QUANTA

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your penchant for demolishing CD players? At least Newton gave it up after the apple — if you had been there, Isaac would've probably been killed by a rogue soup kettle.

"Well, it's not like you've never tossed things out before," was all I said.

"But I wouldn't throw her out. I love her!" He hit the wall with his open palm. "She doesn't trust me. I can't believe it. She doesn't trust me. She doesn't trust me."

He whirled around and glared at me. Both his eyes were open wide, but the eyelid over the hazel eye was twitching a little.

"Thanks, Jim," he told me. "I appreciate your help. I'd like to be alone now."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

I closed my apartment door for the final time and began to descend the steps with my last box of stuff. I figured I wasn't going to do any more about my upstairs neighbor's personal life — if I made him angry, he might toss me out a window, and if I made his girlfriend angry, she could just shoot me on the spot. Or they could act in tandem, with her shooting me and then him disposing of my body out the window.

But I wouldn't have to deal with them ever again. I was going to be out of the building for good. Whatever happened, I would have nothing to do with it.

When I was halfway down the steps, Emily passed me, heading up. She smiled as she went past. I managed to swallow and blink.

I concentrated on keeping my feet moving as a slowly paced out to my car. I opened the trunk and dropped the box in. As I slammed the trunk door closed, I began to hear the shouting coming from upstairs.

I fingered my key, thinking that I should just get in the car and drive away. It wasn't my problem. I didn't know these people very well. If they ended up killing each other, it would have no effect.

But instead of driving away, I stood there and tried to make out the yelling. My car was parked a few spaces down from the Frank Cole target zone, so I figured I was safe from any falling bodies that might be heading down.

The yelling intensified for a second, and then cut off. I swallowed again, and began moving toward my car as soon as I saw a shadow in Frank's window. The window slowly slid open, as I hid behind my car and watched. If Frank had managed to open the window, I figured that Emily'd probably be taking part in Frank's first human-powered flight experiment.

But what came out of the window was far too small to be Emily. It was smaller than anything else I'd seen come out of that window.

I dropped to the pavement when I realized that it was Emily's gun.

On impact, the gun fired off a shot. Great. I just *knew* I was going to be hit by a random bullet, like in the movies.

I realized I was fine when I heard the sound of shattering glass. I peeked my head past the edge of my car in time to see the last pieces of my old second-floor window raining onto the pavement, where so many objects had landed before. Somebody should paint a bull's eye there.

"Frank! Emily!" I yelled. "You could have killed me with that fucking gun! And you broke my goddamned window! Jesus, I just moved out! I'm not paying for this!"

"Sorry," came a soft reply from above.

They paid for the window.

JASON SNELL intertxt@network.ucsd.edu

Is a senior at the University of California, San Diego, where he serves as the Editor in Chief of the *UCSD Guardian* newspaper, in addition to editing *InterText*. He will graduate from UCSD in March of 1992, with a degree in communication and a minor in Literature/Writing, and hopes to enter a graduate journalism program in the fall of 1992.

"I'm sure it does."

"He's always so distant," she said. "He never came over when I wanted him to. He said he was always too busy… you know."

"Too busy?"

"Too busy watching the new big-screen TV, too busy listening to the stereo, too fucking busy with his little *fish!* God, I hated those fish! He should've been spending time with me. I'm his fucking girlfriend."

"You were jealous of his *fish?"*

"No, silly! But I was afraid that he'd lose himself in them, like he did with the TV and the stereo. It isn't right for a man to spend so much time away from his girlfriend, sitting alone in that terrible chair. I should be his only diversion!"

My voice grew louder as I tried to make her understand what Frank undoubtedly had in store for her.

"Now he doesn't have any of those things, Emily! *You're* the center of his living room now."

"Center of his life, that's what I should be. It's my rightful place."

"You don't understand, do you? Remember what Frank did to all those other things when he got tired of them? He threw them out the window! And you're next!"

She paused for a second, as if she had finally understood what I'd been trying to explain to her.

Then she began to laugh.

"Oh, don't worry," she told me, and began rummaging around in her purse. "Frank would never think of doing anything to hurt me. And even if he *thought* of it, I'd never let him try anything."

Her hand emerged from the purse holding a small handgun.

"So don't be afraid for my sake. Frank and I will be fine, as long as he makes sure I'm the only one he thinks about." She slipped the gun back into her purse, and began walking up the stairs.

"Thanks for your help," she said.

I swallowed hard and silently watched her ascend, until even her ugly wooden clogs disappeared from sight.

"Don't mention it," I whispered to myself.

The next day was supposed to be my last day in the apartment. But instead of packing, I spent most of the morning staring out my window at the sidewalk, waiting for Emily and finishing my supply of oranges. I wasn't sure if I'd be seeing her as she walked down the street after leaving Frank's by way of the stairs, or seeing her fall to her death after leaving by way of the window.

After a few hours — and long after the last piece of orange peel had fallen onto that sidewalk, Emily appeared down below. Because I knew she had a gun, I was careful not to move until she was around the corner, out of sight. Then I bolted for the door and ran upstairs.

"Frank!" I yelled as I pounded on his door. "Let me in, Frank!"

Frank opened the door after a few seconds, and smiled at me in a good-natured sort of way. Several clumps of his hair were standing on end, and he was wearing a plain white T-shirt and boxer shorts.

"Hi, Jim," he said. "What's wrong?"

"It's Emily."

He opened his eyes all the way, as if he were finally waking up.

"What? Did something happen to her?"

"No, nothing like that. But Frank, I talked with her yesterday, and I've got to tell you, something's really wrong."

He turned around and began walking toward the window.

"I knew it!" he said. "I knew this would happen. I've screwed up again, haven't I?"

"No, nothing like that, Frank. But I've got to tell you, she's not the woman you think she is. She's no good for you, Frank. She's *crazy.*"

"What do you mean? She's just as sane as I am."

"Not quite. Look, Emily wants you to be her slave. She can't stand to think that there's any point to your life except to please her and think about her."

"She's my girlfriend. I'm supposed to think about her all the time."

"Frank, being someone's boyfriend isn't supposed to mean that you're her slave."

"She took away my chair."

I blinked.

"I loved that chair," he said. "She wanted me to throw it out the window, like I did with everything else. I told her that I only throw things I didn't like out the window."

"And you liked the chair."

"It was a good chair. It wasn't too hard or too small or anything. It was perfect."

"What happened when you told her you liked the chair?"

"She told me that I should only like her, and nothing else. And then she took it away."

His voice was raised. Here was more emotion in it than I'd ever heard before. I idly noticed that only one of his eyes was brown, and the other one was hazel.

"Frank, she's got a gun."

"A gun?"

"A gun. I think she's afraid you're going to throw her out the window."

He opened his mouth, sputtered a few times, and shut his mouth again. I'd never really seen anyone totally dumbfounded before. Frank turned and stared out the window for a while, and finally managed to say something.

"Why would I throw her out the window?"

Gosh, Frank, could it be because you've thrown every damned thing you've ever owned out that fucking window? Might it be possible that all the little fragments of glass that glitter when I walk along the sidewalk are there because of

would be meeting Mr. Concrete pretty soon anyway.

I was sitting on my window ledge, looking out at the sky and peeling an orange — my breakfast — when I heard the argument. It was a couple of days after I had met Frank's fish.

At first, all I heard was thumping — it seemed like Frank was stomping through his apartment. Then I realized that I was hearing two separate sets of footsteps. There were two people up there, running around.

Then, as I sat there stripping the skin from my orange, I started to hear the voices.

"What do you mean mrrm don't like mfff," was what I heard a deep voice, presumably Frank's, shout at the top of his lungs. I tore a round piece of peel from the orange and rubbed it between my fingers.

"I don't mrmff them there at all. They're weird. I ummmf mumm move them, Frank." It was a woman's voice. Frank had a woman in his apartment. And they were arguing.

"It's my Living Room Thing!" he screamed. I held my hand out the window and let go of the round piece of peel. It landed right on the edge of the sidewalk.

"I don't cmf. Either umffo um I go." Then I heard a door slam. I could hear the woman stomping down the stairs. A few seconds later, she stepped onto the sidewalk below and looked up at me. Her hair looked like it had been cut with a bowl, and she squinted behind what seemed to be extremely thick glasses.

"You hear me, Frank?" she said. "Them or me!"

"Don't do this to me, Emily!" Frank must've been standing at his window, right above mine.

"Do *what* to you?" I pulled off a strip of orange peel, and held it against my nose. It smelled more like orange than the actual fruit *tasted* like it.

"Make me get rid of my fish. My Copacabana."

"Them or me," she said. "Barry Manilow or me. Think about it, Frank."

She started walking away, down the street. I threw my orange peel at her, but it missed and landed in the gutter instead.

Frank slammed his window shut. When I went to work an hour later, I still hadn't heard anything else from upstairs.

When I returned from work, Frank was screaming.

"Fuck you, Barry Manilow!"

Maybe I should've been more wary about approaching my apartment building after the CD player tried to kill me. But I was concentrating on licking the ice cream cone I had bought along the way home, and so I didn't get to see the fish tank's championship-caliber dive.

But Frank's scream certainly got my attention. I looked up and saw the tank impact with the concrete sidewalk as fish and water rained down. Glass shattered and flew everywhere. I was lucky not to be lacerated by a flying glass shard.

"No more fucking air pumps! No more food flakes! *No more Barry Manilow!"*

The smell of fish mixed with the taste of Buttered Apple Pecan ice cream in my mouth as I leaped over large chunks of glass and two very annoyed mini-lobsters on my way to the safety of the stairwell.

Two weeks after he dropped the fish tank out the window, I went upstairs to say goodbye to Frank. My summer job was over and it was time to go off to college.

Frank smiled when he saw me at the door. In fact, I had never seen him seem so downright cheery.

"Come in, Jim! Come in!"

The big chair was gone from the center of his room. In its place was a large mat with polka-dotted sheets and pillows on it.

"Where's the chair?"

"Emily didn't like it. So she took it away. Now we sleep on the futon together."

"I see. Congratulations, Frank."

"Thanks."

"But I don't see a Living Room Thing anywhere, Frank."

His eyes twitched for a second, as if he were scanning the room for a Living Room Thing that he couldn't find.

"No more of those things. Emily didn't like me spending time watching anything but her."

"She didn't like the fish?"

"No. She said I thought about them too much. And she said I dreamed about Barry Manilow too much. She wants to be the only person in my dreams."

"Well, that's good, isn't it?"

He hesitated for a second.

"Yeah, I guess."

Frank walked over to his open window, the one he had used to send thousands of dollars worth of electronic equipment — not to mention several fish — to their deaths.

"Emily's my Living Room Thing now," he said.

I could deal with Frank's own special brand of insanity to a point, idly watching the precipitation of electronic equipment (and marine life) that fell from his third-floor window. But the prospect that a human being might become the next object for Frank to drop filled me with fear.

"Emily? I need to talk to you about Frank."

I had caught her in the stairwell, on her way up to Frank's apartment.

"What do you mean?"

"Frank's not what you think he is," I told her.

"Of course he's not. Frank scares me sometimes, you know?"

"You know about him?"

"Sure I do. I'm surprised *you* know how scary Frank is. I mean, I'm his girlfriend. It scares me a lot more than you, I can tell you."

chair and walked toward the door.

The muscles at the corners of his mouth tightened. "Oh, sure," he said. "See you again sometime. Nice meeting you."

"Nice meeting you, too. Thanks for inviting me up."

Frank began to close the door, paused, and stared at me. His dark brown eyes were shining.

"I'm going to throw it out," he said again.

"Well, good luck," I said, and turned away.

I went downstairs, turned my stereo back on, sat down on my couch, and idly stared out the window. I was enjoying my freedom — even if I did have do deal with quirky neighbors.

There was a scraping noise from upstairs. I could hear it over the sound of my stereo. Then there were two loud thumps, and silence for several minutes.

I sat staring out the window, entranced by the music. The wind blew. The trees moved. A Zenith dropped past my window.

I blinked. It must've been a dream, a fantasy, perhaps even a really big bat or bird or something.

Then I heard a loud crash echo up from the sidewalk.

During my dash to the window to see what had happened, two other objects dropped past. Later I'd discover that they were Frank's VCR and Hi-Fi Stereo Surround Sound Decoder.

As I opened the window, I heard Frank laughing and screaming.

"I threw it out!" he howled. "No more fucking static! No more fucking test patterns!"

I made a mental note to buy a deadbolt for my door and called it a night.

A week after Frank had tossed his CD player and speakers out his window, he knocked on my door.

"What is it, Frank?" I asked.

"I've got a new Living Room Thing," he told me. "You've got to see it!"

"It's better than the TV?"

"A lot better. No flicker, no reception problems."

"Better than the stereo?"

"Not as loud."

I opened the door, stepped out quickly, and shut it behind me.

"Okay, Frank," I told him. "Let's go see."

The big chair was still there, but now it faced a large, well-lit fish tank that sat in the corner. There were about 20 fish swimming in it, chasing each other and annoying the tiny lobsters, or crayfish, or whatever they're called, that were crawling along the bottom.

"Is this it?" I asked, pointing toward the tank.

"Yeah. No reception problems, no static. Quiet. Soothing. Fish."

"Where'd you get them? They don't sell fish at Electronics Emporium, do they?"

"Nope. But there's a pet store next door."

"What made you want to buy *fish?"*

"I have dreams," he said. "Fish are in them."

"What kind of dreams?"

"Fish dreams," he said. "In my dreams, the fish are always swimming. People are dying, but the fish keep swimming."

"What's killing the people?"

"It depends on the dream. Sometimes they're being tortured to death, other times they just get shot in the head. But no matter *what* the dream is, the fish keep swimming. That, and…"

Something caught in his throat.

"And?"

"'Copacabana.'"

"Excuse me?"

"I can't hear any real sound in the dreams. People are dying, but I can't hear their screams. All I can hear is the muzak version of 'Copacabana'."

"You mean Barry Manilow's 'Copacabana'?"

"That's the one."

I had to admit, Frank had stumped me on this one. I had absolutely no idea what to say.

"Could I take a look at the fish?"

"Sure," he said, and led me to the side of his tank. Frank began pointing at fish, though they moved so fast that I couldn't tell which ones he actually meant to single out.

"That one's Barry," he said. "And there's Rico, and Lola, and that one in the back is Mandy — "

I stepped away from Frank and took a look around the room. It was almost completely barren, except for a couple posters, the chair, and the tank.

"You know, this place would be nicer if you moved the tank out of the corner," I told him.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Why not put it closer to the center of the room? Maybe by the — "

He squinted at me when I stopped in the middle of my sentence.

"What?"

Maybe by the window.

Frank's window looked exactly like mine. But I couldn't help but think of everything he had tossed out that window. Putting the fish near the window wouldn't help matters any — especially if, on the day that Frank gets tired of hearing "Copacabana," you're one of the fish in the tank or you're taking a walk on the sidewalk under his window.

"Don't worry about it," I told him. "Look, Frank, thanks for the tour. I've got to go."

"Sure," he said. "Come back sometime, and say 'Hi' to the fish."

"Sure."

I turned and left as quickly as politeness would allow. I never wanted to come back to Frank's apartment, especially not to make friends with his fish. The poor devils

Gravity

JASON SNELL

It started when Frank's CD player tried to kill me on my way to work.

I had just come down the stairs from my second-floor apartment, and was already sweating. I could tell that the day would be hot and humid. There wasn't a cloud in the sky.

There was, however, a large compact disc player eclipsing the sun. For a second, my half-open eyes marveled at the sight of its descent. Then I jumped.

It landed about a foot behind me, and skidded across the sidewalk. Plastic shards were scattered everywhere.

"Frank!" I yelled up at the open third-floor window. "You could've killed me with your goddamned CD player!"

A shape slowly inched out his window.

"Fucking *digital clarity!"* he screamed from inside.

Frank's window was giving birth to a large stereo speaker.

"Too clear! Too loud!" he shouted. The speaker picked up speed, slid all the way out the window, and began to fall end-over-end toward the CD player that had almost done me in.

"Too fucking loud!" Frank shouted as it smashed into the sidewalk.

As I rounded the corner on my way to work, I heard another crash come from behind me. Frank's second speaker had joined its brethren in death, the third victim of some bizarre stereo component suicide pact.

My dear upstairs neighbor seems to be on some sort of quest. He's searching for the ultimate home entertainment device, and he's *very* temperamental.

When I moved into the apartment in March, everything seemed wonderful. Living on my own was great, especially after twenty years with my parents — now I could have people over at all hours of the night, could listen to my music any time I wanted to, and I didn't have to worry about my parents walking in on me while a female guest and I were buck-naked on the couch.

Then I met Frank.

About three weeks after I had moved in, there was a knock at the door. It was Frank Cole, a 30-year-old man with an Electronics Emporium name-tag pinned to his plaid shirt.

"Hi," he said to me. "My name's Frank."

"I noticed," I said. "It's nice to meet you, Frank. My name's Jim."

"Hi, Jim. I live upstairs." Frank gave me a wide smile.

"I see."

"I'm going to throw out my TV," he told me.

"Really."

"Would you like to come and see?"

I was going to turn him down, but didn't really want to alienate the person who was living above me. If I made him angry, he could retaliate by jumping up and down on my ceiling any time he felt like it.

"Sure," I told him. "Why not?"

Frank led me upstairs to his apartment, stopped outside the door, and pointed into the dark room.

"You first," he said.

At first, I thought that I couldn't see any of Frank's furniture because it was so dark. Then I realized that Frank didn't really *have* much in the way of furniture. In the center of the room was an overstuffed chair. The chair faced a home entertainment system, including a wide-screen TV, that stood in the far corner. There was nothing else in the room except for me. And Frank.

"Nice TV," I told him. "Where'd you get it?"

"I got it at Electronics Emporium. And it's not a nice TV."

"It sure looks nice. Mine's a ten-inch black-and-white. This has got to be three times that size."

"Four times. It's a 41-inch diagonal rear projection TV with Digital Stereo Hi-Fi Surround Sound."

"Nice TV."

"It's *not* a nice TV. I'm going to throw it out."

"What's wrong with it, Frank?"

He pointed at the big chair. "Sit, and you'll see."

I have no idea where Frank got the thing, but it even had *feet*, like those old-fashioned claw-foot bathtubs. As I sank into it, Frank ran over and turned on the TV.

"You'll see. You'll see."

The TV warmed up. One of those awful game shows that tries to match up couples and send them on dream dates was on. I had auditioned for two of them, but they said I wasn't their type. I guess I wasn't dreamy enough.

"Stupid show," I said.

"Yes. Television is a waste of time — the shows are terrible, the sound — even if you've got a Wide-Screen Rear Projection TV with Digital Stereo Hi-Fi Surround Sound — is incomprehensible, and…"

"And?"

He raised his finger to his mouth. "Shh."

"I'm telling you, Chuck, I didn't want to spill the salad dressing all over Marcie's new dress…"

"Listen to that," Frank said. "Terrible. The sound's terrible. Even with Digital Stereo Hi-Fi Surround Sound. Even then."

"Is that all?"

"Of course not! You're in the chair. You can see. *It's too bright!"*

"Why not just use the brightness knob?"

Frank looked angry, as if I was insulting his intelligence — which I was.

"Because then it would be too *dark."*

Ah.

"Well, if you'll excuse me, Frank… I've got to get back to what I was doing before." I pulled myself out of the

shrill whine, eating up the air, blotting out the natural, beautiful noises of this place, which they had begun to take for granted.

Picasso was the first to notice that the sky was falling. He pointed wildly in the direction of the river, his eyes becoming insanely dilated with fear. Monet turned to see the huge dome of the sky apparently collapsing into the horizon. Looking up, they beheld the entire sky moving, and looking away from the river, they beheld an arc of darkness, opening slowly over their heads.

When Rembrandt could finally see, he beheld a miniature landscape in front of him, revealed by a slowly opening domed lid. Above, two harsh globes hovered in the darkness, radiating a fierce light down on the landscape. The landscape itself consisted of a network of miniature glass spires, interconnected by a series of streams. In the center of the landscape, stood an enormous black tower, dwarfing the crystal spires. At the base of that tower, two figures were clasping their hands over their ears, trying to shut out the sound of the enormous dome, looking off, away from Rembrandt, at their horizon, where even now the final edge of the dome was disappearing into the ground.

For a moment, Rembrandt stood in awe, amazed by the beauty of what lay before him. Then he began to understand what he must do. They had given him a chance for revenge now, and he intended to make use of it. He reached a tentative hand out towards the cowering duo.

Out of the corner of his eye, Picasso caught movement. He turned, his eyes registered the image, but his mind refused to grasp its import. Slowly, he stood, watching the enormous hand, fingers outstretched, come closer and closer to a similarly transfixed Monet. As they touched, Rembrandt and Monet, a surge of light, stronger than any he had ever seen, overpowered him, followed by a surge of darkness.

When Picasso awoke, he was lying face down on a beach, the heat of the suns beating down on his body. When he stood, he could see the familiar landscape of the city surrounding him, although he appeared to be on a small island, separated from the city on all sides by a vast expanse of water.

