a certain implacable dark menace, and that's it. The tape stops.

At that moment, a lot of supposedly important things lose their charisma. Currency, real estate, precious metal and gemstone values plummet. Time doesn't stop, though; it suddenly seems to stretch forever, overall, a very strange turn of events.

Since I died unremarkably, it was not possible to feel that my life was traded for some larger and more important purpose. Altogether, it was an unattractive demise by my standards. I had hoped to spend the hard won currency of my life on something better, but I never got the chance to do that, so my last thought was a feeling of regret while my life quietly leaked away onto the pavement.

2.

Everyone has a moment in life when a choice asserts itself. The way forks, and there is no alternative but to pick, right or left, up or down. It is true to say one can also turn back or stop,

and the choices are rarely so bold as black and white, go or stay. Real life is a vast stream of red, green and blue, matte gray and irregularly dotted. Small or large, woven or finely granulated, dicotyledonous, 2% butterfat or evergreen, surface streets or Highway I5, Catholic or Zoroastrian, and everything in between. The choices are rich, but they remain choices, and there is just no avoiding them. God sends them relentlessly to us in the rapid stream of time, and we are judged by others and endlessly affected by our choices, well made, careful or not.

In the real world, I was often asked to do something I felt was wrong, and I said no. It was a small thing in the minds of the askers, just do this thing, and ask no questions, for we are the wiser and more correct source of moral authority, and if we say it, you can be certain it is so. However, my answer was still no, and their tolerance was slight. I was not especially flippant about it, but everyone that is uncooperative is judged irreverent, which can have serious repercussions for the irreveree. Eventually, they were beyond just displeased, and became outraged. From that moment, there was not much doubt I would have some aspect of my future decided by others, which is all too often the case in the world that we have made.

It is true to say that we all pick our own future, and that we all receive the world we deserve, but it is equally true to recognize that the available-choice-palette is often filled with only a few colors to pick from, and the range is not always so rich. I sometimes reached out without hesitation and pulled the no switch, and understood what would inevitably follow. I was smiling, which no doubt infuriated them further.

However, they lost their chance for that vivid moment of wrath-expression, as my fate (as I mentioned) was changed in a much different way.

I had my suspicions about death, but I confess I really had no idea there would be warm sand involved.

3.

Death is the end of the black path. For some people, it is silent and unchanging, a lonely dark ending with no sense of time. Quiet, cold, unhappy and filled with dread, as if there could be even more to come that is yet more horrible and frightening. Teeth perhaps, lurking just out of view, and malevolent swollen red eyes filled with hunger and hatred. Chewing sounds, pain and evil slobbering and screaming, possibly.

In your life, you learn what you learn, and it prepares you for what is to come. If you are paying attention, the world is full of an endless string of wondrous signs and clues, if not, then it's just full of things. We are all wizards, and reality bends around what we believe, and recasts itself through our direction. There is never any firm reality, but we are very slow to learn that. Most people probably think quantum foam is a dish detergent if they ever think about it at all. But in the end, all is in flux, certainty is the clear exception in the universe.

The poet Basho observed that *when water is cupped in the hands, the moon is reflected in them, and when flowers are handled, the scent soaks into the robe*. There is small and large magic in everything, and every moment is a lesson and a statement sent from the very heart of the universe to open our eyes. We are intimate with the world, but also distant from it, since in the quantum sense, it is not really there at all, yet we are unquestionably in and of the world, with the blood in our bodies made from the very hearts of stars.

When you walk down the black path, you have only what you know to take with you, and it is has to be up to the task. The unprepared find it frightening and alien, fearsome, but it is just what's next, and no more frightening than sunrise.

Heaven and hell are made inside our minds, and we inevitably walk into them when the self-clock has run out. Neither one is truly there, but we make them there, and are happy to populate them with all manner of strange creatures and badly thought out celestial policy. Take some significant comfort in the fact that the daily operation of universe is run and supervised by much better intellects than our own.

Mine was full of sand, warm and with a slight salty breeze blowing over it. I could hear the ocean and some seagulls as if they were far away. As I lay there, I felt the morning sun warm on my face, and felt the slight vibration of waves rolling on the beach, conducted through the sand directly into my deeply injured heart. It was like a lingering kiss from the woman you love, and endlessly welcome.

4.

We are not monolithic and seamless. We show everyone different things; give them more or less access to our hearts and thoughts. We are each a thousand different people, every version tailored for the person we are meeting at the moment, because no other behavior is really possible. No matter what we show, other people can only see

some things, and never see others, and we reflect that in the same moment. Some see the box, some see the contents, and others worry about the brand name.

Every so often, we show everything to someone, and they see it all, and return that generosity back. That's the moment, that state of extraordinary tenderness that explains what life is for, why we are in it, and what our specific part in it is. It's where strength comes from, and what love is built on. The greatest tragedy is that the moment eludes some people all of their lives, and they live in the emptiest kind of sadness, unaware how close escape has always been, sometimes only a few words or a look away. We choose everything, but often never realize that it actually happened in that exact way.

