InterText

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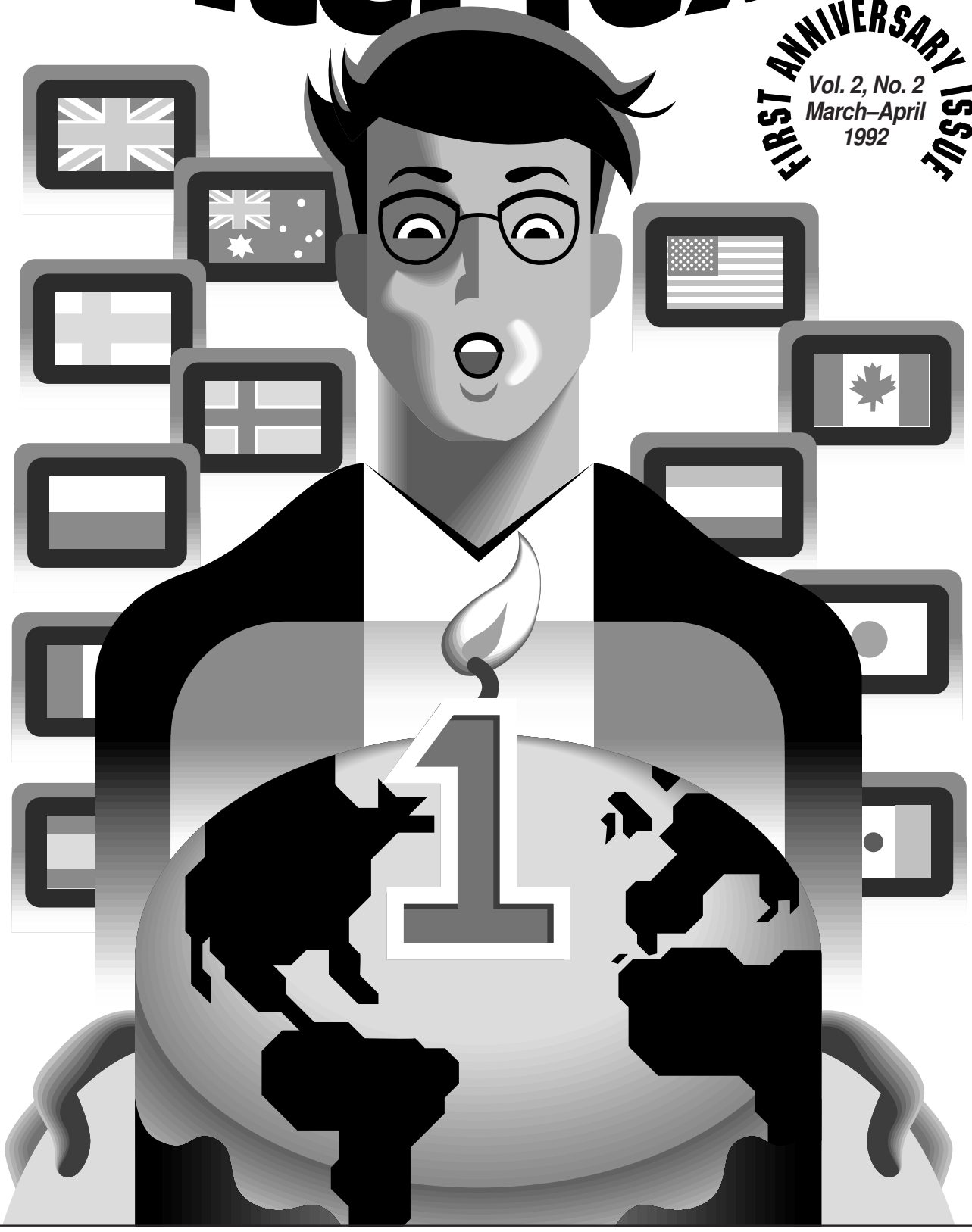

InterText

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Our next issue is scheduled for May 1, 1992.

First*Text*

Jason Snell

It's hard to believe that it's been a year.