For hours, he walked up and down the beach, trying to find some inkling of what had brought him here, what had happened after, or before, or during. His memory of the event was spotty, but he vaguely remembered the giant hand, the blinding light. He found no trace, no indication that any of what he remembered had actually happened. No tower, no domed sky, no metal globe hanging dutifully above his shoulder.

He sat on the sandy shoreline and watched the waves wash up and down the beach. For a brief moment, they were one with the City, endlessly rippling through variation after variation. He was sitting at the window. He was hanging high from a tree-branch. He was flying alongside the parrot, hearing what it could never hear. A tremor came up through the desert island, shaking a few of the rocks loose further up the beach where the sand turned into a desolate moonscape. In the sky, the suns raged furiously. Picasso often wondered what they talked about, the suns. He imagined debates on philosophical issues and moral principles which he, as a mere human, could not possibly comprehend. He was one of them. Even as he was the earth, the stars and the sky.

He wondered, only for a moment, where the others were. Not Rembrandt and Monet, but the others. The background characters that make any story complete. There were none. What was he doing? What was he thinking of when he had signed up for this meaningless existence? Had he even signed? How could one sign away one's soul, one's future, to a fool world with multiple suns that didn't even make sense most of the time. He slowly bent forward until his head lay in front of him in the wet sand. After a while, the tide came in and he ceased to breathe, but death did not come for him.

Like the buildings, shifting endlessly through their circular journeys, washing up and down on the shoreline of the forgotten island, his story was not, could never be, over.

This one, however, is.

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Will, by the time you read this, have graduated with a degree in Cognitive Science from Carnegie Mellon University. In his spare time, he raises killer cats, accumulates huge debts and enjoys crash-testing rental cars without insurance. Currently he's either engaged in a desperate search for employment or hitchhiking his way to Peru.
(Editor's Note: After the writing of this bio blurb, Dan — who also serves as editor of Quanta *— managed to locate a job as a computing consultant at Carnegie Mellon University. We assume this means the Peru trip is on hold.)*

"There is no other choice," the image Picasso said, a smile flickering across his face.

"You're beginning to think like me, Picasso," Monet replied, now grinning. Then image, and sound abruptly faded.

Rembrandt tried to grab hold of the railing, but it did not steady him, and he fell down across the heavy, metal stairs. He looked around wildly, for the walls now seemed to contain menacing shapes. A coldness gripped him and he shivered. "No," he mouthed.

The globe sat impassively over him, silent.

† † †

Dawn broke softly over the steeples of the fortress (Picasso had begun to think of it as a fortress sometime during his fitful sleep under its oppressive shadow.) Picasso's eyes sprang open to behold Monet sitting dutifully on the bank, legs collapsed between his arms, muttering to himself.

"You hate me, don't you?" Picasso said.

Monet looked up, surprised by the other's sudden utterance. "Why do you say that? I don't, by the way."

"You hate me because I forced this situation on you," Picasso responded deliberately, his arms extending above him in an expressive yawn. "I understand perfectly."

"Don't be an idiot. It was the only way."

Picasso sat up, then stood. "It wasn't though. Everything's gone terribly wrong. We should have stayed in the apartment — safe."

"Perhaps..."

Monet remained silent, morosely contemplating the shoreline and the clear blue water of the river.

"One thing is clear," Picasso stated. "We must either devise a plan to find Rembrandt, or move on. One of the two. Sitting here, morosely contemplating the shoreline isn't getting us anywhere."

Monet turned and stared pointedly at Picasso. "I don't think you're seeing the big picture..."

Picasso was taken aback. "How do you mean?"

"I mean that we have to take careful stock of our situation, Picasso. It is my opinion that we are being deliberately manipulated."

Rembrandt broke from his slumber fitfully, grasping out for a lightswitch which did not exist, and steadfastly refused to become existent. The thick black air coalesced around him, encasing him in a veil of darkness.

"Consider our situation," continued Monet. "We have been placed here, by some unknown force. We don't remember *how* we got here, don't really remember any of our backgrounds at all. And now we find ourselves in this unlikely situation; run aground beneath a huge tower, in the middle of some forgotten land."

Picasso stared dumbly at him. "I don't see what you're getting at, Monet."

"If this were a piece of fiction, it would be grossly unsatisfying. There's nothing for the reader to latch on to, no hook, no familiarity..." He turned and stared again out across the calm water. "...no meaning."

Picasso frowned as he regarded his comrade. "You seem depressed."

"We must find him. We cannot continue, in tacit acceptance of the events that enfold around us." So saying, Monet straightened up and began to walk calmly toward the base of the fortress. The metal globe hovering above his shoulder. After a moment, Picasso followed, drawn by the other's strength of purpose.

"Let us assume," Monet continued, "that we are pawns, playing for some unknown being's (or beings') pleasure. The question then becomes, 'Can we affect our own destinies?' "

"But how could we know if we were pawns? What if every action we took were pre-determined?" Picasso chimed in. He was beginning to catch up to Monet's thought process.

Monet continued, "Unfortunately, we can't know."

"You seem to be painting yourself into a corner..." Picasso remarked under his breath.

By the time they reached the base of the fortress, they were both panting from lack of breath. The base of the fortress was smooth, a huge obsidian wall that rose up before them beyond all reason. Monet moved his hand closest to the wall.

Rembrandt continued to crawl through darkness, following brief and faint flashes of color which played over his retinas. Perhaps they were products of his imagination, but the overwhelming darkness forced him to make a goal, any goal, and follow that goal ruthlessly. As he crawled, too scared to walk, lest he fall off some ledge or walk into a wall, he began to mutter furtively to himself.

"Damn Picasso for leading me out here. Damn Monet — the smug bastard. A plot, that's what this has been. 'Let's get rid of that annoying Rembrandt fellow, Picasso.' 'Ok, Monet old boy, how do you suggest we do it?' 'Well...' "

There was a hollow knocking sound. Rembrandt strained his eyes to look towards the source of the sound, but it deliberately refused to come into view, hiding guiltily in the pitch-blackness of this place. He was on the verge of beginning his crawl again, when another loud, reverberating knock was issued from above.

"Who's there?" he yelled out, half in panic.

Several smaller knocks followed, modulating into a creaking, as of an ancient hinge, only now being opened after years of neglect. And with the noise came light, blinding tempests of light, pouring down from above. Rembrandt, temporarily blinded, could only desperately cover his eyes, waiting for the pain to subside.

As Monet was about to touch the wall, a tremendous thunderclap sounded, sending both Picasso and him to the ground, clasping their hands over their ears in agony. Another thunderclap sounded, followed by a series of smaller ones which seemed to quicken until they were a

the right hand side of the base, they saw that the river ended there. The rushing water fell into gratings some three miles from where the river had forked.

Confused by this, Picasso again pulled his map out and began to scrutinize it. "That's odd," he intoned. "If we're where I think we are, roughly in the center of the circular region, here, the map shows the river continuing beyond this point."

Rembrandt turned to him, just as they were coming up on the end of the river. "Well either your map is wrong, or you're interpreting it wrong. Here, let me have it." He reached past Monet and snatched it out of Picasso's hands, just as their canoe grounded itself in the shadow of the huge structure.

The instant they hit ground, Rembrandt and map were gone. A shadowy image replaced the space he had inhabited only a moment before, then nothing. Picasso and Monet could only stare. Monet, being within hand's reach of Rembrandt's former volume, reached out cautiously, as if still expecting to find something there. When he did not, he waved his hand around tentatively, then furiously, anxious to find some indication that Rembrandt was (or had ever been) there.

Picasso simply stared, open-eyed, silent, their collars glowing a deep azure.

Rembrandt turned to Monet, who was not there. Frustrated at Monet's absence, he turned inquisitively to Picasso to find him also absent. It was only at this point that he began to re-evaluate his situation. The surroundings had changed but there had been no jump, no discontinuity. The grey walls that now surrounded him seemed always to have been there. There was no other explanation. And yet, he remembered the shoreline; the canoe; the map! He looked about him, and found it also missing. He shook his head in an attempt to rid himself of this confusion, but the confusion remained, undaunted.

He began to sit, but fell, instead. Suddenly annoyed at the non-appearance of a chair, he scrambled to his feet, determined to do *something*. But there was nothing to do. It was at this point that he noticed the golden sphere. There was no way to know if the sphere had been there when he had 'appeared,' for lack of a better word. It was there now, however. It shimmered, suspended halfway between floor and ceiling, awaiting instructions. Where had that thought come from, Rembrandt wondered. Indeed, he had the distinct feeling that the sphere was somehow awaiting direction, or instruction.

Shrugging his shoulders, he said "come here."

Dutifully, it approached, bobbing slowly through the air until it hovered not a foot away from him. Well, at least something obeys me around here, he thought.

Monet sat on the sandy bank of the river, staring out into the darkness, while Picasso paced back and forth behind him, a gold globe floating dutifully above his head.

"These idiotic globes don't seem to be any use," Monet remarked sourly, belting the one which hovered next to him in an offhand manner. "I mean — what's the point of a metal globe that follows you around — can it do anything? Can it produce food?" He looked pointedly at it. "Produce food." It remained silent. "Nothing." He looked away, disgusted.

Picasso stopped and regarded his globe, which he had almost forgotten about; he was contemplating the dimensions of the structure towering over him. Even though the darkness hid its form, it still seemed to loom over them, a tangible presence bearing down, making the very air heavier with its unimaginable countenance. "They could be monitors — They could serve no purpose at all, other than to report back to their masters what our doings are."

"Why, then, do they seem to obey our simple commands?"

"A ruse? Trickery?"

Monet's lips cracked into a wry smile. "You're beginning to think like me, Picasso." His expression soured again as his thoughts returned to Rembrandt. Monet was accustomed to thinking of Rembrandt as a fool, and it did him no good at all to be worried for him, even, perhaps, guilty that he did not.

"You know," Picasso interrupted. "The globes may simply seem unable to obey commands about food and such because they are unable; assuming they themselves can't transport us."

"A broad assumption, considering Rembrandt's case," Monet retorted.

"Nevertheless, assuming that: Perhaps there is no food to be found here. And no way into the structure above?" He turned to regard the globe coldly. "Perhaps these globes once served some purpose, as rudimentary guiding machines, but there is no longer anything to be guided to."

"A cold thought, Picasso. A cold thought."

"Come morning, we have to move on. There is no other choice."

"Without your Map?" Monet raised his eyebrows.

"Indeed. Our goal is still the same. We must reach the region marked as 'the edge'."

Monet cut in "Without a Map, how can we?"

"Dead reckoning."

Monet, silent to this, continued to stare out into the clear water.

Rembrandt, accompanied by the small gold ball, climbed a metal staircase with metal walls.

"Considering Rembrandt's case." Rembrandt spun around at the sudden voice of Monet, but saw no-one.

"Come morning, we must move on." Now Picasso's voice hung in the air.

"A cold thought, Picasso. A cold thought."

Rembrandt's eyes widened as he ascertained the source of the conversation — the metal sphere. And, within the sphere, the ghost of an image — Monet and Picasso, sitting on the sandy river-bed.

were typically haggard but seemed like they at least had some life left in them. They varied in shape but all of them seemed like meeting halls of some sort. Some, perhaps were large stores? Some were simply strange. About half a mile from where they started, there loomed across their path a huge sphere with no visible entrance or window.

"We're going to hit that," Rembrandt stated nervously.

Picasso did not seemed distressed. "It doesn't look like it now, but there's space underneath it."

Still, it loomed up in front of them. Rembrandt strained to look for Picasso's opening but he couldn't find it. What if the space underneath had shrunk? What if the huge sphere were slowly sinking into the river, eventually to cut it off and form a dam? "You're sure."

Monet spoke: "Shut up."

"Well, I'd prefer not to be crushed to death today, ok?" Rembrandt spat back, but by that time they were close enough that he could see there was indeed a space underneath the huge structure. Still, he was nervous until they had reached open air. When they emerged from underneath, an entirely new scene awaited them.

For a moment, they all sat, mesmerized. There had been no warning, no sign that such a violent change would take place. In contrast to the drab, decimated landscape behind them, spires made seemingly of cut glass or even diamond towered over the them. Inexplicably, the river which was silty and muddy before had turned crystal-clear. Rembrandt wasn't sure when the transition had taken place but his mind didn't stay on this long for he immediately noticed that the sky had changed color.

"It's a dome," someone said. Rembrandt was so awestruck that it took a few seconds for Rembrandt to register that it had been Monet speaking. He could see now that Monet was right. Running across the sky, intersecting in a triangular pattern were white lines which must have been support beams. It was impossible for Rembrandt to judge how far away those beams were.

Monet looked at Picasso accusingly. "You didn't tell us..."

"I didn't know," Picasso cut him off sharply, unrolling his map and studying it. "The city constantly moves and changes. From studying the map, I've found that individual buildings move but large sections of the city also can move." He indicated a portion of his map, a circular region marked in the center by a †. "This area must be what we've entered now. The river we're on clearly intersects it now, where it didn't before." At this point the reader might be getting slightly annoyed by the ubiquitous presence of this map. The map is only vaguely described, and seems to pop up only when convenient. Perhaps a full description of the map would help to ground it a bit....

Picasso put away his map and began to steer again.

"This wasn't here when you...?"

"Absolutely not."

"It's beautiful," Rembrandt said dreamily.

Monet looked up. "Yes."

A change in the wind brought with it a strange howling sound which sent a chill through the minds of the three travelers. If there was any doubt now that they would never return then it was the product of insanity, a derangement so grotesque as to be unthinkable. The sound was like a voice and yet was discernibly inhuman. Soon a second tone, higher and shriller than the first, started up as the lower and more sombre one began to die down. Rembrandt stopped rowing and stood transfixed as the tones rolled over him. As the first tone died away completely, he began to regain some composure and turned to stare back at the other two. Their eyes were glazed over, the whole of their brains devoted to their ears. Rembrandt had heard great symphonies during his time in the flat. His ears had been massaged by Beethoven, Bach, Mozart all in turn. No sound could compare in beauty to the simple tones he heard now.

"It's got to be some atmospheric phenomenon; a by-product of the dome structure, perhaps..." Monet's words cut across Rembrandt's dreamy mood like a hot knife. He looked back at the other to see a face still transfixed. Monet's mind was more analytical, or at least a portion of it was. Looking more closely, Rembrandt could see that his expression was not that of a man overcome by beauty but of a man in the throes of deep thought. Picasso, as always maintained his composure. Even now, Rembrandt could see that the sound was beginning to lose its effect on him. Picasso's eyes fell by the degree until they again rested on the horizon. Rembrandt looked back there as well, as another mesmerizing tone began to dominate their surroundings.

† † †

"Look!" The voice was Monet's. Their journey through the domed country had lasted more than a day now. So far, the scenery had been somewhat uniform, but as Picasso followed the line traced by Monet's pointed finger he began to feel that their fortunes were about to change. Just on the edge of the horizon in front of them there stood an island. There, barely visible, there was a huge building, itself the size of a small city, judging from the distance. Picasso tried a quick mental calculation and dismissed his figures as outrageous.

It took an hour before he could begin to make out the details of the structure, and even then, there seemed no sense to it. It was a huge mass of twisted angles. It was in the rough shape of a mushroom, but with no curves. It was entirely composed of rectangular, triangular and rhomboid slabs, which jutted out unevenly around its mass. Crowning the top was a spire which reached fully twice as high as the building itself, and what appeared to be a cross.

In three more hours, it was looming up above them like a surrealist's nightmare. Furthermore, what they had taken to be an island had in fact been a peninsula. As they rounded

fact that they had lived together for so long (how long, he could not remember, but he knew, or sensed that it had been a great deal of time.) He tentatively spoke out. "It may help if we arm ourselves with a goal." He unfurled the map, and Rembrandt could see that already there were some changes from when he had looked on it last. The forms on the map remained static, though. Picasso spread the map out on a table which came into existence underneath it and indicated a position with an index finger. "We are here." Rembrandt could see their building, marked by a red ⊗.

"If we travel down the river this way," Picasso continued, tracing a line with his finger, following the blue streak of the river, until he reached a white ⊕. Next to the ⊕ were the words 'the edge.' "This can be our goal."

"The edge of what?" Monet spoke up.

"I don't know. On my journey, I travelled this way." He indicated the opposite direction from the ⊕. "It was here I found the map." He indicated a — sitting on the side of the river. "It was lying on what looked like an altar, outside a huge stone cathedral.

"I think I've seen that building," Rembrandt piped up.

"This," he again indicated the ⊕, "is the only representation on the map to be labeled. That must hold some significance."

"But we have no idea what," Monet cut in. "Your addition of the 'goal' to our journey is as meaningless as the journey would have been in the first place!"

"Nonsense!" Rembrandt almost shouted. "Don't you see what this means? 'The Edge' obviously indicates an escape route — a passage to somewhere else."

"But it occurs nowhere near the physical edge of the city," Monet argued, gesturing violently towards the map.

Rembrandt's collar began to grow brighter again. "The city moves! Picasso has confirmed this."

Monet nearly pounced on Rembrandt. "You're just worried you won't find anything and then you won't be able to come back. If you go, it's final. You can't stand the thought of being trapped out there with me in here. Look at yourself!"

Rembrandt sighed as if the tension and energy of the day and of the moment were released in that one moment. As his collar cooled back to its normal azure shade, he plunked down into a form-fitting couch which had not existed a moment before and looked away, toward the now-darkened window. "Perhaps you're right."

Monet simply looked pleased with himself.

"But did it occur to you that you too would be trapped within this apartment?" Rembrandt started again, this time more with a pleading tone than with anger.

"He's got a point. I intend to go back out and to not return. Rembrandt certainly intends to do the same."

"Picasso, I always figured you for such a level-headed fellow," Monet replied, more to himself than to any other speaker.

"That I am, Monet."

⊕⊕⊕

They left two mornings after.

The huge portal rolled back into its frame with a chilling finality. When it was done, and the three were left outside of the door, looking back at their former abode, there was only silence. Rembrandt felt a shudder down his spine and felt for a second that he had left something very important in the house, but he knew that there was nothing. The parrot could not be coaxed out and that had disturbed him greatly, but other than that he was content to start his new life. After the decision, Monet's attitude had changed from sullen apathy to sullen acceptance. He kept up with the others as they walked down towards the rushing river, but his expression was colored with jaded overtones.

Picasso led the others down to the dock and pulled his makeshift canoe by the tether he had so carefully fashioned. He, too was scared, although he felt compelled to exude an air of detached superiority. He was, after all, supposed to be the experienced one. It had been his idea to brave the exterior city. But now he was committed. He knew that he had let himself be prodded into it by Rembrandt's urgings, but now there was no going back. One leg at a time, he stepped into the canoe, and looked back at the other two expectantly.

After much fumbling, they were clear of the dock and paddling swiftly down the river: Picasso steering with one oar, Monet providing the grim motive power with the other and Rembrandt sitting in the prow looking forward. As the city sped past them on all sides, Rembrandt began to sing softly to himself.

Looking back on the building they had come from, they now saw how much it towered over this section of the city. It was a giant, standing amongst midgets; a massive stone monolith which tapered at its top to a sharp point. As Rembrandt looked back, he counted up floors until he reached the tenth, in some vain hope of finding a toehold of familiarity, but his effort was fruitless. Every story was the same. They had never been able to enter any of the other apartments.

The terrain they were now passing through was fairly familiar to Rembrandt already, but it took on a completely different aspect when viewed from the ground. From ten stories up, all had seemed orderly and neat but now the true nature of the city was becoming apparent to him. Many of the buildings were only empty shells where residences and markets may once have existed but were no more. It seemed to Rembrandt that the material used in these shells must have somehow outlived the interiors of the structures. Pieces of what he took to be building material hung tattered from gaping holes. Some of these were so close to the ground that the river had spilled into them. They had become part of the river, and the river had carried away their contents, but the shells remained, indestructible.

Once in a while, sitting among these rotting shells, there appeared a larger, more grandiose structure. These

"Let me in!"

It was Picasso. It was definitely the muffled voice of Picasso.

Rembrandt sat up in bed, his eyes springing open.

"Let me in!"

There was no mistaking the voice. He sprang up and walked to the edge of the room, the wall parting as he passed through it. A story which switches back and forth between two or more characters' points of view can be very confusing indeed. The Parrot, being deaf, heard nothing.

The main door was the only object in the building which actually required some effort to affect. When Rembrandt arrived, Monet was already there, eying the circular stone carefully.

"Why haven't you started?" Rembrandt asked accusingly.

"You know very well that I couldn't even make a start by myself. It takes two."

Rembrandt knew this, but he needed some excuse to abuse Monet nonetheless. He hated himself for this need but he made no outward apologies. He moved towards the massive stone that covered the main entry way and began to push. "Come on!"

Monet followed suit, muttering something under his breath. Soon the slab of stone was rolling under their combined pressure. A small crack of the doorway was uncovered. This crack slowly grew in size until a small man stepped through, a canvas bag slung over one shoulder. Outside, they could see his makeshift canoe tethered to the railing of the stair. None talked until the stone was set securely back into place. When the task was accomplished, Monet and Rembrandt looked their colleague over in frank interest.

"Well, don't you have any questions?" Picasso's zealous voice broke the silence.

"You're quite a sight," Monet commented with more than a hint of cynicism in his voice.

"You two are quite a sight yourselves! A sight for sore eyes."