I was happy to lie on the warm sand and feel the immense pull of the Earth. I had no idea there was gravity in the afterlife. Or smells, frankly they were quite a surprise. The wonderful crisp fresh scent of the sea was intoxicating, an amazing perfume when you are dead and lost to the world.

I had no idea if there was a schedule to death or not, so I waited and let high tide wash over my toes, and let the sun warm up my cold, dead heart a little more.

5.

When I was alive, I was not often amused by the ongoing behind-the-scenes chicanery of those careless with the lives of others. But in reality I was and am endlessly happy. Every part of life was amazing to me, and I treasure the memories of every event. Most importantly, I was equally amazed by those moments when they happened, not just in later reflection. I was just not so accommodating to those selling some kind of gaudy, prepackaged freeze-dried shallowness with a bit of spicy black-bean evil sauce on it. My choice, my rules.

The critical moment of every life is to realize that others are significant in the pattern of the universe. They are not just stage props or set decorations for the incredible story of *me* (*you* need to say this out loud in your own voice to really understand it). We are all equal players in the drama, and it is not possible to learn anything of significance until this spark of awareness it lit inside your heart. The most amazing moments of my life were the lasting memories of being important to someone else, being remembered and loved by them, and cherishing them in return. The wonderful moment when that voice brightens on the other end of the phone, when they realize it is you there, and how happy you are in return.

I let my eyes wander across the sky, and watched the distant horizon where the darkening clouds seemed to dissolve silently into the ocean to make more waves. I could not remember ever being so completely happy before, and without even the smallest concern. I let out

a deep breath and closed my eyes. The sun warmed my eyelids and gave the entire universe a beautiful red-orange color, like looking at the world through a tangerine skin.

6.

I do not know what the purpose of life is. I feel and understand the huge heartbeat of the universe, and how it has started, collapsed and re-created itself in a fiery blaze countless times and expired in darkness and heat death, but I do not know why it does that.

Perhaps that is simply god's dream, or something better expressed in physics. But I have always felt part of the process; I always know there are things only I could do that are needed for the pattern of life to unfold the way it needs to. As Ghandi observed, it is likely that what you do in life will not be very significant, but it is *very important* that you do it. It took a very large number of years, but eventually I understood that my part was to supply what was missing, and then gently push the boat farther downstream for you. It is my part, and a delight to perform. I hope you are always pleased with the results.

I cannot imagine the universe without time, and yet it has none. I cannot see the universe without size or mass, yet it has none. It is everything and nothing all at once, eternal and nonexistent. It was never really a puzzle for me, just a smiling moment of math and philosophy that was in no way hidden, and wonderfully magical to see.

It is not possible to see the incredible daily magic in the universe and be unmoved by the beauty of it, the astonishing level of interconnectedness and complexity that makes every thing large and small possible. There is some real talent there, endlessly fascinating to observe. Water has always been my favorite object of creation; the color and the behavior of it are endlessly enjoyable to see.

I had on a well-worn pale blue work shirt, and some shorts with lots of pockets, but no shoes. After a while warming up in the sun, I decided to get up and walk along the beach and see what was here. Dunes with a bit a long grass blocked off any view of shore, and rocks cut off a view down either side of the beach, so it felt as if I needed to change my perspective to learn any more. I loved the feeling of the ocean on my bare feet, so I walked along the edge of the water to see what was next.

7.

I love music, all kinds of music, although there are a few types I can just as happily miss. I recall once reading a quote to the effect that someone would rather have written a song that everyone loved to sing in his country than an important book. Perhaps I have mis-remembered it, but I still think it is true. Music is an essential shared magic on a level so incredibly powerful, it can change the world, and how people think. Plus, it blends with the rhythm of your body and the world around you to form something even more potent, something that reaches through time and across language to send its message straight to the heart of the listener.

Sadly, I can only send you this, I have no song to relate, but I assure you there is one in my heart right now, and it is calling to you. I hope you can hear it somehow.

I do not know if there is time in death, or what it should feel like. It did not seem long until I reached the rocks by the shore, and went around them out into the ocean. There was another small bay beyond them, with a small wooden house. It was set back from the beach, just behind the rise of the dunes, so I decided to walk to it. There was a wonderful garden growing around the house, and a heartbreakingly beautiful red Japanese maple tree reaching out over the entryway like a leafy gateway.

Overhead, dark clouds were slowly collecting, blown in from the sea, and it looked as if there might be rain, with some sun still streaming around the edges. The wind had that wonderful ozone-electric feel you get just before a storm. It was a bit like standing at the veritable crossroads of the universe.

8.

My list of misdeeds while alive is long, and boring, so you won't have to experience them here. I tried to follow the right path through the world, but to be honest, I was often a selfish fool, and despite my best efforts, I could always have done much better.