I remember when I first discovered that Jim McCabe's *Athene* would be ceasing publication, and I remember thinking to myself: *hey, there's something I wouldn't mind doing. An electronic magazine. Why not?*

And here we are, one year and six issues later.

The magazine has grown and changed over the past year, with the amount of text per issue growing by leaps and bounds. We've got more subscribers now, though the official number has been hovering slightly over 1,000 for quite some time now.

One of the stories in this issue, "Cannibals Shrink Elvis' Head" by Phil Nolte, has quite a history behind it. It is one of the "lost" stories of *Athene*, a story slated for appearance in the final issue of that magazine (my own "Peoplesurfing" was another) that never appeared. I've had the story sitting around for quite some time. The catch is, I didn't know who wrote it.

Now — this may seem unrelated, but trust me — about a month ago I participated in a strange meeting that has only really become possible with the advent of computer communications: I met, face-to-face, one of my assistant editors and contributors, a man whose stories I've been reading for four years. His name is Phil Nolte, and he works at the University of Idaho. As you may or may not know, Idaho is famous for its potatoes, so much so that their license plates have the phrase *Famous Potatoes* stamped right on them.

Here's the catch: the University of Idaho has a special potato testing farm (or something like that — all I know about potatoes is that you're supposed to poke holes in them before you stick them in the microwave oven) in Oceanside, a town just a few miles north of San Diego. And Phil Nolte was going there for an 'Open House.'

I met him at a restaurant about a 10 minute walk from the UCSD campus, and we talked for a few hours over lunch before he headed for the airport and, eventually, back home.

I've done things like this before: my first girlfriend was someone I met on a computer bulletin board I ran in high school (see my story "Sharp and Silver Beings," in the Dec. 1990 issue of *Quanta*, for details), and since then I've met a few other bulletin board or computer network folk face-to-face. It's even a strange experience to talk to them on the phone, as I did with Dan Appelquist a few months back.

I digress. At any rate, it was fun actually *talking* to Phil, about writing, computer communication, and all sorts of other stuff. And at one point, as we were discussing Jim McCabe and *Athene*, I mentioned a story I had called something like "Aliens Stole Elvis' Brain."

"Why, that's 'Cannibals Shrink Elvis' Head!'," he told me. "I wrote that!"

So it was. I had never bothered to ask Phil in e-mail, but over lunch we finally overcame a year-long communication barrier.

The moral of this story? Maybe that while computer communication is an incredible thing, it also can foster a lot of misunderstandings. (So, of course, can live human communication — it's just that the misunderstandings fostered by computer communication are of a different type.)

In addition to Phil Nolte's store, this issue brings us a few other fine short stories and the continuation of Jeff Zias' "Unified Murder Theorem." Jeff informs me that a few readers have mailed him, asking to be sent the rest of the story so they can know what happens before the conclusion (which should appear in mid-June… we're only halfway through now.)

I encouraged Jeff to make the readers wait. First off, waiting will make the cliffhangers much more interesting, and we are providing synopses to refresh your memory of the previous installment. In addition, the version of the story that appears in *InterText* will be somewhat different than the version Mr. Zias has at home. Geoff Duncan and I have been jointly handling the editing of "Unified Murder Theorem," and if we haven't been completely lax in our duties, what you see here will be the "preferred form" of "Unified Murder Theorem."

Before I go, I'd like to thank Mel Marcelo for providing us with the special "First Anniversary" cover art. And I'd like to thank Geoff Duncan — an act which is becoming a habit of mine — for contributing a column of his own for this special issue. It's well worth reading, I can assure you. (As a sidelight, while I've met Phil Nolte and spoken with Dan Appelquist, Geoff and I have never even spoken. His hometown of Reno, Nevada is only a couple of hours from my hometown (Sonora, California), so I'm hoping I'll get to meet him sometime in the future.)

Enough of me, already.

Until next time, I wish you all well.