"Didn't you find anyone else?" Rembrandt asked cautiously.

"No one."

"No one?"

"Not a soul."

Rembrandt paled. "Then we are truly alone."

Picasso walked over to him, trailing mud and silt from his feet. "Don't lose hope yet! I didn't cover even a fraction of the city. The city is even more immense than it looks from the window. It will take years to explore it all," but as soon as the words escaped Picasso's lips he knew that they had been a mistake. Rembrandt was like a small child. His urge for instant gratification overpowered his reason and his logic. The thought that exploring the city might take *years* or even *weeks* filled him only with grief.

"That long?" he sighed and hung his head.

"But now we are armed with a weapon." Picasso reached into his back and pulled forth a paper scroll. Spreading it out on the floor of the entryway, he declared "this, as far as I can tell, is a map. A map of the city."

Monet scoffed. "But that's plainly ridiculous, Picasso. As we have observed, the city is a moving landscape, it never remains constant. How can one make a map of such a place?"

Picasso waved his hands in the air as Monet spoke, obviously quite excited. "That's what I first thought, but I found this map infinitely more useful than I first expected it to be."

"Do you mean that it changes with the city?" Rembrandt queried, wide eyes turning to stare at the unfurled scroll.

"I've never actually *seen* it change, but it always seems to show basically the correct configuration. While travelling back from here," he indicated a position on the map "I made it a point to stare at the map continuously for a good while. I never caught it changing, but somehow, the positions of the buildings, even though they were moving, were always correct."

Rembrandt looked to Picasso in wonder and then stared back at the map. Monet simply started on the long trek up the winding stairs to their tenth floor apartment. Picasso rolled up the map, much to the dismay of Rembrandt, and also started up.

⊗⊗⊗

"So what are we to do?"

"It's clear that if more than one of us leaves this place, they won't be able to get back in. There's no way to move the door from the outside."

Rembrandt rolled his eyes at what he considered to be Monet's defeatist attitude. "But there's every possibility that we can find just as good if not better accommodations elsewhere within the city."

"There's no proof of that."

Picasso, who had remained largely silent throughout the conversation, saw fit to interrupt now. "I didn't find a way into any of the buildings, you know. I did tell you that, didn't I?"

"There's no other way."

"There is."

"No."

"I will stay," Monet stated in an infuriatingly final manner.

"If we go, you have to go with us!" Rembrandt was furious. His collar was bright green, and even seemed to grow brighter with each pulse of aggression. Involuntarily, he reached out into the air and a glass of ice-water appeared in his hand. He downed the water and his collar began to grow dimmer.

Picasso detested the way the other two always fought, but somehow he felt connected to both of them, if only by the

o'lantern.

David sat back down behind his desk, his job completed, the monster vanquished. Even Mrs. Wadlemire, now clothed in her traditional blue dress, would have to thank him. He had, after all, saved her class from a fate most probably worse than death. But she only looked at him, with her not-disgusted expression and said, "Very good, David."

Hmm. Some thanks that was.

A Handful of Dust

DANIEL K. APPELQUIST

Rembrandt looked out of his tenth floor window and crooned softly to the parrot perched on his wrist. The city lay outside, a strange mix of traditional, postmodern and futurist styles, now bathed in the light of the noonday suns, but Rembrandt's thoughts were elsewhere. His thoughts, specifically, were of Picasso. It had been ten days now since Picasso had ventured out into that cityscape and they had heard nothing. Not a peep.

Monet looked up from the table and spoke. "Anything?"

It took a few seconds for Rembrandt to respond, but his answer was quick enough not to provoke a second asking. "No. Just the same." He turned, and the parrot left his arm, flying off towards some unknown perch. "Do you really care?"

Monet sat back in his sparkling chair and gave Rembrandt an icy stare, but remained silent.

"What if he never comes back?" Rembrandt continued.

"He will."

"But what if he doesn't. You certainly wouldn't shed a tear."

Monet rolled his eyes. "Picasso and I have had our differences, but that's no reason for me to want him out of the picture."

Rembrandt sat down, and as he did so, a chair came into existence under him. His eyes were still locked on Monet's. Increasingly of late, he was beginning to believe that Monet was a bit off-color. At first, he had seemed simply withdrawn, but his arrogant attitude now betrayed something Rembrandt detested, something that was only now becoming apparent. "If he doesn't come back, what are *you* going to do?"

Monet's collar, normally green, suddenly glowed bright red, betraying his emotions to Rembrandt even if he would not openly display them. "I will remain here. I'm perfectly content to stay here."

"You're not curious about what lies outside the door?"

"I've seen it. You've seen it. You were just looking at it!"

"And that doesn't interest you?"

"Frankly, no."

Rembrandt looked away, disgusted. After a second or two, he looked back, his eyes gleaming with purpose. "Well it interests me. If Picasso doesn't come back by tomorrow, I'm going out after him."

"Very well."

"I'm tired of being cooped up in here like some sort of animal," Rembrandt continued, ignoring the other's response, still feeling the need to justify his decision.

"Fine."

"Has it occurred to you that that's all we are: Animals, performing for someone else's pleasure?"

Monet's tone grew brusque. "As a matter of fact, it has. I've spent a great deal of time thinking about who we are and how we got in this unlikely situation and, as I told Picasso, my conclusion is that it is best not to think about it." With this he looked back at Rembrandt, challenging him for some sort of rebuttal. Rembrandt snorted defiantly, got up, and left.

The sparkling remains of the chair slowly disintegrated as Monet looked back towards the table and his book.

A person reading a story might expect certain elements. For one, they might expect a setting which they could relate to. Certainly they would not want to be thrust into a cold, surreal universe where the characters are named after famous painters and chairs appear and disappear, seemingly at will. Any reader expecting this sort of textual trickery would be brutally disappointed by most modern fiction. In fact, it was just such disappointment which caused Monet to look away from his book after a short while and seek some other form of entertainment. He stood and walked slowly over to the window. As he turned his back, table, chair and book melted into nothingness.

The window presented him with the same shifting scene. Much of the cityscape lay below him now but a few of the buildings jutted up towards the sky. Many of the buildings lumbered along at a slow to moderate pace, some stopping momentarily in their journey to allow others to pass. As he watched, a massive stone cathedral slowly ground to a halt to make way for a squat, round building which looked like it might also serve some religious purpose. There were never any people to be seen in the city.

Monet leaned out towards the window and looked down. Below, the river was reasonably quiet. On some days, massive amounts of debris could be seen floating down it. Today, it merely streamed past, brown and silty, making oval patches of bubbly froth around the streetlights. For the first time, Monet thought it bizarre that there should be streetlights on a river, but this thought was dismissed from his mind by a sharp noise.

Multiplication And the Devil

DANIEL K. APPELQUIST

The rain poured steadily down on top of the one-room schoolhouse. To David, it sounded like the world was crashing down around him, and the normal routine of morning multiplication tables proved to be little comfort. David was smallish for his age, with sandy hair that didn't quite cover his gray eyes, eyes that were now closed tightly shut.

"David?"

The eyes sprang suddenly open in an expression that was a mixture of fear and surprise. "Yes, Mrs. Wadlemire?" The words came almost unconsciously, as his head swiveled to survey his surroundings. He saw only faces, turned towards him in amusement. There were only fifteen other children in the morning session, but to David it seemed like the entire population of some child-inhabited planet was staring him down, taunting him, making fun of his stupidity, his ignorance.

"I asked you: Would you care to recite the second row from the table?" She pointed a stiff, bony finger to the chart which hung on the wall. Conical hat and flowing black robes only materialized afterward in a brief flash.

"Uh..." Hat and robes were suddenly gone, as were the millions upon millions of rapt watchers. All was replaced with the suddenly confining space of the small classroom, rain still descending in a cacophony above his head. Mrs. Wadlemire, now clothed in her traditional blue dress, stared at him expectantly.

"Two times one is two," he began.

One by one, his classmates started to look back towards the front of the room.

"Two times two is four," he continued in his well-practiced monotone. The beating of the rain on the roof seemed to intensify. Mrs. Wadlemire may have said something. Something to do with fish, perhaps. Whatever it was, it was droned out by the incessant downpour.

"Two times three is six." At this point, the lights went out, shrouding the room in a sort of gray darkness, the color of rainy skies. Through the skylight, David could see a dark shape moving above. David squinted to see what it might be through the continually renewed layer of water, but its form remained indefinable.

"Two times four is eight." A face! For an instant, he could definitely make out a face, staring down at him from the otherwise featureless gray rectangle of the skylight. The face was full of strange, mixed-up features, and yet had been strangely familiar to him, as if it was one he was supposed to recognize.

"Two times five is ten." He looked around to see if anyone else had seen it, but the other children were all gone, replaced with cardboard cutouts, decorated with crayons. Only Mrs. Wadlemire seemed untouched by this strange transformation, as if whoever had affected it had let her be, out of disgust. Her face, now framed in harsh shadows, seemed like an amalgamation of the worst traits of mankind. In it he could see hatred, cruelty, as well as a host of other, equally undesirable traits.

"Two times six is twelve," still he recited on, as if any deviation from the norm might alert them to his presence; the monsters that stole children and replaced them with cutouts. A chill started to work its way up his spine. He could feel the presence of something behind him. A dank, musty odor assaulted his nose, almost eliciting a sneeze. He did not turn, for he knew that to do so would mean certain death. The whatever-it-was that he had seen on the roof had definitely made its way down here, somehow switching the other children in the class while he wasn't looking.

"Two times seven is..." he faltered. The answer was on the tip of his tongue. He had recited the same phrase over fifty times, but today it stuck in his throat like chunky peanut butter. He felt the presence behind him closing, closing on its target like some great snake, now ready for the kill. If only he could remember!

"David..." The voice of Mrs. Waddlemire cut through his concentration. Why didn't she do something? Was she blind? Didn't she realize that her class now consisted of a host of badly drawn replicas, one child and an unmentionable beast? Perhaps she had been in on it from the beginning!

"Fourteen," the momentary distraction of these thoughts was enough to dislodge the word from his throat and cough it up. In the presence of the word, the creature behind him seemed to shrink back, as if it couldn't bear to hear it. Mrs. Wadlemire, now blindfolded, holding a calculator in one hand and a chalkboard eraser in the other, smiled a faint smile and shifted inside the folds of her white robe.

"Two times eight is sixteen," he went on, causing the thing to shrink back even further (had it emitted a gasp of terror, just then?) One by one, the cardboard children were replaced with their flesh-and-blood equivalents.

"Two times nine is eighteen." He definitely heard a stifled cry from the creature (he dared not look back yet, lest he be turned into cardboard and become unable to recite the last verse of the deadly spell). Under the fluorescent lights, even Mrs. Wadlemire seemed to radiate a goodness, a quality which David found to be quite at odds with her Nazi armband and smart officer's cap.

"Two times ten is twenty."

With this last incantation, the beast shrieked in agony. In its death-throes, it managed to overturn a table, and set a globe careening down the aisle towards the blackboard with its immense claws, now waving randomly in the air. When David finally looked back at it, it had almost shrunk out of site, seeking to hide, in its disgrace, behind the plastic jack

in my apartment. Only honor students could study in their rooms during the day, and no one expected a teacher about. Philip Smethurst ambled past the showers, his back to me, and as he passed Rabinowitz's room, he let out the moan from "The Diary of Anne Frank." As much to my surprise as his, I pounced on Smethurst before he ever saw me, lifted him off the floor by his jacket, and held him against the wall, my fist pressed into his stomach.

I don't remember any words. I just raged. I saw him only once after that, when he gave the Valedictory.

I learned by the grapevine that after the summer break began, The Witherspoon School notified the parents of several of underclassmen that their sons could not return. Claiborne placed in The O'Gorman School the one senior who flunked, and the governor's son.

Viewed from a quarter of a century, Claiborne's seems a much cleverer way to handle the gambling than to panic as I had done with the water bombs, even though I still do not respect him.

When Claiborne succeeded Dr. Smitherman, he too metamorphosed into "Dr." and built a garage beside the President's Mansion for his new Lincoln. I heard he inherited even the leather, uncut books.

I understand that it took a few more complete turnovers to rid the place of all hints of scandal when marijuana hit in the early seventies; but The Witherspoon School survives, its good reputation intact. It has initiated even a few black students into reverence, not just football.

"Old Joe" Thompson and Dr. Geoffrey Smitherman eventually died, confirming my theologian friend's emendation, "So long as there's death, there's hope."

When I fled, I taught first at an Episcopal school outside the South. From there to London to teach poorer boys, in the slums. From there to my Ph.D. and teaching adults in college.

Each year at its Commencement, The Witherspoon School bestows several coveted awards, including the Bible Prize, given in perpetuity by the family of an early alumnus who died of a cold his first month as a missionary to Nigeria, to "that boy who in the view of the Senior Bible Teacher best demonstrates a rigorous understanding of Holy Scripture." I surprised no one when I posted the grades for the final examination outside the classroom: everyone had guessed that Robert Martin would win it.

Then Claiborne called me to the President's tiny office for my second and final visit. Dr. Smitherman sat high in the "W & N" chair. Claiborne leaned against the wall, stoking a cigar. I sank in leather.

"Mr. Smith, you have taught well for your first year," Dr. Smitherman said.

"Thank you. Next year I expect to revise..."

"We hope that you will cooperate with us so that you can teach here next year," Dr. Smitherman said.

"Cooperate?"

"It's about the Bible Prize, Lee," Claiborne blurted, ever impatient with Dr. Smitherman's delicacy.

"That's easy," I said. "Everyone knows that Robert Martin has won it. He has led all year, and I posted his final grade, a 99, which normally I reserve...."

"Not easy," Dr. Smitherman said, softly.

"Sir?"

"We cannot tell you any details. You must trust us. But Robert Martin has done something we prefer not to mention, ever. He cannot win the Bible Prize or any other."

"But he already has. I have posted the grades...."

"Lee," Mr. Claiborne said as paternally as when he advised me what kind of automobile to aspire to, "no one has ever said that the Bible Prize has to go to the boy with the highest score. You may freely consider other factors, like character. I believe that Edgar Bell scored second highest. He plans to preach. Robert Martin will study business at Shackville State."

"Mr. Smith, you have taught a good course. We hope that you will cooperate." Dr. Smitherman urged, not looking me in the eye.

6

Every other time that I have told this story, I have used it as a model for endurance not orchestrated, for risk without clear rules.

I have explained to all earlier audiences, as I told you at the beginning, that I left The Witherspoon School soon thereafter. Everyone charitably assumes that I walked away from Witherspoon with this courage of a different kind.

But I didn't. Actually I stayed on for two more short years. Edgar Bell won the prize and went to Evangel. Robert Martin never got to Shackville. He drowned in a sailing accident two months later.

I remember driving my black Falcon to the muddy lot behind the Field House. Boys and their families sloshed everywhere. I saw him several cars away, loading his gear.

My face said: "They pressured me; they made me; I'm sorry."

Robert seemed to see. I can't be sure. He waved from the gate of his family's station wagon, shrugged his shoulders, and winked.

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impatiently waited for Dr. Smitherman to retire so that he could replace him in the President's Mansion. Perhaps I misjudged him.

I learned later that few boys or faculty approached Claiborne for anything, except to listen. Isolated in my books and music, I did not notice their reticence and had to learn the collective wisdom on my own.

I had no discipline problems in class. Students respected my work ethic. If a boy ever did sass, I would squelch him with invincible sarcasm: "John, you are very perceptive and therefore will understand how important it is that you meet me here for two hours after class to analyze your perception."

But in the dark, after lights-out, I could not defend myself with words. As the newest faculty member of three on Senior Hall, I had a hard time when the boys tested me.

They usually started off playful enough. Birdcalls. Frog croaks. But I too soon took bait and shouted, "Who made that noise!?" or guessed wildly, "Poindexter, the next time you do that you'll sit in study hall for a week!"

This licensed the circus as clearly as if I had walked to the center ring. By three o'clock in the morning I might have nabbed three culprits, but the hall would remain littered with water bombs and other trash. Everyone, highly entertained, would wait for my next turn on duty.

Next I decided to ignore them, not to take even the first bait. Let the menagerie built to whatever crescendo their ears could bear, I would wait fortressed in my room. They gave up after about an hour, but resented me. My ploy might have worked if I used it when they first played, but now I was a spoilsport. They turned mean, to jew-baiting.

Rabinowitz played right into their trap. The moment someone made the wailing sounds used in the movie version of "The Diary of Anne Frank," Rabinowitz would run out of his room and bang on my door. They loved it better than water bombs.

I would stand in the dark hall for hours, but no one ever made the noises from a range close enough for me to catch him.

During Thanksgiving, I searched for evidence. With a master key, I crept through all 45 rooms on the hall. Lawrence's Lady Chatterly and Miller's Tropics had only recently broken the censors' backs, but the porn these rich boys sported would not be marketed publicly for another decade.

I stared for a long time, especially when I discovered in the drawer of a weightlifter the pictures of men having sex with men. If I had known such pictures existed outside my mind, I might have predicted Poindexter would have a stash. He often jerked off at the late bed-check; sometimes he waved! Yet he hoarded only dirty letters from his girl friend, no pictures at all.

Partly on instinct, partly because a box of my books had pushed the back out of my own laundry bin, I decided to check the backs of bins in several boys' rooms. I hit the jackpot on my first try. It opened to a casino.

Yes, as in mine, the back of the laundry bin opened into a low, narrow place under the roof, large enough to squeeze maybe two people. But behind the boys' bin, unlike mine, the narrow space opened into a much larger one that ran the full length of the shower room midway down the hall. In this secret space boys had placed a rug, several cases of whiskey, three slot machines, and enough other paraphernalia to keep up to fifteen gambling at any one time.

Even though I routinely eavesdropped, I had not expected anything like this. Once I had overheard a prefect on the hall say that the governor's son, a Form Two boy who lived in the Field House, had lost $1,000 in one card game, but I presumed that the prefect exaggerated, or referred to something that had happened during the previous summer.

Knowing that this evidence could blow the top off Witherspoon's reputation as one of the finest prep schools in the South, I went cautiously to Claiborne's Office. Closed for the holiday. I spotted his Ninety-Eight parked in front of the gym and trekked through the rain to his apartment at the back. Mrs. Claiborne, sensing my urgency, asked about my family, pointed to some fruitcake, and quickly left me alone with her husband.

Claiborne did not interrupt once during the whole time I told him what I had discovered. I omitted the parts about water bombs and jew-baiting, even the part about my plot to check the boys' rooms. I fibbed a bit; I said that a stranger had telephoned to tell me to look under the eaves.

Claiborne didn't question me. He didn't take notes. He just listened. For half an hour he listened.

After I had stopped, Claiborne said, "Now, Lee, have you told anyone else?"

"No, sir."

"Don't."

"Yes, sir."

"You've done a good job. Now let me take care of it completely. Do you understand?"

He already stood at the door.

"Well, yes, sir," I lied.

"Good."

He never mentioned it again.

5

I've told this story out loud at least a dozen times over the past quarter of a century, usually to close friends, but sometimes even to my classes. Since I don't know you, I'm pleased and a little surprised you've gotten this far. I never thought that in print I would risk sounding like Edith Bunker when she loses her main point to give you ten interesting minor ones instead.

But I never have come to terms myself with the main point. I know the minor ones add up to something big. Maybe you can tell.

I can easily conclude the part about the jew-baiting. By the time the boys returned from Thanksgiving, for the two weeks of term examinations, they had too much work even to think of late-night play. Then after Christmas, that seemed like another dispensation.

Until April. Mistakenly I left my copy of Emily Dickinson

Four years of bowl fanaticism at "Bigotry U." made me an apostate to sports religion. I worried that The Witherspoon School might revive that. Since new teachers often have to coach j-v teams, I made a point during orientation to visit the varsity workouts, hoping to influence my luck.

It paid off. At a break in football practice, I asked a coach, "What inning is it?" I got to advise the staff of the student newspaper.

But Rubbings no longer threatened me. By then I had learned to live with my secrets, to channel most energy into books and music as easily as tackles thrust it into another's gut. Besides, *The Sound and the Fury* and enough other works I admired had committed me to suicide before I would ever act on the passions that surged in the dark as I peeked out the blinds.

Instead, I feared the way that sports sucked me into their definition of courage as essentially physical, an endurance of pain and risk according to clear rules. That's why I never liked Hemingway. But so pervasive is the point of view, I knew I could easily fall back into thinking that only good athletes can win courage, like a team trophy at the annual steak banquet. In that world, waterboys like me live, if at all, off-sides, out-of-bounds.

I preferred to read "A Certain Slant of Light" and blast Mahler's Ninth down Senior Hall.

3

Robert Martin appeared to respect my terms. He never volunteered to give a talk at chapel, though faculty often recommended such speakers for the Ivy League. He never joined the glee club to sip sherry in the director's bachelor apartment and sit in the bachelor's chair monogrammed "V." Robert kept to himself his athleticism and any other religion he might have had; studied rigorously; and never made less than a 96 on any of my tests. He worked less hard for other teachers.

The more I learned about The Witherspoon School, the more I admired Robert Martin. Witherspoon's trustees had given Geoffrey Smitherman his "Dr." easily, since they also served as trustees of a nearby Baptist women's college. Dr. Smitherman's "publications" turned out to be several editions of a workbook on sentence-diagramming, taught in no other school and only in our own Form One. At his autumn tea, I examined a dozen of the impressive leather classics in Dr. Smitherman's living room and found not one with the pages cut.