Plato said the unexamined life was not worth

living, and he was certainly right, but I can attest to the fact that it is not much comfort to recall your failings on a regular basis. I can recall crying more than once, sick at heart, for the staggering stupidity of something I had done. Sometimes there is just no one to forgive you for your failings, so they collect in your heart like random cold stones.

Still to be fair, I did my best to avoid those things I felt would blacken and corrupt my heart irredeemably, and I always tried to be to be person I was supposed to be. Only the hearts of the people I knew could ever say how close I was to that inner desire. I suppose everyone in death realizes they could have been much better at life, if only they had understood at the time that it was so important for that to be true.

I walked up the beach to the front of the house, and saw it was hand made from weathered wood that looked like cedar. It had a wooden staircase leading up from the beach to the small porch at the front of the house. There were sectioned windows facing out to the sea, and a carved door with a round window in its center at the top of the staircase. There was a bricked chimney towards the rear, but no smoke was coming from it.

I went up the staircase, and stood in front of the door, wondering what the proper etiquette was for intruding on someone while dead. I decided to knock, and looked in the window. No one answered, and I did not see anyone inside, so I opened the door, which simply seemed like the inevitable thing.

There was a wide front room, with a kitchen at one end, and day room and table at the other, with a

doorway leading back to what I imagined was a bedroom. Everything was hand made, with a feeling of great care and attention.

Behind me, there was a blue-white flash of lightning, and a clap of thunder. The pressure wave pushed through the doorway and windows like a firm hand. I could hear the crisp rain start to fall on the roof and windows. I had no idea there was rain in death, but it does seem appropriate in retrospect.

9.

When every tale is told, there is always some discussion of size. Is this to be a large tale of clashing armies and titanic forces, or a small story about three small stones in the back of the yard that look especially interesting? It is fair to say that right now, today, the stage is set quite small in this story. But the ideas in the background, just behind that tree over there, are much larger, they are just masquerading here as small ones. Why do we tell these stories? Because as it happens, every heart is a lock and every word is a key. And today, this task is our minor destiny.

It can be hard to say what is truly important, sometimes those things may seem a bit awkward said out loud, almost as if they are so obvious, it makes one foolish to say them. But that is never really so, and some things remain important whether they get spoken or not, which is truly fortunate for so many.

When your mother and father pick you up in a big hug, and say they love you, that is as important as it can be. That feeling, of being important to them, and loved so much that it never stops, is part of what makes the universe work every day. That is what lights the pilot lamps inside the stars, and makes flowers bloom in the sunshine. When it doesn't happen, that is sadness on a cataclysmic level.

We start out in life without any maps. Every day we have to discover another clue to decode the next day, and figure out what our task is meant to be. No doubt you are picking up a few useful pointers here as we go along.

I walked into the kitchen and found a small wood stove, meant to be lit with neatly split wood conveniently stacked nearby, and a tall glass jar of water on the counter with a spigot at the bottom. I filled a teapot with water, and made a fire to warm up the stove, and searched for tea, which I found in a cupboard. Green tea, as it happened.

I made a fire in the fireplace, and sat in the open doorway, my face in the wind and rain, and my back slowly warmed by the fire. When the teapot whistled, I made a large mug of tea, added a bit of honey, and went back to my seat in the doorway to watch the storm over the ocean. Every so often, the sky lit up with lightning, and very soon, evening set in. Darkness, just as I sort of expected in death.

10.

Good and evil are the big puzzle, but it is important to see that they are choices, not ordained, never inevitable. The universe in each incarnation is the pattern of choices we all make, a song of incredible complexity and beauty, but it requires contrast to be felt and correctly drawn. Fear is the looming mountain ahead, and many cannot climb it, or approach it. But it is just a hill from a certain perspective, and not so much. Life is on the far side, and you have to know it, and overcome fear to ever be a part of the amazing tide of life sweeping across the world.

Fear of death is the big fear. Fear of pains in all their variations the small one. There is a powerful lesson to learn about them both, if your heart is open to it, but you have to walk over the hill or mountain, according to your perspective, to learn it. Remember that you have the hearts of stars flowing in your veins, and the dreams of god in your head, and the walk is not so hard from that perspective. Remember that you have things to do in the world, and only you can do them in just that way.

I sat in the dark and watched the rain on the ocean and beach, faintly lit by the rising moon just to the edge of the clouds. I could just see the steam rising from the tea backlit by the fireplace. I was deeply satisfied in my heart to be there, and in no hurry to stir.

The clouds blew over the horizon and the moon rose over the ocean, a beautiful silver fire that sparkled off the wave tops and lit up the night landscape. Eventually I went into the back room and slept. I had no

idea there would be sleep in death, and it still seems odd to me, but I was finally tired. My dreams seemed to go on forever.

When I woke up in the morning, I was back in the world, and alive just as if I had never died. But now there are so many things I know that I never realized before. Things taste sweeter, every moment seems more important; every day has that hint of opportunity to come.

I never really knew there was life after death, but now that I know that, it simply seems inevitable.