Geoff Duncan

Recently, I had the opportunity to have lunch with one of the people who got me started in computing. I'd been the wide-eyed first-year undergraduate who had barely touched a computer; he'd been the intimidating electroculture veteran, mentor to everyone who was anyone on the machines. He'd lived during a local "golden age" of electronic fiction, when there had been a virtual writer's community on the campus mainframes. Now he was a computing professional wearing a suit and passing out business cards, while I still worked on campus and hadn't cut my hair. Funny how times change and people change with them.

Over cafeteria food we reminisced about computer gurus, primitive graphics, and the old days of e-mail serials.

It was time well-spent, a validation of our pasts and the things that had been important to us. I discovered his interests include avant-garde gothic rock; he was amused to learn I was an assistant editor for a network-based fiction magazine. "Don't you ever grow up?" he asked between sips of coffee. "Electronic fiction is dead, if it ever lived in the first place."

Mildly offended, I pressed him on the issue. It's not dead, I explained. It's doing better now than ever before. "That's not the point," he said. "Electronic fiction will probably continue to grow for some time. But it's crippled by its medium. Computing is based on information, and information is measured by *volume*, not by *content*. You only offer content. You'll eventually run out of stories, then writers, then readers." He sat back and crushed the paper cup. "It's just a matter of time."

I laughed in his face. *We'll see who's right in the end, bucko.* We spent a few minutes exchanging e-mail addresses and then parted amicably. I went back to my office and my usual routine; he went back to Brooklyn and a high-rise office tower. And that was the end of it.

Except what he'd said kept bothering me. Is electronic fiction doomed from the start? Is its very media — information technology — going to be its demise?

It's obvious that electronic fiction wouldn't exist without information technology. What's not so obvious is that information technology supports the *amount* of information available without regard to the *meaning* of that information. Technology lets us store, organize, and retrieve more material than ever before. But what is it that we're storing, organizing, and retrieving?

Signal-to-noise ratio is a term used to describe exactly this dynamic. In a nutshell, *signal* is the content you want to receive and *noise* is any other information that comes along with it. The term actually predates computers: on a telephone system, *noise* was literally "noise" — hissing and crackling. But the idea still applies: the lower the ratio of signal to noise becomes, the less worthwhile it is for you to pay attention to the information as a whole. It hurts your ears.

The signal-to-noise ratio of information technology today (and of large computer networks in particular) is generally low. This has a lot to do with the diversity of information available — not everyone is interested in a constant feed of Star Trek trivia. But it also has to do with the way in which people *use* information technology. From the point of view of any particular person, most users don't generate much *signal*, but they do generate a fair bit of *noise*. Most electronic information is addressed to a narrow audience or is related to the use of the media itself. Very little of the available material is intended for a wide audience.

I realized that this is what my friend was trying to tell me about electronic fiction. The people producing the signal are vastly outweighed by all the people producing the noise. My friend doesn't believe that projects such as *Quanta* and *InterText* can be heard for long above the din of the mob. And even if these projects survive, how many people will try to distinguish them from the tumult? It's easier to ignore it all.

Well, maybe my friend is right. There is evidence. To my knowledge, none of the network magazines have much of a catalog on hand, perhaps with the exception of *DargonZine*. I've seen most network-magazines print outright pleas for submissions. Maybe there's already a lack of *signal* in electronic fiction.

And perhaps I shouldn't say this, but editorial support is also a problem. At most, a small group of people produces each publication; the departure of one person can seriously affect a magazine. *Athene* shut down because of the time commitment involved. Furthermore, network access is not guaranteed. A graduation or a career change can stop a publication overnight. So coupled with a weak signal, we may have a weak transmitter. Maybe we *are* a match in the dark, merely putting off the inevitable.

But looking back, I still think my friend doesn't quite know what he's talking about. Electronic fiction has come a long way since its indeterminate inception. Beginning with Orny Liscomb's *FSFnet*, we've seen a very long-running shared universe in *DargonZine*, the on-line magazine *The Runic Robot*, the irrepressible *PULP*, and a new set of far-reaching magazines — *Athene*, *Quanta,* and (of course) *InterText*. And that doesn't take into account commercial services and local electronic institutions: published novels have made their first appearances on networks such as GEnie, and e-mail serials continue like clockwork. New publications are emerging such as Rita Rouvalis' *CORE*. I used to be able to count the editorship of electronic fiction on one hand; now I scarcely know where to start.