Claiborne was easier to like, if not respect. Dr. Smitherman held the title "President," but Mr. Claiborne, as "Headmaster" actually ran The Witherspoon School. Claiborne did not even try to mask his pretensions.

"What did you buy that buggy for, Smith? Do you drive it with a rubber band?" he teased me publicly when he first spotted my new Falcon, parked so all could see it, by the new Demster Dumpster.

I had gone $2,100 into hock to buy it — $2,800 after interest — and I earned only $3,600 for the 9 months, plus my room and board.

"Seriously, Lee," he added when he invited me to join him and Mrs. Claiborne at their table in the refectory, "you will never know that you have arrived until you sit behind the wheel of a big car, smoking a cigar, knowing that it belongs to you."

I added *Babbitt* to the reading list for Senior Bible. Students could earn up to 10 extra points for their annual grade (at half a point per book) for each work that they tested well on, in an oral examination.

"God makes 100. I make 99. The highest you can make, 98," I explained.

Robert put all 10 of his points into storage by the end of the first semester, though he never needed them.

Amazingly, no boy ever let out that I had put Dr. King's *Strides Toward Freedom* on the list; some even read it, and those who did not, still seemed pleased to have a teacher that had heard of the outside world.

On Saturdays when anyone went to town, he had to pass a Hospitality Tent which the KKK had set up in a mill village. Management had closed the mill and moved the work to Hong Kong and Taiwan when local labor organized. News about sit-ins in the Carolinas gave the white unemployed something different to get worked up about.

Dr. Smitherman addressed the new unrest the same way that he had addressed the "Race Problem" every year for over thirty years. He talked at chapel about "Old Joe," the barber to boys when a young "Mr." Smitherman first came to The Witherspoon School.

"Joe is one of the finest human beings I ever met." Dr. Smitherman modulated a slight tremolo. "Mayors and governors would do well to imitate his honesty and his good humor. He loves Witherspoon boys. He helps us turn them into Witherspoon men. You should respect good Negroes. Don't stir up a fuss like unfortunate rednecks. If you treat the Negro kindly, the Negro will serve you well.

"Of course Old Joe would be the first to say that God does not intend for the races to mix socially. Right, Joe?"

Venerable Joe Thompson, now in his eighties, hauled out of retirement for this paid annual production, smiled generously and said, "Yes, sir. You are a good man, Dr. Smitherman!" He would smile to the audience and say, "Dr. Smitherman is a good man, boys, a good, good man."

"Boys," Dr. Smitherman would close, "Joe confirms what you learn when you study 'Mending Wall,' the great poem by Robert Frost: 'Good fences make good neighbors.' "

4

"He can't go behind his father's saying? What's 'behind' it?" I would ask my fifth-formers in the next period, given Dr. Smitherman's own prompt to teach the poem.

As far as I know, they never reported to Dr. Smitherman how I used Frost's own words to mince his interpretation. Claiborne probably would have enjoyed it if he could have understood it. I felt that he didn't like Dr. Smitherman and

To Comprehend The Nectar

LOUIE CREW

1

I did not expect Robert Martin to die. I fled The Witherspoon School soon thereafter. That's not the gamble I thought I took when it began.

Dr. Geoffrey Smitherman sat straight in a chair embossed "W & N". I sank in leather. The cotton of my new suit brushed a panel of the empire secretary which separated us. I had to tilt my head slightly to look him in the eye. We did not yet have air-conditioning. Early August. Not even a breeze.

"Mr. Smith, can you also teach Senior Bible?" he asked.

"Well, sir, I suppose I could, but I would prefer to teach only literature. I have finished my thesis on Shakes..."

"We will give you plenty of that, but we need someone to take the Bible class. Mr. Foxworthy retired in May. I see that you double-minored in religion and New Testament Greek at Evangel University. Foxworthy lacked rapport. He talked about missionaries and heathens. Quite candidly, our boys take the course mainly to impress the colleges. Bible on their transcript distinguishes us as a 'private' school. It also alerts admissions people that our graduates understand allusions."

"I could do it. It won't be a crip course though. I'll teach it as literature, not as Sunday School fare."

"Fine, Lee. I think you'll get along nicely here, especially since you attended The O'Gorman School."

"But O'Gorman is Witherspoon's biggest rival."

"You know a fine Southern boarding school first-hand. New faculty who went to public school often don't understand us. Our reverence. Not the fanatic kind, but you know what I mean. I believe Dr. O'Gorman wrote me that you won the Bonner Award 'For Unselfish Service' at O'Gorman. Did you not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good, can you attend faculty orientation the last week of August?"

"You mean I get the job?!"

"The boys won't arrive until Tuesday after Labor Day, except for the football team."

My new trousers peeled from the chair as I tried to rise.

"Thank you, sir. I am much obliged."

"But you haven't asked what salary we will give you," he smiled.

"Oh." I blushed. "That's not important. I'm sure you will treat me justly. It's the teaching that interests me, not the money."

"Excellent attitude!" he said. "Welcome to the Witherspoon family."

2

Later I learned how much Dr. Geoffrey Smitherman valued the word *family*. Because I had not pushed, he began me at the rate he gave to those without a master's.

But I had not exactly leveled with Dr. Smitherman either. I doubted that he would hire me if he knew that I no longer believed in God, or knew that at least I thought I didn't. Four years at Evangel, the world's largest bigotry institution, unconvinced me. I dropped my intention to preach and took up literature as a better venue for "a living sacrifice."

O'Gorman, had delivered me from a bad public school into a community of others who enjoyed homework. But teaching as a graduate student at a large state university taught me that too few others value their brains. I had found such people at O'Gorman; I might find others at Witherspoon.

I tease fiercely, and teach best by what I call "creative intimidation." Boys liked my classes. Since I began school early, at age 5, I was only four years older than some of them. Many got close, especially the brighter ones.

But my best student, Robert Martin, rarely said a word, except in class, where he shined. At O'Gorman, I had groveled too often.

Robert's football teammates teased him about his early lead in my class, and would importune me to tell how soon I would post the grades for the latest Bible test. Robert himself never asked. Was it arrogance? Robert seemed to presume that he would best his closest rival, Edgar Bell; and on every test he did, by at least three points.

Robert was prefect to second-formers in the Field House, but he came to see his classmates on Senior Hall often and could have dropped by with them to my apartment, had he chosen to. His friend Philip Smethurst, heir to a textile fortune, visited often enough, and even brought others, especially when I bought one of the first stereo sets. Sometimes second-formers, not even in my classes, came with him. But Robert never once did. Even at the refectory, he seemed not to notice. He didn't avoid me, just didn't notice and passed right by the faculty tables without a nod.

The perpetual shadow of his black beard made Robert seem older than the others, but not sensual. Even now, over twenty-five years later, and on much maturer terms with myself, I cannot imagine myself in darkness peeking out blinds to look at him, as night after night I waited to see either of his classmates, the two prefects in the next building, shirtless, scratch balls.

Robert triggered fantasies less sensual. They had something to do with power, not his modest skills as a tackle, but his ability to stay with a commitment until he won.

At O'Gorman, I had escaped playing sports by becoming the athletic trainer. At games I was a glorified water boy, but after hours, with tongue depressors I swabbed many a hero's jock itch with slabs of what looked like peanut butter and smelled like axle grease. I aimed deep heat at others' sore buns; ground analgesics into others' shoulders.

"How do you know his sister?"

"From school. You know her," said Deavon.

"I do?" asked Mark.

"Yeah, she's a year ahead of us, sixth grader, got black hair, kinda' tall.

"Whose class is she in?"

"Mr. Deiter's." Mark searched his mind as he waited in the knee deep water. Impatiently Deavon said, "You know who I'm talkin' about. Black haired girl with those big titties that are always bouncing up and down the hall."

"That's Tricia Stueben's brother?" exclaimed Mark, pointing to the road with one of the mussels.

"Yeah. That was Boobin' Stueben's older brother, Steve," said Deavon.

"He looks kind of old to have a sister in sixth grade. Is he a senior?"

"No. He's out. Just works on his truck and drives around bothering people," said Deavon. In the distance, the engine rumbled and became louder as it approached. The two boys looked at each other and faced the road. Rumbling down, right on top of them, the truck appeared from around a turn. A long haired, bearded man in the passenger side leaned out of the window and shouted, "Fuckin' nigger!! Go back to Whittsett where you fuckin' belong!"

Mark threw one of the mussels. It missed the truck and spun across the road.

Stueben gunned the engine. The truck raced red and gray back through the trees. The planks bounced in tandem. Loudly, *Ba Boom!*

Deavon got out of the water and found an old coffee can. He filled it and spilled water on the plate two or three times. The water dried quickly over the hot metal, but cooled it enough so he could walk across. He stepped up onto the plate and sat in a puddle where the water had collected near the edge. The metal banged against the stone.

The boys fished silently for the rest of the day. Using the other mussel as bait, Deavon caught two or three bluegill and a very small perch. Mark caught another sunfish, but lost a catfish caught with one of Deavon's nightcrawler's. In the warm water, their fish lay curled and stiff. Only the tiny perch, the most recent catch, lived on the stringer. Snapping violently, it made a gentle splash.

Mark leaned back on his elbows and looked up. Deavon sat stiff armed; tilted back on his hands. His legs hung flaccidly over the edge of the plate. He's still looking out, ahead; thought Mark.

"So Deavon, you wanna get out of here?" he said through a loud yawn.

"Yeah. Let's go home." he said and silently stretched.

They brought in their lines and gathered up their gear. Mark surveyed the ground for any hooks and bobbins that might have fallen from his vest; then, he put it on. Its rough canvas stung his sunburned shoulders.

Deavon wrapped his line around the base of the bamboo pole and put the red and white bobbin in his pocket. The large ball bulged tightly against the denim. Looks like old man Sweeney's goiter, thought Mark. He jumped off the plate onto the cracked clay bank and walked over to Mark.

"How are you gunna take your fish home?" asked Mark, holding the stringer.

"With this." Deavon reached in his pocket and pulled out a length of blue nylon cord.

"I'll run this through their mouth, out their gills, and carry em' like this." Holding the ends of the rope, he showed Mark how they would hang.

"That'll work; but you're not gunna keep that perch, are you?" asked Mark.

"Hell yeah, I'm gunna keep it."

"Deavon, you can't be serious. It isn't more than three inches long," exclaimed Mark.

"So."

"So, how are you gunna eat it? You'll cut most of it away when you clean it."

"No I won't. I'll give it to my grandmother. She grinds them up and makes fried fish cakes."

"All of it? Won't she cut off the head and the tail?"

"I don't know. All I know is she tells me to bring home all the fish I catch and them cakes is *gooood*," Deavon said smiling.

Up on the road, like cut-outs of half moons made in grade school, one black, one white, they moved in a common sky. One passed behind the other, grabbed at the sagging limbs of a choke-cherry tree; the other crossed over and tormented a garden spider webbed in a barbed wire fence. At the plank bridge by the swamp Deavon turned to Mark and asked, "So, what are you gunna do about tomorrow?"

"Go down to Whittsett," answered Mark.

"Are you gunna ride your bike?"

"No. I'll walk down in the morning."

As they crossed the bridge, the planks wobbled under their feet. Softly, *Ba Boom*.

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Mark brushed the rusty dust from his hands.

Around the reservoirs, styrofoam bait cups are all you could find, thought Mark. Fishermen from Virgin Run, who stop at the reservoir to use up old bait, leave them lying around without even a worm or two. Inside the cups, there's only perfect dirt; the kind that comes with bought worms: no roots or coal or clay or bits of coke ash, just perfect little moist chunks like black cottage cheese.

Mark looked at Deavon standing on the plate. He wore cut-off shorts and his slight body bent backwards. His stomach stuck out a little and appeared to have an inflated stretch, like a round balloon pulled from both ends. His rich black skin seemed to absorb the sun, soaking it into his body, never to release it.

He stands just like those African bushmen, the ones on TV specials about Kenya or Botswana, out there on the Serengeti or Kalahari. They always look so curious, so concentrated, he thought; still, but in motion with small pieces of hide around their waists and a stick at their side. What are they looking at? Maybe a lion or rhino. No. It had to be something else. Something harder to discern. A small deer maybe. Dad always said how hard it was to see deer when he went hunting. Maybe it wasn't that different in the Serengeti than it was here.

"So what are you gunna do?" asked Deavon.

"Huh?"

"What are you gunna do about tomorrow?"

"I don't know."

"Come on, Mark. You always think of something," said Deavon.

"Yeah, I... Shit! Here it goes!" Mark leaned on his haunches toward the pole. The bobbin wiggled back and forth, raised half an inch, then stopped.

"Gettin' a bite?" Deavon asked.

"Yeah."

"So what are you gunna do?"

"Wait for him to hit again, he's just playin' with it now," said Mark.

"No. Not about that, about tomorrow. What are you gunna do?"

Mark waited silently for the bobbin to move. It remained still. Satisfied that the fish wasn't going to strike he turned to Deavon.

"I can't walk down to Whittsett," said Mark.

"Why not? You got legs."

Mark looked sternly at him and tried to explain.

"Deavon, you know how these people are around here. Some of them just like to make trouble. Maybe I'll ride my bike, I don't know. I just can't walk down," he said with finality.

KEIRHH!

The bobbin smacked against the pole. Mark grabbed the pole and pulled violently.

"Shit! I missed him," he shouted and began to rapidly reel in the line.

Deavon walked to an edge of the plate and jumped. His leap was a little short and his left foot landed in thick mud at the shoreline.

"Son-of-a-bitch!" he yelled, and pulled his foot from the mud.

Mark laughed as Deavon turned his foot to examine the dripping sneaker. When he pulled off the shoe, it made the same sucking sound coming off his foot as it had coming out of the mud. Deavon removed his other shoe and tossed it on the ground. Barefoot, he stepped in the water near the stringer and crouched to rinse the mud from his shoe. The yellow paleness of his feet and palms was highlighted in the water. They're not white or faded like people said, it's as if more of the blackness is trying to come through, but can't, thought Mark.

"You should put it on the plate to let it dry when you're done," said Mark. "It's so hot it'll be dry by the time we go home."

"Yeah, I know. Hey look! There's a mussel out there." said Deavon, pointing to a submerged rock.

"Yeah, I see it. Right by that rock. And there's another one behind it." Mark finished reeling and laid the pole on the bank. "Let's go out and get them."

"We can use them for bait," Deavon added.

At the rock, the water reached their chests. Deavon went under for the first mussel then splashed to the surface with it. Stars of water glistened on his tight jet hair. Mark went under and retrieved the second. He pushed back his straight wet hair and took Deavon's mussel. With one in each hand, he tapped them together. Deavon watched closely, but the mussels remained sealed from them.

A loud engine rumbled on the other side of the reservoir. Wooden planks bounced in tandem as a pick-up truck crossed the small, flat bridge over by the swamp. The driver gunned the engine and raced up the road along the reservoir. The boys turned and saw patches of red streaking through the tree line. Past the trees and out in the open the driver yelled, "Hey, you motherfuckers!!!" The truck, patched with gray primer, continued up the road. Its engine strained as it reached the top of the hill. Mark put his head down.

"Asshole," he muttered.

Deavon laughed and said, "He don't mean nothin' by it. He's just playin' around."

"Maybe he is, but he doesn't have to play around with us. Besides, who'd want to play around with anybody who has a piece of shit truck like that?" said Mark walking to the shore.

"Yeah, I know what you mean," said Deavon. "But, I'll tell ya' something. His truck might be a piece of shit, but he got a *good lookin'* sister."

"You know that fuckhead?" asked Mark.

"No, but I know his sister. I see his truck at her house when I walk to school. Sometimes I see him working on it. He's too young to be her dad, so I figure he must be her brother."

"Catfish. I saw a couple sittin' off of this plate when we was up on the road," he said in mild defense.

"Those fish looked about three feet long. There aren't any catfish in here that big. You probably saw carp. Besides, you know catfish eat off the bottom. Your bait's hangin' four feet below that bobbin and probably fifteen feet off the bottom. No catfish is gunna come up there. Some baby bluegill's gunna eat your nightcrawler and you won't even know it because that bobbin's too big for him to pull under," said Mark.

"You just worry about your own line. I saw your hook baited with *velveeta cheese*. What are you gunna use next, a ham sandwich?"

"Deavon, *I'm* fishing for trout, not some sewage sucker."

"Trout. There ain't no trout in here. Shiiiiit, you're lucky you caught that sunfish. What do you know about fishin' anyways? All you got up here in Star Junction is this reservoir and the one above it. Both of em' full of bluegills. What you need is to come down to Whittsett and fish in the river. You wanna catch some fish, that's where they are," he boasted.

Mark knew Deavon was right. There really wasn't any "good fishin' " in the reservoirs like before. On days like today, when the water was clear, carp could be seen sitting on the bottom off the "tin plate," but mostly, the two reservoirs, one overflowing into the other, were populated with bluegills and sunfish. Occasionally, a catfish or perch would swim through to break the monotony.

Local fishermen spoke of a bass population returning; every year around bass season, "They're comin' back." This kind of talk and stubborn locals returned to the small, rain and spring fed lakes; but outsiders wouldn't fish there. Not for bass. They would go to the Yough river or up to Virgin Run lake: both stocked by the state or a local fish and game club.

"Why don't you come down to Whittsett and fish in the river? We can go tomorrow," said Deavon.

"You gotta be crazy. My dad would kill me if he knew I went all the way to Whittsett," said Mark.

"Shiiiiit, he don't have to know. You can leave in the morning, fish all day, and be back by six o'clock. He'll think you was up here all day."

"How would I get there?" asked Mark.

"Walk. How'd you think?"

"I couldn't walk there," said Mark.

"Why not?"

"You know how this town is. If people see me walking towards Whittsett they'll call my mom and tell her."

"So what," said Deavon.

"If my mom finds out I went fishing in the river she'll get pissed at me and say I could fall in and drown. Then she'd tell my dad and I'd have to hear it from him too," said Mark.

"Man, your folks don't let you do nothin'," said Deavon.

"Does *your* mom know you fish up here?"

"Hell no, you gotta be crazy. I tell her I go way down the river past the island to get catfish. The island's too far away for her to check," said Deavon.

"Doesn't anybody call your mom and tell her they saw you coming up to Junction?" asked Mark.

"They can try. We don't got a phone," he said, and turned to Mark and smiled.

The boys laughed out loud then Mark plainly said, "Look Deavon, I just can't go."

"Ok," said Deavon.

Deavon sure is lucky to live in Whittsett, thought Mark. The river's down there, and all those different kinds of fish. Muskie, bass, pike, and trout. And things always wash up on its banks. Rusty tricycles, cables, and plastic parts of things that look like they come from appliances or factory machinery. And he always has something from the river. Hunks of blue glass or rusty railroad spikes. Sometimes his pockets are full of iron ore pellets that fall out of railroad cars.

Mrs. Adams almost went crazy the day he rolled a handful of them to the front of the room while she was reading to the class.

"Who's balls are these?" she shouted holding them in her hand. "I want to know right now."

Deavon puffed as he tried to restrain his laughter. Tears streaked his face. Beside him, Mark buried his hysteria in a social studies book. Under the desk, Deavon handed him some pellets.

"I know they're from the river. My son brought these home when he was your age," she added.

"Then maybe they're your son's balls," shouted Scott Stanko from the other side of the room. The class roared. Tammy Smith lowered her flushed face.

With a crooked finger Mrs. Adams pointed toward Scott, but the tip of the finger actually pointed right at Timmy Veletti.

"Listen, young man. I'm warning you. You're already in trouble with me for your outburst this morning. I was a WAC in World War II, you know," she said to Scott, pronouncing WAC as "wack."

"What are you pointing at me for? I didn't do anything this morning," shouted Timmy. The class laughed even louder than before.

"No, but you did just now," she said and furiously rushed to him in the middle of the room. The students moved their desks in big jerky motions to exaggerate the width of her hips as she waddled past. In the rush, she seemed to burst from her tight black skirt.

She grabbed the back of Timmy's shirt, put her face right up to his and said, "I knew *someone* in the army like *you*."

Just then three more of the rust red pellets bounced off the blackboard. The class roared and she stormed out shouting for the principal and her old commanding officer.

strung on a chain. Somewhere, those facets had changed, become something new that was called Benjamin Grayson. Did that make him real? And what did that make Tim McCarthy? Unreal?

He could imagine the resurrection. The chain would snap, oh yes.

I can make the appointment for you this afternoon, Maximillian said. Just a suggestion, of course.

Dully, he nodded. Make the appointment.

The implants were such a little thing, they had said, right after the operation. Just to carry you along. And they'd led him into a new life, something that Tim McCarthy had never imagined.

And the strangers? Midnight blending of flesh. It was another part of the life. Nothing personal, he could hear Maximillian say — it was only the body.

Changing his mind, Grayson carried his orange juice out to the terrace, cool morning air marbling his skin. He looked over the sleeping city and imagined them out there — the audience that wanted him to be what he was now, not the repository of someone they didn't know.

And didn't care about.