Cooperation between publications is astounding. *InterText's* page of ads is one example; a more significant one is the comprehensive access site recently created at the Electronic Frontier Foundation. Looking through that site, I am impressed by what a few hyperactive, impulsive editor-types have managed to coax out of the on-line community. I'm a little bit proud to be part of it.

All this may add up to a little more *noise*, but it also creates a much stronger *signal*. "Real" publications (and with them "real" authors) are taking notice. Subscriptions aren't flagging. There has to be fuel for the fire, and for now things are getting brighter.

The funny part is that my friend sent me some e-mail the other day. "That magazine thing you mentioned," he wrote. "Sign me up. And it'd better be good, or I'll give you a swift kick in the disk packs." Maybe my friend shouldn't try to be an electronic comedian, but he only verified what I knew all along: *content* is what counts. Or none of us would be involved.

Frog Boy

ROBERT HURVITZ

Johnny Feldspar woke up one February morning feeling slightly different. He couldn't put his finger on exactly what it was, but it bothered him nonetheless. He got out of bed, walked over to his aquarium, and pulled out his pet frog, Jumper.

"And how are you feeling today?" Johnny asked his frog, gingerly stroking the cool, damp skin.

"Ribbit," said Jumper noncommittally.

Johnny held the frog up to his face. "You look kinda hungry. I'll stop by the pet store after school and get some food for you. Okay?"

"Ribbit," Jumper repeated.

Johnny put his frog back in its little home, locked the lid, got dressed, and went downstairs for breakfast. His mother was pouring milk into a bowl of cereal when Johnny sat down at the kitchen table. She placed the cereal bowl and a spoon in front of him.

"And how are we feeling today, Johnny?" she asked.

He took a mouthful of cereal and said between chews, "I feel kinda funny, Mom—"

"Don't speak with your mouth full," his mother said. "It's impolite." She reached over and tousled his hair. "How many times have I told you that?"

Johnny grinned sheepishly and swallowed. "Sorry, Mom."

"That's okay. Now what were you going to say?"

"I feel kinda funny."

"Are you sick?" She sat down next to him and put her hand on his forehead. "You're not running a temperature." She looked at her watch and scowled. "Damn. I've got an important meeting at nine, so I don't have time to take you to a doctor…" She drummed her fingers on the formica table-top.

"I'm not sick, Mom. I just feel kinda funny." He frowned. "I'm not sick."

Johnny's mother crossed her arms and looked at him. Then she smiled. "I know what it is," she said. "You're just nervous because it's Valentine's Day and you're afraid you won't get any valentines, right?"

Johnny looked at his hands. *Valentine's Day.* The words came crashing down on his ears like panes of glass, shattering. How could he have forgotten? He'd spent the last three nights churning out valentines for all the girls in his class, as per his mother's stern instructions. If it had been up to him, in everybody's Valentine's Day mailbox, which they had all made out of cardboard the previous week as an art lesson, he would have put frogs.

Frogs…

Palm up, fingers stretching out to infinity, Johnny's right hand had slowly gained his complete attention. He clenched his hand into a fist, turned it over, and squinted.

"Johnny?" his mother asked, concerned.

He looked up, blinked. "Uh, yeah, Mom. That's probably it." He smiled weakly. "I guess I just must be nervous."

"Hey, snot-face!"

Johnny stopped in mid-chew, turned his hand inward to protect the peanut butter and jelly sandwich he held.

"That's right. I'm talking to you, snot-face. Or should I say lover-boy?"

Johnny turned around and stared at Fat Matt.

"I saw you stuffing all those mushy love cards into the girls' boxes." Fat Matt laughed, the small rolls of fat bunching up about his face. His beady eyes glanced down at Johnny's lunch, in which several pieces of heart-shaped candy bearing messages such as "Will U B Mine?" and "I Luv U" were strewn. "I see you also got your own share of valentines, didn't you, lover-boy? You know, I didn't get any valentines, or valentine candy."