Suddenly, he felt lonely, wishing for the memory of blue sky again. Wanting a past he knew was his own. Knowing that it would never be there.

Oh, I remember. . .

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Half-Moons and Sunfish

JOHN REOLI, JR.

Mark smoothly whipped the pole backward. The tip bent, wiggled, and jerked. He focused on the line out in the water. The struggling creature played it, making small S-shapes and the almost-circles of a stretched spring.

"I bet it's a bluegill. Feels like it," he said.

"It's a sunfish," said Deavon. "I can see it from up here. Guess you're lucky today," he said, pulling in his line.

Mark reeled the fish up to the clay bank and dragged it out of the water. A long, thick strand of green moss had gathered where the leader was attached to the line. He could see the orange belly of the sunfish blazing through the moss.

"Watch out for his spines," said Deavon. "It'll hurt like hell if he sticks you with one of 'em."

"I know."

He raised the fish by the line, slowly pulled away the moss, and tossed it aside. The sunfish arched its fan of spines and curled its body in defense. Cautiously, he inspected it to see where it had been hooked. The bright afternoon sun reflected off of the sunfish and struck Mark in the eyes. He swung the fish away and turned from the glare. The fish flopped hotly from the motion.

"It's pretty big. Looks about seven or eight inches long." said Deavon.

Mark put the fish on the ground. Expertly, he slid his fingers down the line to the fish's mouth and then gave the hook a quick twist. There was a slight tearing sound as the barb came out of the cold stiff flesh. He stood to kick the muddy sunfish back into the water.

"What are you doin'?" exclaimed Deavon.

"I'm putting it back in. I just don't want to get one of those spines in my hand," said Mark.

"Are you crazy? Sunfish is good. I'll take it home if you don't want to."

"Ok. You can have it," said Mark.

He put the fish on one of the metal clips of his chain stringer and dropped it into the water beside his pole. It puffed and flapped. He could see the red gills swell with each of its breaths. Like a runner after a marathon, he thought; then baited his hook and cast again.

The line hummed like the high voltage wires overhead, and the sinker made a muffled *pluiff* when it hit the water. Mark reeled the loose ringlets of slack, rested the fiberglass pole into the Y of a stick, and hung a small fluorescent bobbin between the second and third eyes of the pole.

Not far from shore, the late June heat rose in waves from a rusted, metal plate laid across two parallel stone walls. Standing on its edge, Deavon whipped a bamboo pole over his head. A red and white plastic bobbin, round as a billiard ball, jerked; then plopped onto the smooth green water. He put the pole on the plate. The bamboo was sandy brown like the cattails on the other side of the reservoir; its shadow curved across the ripples of water. Small bluegills cautiously approached, then nipped at Deavon's floating line.

"That's an awfully big bobbin, Deavon. What do you think's gunna pull it under, Shamu?"

The woman eased into sleep. Only then did he slip out of bed, gathering his clothes and looking for a bathroom where he could shower. Luckily, the bedrooms were connected with a palatial bath. Soundproof door, he noted, closing it behind him. Good.

Alicia was already there, washing herself at the bidet. She turned, looking over her shoulder, and gave him a cheerful smile. "How was it?"

"Not bad." Grayson went through his clothes, hanging them on a towel rack. "Better than last time. At least she was in pretty good shape. Yours?"

Alicia shrugged. "About the same. He likes to be on bottom."

Grayson grunted understanding, stepped into the shower to wash off the woman's sweat. After a minute, Alicia slipped in. "You mind?"

"No." He handed her the soap, and received a sudsy washcloth as a prize. Like cats on good terms, they washed each other. Asexual, friendly.

He was incapable of feeling any real attraction for Alicia, wet and slick as she was. He was sure she felt the same way — Maximillian had suggested that a romance between them wouldn't be in their best interest. He reached down to turn off the water, when a showed appeared through the steam, watching them.

"Lovely," the studio head whispered above the water's hiss. "Lovely, children."

Grayson felt Alicia freeze, next to him. Waiting for the next suggestion, he thought disjointedly. Sure, we do requests, an insane voice sang in his mind.

"I'd like to see a love scene." The man leaned up against the sink, his eyes slipping over them through the moisture. "Now."

Compliantly, Grayson straightened up. His indifference melted, changed to desire. His need was reflected in her eyes, blue and eager, as she rubbed up against him, the water from the shower no longer her only wet. He grabbed her roughly, the way the studio head wanted him to hold her, the water beading on their skin.

It had been the money that finally convinced him. A guaranteed $100,000 the first year; after that, the sky was the limit. Whatever his talent could pull in — a million and up wasn't impossible, they had said.

What if nobody wanted to hire me, he had asked. The administrative section of the Hiller Group just laughed. Maximillian hasn't picked a loser yet, they told him. Don't worry. You'll be fine.

And he had. After the surgery, renamed Benjamin Grayson, he had co-starred in a fluff sitcom. Neilsens went through the roof — the public loved him. After that, it was a string of steadily bigger movies, until he was signed as the star for his current 3-D, American Players. Women walked up to him everywhere, offering him their bodies, anything he desired. Men wanted to be like him. He was successful, a star, just as Maximillian planned.

And his memories of life as Tim McCarthy were dimming.

The sun was a faint shimmer over the Hills when he finally got home. Good party, he thought, throwing his jacket over the couch. Another one for the record books.

The events of the night, after the party — well, they didn't involve him, not directly. The sex had started after his first movie, with the producer and his wife. Grayson remembered it in a clinical way — the quiet summons from Maximillian, being delivered to the hotel by limo. Wrapped up like a birthday present, he thought. It had been his first experience with a threesome, the feel of male skin next to his own. Maybe that was when the dreams began to bleed over into his conscious mind; the ghost of Tim McCarthy screaming in agony, he thought morbidly.

He had asked Maximillian about the sex once, and the agent had explained it. These people were important in the Business, and wanted intercourse with the godhead of entertainment. Contact with beautiful bodies, nothing more. And it was part of their job to supply that contact to the right people, he'd added. Every member of the Hiller Group did it. Nothing new — actors and actresses had been doing it for years. The implants was an improvement on the situation, a way to protect themselves emotionally. Let the implants carry you through, Maximillian had suggested before taking him up to that first hotel room. They'll know what to do.

Still musing, he poured himself a glass of orange juice. Standard morning ritual — orange juice, vitamin. More suggestions from Maximillian. Thank God we're not shooting until noon, he thought, shrugging off the rest of his clothes, standing in his briefs in the middle of the living room. At least I can get some sleep.

He had wanted to talk to Alicia afterwards, but she had gone straight home. Instead, Maximillian had been waiting downstairs for him. Alicia told me you've been having some problems, he'd said, slipping into the father confessor role. Like to talk about it?

And for the first time since Benjamin had started acting, he didn't. He didn't want to talk to Maximillian Hiller, father surrogate, chaperone, super agent. He wanted to work the memories out on his own. But Maximillian wouldn't hear of it.

I told you that might happen, he'd said easily, on the way home. Your body's immunological system is reacting to the implant. We'll have Dr. Berringer look at it tomorrow.

I don't want him to, Benjamin had said. But Maximillian insisted. It'll only confuse you if you allow this to continue, Benjamin, he said.

My name is Tim, he said irrationally.

Maximillian was silent for a moment. He finally said, in this place and time, your name is Benjamin. In two years, when your contract is up, you may decide to go back to that name. The agent smiled, and Benjamin felt chilled by that smile. Or you may prefer the one you have now.

No, I don't think so. But the words brought a strange, deep confusion. His life seemed to be a series of facets, beads

right after graduation, where he met Tim McCarthy for the first time. Benjamin felt like a ghost, watching Maximillian and the boy walking on the campus's quadrangle. The sky had been blue, very clear, and the sun had been warm on their shoulders as Maximillian explained how the boy could make a great deal of money in the entertainment industry.

Tim insisted that he wasn't an actor — the commercial had been his girlfriend's idea. He wanted to be an agricultural researcher. Maximillian demurred — acting talent wasn't necessary, not with the technological options at his command.

"You look lonely."

Not moving, Benjamin tried on a small grin that didn't seem to fit. "Not really."

He glanced sideways. Alicia's profile was framed, outlined by the lights of downtown L.A. Classically beautiful. He tried to come up with the right answer, something that would describe the dreams he'd been having lately, but nothing seemed right set against a background of the city's light. Especially I'm afraid of my memories.

They stood there in companionable silence, the cool night breeze ruffling through their hair, before he said, "Do you ever remember what it was like? Before?"

Alicia sighed. "I don't think about it," she said. "You shouldn't, either. It only confuses you."

"I know. But sometimes I can't help it," Benjamin said, the words moving sluggishly now. "It's like I'm being invaded by memories. I don't know what to do."

Alicia shook her head, moving away from him. She didn't want to talk about it, he knew. Alicia was the ideal actress — calm, competent, perfectly adjusted to the change in her life. She had a magic that critics kept comparing to the screen greats — Gish, Hepburn, Streep. Great implants. Alicia was never confused. "Maybe you should go see Dr. Berringer," she suggested, brusque. "Have him take a look at you. You might need an adjustment."

Unconsciously, Benjamin reached up and touched the skin underneath his right ear, massaging it with two fingers. That was where they'd gone in, with the surgical probes. "Maybe," he agreed.

A small surgical procedure, the newest form of wetware, and Tim would have the skills of the greatest thespians at his fingertips, Maximillian said. The silicarbon circuits would interface directly with his brain, a biocompatible network riding the limbic ring. All he would have to do is think about the network, and it would generate controlled emotional states in response to incoming stimuli.

You mean it's an artificial persona, Tim said, quiet. He'd heard about the procedure from friends, horrified at first, then fascinated. It wouldn't be me, just some software riding around in my head.

You make it sound so nefarious, Maximillian answered, smiling. Like it's a form of mind control.

Well, isn't it?

And this time, Maximillian did laugh, the father figure amused by a fearful child. Of course not, he said. You would have control over your every thought, your every mood. Your implant would simply allow you access to a greater range of emotions, the skills you would need to be a great actor. Think of it as a built-in acting coach.

"Anyway, I came out here to find you," she continued, her voice growing warm again. "Maximillian's waiting for us upstairs."

"All right." Benjamin turned, willing the vagueness to be gone. He took control again, the smooth persona clicking into reality. Turn up the charm, boy. It's showtime.

Grayson dug his toes into the satin, thrusting harder. The woman beneath him moaned, winding slippery legs around his hips, whispering obscenities under her breath to urge him on. Across the hall, he thought, Alicia was probably doing the same thing with the studio head, unless the man got into something kinky. Not impossible, but Alicia knew how to handle that.

He jerked again, and again, until it was finished. Naturally, he made sure the woman came first — sometimes, he could even hold back until she had two orgasms, once even three. After love (because with him, it was love of a sort — wasn't that programmed into the implants?), he slid off to the side, holding her. The after-sex comedown that women needed, he told himself. If you were going to do a job, do it right.

In the quiet of the room, he felt the other memories sliding up to him, demanding notice. He tried to ignore it, to be the perfect actor. Maximillian had said this would happen. Sensory bleedover, he called it — sometimes the implants didn't filter correctly. But tonight, Benjamin was too tired to fight. He let them come, shivering under their weight:

Why me, Tim asked.

Because you're the American ideal, Maximillian had said. They want your type, your voice — they'll love you. Maximillian smiled, the cool charm turned up a notch. And because it would make us both a great deal of money, he added gently. Tim flushed, he mention of money tying a hard knot in his gut. There weren't many scholarships for aggie scientists anymore, and he had been living on loans and side jobs. And with graduation, the loans would start coming due.

Five years with the Hiller Group and you would have the money for your bills, for a graduate degree, whatever you want, Maximillian said. Five years with us, and you will have financial freedom for the rest of your life.

In exchange for five years of slavery, Tim said, horribly surprised at a sudden, tiny desire to believe Maximillian. An artificial persona was interesting when you were sitting around with friends in a safe dorm room, your mind still your own. The thought of actually carrying something like that in your head —

I wouldn't call it slavery, Maximillian replied. It's simply acting, taken to the ultimate degree.

Star Quality

MELANIE MILLER

I remember. . .

Benjamin Grayson opened his eyes, struggling out of the dream. He had been with Alicia Wilcox, his co-star, in a scene from their latest movie — smooth, blond Alicia, and the dreamscene had moved beyond an acceptable rating into censored territory. His fingers slipping underneath the velvet strap of her monogown, exploring the feel of silky skin. And then, that thought —

I remember. . .

An image, textbooks on an old wood desk. Grassy lawn, with blue sky above it. It had a flavor to it, a texture of dread and anticipation, pushing him away from Alicia, out of sleep. An old, treasured fear.

Of what?

Slowly, he focused on the bedside clock. 7:30 p.m. projected in ruby holograms, hanging in the darkness. Time to get up, get ready for the party. It wouldn't do to keep the head of a major Hollywood studio waiting.

And he would never do something as rude as that, although he could if he felt like it. Benjamin Grayson was one of the elite of the '20s. Stars. And he was under contract with Maximillian Hiller, the agent of the decade. Everyone wanted to belong to the Hiller Group, and only the best, the hungriest, would be admitted. Maximillian (never Max — he hated diminutives) didn't handle anything else.

All of Maximillian's clients were stand-outs in some way. Professional, other agents said with envy. Maximillian never had to cover up embarrassing pasts, arrange special hospital stays, pay off local law enforcement. The Hiller Group were actors first and foremost, dedicated to their craft. Not to providing filler for the tabloids.

And part of their craft was to project an image. As Maximillian suggested, Grayson arrived at the party just late enough to make an entrance. The eyes of the crowd — all people involved with the Business — crawled over his skin agreeably, feather-light massage on the ego. Something clicked inside his head and he went into automatic pilot: Benjamin Grayson, The Actor. Watch him walk and talk, folks, like a real human being. Gossip about him, wonder who he's sleeping with this week, what his next 3-D will be. And, in a softer tone, how long can he last?

To hell with it. I'm a star.

Grayson kept the grin up, easing into the crowd. Nod here, kiss a cheek there, get into the groove of things. Project.. He saw Maximillian with Alicia, and waved. And when a director intercepted him, launching into a not-so-subtle film offer, Grayson managed to catch Maximillian's eye.

"Benjamin, my boy, good to see you," the agent said, cutting into the conversation. Maximillian looked like the ideal parent — six feet tall, a strong, kindly face, dark hair edged with gray at the temples. The only thing that spoiled the image was his eyes, a curious shade of light, oddly flat blue. "Enjoying yourself?"

"Naturally," Benjamin replied, giving the agent an wide smile. He glanced at Alicia (I remember) and faltered. "Jorge and I were discussing his next picture," he said, as if to explain the break.

"Which Benjamin would be perfect for," Jorge added, delighted to have Maximillian's attention. "The part was practically written for him, but he keeps dodging me — "

"Which he is supposed to do," Maximillian said smoothly. There was a new undertone to his words, an ice that casting agents and directors had come to recognize as a warning shot over the bow. Keep Off, Private Property. "All business deals are done through me, as I'm sure you know."

Jorge immediately became apologetic. "I'm aware of that," he said quickly. "I simply wanted to run the idea past Benjamin — "

"Which you've done. Benjamin, why don't you escort Alicia around, while Jorge and I discuss his idea." Maximillian handed the actress to Grayson, then guided the director off to a corner.

Alicia glanced after them, the demure expression melting into a smile. "This is the third time he's handed me off while he sets up a deal," she said, half-laughing. "I'm starting to wonder if I should ask for a cut."

"I don't think you'll get it," Grayson said, grinning. "He's the top hustler in town."

"I like it that way. It makes me feel more secure." She had a voice that had been described variously as soft, lilting, honeyed. Tonight, Grayson thought, it was elegantly sweet; champagne and strawberries. "By the way, he has some work for us afterwards."

Grayson nodded, understanding. The host, and probably the hostess. It was part of the job when you worked with the Hiller Group. The dream floated into consciousness again, overlaying the party. I remember. . .

"What's the matter?" Alicia asked. She looked up into his face, smile turning down at the corners. "You faded out for a minute."

"Nothing." He shrugged the dream off, back into his subconscious. "You want that drink?"

"Of course. Then we'll entertain the peons."

Two hours later, he took a break from the mingling. Drift from one group to another, be witty, amusing — even if you were used to it, it could get tiring after a while. Alicia was still downstairs chatting with people in the vast ballroom, and Benjamin wanted a chance to be alone with the night sky, polluted as it was. He leaned out on a second-floor balcony, tracking faint traces of starlight that made it through the smog. Memories started bleeding through again, subconscious fragments:

I remember. . .

Another time, another place. Further east, where people only watched the stars on holovision, never thinking to become one of them. Maximillian had come to the campus

He was punched, kicked, crushed, pinched and groped. Every square inch of his body was touched, attacked, in some way. His clothes were torn away from his body, leaving him naked, exposed, humiliated.

Tony's sense of time bogged-down to the slow-motion rate of tragedy and disaster; the entire encounter really lasted only seconds.

He lay near death, only shock and the hallucinogenic aftertaste of violence spared him from terrible pain.

He swallowed the salty and fast-flowing blood that filled his mouth. A slow calm kept him from panic. He knew to conserve energy, to hug himself tight and construct a spiritual cocoon around his destroyed body.

Faint in the distance he heard the doorbell ring inside Cruger's home. He felt himself slipping closer to that dark, cold cave that filled his mind with images of pure fear. As if a brutal joke were being played, Tony heard the thin beep-beep-beep of his digital watch alarm — telling him his time was up? Then, as if hitting an ice slick, he slid quickly into the cold and gloomy abyss of his nightmares. He was gone.

Chapter Fourteen

Friday had been a lousy looking day. The foggy and smoggy sky pasted a dull gray tint across everything below it. Clouds, trees, houses, birds, and cars absorbed the depressing dull radiation and emitted a picture of impassive apathy.

A rotten day.

Saturday was different. In a climactic zone that rarely had quickly-changing weather — Cruger's friends on the East coast saw wild weather swings like this all the time — Saturday was a big switch. The wind blew just strong enough to clear the skies to a bright blue. The smog count was low, the conifer pollen count high. Bright sunlight tunneled through Cruger's silky curtains, illuminating small dust particles, the kind usually never seen unless the light shines through them at a certain angle.

Cruger was home washing the dishes, Corrina just having left to work. Cruger never taught lessons Saturday. Some Saturdays he would play a birthday party, Bar Mitzvah, or wedding reception. Not today. He wanted to sit and think. Pulling himself away from the regular monotonous list of duties he usually attended to, he would figure out what was happening in his life. Too much — he knew that at least.

The doorbell rang. Cruger dried his hands and walked to the front door.

Cruger's stomach compressed into a tight knot. The horrid wake of catastrophe flooded Cruger from his toes to his fingertips. Tony lay face down on the doorstep, a puddle of crimson liquid forming around his limp blond hair.

Tony's innocent exuberance for life was gone, wasted, spilt like a child's first glass of wine; spilled like Tony's blood across Cruger's doorstep.

Cruger reached down to feel for a pulse, but, he knew the answer before he even began to bend over. The realization of Tony's death hit him; the emotional collision with an overly harsh reality demanded some necessarily inadequate dissipation of unwanted energy.

Cruger exhaled loudly "No . . .my God," and then sunk to his knees, not knowing what to do.

And that sound, what was that sound? Cruger then saw the black digital sports watch on Tony's wrist, chirping its annoying repetitious chirp over and over.

Leon Harris stuck his head out of his front door. He saw Cruger doubled over in front of his young friend, who lay in an entirely unnatural position, limp armed and limp legged. Harris ran across his lawn to Cruger's front step.

"What happened?" Harris said.

Cruger's heart fluttered like a bird's; his skin was flushed from the neck up.

"I don't know," Cruger said, "I think he's dead."

Harris bent down and checked both Tony's carotid and radials arteries for a pulse.

"Yeah ... I'm afraid you're right."

Cruger reached down and unstrapped the noisy watch from Tony's lifeless wrist. Using the heel of his shoe, Cruger stomped down on the fancy blue plastic watch a few times before it was silenced. He wanted to see a spray of springs and clamps and smoke pouting out like in the cartoons, but the watch only lay there, in the stark sunlight, like Tony: beaten, broken, and wasted.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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Has written and managed software at Apple Computer for ten years, and will soon begin a stint with a new software company. He enjoys spending time with his wife and two small children, playing jazz with Bay Area groups, writing software and prose, and building toys for his children to trash. *The Unified Murder Theorem* will continue next issue.

"Then how do we know that they exist and are here?" said Cruger.

"You just have to take it on faith, my man. We have intelligence reports that say so."

Cruger wondered if these "low-tech" intergalactic hitchhikers were really so low-tech. Seemed like they had kept a pretty low profile so far. That takes a little intelligence, at least.

"Is there any sure-fire way to know which ones they are?"

"No," said Tony. "I consider that an important area for future research. Especially since many of them may be involved with the Other Company."

The words fell on Cruger like a sack of rocks. He had begun to imagine these people, or whatevers, as playful, somewhat backwards magicians. He had wanted to think of them like cute sea otters at the zoo: swimming on their backs, doing flips, and generally mimicking human behavior in a delightfully anthropomorphic way. It now seemed that the Chysa were not so innocent and playful.