Johnny felt his face flush. He knew what was going to happen.

"It seems to me, lover-boy, that, since you got so many candies and I didn't get any, that it would only be fair if you shared some of yours with me." He moved forward and grabbed up the candies.

"Thanks, snot-face," Fat Matt said with a laugh. "Oh, that doesn't leave you with any candy, does it?" He picked out a heart from his sweaty grasp and licked it. "Well, here you go, snot-face," Fat Matt said, dropping it into Johnny's pint of milk.

At that moment, Rebecca Moyet, the prettiest girl in school, and Quinn, her little brother, walked by. Quinn laughed, pointed at Johnny, and said, "There you go, snot-face!" He laughed some more.

Rebecca frowned.

Fat Matt popped a few hearts into his mouth and looked once again at Johnny's lunch. "Hey, snot-face, what else you got there?"

Quinn laughed once again, and Rebecca looked down at him sternly.

Johnny looked around at the crowd that had suddenly gathered around the four of them. Dozens of eager faces shifted left and right, vying for a clear view of whatever further ridicule Johnny might soon suffer. He felt nauseous, and his hand began to tingle…

A shout erupted from the crowd as Johnny's half-eaten peanut butter and jelly sandwich fell, hit the pint of milk, knocked it off the bench and onto the asphalt. The initial spray of milk spattered the blacktop with white spots; the rest puddled around the fallen carton.

Johnny's outstretched hand, raised toward Fat Matt, burned with an increasingly painful pulsing. Sweat ran down, dripped off Johnny's forehead, his nose, his chin. His lips twitched. "Frog," he said gutturally, and slouched, exhaling, cooling, feeling spent.

Johnny hadn't expected there to be any noise; he hadn't expected anything, really. He certainly hadn't expected, when he looked up, to see Fat Matt screaming, to see his body spasm violently. He hadn't expected his hair to shrivel acridly and to come out in tufts as his hands clawed at his face, his head, his throat. He hadn't expected his skin to turn green, to bubble, to drip off in clumps and sizzle away on the asphalt into foul vapor.

The nausea that Johnny had felt only moments earlier gripped his stomach fiercely. The shriek continued, stabbing progressively deeper into Johnny's ears.

Fat Matt wobbled, what was left of his legs buckled, and he collapsed to the ground with a crash of shattering bone. On impact, a noxious cloud of green and red steam erupted from his body, obscuring the view.

The vapors made Johnny's eyes water, and he grabbed the bench to steady himself from vomiting.

The cloud dissipated, and all that remained of Fat Matt was a pile of stained clothes and, sitting in the middle of them, a frog.

The crowd gasped, stared in disbelief.

Quinn's laughter sliced through the heavy aura of astonishment. He pointed down at the newly created amphibian. "Frog!" he cried out, and laughed harder.

Johnny felt ill. He wiped his forehead, his trembling upper lip. His skin felt cold.

The frog tried to hop away, but slipped on the slick clothing and landed on its side, making the rest of the children laugh loudly. Johnny saw Rebecca try to hide the nervous smile on her face. The frog stopped, then tried to bury itself under the clothes.

Quinn rushed forward and grabbed the frog. "Gotcha!" he said, hefting it.

"Hey! Put it down!" Johnny said. "Can't you see it's scared?"

The frog squirmed in Quinn's grip.

"Put it down?" Quinn smiled wickedly. "Okay. I'll put it down." He lifted the frog above his head and then, with the help from a little jump, he hurled it to the ground. It hit the asphalt with a wet splat and lay there awkwardly, legs twitching slightly. Quinn laughed. "Want me to scare it some more?"

"No!" Johnny cried, as Quinn swung his arms and launched himself into the air, feet held together to ensure that his landing would strike true. At the last moment, though, just before Johnny was about to cover his eyes, Quinn jerked his feet apart and ended up barely straddling the injured frog.

The crowd let out a sigh.

Glancing around, Quinn laughed, lifted up his right leg, and forcefully brought it down on the frog.