"Why the Other Company?"

"That may be how they were recruited by delinquent Tvonens. The Chysa have a tendency towards deceit and magic. This, in a way, parallels the philosophy of the Other Company. You know, they are totally into deceit and trickery. In the Chysa culture, this is considered to be exemplary behavior."

"The question is, do they really know what they are doing, or are they pawns?" Cruger said.

The luminance of the color computer monitor reflected a bright and diffused image off Tony's face. "We don't really know, but, it would probably be a mistake to think that they are mindless and don't really know what they're up to. Just because they are not more technologically advanced than us doesn't mean that they are stupider than us," Tony said. "In some ways, we are really stupid. We may be destroying our planet beyond help. We have, throughout history, committed genocide. We may be the most homicidal intelligent life form that ever lived. Maybe the Chysa aren't so stupid."

Cruger couldn't disagree. In one breath, humans were aspiring to godliness. In the next, humans were possibly the stupidest of the "intelligent" life forms. Contemplating the possibilities of combining stupidity and power frightened Cruger. *Absolute power corrupts absolutely.* How could he, of all people — Jack Cruger, the laid-back musician — be involved in what was starting to sound, disappointingly, a hell of a lot like politics.

Tony gave him a computer overview; Tony had accomplished a great deal on the computer so far. When Cruger's attention and energy level began to fall off quickly, they agreed to get together again Saturday.

The next day Cruger gave his accordion lessons as usual, except an extra sense of pride and meaning filled what must have been a void in his life. He was proud of himself, proud of Corrina, happy with what life had recently dealt him. Now he was giving something important back, possibly making the world a better place. Heck, maybe making the universe a better place.

The quote, *we are spinning our own fates, good or evil, and never to be undone* popped into his head. How true — who had said that? James, or maybe Emerson. Little did they know just how right they were.

Chapter Twelve

The engaging back-beat of the legato bass-line anchored the solid, driving blues that Cruger coaxed from his accordion. He had developed yet another new technique: he played the bass line with his left hand while reaching over and playing the melody, higher on the keyboard, with his right hand. The bellows were pumped with his elbows while both hands worked out the dirty blues in synchronicity.

Next, he picked up the tempo and banged out a respectable arrangement of Charlie Parker's "Donna Lee." *Corrina would like this — too bad she isn't home yet.* The other night she heard him playing "Dolphin Dance" and "On Green Dolphin Street." Was he in a dolphin mood that night, whatever the hell a dolphin mood may be? She was as surprised as she had yet been in their three-year marriage — wasn't she the one with the stack of Miles, Bird, and Coltrane albums, while he had the most unhip of old records ("The Schmucker brothers play the Catskills") piled in their wall unit?

"Hey, you're playing some good stuff, I can't believe it," she had said.

"Well, I'm just getting into some more jazz and classical to broaden myself. Your bebop albums are pretty good after all, now that I actually listen to them. I have to admit."

She continued listening from the kitchen, not yet seeing and questioning his instrument's secret blue sparks. Next he played Bach's Toccata in D minor. Very dramatic. He finished up with a rousing version of Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze." Cruger clacked the keys for percussive effect and even nursed a hypnotic distortion from the box, blue streaks flying. Hendrix on accordion? Maybe this is pushing it a little, he thought.

Chapter Thirteen

Bright and blue beyond belief, the Saturday morning sky hung like a warm protective blanket across the wide sky. Tony walked to the front door of Jack Cruger's house. Just as he heard the slightest rustle of a sound, he turned to see something large, colorful, and horrible. It was on him in an instant. Tony was thrown hard to the concrete steps. As his clothes were ripped and torn, he felt immobile, suffocated, entirely constrained and helpless.

Crouched along the fence, watering can in hand, was Cruger's neighbor, Leon Harris.

Harris had been curious about the young visitor that Cruger had entertained twice before. Explaining that he planned to work on documentation at home that afternoon, Harris sat by his bay window looking for anything out of the ordinary at Cruger's house. Luckily, he found it. *What's with the blond kid*, Harris wondered. *And the accordion and the blue light at night?*

Harris was cursed with the curiosity of a cat. He would not rest until he understood what was going on.

Chapter Ten

Cruger sat crouched over his accordion as he played. The notes he struck had a special warmth that night, a deep dark sound that reminded Cruger of the pounding Pacific ocean surf. The room was fairly dark, brightened only by a single lamp covered by its dark brown shade. Earth-tone light reflected off the warm, egg-shell-painted walls. He looked at his trusted, dusty old books in the large teak bookshelf as he carelessly flipped his fingers across the piano accordion's keyboard.

As he played, unbeknownst to him, babies were born, elderly and sick people died, and innumerable twists of fate and fortune ensued. Not all events were strings that were spun. Not all events that were spun were done by Cruger. The complex interplay of strings was ever changing, always evolving. Cruger would never know the exact results of his actions.

Within the next three weeks, a 7.2 magnitude earthquake hit the San Francisco Bay Area. Part of the Oakland/San Francisco Bay Bridge collapsed. The Highway 880 Cypress structure collapsed. New lives began. Medical breakthroughs were made.

A spinner in Iowa used his flour mill to do the special deed. One evening, he got into a fight with his wife over the subject of children. She wanted a large family of eight or ten children, he wanted to stop with three boys. *Enough children, enough children,* he thought.

He went in to the barn and began spinning. Blue threads of light ricocheted off the millstone and across the pale, straw covered barn floor.

That night, 700 miles away, a future President of the United States was conceived. A big night, even for a spinner.

A solitary spinner in Moscow sat in front of the his large wooden chessboard. Each exquisitely crafted onyx piece was an individual, telling a sordid tale of battle and emotions through their small scars resembling nicks and scratches found across their exteriors. The spinner, a Grandmaster — only playing against himself, with this chess set, in the warm, dark room — used the Karamoff defense; as he moved the Knight blue streaks splattered the dull plaster walls. "Checkmate," he told himself.

A man in California attached thirty-five large helium balloons to his deck chair; he wanted to see what would happen. What happened was: he floated into the sky. The air pistol that he brought along to pop the balloons, one by one, in order to smoothly descend, fell down between the chairs slats. He drifted up to 17,000 feet, waving to passing birds and airplanes indiscriminately.

Spinners could not be held accountable for everything every idiot did.

Chapter Eleven

"It's close to school actually, only take a minute to get there" Tony said.

Tony wanted to show Cruger where he hung out when he was doing "company work." They got into Cruger's Honda Accord, started it up. The small engine purred like an overfed kitten.

The building was, as promised, a five minute drive from Cruger's house. Tony's office was rented space in a small office building shared by a Title Company, some Law offices, and Tony's facade business. The placard outside his office entrance read "Universal Properties, Inc."

Tony's office had a small desk sitting in the middle of the room. On the small desk was a thick blue cable weaving a circuitous path to a two-inch hole in the wall.

They sat at Tony's small, plain desk.

"We need to continue your training," Tony said. "You only got a small dose of it so far."

Tony leaned back in his office chair and kicked his legs up on the desk. "The other source of intelligent life that we know about is the Chysa planet. They are actually a totally different story than the Tvonens."

Cruger felt like a child listening to his father tell bedtime stories. But, he was no child; Tony was no parent; these were no bedtime stories.

Tony continued. "The Chysans are evidently really low-tech. If it weren't for the Tvonens, they would not have any representation on Earth or in the Company at all. No one has seen them in their real form — "

"But you said they were on Earth," Cruger said. He had been trying to form a mental image of these people and their ways. If no one knew what they looked like, how could he imagine them?

"Yes, but what I hadn't mentioned yet is that they evidently can disguise themselves very well. I don't know for sure, but they seem to easily take on new forms or at least wear very good disguises."

"Are we talking about adding something like makeup to their faces, or are we talking about completely changing shape?"

"I don't know," Tony said.

Cruger wished he faced more absolutes, more certainties; all he could get so far were maybes.

department didn't immediately understand. Einstein had proposed a theorem that the company engineers, the planet builders, had to check on to see if it was actually the equivalent of their method. The theoretical physicists of the 1970s through now had come incredibly close to defining the time/space continuum, at least in human terms, in their "string theory" as it relates to the formation of planets, galaxies, and the universe. The work of Hawking and Penrose had brought the theory closer to full proof.

"I don't know what happened to the original universe builders because they are working on new projects. You know, the ones who originally built the earth and all the galaxies. They're entrepreneurial types. The maintenance engineers must check the relativity and string theory to see if we really have done the incredible: this planet itself has evolved a species to the point that it has defined or even surpassed the knowledge of its creator." Tony smiled proudly, his already bright eyes putting out a higher amperage gleam. "An incredible notion. Think about it, we're the student actually surpassing the teacher — doesn't happen often."

"Yes, but if it's cliches you're looking for, 'those who can do, and those who cannot teach'," Cruger said.

"Mmm. That would be saying the creator can't create? I think, as a species, humans are self-taught. In a nutshell, that's what evolution of an intelligent species is: the slow education of a species over time. We could call it Intellivolution."

Tony grabbed a quick breath and then continued in a deep, confident voice. "A better analogy is the notion that someone like you could buy a fish tank, put in some fish, plants and food. You then come back to check on the tank a 'while' later — remember the fragility of the notion of time — and then the tank is full of smooth skinned little "fish" with arms that are telling you how the pump and filter work and what they want to be fed. That's the human condition," Tony said.

Cruger expected Tony to follow with the words 'Q.E.D' — Tony had sounded formal and overly confident in his statements. Cruger grimaced during Tony's comparison of humans to fish but vowed not to take it personally.

Tony noticed Cruger's displeasure. "Hey, I am as human as you are, bud. I know it hurts. But admit it, we humans aren't God's gift, so to speak."

Cruger chuckled. He thought about what Tony had said, wishing that he had any kind of a background in science at all that would help understand the concepts that Tony wrestled with.

"Can there really be a complete Unified Theory?" Cruger asked. "I mean, everything seems so infinite, how can it all be explained or managed?"

Tony nodded his head. "Right, it's all mind-boggling. Another possibility that had been investigated was that there is actually no theory of the universe that describes all of the actions and behaviors in a scientific sense. It could be that an infinite series of different explanations exist that apply to each situation. Just like you wondered, it has been thought possible that there is really no theory of life and the universe. Events cannot be predicted beyond a certain extent; they occur in an random and arbitrary manner.

"Even if we were able to fully quantize the Unified Theory, for example in a series of algorithms on a computer, the theory would still remain undeniably separate from implementation. As an example, even if we completely understood every detail of the functioning of the human body, it would still take a long time to learn to actually create or 'build' that body.

"In the same way, understanding the entire universe and creation of universes would leave a lot of work to be done in implementing tools that implement the theory."

"But, they have the tools — they've provided that step?" Cruger asked.

"Yes, I have converted their system into a human implementation that actually uses computers. Digital electronics is our big addition or contribution to this model," Tony said.

"That's hard to believe. What they originally used must work, right? Why would they want to convert to our technology?" Cruger could not imagine a computer running the show. Images of '50s science fiction films and the overused term 'computer error' popped into his mind.

"I can think of a few possible reasons. For one, in order for earth to maintain itself, it may need to have a system developed in its frame of reference, a human frame of reference. Another possibility is that since we were getting so close ourselves to cracking the code — remember what I said about string theory — that they may have just expedited our own destiny."

"Great. It also sounds like this 'promoting from within' was a factor. If you want humans to do the job, give them endemic, human-oriented tools," Cruger said.

"Tools that are user-friendly," Tony said, following his marketing jargon with a sardonic grin.

As the orange sun started to hide itself behind the lighthouse, beach cliffs, and twisted Monterey Cyprus trees on the horizon, they packed up, brushed off sand, and began the drive home.

"What about spinning?" Cruger asked while guiding the car over the twisted road across the Santa Cruz mountains. "Is there anything more that I should know or concentrate on when I do it?"

"No. I can't tell you exactly how to do your job, that would be prejudicing the future's outcome. You must simply do it the way you would naturally do it, without direction," Tony said.

A while later Cruger pulled car into his driveway. He and Tony said goodbye and Tony grabbed his skateboard. Hips swerving and knees rolling, he sped down Cruger's driveway, all the while whistling a small, nearly silent song that played hauntingly in Cruger's mind as his tired legs walked the front steps of his beckoning home.

only irony is, their mythology is not allegorical like ours but entirely factual.

"It seems that the Tvonens were originally created as a tribe of androgynous beings; there were exactly twelve of them and they lived in a setting that we would have called Eden. It seems that their creator, and exactly who that was is something I will get to later, had quite a sense of humor. They were twelve Tvonens living in a perfect environment; all the food they needed grew in the ground and on trees, the atmosphere and temperature was very mild, although too high on the nitrogen side for humans, and there was no disease, poverty, pestilence, or taxes to pay.

"Well what's the catch, you'd probably ask? Like I said, they were androgynous; they had no way of reproducing. This did not turn out to be such a disaster, though. The original twelve didn't age. Their skins remained free of wrinkles and blemishes; their bodies stayed young, flexible, and healthy. Before they knew it, centuries of our equivalent time had passed and they were all still young and healthy.

"But, now I get to the part about the maker's sense of humor. It turns out that one day, one of the twelve who was called Remad, went a bit loony. He pulled limbs off *tankas*, or trees, and ran around in a wild circle of self-flagellation. When the others, who were entirely horrified, tried to stop Remad, he hit them and then continued on himself. The next morning, when Remad awoke, what do you think they found?

Cruger just shrugged.

"He had grown a sexual organ between his legs — a penis." Tony laughed and shook his head.

Cruger scratched his head thinking that this, possibly the strangest story he had ever heard, was maybe the most important story he ever heard.

"This is a documented fact, dude. To this day a Tvonen can be observed to undergo 'the change.'

"Maybe you can guess the rest. Two days later, another tribe member misbehaved badly. The next day this Tvonen had become a she. Only four days of groping and rubbing and kissing and general boot-strapped sex education before she was pregnant by Remad. Actually it wasn't that easy to figure out: the female Tvonen has almost a half dozen sexual orifices. Only one is good for reproduction, and it varies from individual to individual. Trial and error.

This conjured up some wild mental images for Cruger. *Sounds like a couple of sixteen-year-olds trying to do it in the back seat of a Volkswagen have it easy compared to the Tvonens*, he thought.

"For the longest time the rest of the original tribe remained as they were — looking younger and healthier every day, actually. Remad and his wife, Tvena, had twelve children in as many years. Strange thing is, Remad and Tvena were old, wrinkled and dead within sixty years.

"Three centuries later they knew that a special enzyme in their blood stream control the secretion of the hormone for sexuality. The sex enzyme was activated by exposure to environmental or emotional impurities. Centuries later a Tvonen could either have immortality, or a life of booze, drugs, sex, and procreation. Isn't that cruel?

"An interesting footnote to the story of the Tvonens is that their early history was characterized as something that roughly translates to: "The Fouled Fountain of Youth." Their culture does provide the sort of Fountain of Youth that humans have searched for in vain. When the Tvonens live in harmony with their environment and avoid violence, destruction, and pollutants, they live from that fountain. Once converted sexually and environmentally, they can never go back. What you see there currently, after millions of years of civilization, is a healthy mix of reproductive and immortal Tvonens. Of course they have preserved their environment, unlike earthlings, in order to give their people a choice between immortality and reproductivity."

Cruger had trouble believing what he just heard. The idea of androgynous and immortal sentient beings was hard to swallow. But, then again, the idea of technological and "logical" humans destroying their own planet was also a tough cookie to crunch.

"What is their civilization like now?" Cruger asked.

"Now they are what we would call a very advanced society. They have technology that seems amazing. But, keep in mind, they are a lot different than humans. For example, they never devised any digital electronics. Their entire technology is based on analog computing and mineral crystals. What they also have is terrific projective holograms that they can transmit with pinpoint accuracy. For clothing, they wear trained microorganisms that are self-cleaning and form-fitting."

Cruger sat there, the salt air blowing across his cool face, thinking about the Tvonens. Whereas the sand was beginning to stick to every square inch of Cruger's body, those small, coarse annoyances seemed to slide off Tony's tanned surfer skin, as if he were coated with teflon. Maybe the sand knew who its friends were.

"Normally science progress with one smallish advancement after the other. Each scientist stands on the shoulders of all his worthy predecessors. One thing that was never done before is to stand on the shoulders of alien scientists — that is how we've skipped a few steps here and advanced so quickly," Tony said.

"You mean the Tvonens, they've helped us?" Cruger asked.

"Yes, the ones that are running the company. They've pitched in a few key ideas that have allowed us to tie together string theory with the singularities — black holes and the Big Bang phenomenon. Without the little tidbits they provided, we would probably still be stuck for a decade or even a century or two."

The wind blew Cruger's thin, curly hair down across his eyes. He absently swept the hair away with his forearm.

Tony explained that the theoretical physicists had made some breakthroughs that even the company's R&D

They got into Cruger's car. Tony rifled off instructions before they had even left the driveway.

"Seventeen shouldn't have any traffic going towards Santa Cruz this time of day. Take Route One North when we hit it, and then we can go to Natural Bridges — I like that beach a lot."

Cruger nodded and exhaled deeply, preparing himself for the fifty minute drive. Shooting over to Santa Cruz was a young man's move, but it felt good to be mobile, to live life to the fullest and get the most out of every minute. His back was starting to hurt from the drive already. He wondered where his bottle of aspirin was and hoped Tony didn't want him to buy some beers — probably some wispy thin domestic beer that tasted like slightly used water but left you with a thick headache the next day.

They started to ascend, having passed quaint Los Gatos nestled in the foothills of the coastal mountains. The dense pine and Douglas fir forests jutted skyward on each side of the two-lane road, resting atop the smallish shoulders of the vertical clay-rock walls that encased the highway.

"I'm going to be a Physics major next year in College, man, I'm really into it," Tony said.

"I think I can understand your fascination with it," said Cruger, "In fact, I guess you have access to, what would you call it, inside information."

"Yeah. I mean, the way things work, the scientific method, that's everything. The only hope we have is to fully document and describe the physics of our environment and our lives, only then are we in charge — you know, the masters of our destiny. Hell, I can't talk to people about this at school. If they knew that I skate home after school to review Schrödinger's equations, they'd peg me a nerd."

"So, is that where the 'Tony the GQ surfer dude' act comes from?"

"Totally dude; like totally," Tony said as he blew his hair out of his face.

"But what else is at stake here? How about this stuff with humans being more in control because of the Unified Theorem?" Cruger said.

"That's the key. And when we get more control because of our particular technological approach, I want to be one of those in the know. The driver's seat will be for those of us who understand the theory. The theory of operation."

"And where does that leave a dumb old spinner, accordionist, good for nothin' like me?" said Cruger. "I hope not as corporate dead wood."

"Oh no," Tony said. "Think job retraining, the wave of the future."

The twisted smile on Tony's face was the kind of smile that reflects a sarcasm that is entirely too representative of the truth. Cruger tried to take no offense.

They arrived and Tony led them to the edge of the sand. Cruger could only see one person, a quarter mile away, on the deserted beach.

Waves mercilessly pounded against the shore, slowly grinding the fine sand particles into smaller and smoother pieces of sand. Natural bridges was a limestone structure that formed a bridge across a small ocean inlet. Through the center of the stone structure was large circular hole that people would walk through when traveling from one section of beach to another.

Cruger took off his shoes and socks and stepped into the cooling sand. The smooth particles massaged the bottoms of his feet, rolling across the top of his feet when he took larger steps. Cruger had always liked the beach, the winds, the sand, even the fog that accompanied most mornings on the shoreline. Now the cool afternoon breeze moved through his hair like an invisible rake though grass, the salty air massaging health and the robustness of the ocean into his scalp.

Why don't I come here more often, he thought. The same thought he had whenever he came, except for the times where he first had to struggle through hours of traffic. If you knew when to leave and when not to, that wouldn't happen.

Tony sprinted down to the shoreline, dipped his feet in the foamy water, and ran back to Cruger, covering the thirty yards in what seems like a couple of seconds.

"Need to get some exercise — spent the whole day sitting on my rear in class," he said.

"Right," Cruger said, "a little exercise like that for me and you can call 911."

A gust of wind passed over them, kicking up sand, chips of water-logged wood washed in by the tide, and scraps of leaves and seaweed.

"You need to know some more things about the Company," Tony said. "The Company has a large, complex organization, but, I'll tell you what you really need to know. As you probably already guessed, a good percentage of the Company is composed of people right here from earth.

"Many of the executive positions are still held by Managers from elsewhere. The vast majority of these — well, I'll call them foreigners, sounds better than 'aliens' — most of them are from the same planet: Tvonen. You won't find this planet on any of your astronomy charts; I assure you, it's far away. Oh, by the way, the Chairman himself is a Tvonen."

Cruger raised his eyebrows. Now he knew the top dog was an alien, did that matter?

"These foreigners went through a process of evolution quite similar to what the humans have endured. However, there are a few major differences, and they're important differences."

Cruger noticed that Tony's ability to talk so matter-of-factly about these matters was surprising and frightening — it even grated on him a little. How could God and the secrets of life that had previously seemed magical and immortal now be so prosaic?

"First of all, the Tvonens have creationist mythology that rivals the book of Genesis for entertainment value. The

semi-opaque privacy glass, he could see the Crugers' house. A soft blue light radiated a sense of peace and contentedness from one of their bedroom windows. When Harris stopped brushing, he could hear the sound of the accordion. It was a faint sound; Harris thought it sounded like the old standard tune "Autumn Leaves," but he couldn't tell for sure. It definitely wasn't a polka, and Harris considered that much a great improvement.

Chapter Nine

The doorbell rang at 4:15, right on time. Cruger opened the door. Tony was wearing day-glow pink beach shorts, a black Megadeth tank top, and unlaced high-tops. He stood with one arm holding his skateboard and the other around the shoulder of a young lady friend who held her own skateboard. Her skin was tanned to a smooth medium-brown. A perfect match for Tony, Cruger thought. Her flaxen blond hair hung down to her shoulders and across her eyebrows. Baby blue skin-tight lycra pants, peach halter top and sandals completed the perfect young-California ensemble. She was beautiful.

"Cruger, this is my friend Sky," Tony said.

"Sky? Nice to meet you."

"Hi, shall I call you Cruger?" Sky asked between bubble gum snaps.

"Please. Are you and Tony in school together?" Cruger said.

"Yeah, Tony and I have three classes together." Sky smiled wide and lifted her big blue eyes towards her namesake as if having three classes with Tony was better than winning the lottery.

"I'll meet you later tonight, Sky. Cruger and I have some business." At the word business, Tony's tone of voice dropped to a deep growl.

"OK, later." Sky waved and slapped her board on the ground in a single fluid motion.

Cruger watched her closely as she sailed, on the small plastic board, down the driveway, swerving back and forth and then cutting a turn onto the sidewalk. A second later he caught himself staring and stopped.

"Very attractive young friend you have, Tony."

"I wouldn't have thought you of all people to be such a lech," Tony said.

"Lecher is too strong a word. Dirty old man will do just fine" Cruger said. He rolled his eyes and smiled.

"OK," Tony said. "Let's get to business here. Last thing I need is *you* giving me a hard time about Sky."

"Why is that? Is anyone else giving you a hard time about Sky?" Cruger asked automatically, unable to imagine what conflicts Tony would be having over a girl like Sky.

At that moment Tony instantly looked like a teenager again. Tony's shoulders slumped forward almost imperceptibly, yet, the slight lapse in posture illustrated a vulnerability that Cruger hadn't noticed before.

Tony dropped his eyes to the floor and said "Sky is in what you would have to call a 'sick' relationship. She's been going with this guy for a year, and she's tired of him, but she can't get out of it."

"Why can't she get out of it? Has she tried to break up with him?"

"Oh yeah. In fact she's told him that she wants out and she wants to date me. That just makes him grab on tighter and follow her around — I think he's obsessive."

Cruger pondered Tony's situation, nearly breaking out into an inappropriate grin, thinking of the fact that Tony was such an extraordinary kid, plagued by ordinary problems.

"The thing is," Tony said, "she and I have a lot in common, and he — his name is Rick — doesn't have anything in common with her. The guy is a delinquent. Really, I'm not exaggerating."

Cruger wandered over to the family room couch and motioned Tony to follow. The plush carpet and late afternoon sun blended to create a calm atmosphere that clashed with Tony's mood.

Cruger said, "there must be something about this guy that's not allowing her to get away. Is she afraid of him?"

"Well, she might be afraid of him. He's sort of wacko acting sometimes, and that scares her."

Tony was truly a teenager; Cruger could see that now. Not only that, but, he was a sensitive young man who must feel like an outsider among his peers. Tony lived a secret life that he couldn't share with his friends. In the status-hungry phase of late high school, that must be a serious social burden.

"Well, enough of that," said Tony. "We need to get down to some business.

"OK. But if you want to talk about this or anything else like it again, feel free."

"Thanks, Cruger. I don't care what the Big Guy says, you're all right."

Cruger almost jumped off the couch: "Don't scare me like that — I went to Catholic School, you know."

"Sorry," Tony said. "Now that we're being serious, I need to continue your orientation lecture. How's the spinning going so far?"

"Great, considering I don't know what I'm doing."

Tony paused for second, a look of concentration on his furrowed brow. "If you've got time, I like to shoot over the hill to the beach to think sometimes. We could talk there if you don't have to be back," Tony said.

"Actually, that would be fine. I don't have any plans this afternoon — my wife won't be home until seven-thirty." One of the luxuries of being a musician who works few hours, Cruger thought. Makes up for the magnitude of pay, or the lack thereof.

"Cool. Let's go." Tony was heading for the door like a rocket, his surfer's body being pulled toward the beach by a nearly visible magnetic attraction.

a journey that, as opposed to some others, was not in itself the reward.

A baby, a baby, goddamn, I don't believe it. He hugged Corrina tight and close, eyes shut hard, leaking only slightly.

He and Corrina knew the fragility of life. Corrina had been pregnant a year ago. The baby — not yet known as a 'he' or 'she' but most certainly not an 'it' — was of course destined for greatness. Possibly a doctor, an astronaut, or maybe even President of the United States, the baby would most certainly be a special person.

The winter months of December and January passed. Then, for Corrina, she said it felt like a heavy period. Realization of the dreaded fact was more horrid than anything they had ever faced before. The robbery of a promised life was a malicious obscenity.

The Doctors gave Corrina a set of explanations. These thing can happen for many reasons: failure of the fetus to attach properly to the uterine wall, scar tissue, or hormonal imbalances. She had still been in the danger period — just barely. The first trimester had nearly elapsed without incident. The integrity of the umbilical cord had been questioned; the doctors thought that the cord became twisted and then failed.

He and Corrina vowed to be brave and try again. Only a success could erase the miserable failure of their first attempt.

Cruger wondered if he would ever believe that a real life had not been lost. Sure, the first baby actually born to them would be the first child, but, hadn't their been a different life, a thoroughly different zygote based on different genetic material that had existed and then suddenly not existed? In practical terms, it didn't matter to him. In terms of the meaning of a life that has been thoroughly erased, the meaning was very special. The poor damned little umbilical cord.

He kissed Corrina again. Yes, we are brave enough for another shot at it.

And what type of world would they be bringing their baby into. Would they bring the baby into a world that he felt he had to apologize for? No, his child, all the children deserved better.

He vowed to try hard to make it better. For his baby.

Later that night, Cruger retreated to the den to play Tony's accordion. Cruger, admittedly, had never been an exceptionally good accordionist. His repertoire consisted of a dozen Polkas, some folk music, a few old swing standards, and "Lady of Spain." Anything else and he had to read the music; and he was not one of those expert sight-readers who could play anything perfectly the first time. Since he had been spinning alone in this room for a few nights, he noticed a change in his playing. The notes seemed to flow out more smoothly. The instrument produced a rounder, more musical tone. Cruger could play almost any tune he had ever heard before, his ear and instincts accurately leading him across the keyboard.

This night was no exception. His paying felt strong and full of life. He played Thad Jones's ballad, "A Child is Born." He had only heard the song once before on one of Corrina's old Thad Jones & Mel Lewis big band albums. But he knew the song now; he deeply felt the song and every one of its nuances and alternate chord changes. Life could be so good.

Chapter Eight

Leon Harris' beautifully landscaped front yard stood out as the neighborhood's best. The lush green carpet of his front lawn was thicker and greener than a billionaire's wallet. To the other side of Harris' driveway was an elevated Japanese Rock garden. The Scotch moss, red-tinged boulders, gravel, as well as the spherically-shaped Pyrocantha and Juniper bushes formed a visual retreat from the concrete and asphalt monotony of the maze of streets, sidewalks, and driveways that entangled the tightly-housed neighborhood.

As Harris had improved his yard, his impression of the neighbors' yards had diminished. At first his neighbors, both the Crugers and the Youngs on the other side, had what appeared to be perfectly adequate yards. By the time Harris had added the final fieldstone to his rock garden, the neighbors' small intermittent weeds seemed bigger, the rusted brownish grass more horrid.

The neighbor's yards had clearly become the landscapes from hell.

Harris didn't know any of his neighbors well. He said hello to the ones he passed when he was out for a run, and had only spoken briefly to the Crugers a couple of times. The Cruger guy was a pretty lazy dude, Harris thought. A musician. Somehow he had a babe of a wife. The guy must be twenty pounds overweight, a scarcely employed accordionist (calling him a musician was probably a stretch), and he's got a hot-looking wife who pretty much supports him.

He must not be as stupid as he looks, Harris realized.

But who knows what the hell this Cruger guy is up to now? Harris poured some boiling water over an herbal, caffeine-free tea bag. Ginseng root, good for sustained energy as well as sparking the immune system.

Harris didn't have any plans for the evening. He sat at the terminal in his home office and played with a few matrix solutions he didn't get a chance to try at work.

Later he went into the family room, were there was room to move, and practiced a few dozen low and high kicks, on left and right sides. He finished the quick workout with sixty-five knuckle and fingertip push-ups. Even this quick workout gave him a good healthy sheen of sweat. He peeled his shirt off as he entered the bathroom and, grabbing his toothbrush, began his fourth tooth brushing of the day. He concentrated on his gums — the plethora of television ads concerning gingivitis had him worried.

From the bathroom, through the obscured view of the

know that you are going to accept the job," Tony said.

Cruger rose his eyebrows and felt his chin jerk involuntarily, demonstrating a small surprise reflex that he never knew he had. "How the hell do you know that?"

"It came down to me in a memo. It's determined already by other spinners. You're it."

"Then why did you even ask me?" Cruger said.

"Oh, we try to be polite in this business."

"And what about that family health plan you mentioned," Cruger smiled at the incongruous use of such prosaic corporate terminology.

Tony nodded and answered. "That means that you and your family will experience no illness or harm, except for what is beyond our control, like intervention from the Other Company."

"Now that sounds like a pretty good benefit."

"Yeah, well, we're a very competitive employer. We don't even ask for your immortal soul in return."

Chapter Six

Cold, cold, cold. The frost was fall's thickest yet; the dried old leaves of Maples and Eucalyptus lined the streets. Most of all, it was cold.

Leon Harris had just started his morning jog. His blood had yet to flow to his extremities, which were as numbed from sleepiness as they were aggravated by the chilling morning breeze.

Harris glanced quickly at his black plastic, multifunction jogging watch, $3.95 from Service Merchandise. He had only been running for three minutes, two seconds, and fifty-seven hundredths. Usually the endorphin rush didn't kick in until fifteen minutes, at least. Harris imagined the feeling he would have when the sweat poured off his brow and the blood pulsed through his trunk and thighs. *Running, it feels so good when you stop,* he told himself in a clenched-teeth mantra. Morning runs are a lot nicer in the summer, but, think of the poor suckers who live were it really gets cold, he thought. The radio weather report that morning said currently forty-three degrees, warming to a high of sixty. Not too bad.

Harris usually got his run done by 7:05, into the shower, breakfasted, dressed and out the door by 8:00. He could be to work by 8:15, hit the weight room or Karate practice at lunch, leave work by 6:00 and get home around 6:30. Not that he lived by the clock.

At home, Harris would throw together microwaved leftovers or cook a quick stir-fry type dish: lean meat, vegetables, and rice or potatoes. He only drank alcohol when out with friends, keeping it to one or two drinks, which didn't have too much of an effect on his lean 6-3, 210-pound body.

Once at work, he would make out a list that described his goals for the day. A typical list looked like this:

8:30 Glass of Water, write list
8:45 Investigate File System bug
10:00 Staff Meeting
11:30 Lunch workout
12:30 Debug, design next lib interface
6:00 home

Then, he would break the list down into sublists. Often the sublists generated sublists of their own, but Harris knew where to draw the line.

His performance reviews at work usually commended him on his organizational, attention to detail, and ability to persevere on a problem until closure.

The man had no vices. Well, almost none. When given the opportunity, Harris could be an extremely inquisitive person, far past the point of simply being nosy.

When Harris' next door neighbor, Jack Cruger, began playing his accordion every single evening, Harris noticed.

Harris, a black man who grew up in the sixties and seventies, liked to listen to Stevie Wonder, James Brown, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Hendrix, Muddy Waters, and some Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, but not accordion music.

He would have been merely disgusted with Cruger and his instrument, if not for the flickering pale blue light that shone through the curtains when Cruger played every night.

Chapter Seven

Cruger was cooking dinner when he heard Corrina coming through the garage door.

"Back here," he said. "Your chef is at work creating another masterpiece."

He stirred the mushrooms sauteing in the butter sauce and sprinkled the minced green onions from the cutting block.

Corrina walked into the kitchen and put her purse down on the counter. She sniffed the air. She smelled Tarragon.

"Mmm, smells good."

"But of course," he said, mocking the accents of the French chefs that worked at restaurants more expensive than any he had been to. He sounded exactly like one of those temperamental little *Cordon Bleu* jocks.

"Was that supposed to be a French accent?" she said. "Sounded more like an Australian with lock jaw."

"You've got no ear, no ear. My accent is *magnifique*," he said, again sounding like an Aussie with lockjaw.

"Whatever." And then she put her arms around him and pushed her face into his neck. She whispered into his ear "we're pregnant."

Cruger forgot about his culinary masterpiece and bad accent. They kissed and hugged and she cried. He did too, a little, but worked hard to keep her from seeing it and himself from admitting it.

Cruger believed that whatever would happen, they were strong enough for it. The journey would begin again,

them."

"My friends tell me I'm open-minded," said Cruger. "And my enemies tell me that my mind is so open that everything has leaked out."

"Great, you'll need room in there for the stuff that I'm going to lay on you." Tony flicked a wisp of his long blond hair out of his eyes, as if the motion were a precursor to any serious discussion.

"Starting with an explanation of the blue light, I hope," Cruger said.

"Yep. Did you look down into the belly of that box when you were playing?"

"Uh-huh."

"And you saw those blue strands of light sort-of moving around, creating different patterns and stuff."

Cruger nodded, wondering if they were going to play a guessing game or if Tony would just tell him what was what.

"Well, what was happening in there was significant. Each one of those blue lights — or strings, I would call them — each represents a path, a possible outcome. As you saw, there are millions of those things wiggling around when you play.

"I contacted you because you were chosen as someone who will do a very good job of making, or, as I like to call it, *spinning* these strings."

"What is the point of spinning these strings, and why are you involved?" Cruger said, the questioning leaping out automatically before he fully comprehended what Tony had just said.

Tony began to explain everything, or, at least, quite a bit. Cruger was being offered a job. Tony belonged to an organization that looked for people who had special talents and abilities: abilities that were a match for the special needs of the company that Tony worked for.

Cruger, mainly because of his musicianship, was one of the dozen or so people in the world chosen for this job of "spinning" the strange blue strings.

"So your company is an international company then?" Cruger asked.

"Oh yeah. In fact the company is a lot broader based than that."

Cruger frowned and Tony explained more.

"The Company, as we like to call it, has a bunch of responsibilities. The primary responsibility is to create and support all worlds, galaxies, and universes."

Cruger gave Tony a blank stare.

"It's a service industry, really," said Tony.

Tony laughed. Cruger pretended to laugh along with him. They both continued to laugh — Cruger felt like a cartoon character, laughing, slapping his his knee; he would have even guffawed if he knew what a guffaw was.

"You're joking," Cruger said.

"No, I'm totally serious. I can understand that you don't believe me — I didn't believe it at first either; but you'll believe it soon."

Tony explained more. The spinners completed a necessary function of determining the probabilistic outcomes of all events on earth. Each string could be thought of as a possible plane of reality across time. The many parallel strings that intersected each other represented the large number of possible outcomes for any given instant.

"Couldn't God just toss some dice? I had always thought that's how it might work anyway."

"No," said Tony, "and we call him the Chairman, or the Big Guy, by the way. Just Him rolling the dice would be a poor way of spinning because it would be cold, mechanical, and lack the variation and natural beauty that people like you provide."

"Well, how could it be that I do a better job than, um, the Big Guy?"

"Originally everything was done by Him, like you say. But, then it became clear that a more personal way would incorporate the proper aspects of the human condition. I don't fully understand it, but maybe you can think of it this way: it's like the difference between computer-generated art and human-devised art — an expert can tell the difference."

Cruger was either satisfied with that explanation or so immersed in thought that he failed to respond.

Tony continued to explain that the job of spinner would entitle Cruger to a family health plan, enriched musical talent, and a sense of accomplishment. Cruger just needed to play the special accordion every evening for at least thirty minutes. Playing more would do neither any good nor any harm. The job did not come without risks, however. Not everyone was a friend of the company. In fact, the company was in direct competition with what they referred to as the "Other Company." Tony reminded Cruger that he was most likely at least conceptually familiar with the "Other Company."

"If not for them, everything here would be perfect. Can you imagine, no hunger, no disease, no murder or greed?"

"So the 'Other Company' is responsible for everything bad?" asked Cruger.

"More or less. Death would always be with us along with the natural occurrences that some people think are bad, but, the Other Company pretty much has what we think of as the Devil's work as their charter."

"Somehow this translates to a risk for me?" Cruger moved the conversation back to what stuck in his mind.

"Yes. The Other Company has employees here just like we do. They can get involved in messing us up — they have in the past. But, we keep a low profile. I am your only contact in the company. Just like you, I have only one original contact, my boss, and now I guess you, as an employee."

"Hah," said Cruger. "You come in here and tell me I can have a job with the rulers of the universe and my boss will be a high school kid who looks like a surf bum?"

"Yeah, that's pretty much what I'm telling you. I also

Chapter Four

Cruger tried to put Tony out of his mind and found Corrina in the living room doing aerobics. He asked his wife for a dinner date and she kindly accepted. Corrina had the day off after working a week of day shift, so she was rested and ready to go out to dinner. The new Cajun place on El Camino Real, *Louisiana Pot,* was their choice.

The restaurant was located in a mini-mall that also had a dry cleaner, record store, sandwich shop, crafts store, and Pizza place. You could have your clothes cleaned, buy some overpriced CDs, stock up on yarn, and eat anything from pizza to a tofu burger all without reparking your car. Great.

The *Louisiana Pot* was New Orleans moved 2,000 miles west. Dixieland music played, people drank like fish, and the Gumbo was excellent. Corrina waited for her blackened prime rib and Cruger waited for his blackened catfish.

Corrina told Jack about her patients, in particular a young girl with MS who was a sweet kid with serious problems. In a way, the toughest of patients.

A tape of a Dixie band played "Here Come the Saints." Cruger felt himself floating in and back out of the conversation with his wife. He wondered if the whole function of entertainment, evenings out for tasty dinners and movies, where nothing more than a way of escaping from the harsh reality we all see when we're alone. At the restaurant, Cruger could see his pretty wife and well-dressed waiters and pretty waitresses and laughing couples with nice clothes. He could hear Dixieland music and the intoxicated laughs of young men and young ladies who had just downed their "authentic" New Orleans Hurricanes.

If this were more real than playing his instrument or reading or sitting around the house, then it only seemed more real because restaurant scenes are what you see in the movies and on TV and what you read about in the newspaper. Everyone, without exception, was at least moderately young and moderately well-dressed. Bright colors and patterns that seemed to say: I'm centered, I have money, do you too? These people are all sheep, Cruger thought. They could be trained to accept nearly anything as reality.

The waiter arrived with the prime rib and the catfish. Both the fish and beef were spiced and burnt black in an iron pan. For all he knew, the meal was highly carcinogenic. Cruger looked around as people eagerly awaited their burnt-to-a-crisp twenty dollar entrees. Like sheep.

"You think this blackened stuff causes cancer?" Corrina said.

Cruger was surprised. Either his thoughts were printed on his sleeve or she was as cynical as he. She's a worrier like me, he thought, that's why we're married.

"Un huh," he said. "But don't worry, what we did this afternoon was an anti-carcinogen."

"And good exercise too," she said.

They ate their dangerous meal and Cruger tried to pay attention to her discussion of patients and hospital politics.

"You really help these people — I'm proud of you. At least one of us is making a contribution for the better," Cruger said.

"Oh come on, you're making a contribution — you're a teacher," Corrina said. She had her nose screwed up that way it got whenever she became mildly annoyed.

Cruger realized that he was preoccupied and in a self-pitying mood. At this rate, he would not be a very good date.

What she just said was true. Yes, he was a teacher and that was generally considered a noble profession. Unless you teach accordion, in which case, he thought, people thought of you like they thought of the neighborhood crack dealer: forcing horrible habits on young, impressionable kids.

Self-pity aside, honesty was sometimes the surprisingly best policy: "It's just that I'm afraid I'm not doing enough with my life," he said. " I've been worried about not making a contribution, not giving enough."

Corrina looking him straight in the eye, her pretty and open face telling him as much as her words. "You're worrying too much. Just face it, you're a good person, a great guy — why else would I have married you? Just accept that and quit punishing yourself."

And maybe he should let well enough alone. Did every action that every person did on every day necessarily contribute to the course of the future? Cruger thought that might be so; but, playing that weird accordion with the blue light must be something important, a substantial contribution, because there was something about it that felt magical. He was somebody now, playing that weird accordion.

Whatever the flashy little thing really was.

Chapter Five

Our daughters and sons have burst
from the marionette show
leaving the tangle of strings
and gone into the unlit audience

— Maxine Kumin

Tony showed up at Cruger's doorstep the next day, as planned. Cruger was relieved and excited to see Tony, although he wanted to appear nonchalant about the situation.

"Can I get you anything to drink? Cruger asked.

"A Coke or Pepsi, if you got it, thanks."

Cruger popped a can and poured two glasses full, on the rocks. He motioned for Tony to sit at the kitchen table.

"So, you think the accordion I gave you is cool or what?"

"You only lent it to me, and, yes it's cool." Cruger's use of the word cool came out as a mockery of Tony, and Cruger regretted it immediately.

Tony said, "I have a lot of things that need to be said, and I'm afraid you will need a really open mind to hear

athletic, Corrina was still a head-turner, even a 'real fox' as one of his buddies annoyingly called her. Trim, tan, with mid-length auburn hair, she was extremely attractive. No tofu thighs or belly rolls like Cruger saw on so many women at the beach and around the neighborhood. Corrina didn't need help to get his libido into high gear.

"All I have to do is think of you in your string bikini. My circulatory system does the rest," he said.

Corrina walked over to Jack and gave him a soft kiss on the lips.

She said, "All I have to do is think of you getting into my string bikini."

Then they began to try to make a baby. No oysters necessary.

Later that evening Cruger accepted the inevitable: he would have to play Tony's accordion. From good sex to accordions, isn't live full of dichotomies, he mused. And why play the thing? First of all, the kid asked him to. Second, the thing was exciting and strange and unexplained. Lastly, it had a nice sound and a good feel. Why not?

He closed the study door so Corrina would not easily walk in on the strange sight. The warm, softly illuminated study was lined on one wall with bookshelves full of Cruger's favorite reading as well as a few shelves dedicated to Corrina's anatomy, physiology, and nursing textbooks. Cruger allowed his eyes to scan the shelves that were like friends to him, holding up parts of his mind, parts of his past, books that had become a part of his world view — part of his most private self. On the top shelf, a little Hemingway, some Fitzgerald, everything by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The shelf below, invoking a more philosophical mood, housed some Kafka: *The Castle* and *The Metamorphosis*, Huxley, Plato, Koestler. The next shelf had the high-speed fantasies of Heinlein, Bradbury, Asimov, Sturgeon, Clarke. Then Cruger's eyes stuck to the next lowest shelf, full of the reading of the college years: Joyce, Proust, Mann, Elliot, Beckett, Conrad; even some sixties classics jumped out at him — Mailer, Malamud, Pynchon, Barth. *Catch 22* was there, and others equally important.

Cruger wanted to reach around and pat himself on the back for his literary achievements, at the same time saying: *Yes, ladies and gentlemen, I read all of these and more.* But, please hold the applause, save the awards, because I've done nothing with them but file them away in my mind, my selfish head; they are now stashed deep into the brains of an accordion instructor who is merely a consumer of knowledge, not a provider, a processor, a manufacturer or a designer.

Unlatching the old case, he pulled out Tony's exotic instrument. Caressingly, carefully, and tentatively, he began to play a few warmup scales.

Inexplicable blue light notwithstanding, the strangest thing was this: Cruger began to play things he never played before. After a few requisite Polkas, he launched into a snappy rendition of Malagueña, a song he had heard but never played before. The instrument's mysterious, resounding overtones echoed in Cruger's mind as its blue sparks and beautiful notes rang out into the energized, tranquil air.

Chapter Three

As promised, Tony called Cruger at home the next evening. Tony thanked Cruger for practicing the instrument as he had requested.

"How do you know that I actually played it?" Cruger asked.

"Oh, I know, it's obvious."

Cruger was only slightly disturbed by the fact that Tony seemed to know this for certain, somehow. Other more disturbing questions were still unanswered. As if a witness to Cruger's silent thoughts, Tony said "I'd like to come over to fill you in on some facts."

"I think I would enjoy that."

"How about I come over after I'm out of school tomorrow, like around four thirty?" Tony said.

"That's fine, I'll be back here by quarter after four. And you better have some good explanations; this whole thing is really weird," Cruger said.

"Oh yeah, must be totally weird for you. Don't worry, see you then."

Cruger hung up and thought about this High School "dude" who was "totally" messing his mind. This kid was the strangest thing to ever happened to Cruger. Being a true skeptic at heart, he still felt that this was some kind of hoax, some strange setup. He expected the hidden camera to pop out from behind the wall at any minute: "Surprise, it was a joke, you're an idiot."

Cruger realized that, according to the apparent behavior of most people, he should have been jumping out of his skin with curiosity. Most people would have been more affected, Cruger thought. But he evidently had a high tolerance for ambiguity.

He wondered if anyone really knew anything anyway, so why should he worry about his silly predicament. He meant really knowing what was going on, as in having positive, scientific proof of existence. Besides, a little excitement was what he thought he wanted. A small little challenge had presented itself, and he now accepted the challenge, on its (or Tony's) terms.

So like people, he thought, to accept challenges that find them while never choosing a challenge on their own. Playing the game is so much easier for people than inventing it.

Cruger now waited for Tony to play his next move. What had Kierkegaard said? *Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.* Cruger now waited to live his soon-to-be-explicable future.

keys of the fine instrument. The "Too Fat Polka" reverberated throughout the small practice room. The instrument had a smaller, darker tone than Cruger was accustomed to. He was into the second eight bars of the tune when he jolted slightly at the sight of a strange luminescence rising from the belly of the instrument. Blue streaks of light, entwined like yarn across a cat tree, flickered their surprising veneer within the accordion's belly. Cruger could see down into the cavity through a three-quarter inch opening directly above the keyboard. Shock notwithstanding, Cruger had continued to play down the solid Polka. When he stopped, the strange light did likewise.

"What's that light?" asked Cruger in a coarse voice ringing with disbelief.

"That light," Tony said, "is the reason that I had *you* play that box." Tony seemed satisfied with that answer, but, Cruger clearly was not.

"What do you mean?"

"The box will only do that, what we just saw, for you," Tony said.

"Are you trying to con me or something — you calling this magic?" Cruger didn't know whether to laugh or let out his true feelings. He gave Tony a hard, defensive stare.

"I know that this is all confusing for you, ah, Cruger. Is it all right to call you Cruger?"

"Yeah."

"Anyway, I need to get this into your head, and I know it won't be easy. All I want to do for now is tell you to please play this instrument every night, for at least a little while."

"I still want to know what this is all about."

"Can you please just take it home and play it a little at night? I will come back and explain everything to you in a day or two," Tony said.

Cruger looked up at the ceiling of the small practice room. Small styrofoam polygons covered the ceiling; Del, of Del's Music World, certainly wasn't using the high-quality foam soundproofing material. With accordions being played, you'd think he wouldn't skimp on it.

But what should he do? Cruger was scared of his inaction. *What should he tell the kid? What the hell would friggin' Clint Eastwood do in this situation? This is just plain bizarre. Is the kid a nut case, on drugs?* Thoughts sprayed through his mind like machine gun fire.

"'Oh, by the way," Tony said, "Don't tell anyone about this, please. "I know you won't," he said as if to assure himself.

"But..."

"Later," Tony said as he swung out of the cheap folding chair, opened the door, and walked briskly down the musty, narrow hall.

Cruger had no response. He slumped forward and stared at the strange small instrument that rested on his forearms. Shaking his head from side to side he smiled as he rehearsed, in his head, telling his wife for the very first time, "had a tough day at the office, dear."

Chapter Two

Cruger's wife, Corrina, was prone to the scientific approach. Since Jack and she had decided to try to make a baby, their sex lives had undergone a change.

For one thing, they now made love three times a day. Three times a day had previously loomed as a mythical figure to Cruger. Not since their brief and carnal Honeymoon had the prospect of such frequent intercourse seemed plausible. Yet, now, it was three times a day whether or not Jack liked it, just like the self-help fertility manual said on page twenty-four.

They had been trying for four months. No periods had been missed yet. Even so, Corrina continued to support the home pregnancy test-kit industry with frequent testings. Rabbits dying were yesteryear's method of test; vials of water needed to turn a rich blue color or little tablets needed to spell plus or minus. Four months of pale water and minuses — the equivalent of live rabbits — was not considered a long time by most people.

Cruger thought it was a long time. His lower back thought it was a long time.

When Cruger walked in his front door that evening, his own accordion case in one hand and Tony Steffen's in the other, Corrina was anxious to talk with him.

"I'm going to start monitoring my ovulation cycle," she said. She was excited, her bright eyes on fire, lighting the room.

"Just as long as you don't make me count all my sperm every day."

"Listen silly. What I do is take my temperature every morning and I can then chart when I start ovulating. Then we can make sure to make love a lot just before and during my ovulation."

"Sounds wonderfully romantic. Out of curiosity, along with *Bolero*, did Ravel ever write any music entitled *Symphony to Ovulate to, in G minor*?"

"Did anyone ever not tell you that you're a smart ass?" she said.

"People who have never met me generally don't."

Corrina sighed. "Ah, the lucky ones."

"Listen, let me get this straight. When you're not ovulating I take cold showers, keep to a low testosterone diet, and occupy my mind with Baseball scores. Then for a week each month I eat oysters, beat my chest like a gorilla, and jump your bones every time the wind shifts?"

"You've got it, partner — but you don't always have to wait till I'm ovulating," she said. "We can just practice the rest of the month."

"What, you think I'm a machine, a love-making machine; switch me off, switch me on," Cruger said, "like clockwork?"

"You've done well in the past. And, if your batteries need recharging, I've got a few tricks up my garter belt."

Cruger believed what she said. In her late twenties and

laugh. And what else had Twain said: "At this day, I hate that contrivance as fervently as any man can, but at the time I speak of I suddenly acquired a disgusting and idolatrous affection for it. I got one of powerful capacity and learned to play 'Auld Lang Syne' on it."

As the story went, after being thrown out of various residences, Twain was eventually pressured to give up the instrument. He even wrote a rude statement of defection. "When the fever was upon me, I was a living, breathing calamity... desolation and despair followed in my wake. I bred discord in families, I crushed the spirit of the light-hearted, I drove the melancholy to despair, I hurried the invalids to dissolution and I fear me that I disturbed the very dead in their graves... with my execrable music."

Cruel was the capricious twist of public sentiment. Back when Cruger was a teenager, playing the damn thing was almost hip. Of course, these misguided people, much as Mark Twain obviously had become, were forced into a reactionary hatred of the instrument that only spoke of some underlying passion, some real human emotion, that surrounded their feelings for the instrument. Cruger could see this — seen through the facade of ridicule, hatred, and name-calling. Deep down, he knew they must actually like the accordion.

The real problem was half of Cruger's students didn't have any talent. Little Billy Weymuts, the student that had just left, was an exceedingly bad student who hated the accordion. Billy either never practiced or had an almost disconcertingly powerful lack of talent.

This day, after three minutes, it had become clear that Billy couldn't play his lesson assignment, a C major scale.

"OK, try again Billy, starting on the low C."

"The one here, this key?" Billy asked, as if he were searching for the optimum spot to split a 80-carat diamond.

"No, two keys to the left, there."

"Oh yeah."

Billy plodded through a few notes, then hit a clinker.

"You know," Billy said, "This isn't so important. I want to get into sports. Chicks dig a jock."

Cruger scratched his head. There was something about an eleven-year-old saying *chicks dig a jock.*

"Who told you that?"

"Told me what?"

"About chicks digging a jock."

"My brother, Ronnie. Told me I should just be a jock, or at least play guitar, ya know, like Beejee King."

"That's B.B. King. Do you even know what a jock is?"

Billy Weymuts brought his shoulders to his little elfin ears and dropped his eyes. "I guess not."

They got back to the C major scale but didn't get far before time was up; so much for Billy's lesson.

But it was a living. With twenty-one, no, make that twenty-two students, plus gigs, plus a workaholic nurse for a wife, his was a workable career.

That's what was holding him back, Cruger thought. This was all too easy, much too easy. His students, clients, and wife were all very willing to shell out enough money to make Cruger's life very comfortable. No, he didn't drive a Porsche with personalized plates saying "MONEYBAGS" — these yuppie pursuits were of no interest to Cruger. But still, he wanted more, just because it was all too easy.

Challenge, discord, friction. Friction; that's it. You couldn't climb a mountain if it weren't for friction. In a world lacking friction, you would slide back down into the saddle of your equilibrium — be it for better or for worse. *Where is the friction in my life? What are my battles, my defeats, my failures*? If it weren't for friction, no heroes would ever live.

Cruger glanced at the practice room wall clock — the new student's time slot was about to start. Cruger began to recall the initial phone conversation with the boy. The student had said *I would like to hear about playing the accordion*. A strange thing to say. Not a simple *I want to learn how to play* or *I would like lessons in . . .* not the usual.

Three minutes after the hour a young blond teenage boy knocked softly on the studio door and then entered.

"Hi, I'm Tony Steffen, I talked to you the other day." The youth's voice was low, slow, and punctuated.

Cruger reached over and shook Tony's hand. "Good to meet you, Tony," he said, "have a seat."

Cruger was impressed with Tony's maturity. *What is it about this kid*, he thought? Tony stood about six foot one, more than a few inches taller than Cruger, and had a wiry, muscular build. But, Cruger thought, it is more than his height - the kid has presence. The surfer blond hair, long arms and legs, erect posture and resounding voice combined to create a seamless package; the kid reeked of self-confidence. *What the hell is he doing here*? Most of Cruger's students were from Nerd Squad. Tony didn't fit the bill.

Cruger looked at the dusty brown case that Tony held by the handle. "I see you already have an instrument."

"Yes," Tony said. "In fact, that's what I really wanted to talk to you about most." Tony swung the case out in front of him. Quickly popping the two aluminum latches on the front of case, he reached in and pulled out a small and ornate accordion. Polished cherry wood. Corrugated side panels and engraved trim gave the old instrument a stately look.

"It's beautiful," Cruger said.

"Yeah. It's been, um, passed down to me. A really special instrument, I've been told."

"I'm not knowledgeable as a collector, Tony, but I can tell you that they don't make them like that any more."

Tony smiled a wide smile that radiated light and warmth. "I wonder if you would play it a little for me?"

Cruger had been anxious to do just that; now he needed no excuse to grasp the accordion and give it a try.

"I'll play it a little Tony, but, it's you who we need to get playing it."

Tony nodded unconvincingly and watched as Cruger gently moved his arms and pressed his fingers across the

The Unified Murder Theorem

PART ONE OF FOUR

JEFF ZIAS

Prologue

They killed him that night and somehow he felt it coming. In all other respects it was a typical Thursday night gig. Getting killed was something he was prepared for, so it was no big deal.

The dark bar he was killed in was filled with noisy patrons drinking beer, hard liquor, wine, or expensive mineral waters in clear glass bottles. In the center of the smoky hovel was an elevated stage. Merely four feet by six feet, the stage gave him plenty of room for his Thursday night solo guitar gig, but fitting a whole band up there was like putting a dolphin in your goldfish bowl.

The guitarist was medium height, brown haired, slightly slovenly, and unremarkable in remarkably many ways. He could, however, play the hell out of his instrument. The Thursday regulars attentively listened to his cascades of chords and flurries of arpeggios. Not only did his playing hold their attention: the guitarist's instrument itself was a special custom job, a focal point.

Yes, all guitars have a fretboard, strings, and body; but this guitar always projected a strangely luminous blue light which emanated from its hollow body; it was *simply a modified instrument,* some people in the audience thought. Most people didn't pay much attention to the light, preferring to assume it was nothing special, or assume that they really knew what the light was, when they really did not. Like so many other mysteries in life, the audiences usually chose to ignore the phenomenon rather than explore it. Only a few people — maybe one out of every dozen — would ask about the blue light. *How could he get that light to pour out of the hole — in synchronization with his notes*? The guitarist would never fully answer such questions. *It is just a light,* he would say, *a very ordinary light.*

That Thursday night two guys who had been standing in the back, against the wall, made their way up to the stage as the guitarist was finishing his first set. He didn't get a good look at them because as he lifted his head up from staring down at the fretboard the taller of the two guys pulled out his thirty-eight and fired two shots through the guitarists head while mumbling, inaudibly, the words "goodbye from Nattasi."

Chapter One

The advancement of science is not comparable to the changes of a city, where old edifices are pitilessly torn down to give place to new, but to the continuous evolution of zoologic types which develop ceaselessly...

— Jules Henri Poincaré

The sun was too hot, the shady grass too cool; the breeze was too brisk and the baked sidewalks too dormant; but, taken as a whole, the day was perfect.

At three o'clock in the afternoon of a sunny, mid-November California day, an accordion instructor named Jack Cruger looked through the windows of his stuffy first-floor practice room into the parking lot of Del's Music World. High School kids floated through the parking lot like twigs down a river. Some moved fast, some slow, and some clumped in a living, breathing circle of conversation that resembled a whirlpool.

Jack Cruger sat in the practice room waiting for his next accordion student, a new kid. He hoped the kid had some ability; any amount of ability would be greatly appreciated. Most of the kids he got were forcibly sent by their parents in order to satisfy some twisted ethnic family tradition. He could hear the parents now: "we want Johnny to be able to play polkas at the family reunion," or "teach him to play the Beer Barrel Polka for OctoberFest."

That's why these miserable little students Cruger got were so pathetic: almost none of them were acting of their own volition. Forced to play the accordion, nature's most hated instrument. What could be worse?

Up in San Francisco, forty miles away, a law was on the San Francisco ballet, proposition P for Polka, known as the "use an accordion and go to jail" proposition. Times were tough for accordionists.

This accordion law (even though it was a joke) surprised Cruger — San Franciscans should know better, and some of them did. Concurrently San Francisco, the city supervisors were ready to appoint the piano accordion as the official instrument of the city, since the piano accordion was invented in San Francisco, in 1907 by Colombo Piatenesi and Pietro Dieiro.

In fact one of San Francisco's leading literary icons, Mark Twain, had been an accordionist. Not for long, though. Jack Cruger — being a fan of Mark Twain's — recalled Twain's acerbic notes on the subject of playing the accordion. Cruger's nearly photographic memory (which he called his "pornographic memory") for enjoyable quotes and images pulled in the choice memorable quotes like a fisherman hauling in his nets. Twain had said "After a long immunity from the dreadful insanity that moves a man to become a musician in defiance of the will of God that he should confine himself to sawing wood, I finally fell victim to the instrument they call the accordion." Even Twain maligned the instrument; the accordion, always good for a

First*Text*

JASON SNELL

Another year has dawned, and I'm back here again.

Welcome to 1992, and to the first *InterText* of this year. I hope I'll still be bringing you *InterText* into 1993 and beyond, but that's now in the hands of various Journalism School admissions officers around the country.

At this time last year, in addition to covering protests against the impending Gulf War for my school newspaper, I was involved in designing my new net magazine, tentatively titled *InterText* (I never did come up with a better title), and searching far and wide for stories that I could put in issue number one.

A year later, I think we've produced our best issue to date. The stories in this issue are all first-rate. First up is *The Unified Murder Theorem* by Jeff Zias — a first for us, because it's a four-part serial. Rest assured, the whole thing is written and in my hot little hands right now. It's hard to describe what *Unified Murder Theorem* is about, but I can say that it's gripping stuff, and well worth reading.

Another first in this issue is our first story (or so I think) by a professionally published author. Louie Crew, who has published hundreds of works, is a professor at Rutgers University. His contribution this issue is the story *To Comprehend The Nectar*.

In addition, we've got a good cyberpunk-style SF story from new writer Melanie Miller, and a somewhat pastoral piece by new writer John Reoli, Jr.

And to complete my ever-so-exciting synopsis of this issue's stories, I'll mention what is *not* an example of nepotism — our final two stories are by the editors of *Quanta* and *InterText:* Daniel K. Appelquist's "Multiplication and the Devil" and "A Handful of Dust" and my own "Gravity."

Just a note to readers and writers — the appearance of stories by Dan and myself in these pages by no means proves any sort of conspiracy (Oliver Stone take note) or old-boys'-network. All submissions we receive are judged solely on merit, not on the identity of the writer. I'd never dump another story just because I had a story by Dan or myself.

So please continue to submit your stories. I've already got a couple lined up for next time — which is the first time that's happened in the year I've been doing this — but we need as many stories as we can get.

Since I began this column by discussing one year ago, perhaps I should continue the anniversary spirit by mentioning that our next issue will be a special first anniversary issue. I'm hoping to have a special cover for the PostScript version and more goodies. Be sure to submit stories or articles soon if you'd like to be in the anniversary issue.

One other thing I'd like to mention is how amazed I've been at the international flavor of my subscription list. *InterText* is now sent to, among other places, Russia, Germany, Great Britain, Sweden, Switzerland, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Japan, China, Australia, and New Zealand. Our circulation is slowly climbing, as well — at last count, exactly 1100 people were on some distribution list. And that doesn't count the people who FTP *InterText* from some site without asking to be put on the distribution list.

Be sure to let us know what you think of *InterText*. The great thing about computer communication is that one can receive almost instantaneous feedback. You rarely if ever get chances to receive replies from the editors and writers of mainstream magazines — but *InterText* lists the addresses and names of its editors and writers. If you have questions or comments of any kind, please feel free to mail us.

Enjoy the issue. Take good care of yourselves. We'll see you back here in two months.

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INTERTEXT

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