The crowd let out a sound of disgust, and Johnny jumped to his feet, enraged.

Quinn stepped away from the dead frog and looked down at his blood-stained Reeboks. He frowned and poked his shoes into Fat Matt's soiled clothes, in an attempt to wipe them clean.

Hatred coursed through Johnny's veins. "Quinn! You… You…" The air seemed to thicken, grow hot and humid, as he struggled to express his anger. "You…" Each breath he took became more difficult than the one before. He strenuously dragged each mouthful of air down into his lungs, only to have it slip through his throat and rush back out into the world. And all the while he stared at the grinning Quinn, who was now busy entertaining the crowd with theatrical attempts at cleaning his shoes.

Johnny's vision blurred, the air coagulating into a sickly grey soup, as if the day were hazardously smoggy or he were looking through a grimy pane of glass. He squinted and saw Quinn kick the dead frog toward the crowd, which immediately widened with shrieks of amusement.

Johnny violently snapped his arm forward, his elbow joint popping, and pointed at Quinn. One word, dripping acid, burned through his lips: "Frog."

Quinn jerked his head around, a surprised look on his face, and looked at Johnny before he screamed. His small body shuddered with convulsions as the hideous transformation began.

The crowd, frightened and confused, screamed in macabre accompaniment to Quinn.

"That's my brother!" Rebecca yelled, running up to Johnny. Her face was flushed, violent. Tears were forming around her widened eyes. "That's my brother!" She slapped him across the face. "That's my brother!" She kicked him in the leg. "Make it stop! Make it stop!" As she raised her hand to strike again, chorused with screams from Quinn, the crowd, and herself, Johnny pointed at her and said meekly, "Frog."

In horror, Johnny watched Rebecca's face contort monstrously as she shrieked and as her hair, crackling, shrivelled and burst into dark, acrid smoke.

Johnny reeled back, tripped over the bench, and tumbled to the ground. He stared up at Rebecca, who was still screaming, though Quinn had by then stopped, and saw her skin begin to dissolve.

The crowd swarmed into his view, rushing up from behind Rebecca and from the sides, surrounding him. Every face was twisted with desperate fear, every pair of eyes burned wildly, and every hand was clenched into a fist.

The sudden closeness of the bodies of all his schoolmates made the air so stifling that Johnny was not able to breathe. He raised his hand in an attempt to defend himself, but could not utter a single sound.

ROBERT HURVITZ hurvitz@cory.berkeley.edu

Will finally be graduating from UC Berkeley this May, despite all attempts on his part to avoid the real world for as long as possible. He assumes he'll have to get a job or something.

Cannibals Shrink Elvis' Head

PHIL NOLTE

It started out as a joke. I mean, we were just going to have a little fun. You know, do something weird. That, and we thought we had them cold this time.

"Them" is the folks that publish those idiotic tabloid newspapers. Every now and then someone will bring one of them in to work. You know the ones, they're right beside the checkout counter in the grocery store. That's right, the ones with headlines like "Vampire Mummies Repel Space Alien Invasion" or "Tammy Faye's New Miracle Diet." The stories are always about odd things that were supposed to've happened. Trouble is, they always happen in foreign countries or in little towns that you never heard of like Slapshot, Wyoming or something. Not this time. This time they'd made a mistake; they'd picked a real town.

It was Raymond who pointed it out. "Hey guys, look at this! There's two brothers in Absaraka, North Dakota who have a space alien ship in their barn!"

I replied to that with something very intelligent; something like: "Huh? Bullshit!"

"I'm not kidding," he said. "Here, read it yourself."

"Bachelor Brothers' Barn Houses Space Alien Ship," I read aloud. "Trygve and Einar Carstenson found the strange craft in an abandoned field near their farm. 'We could barely lift it on to our trailer with the endloader,' says Einar. Well-known Yugoslavian experts say it probably came from Rigel." I could barely keep from laughing as I read it. "Shit!" I said. "Absaraka? That's only 30 miles from here."

It was Neil who had the next thought. "Let's drive out there and see if that farm even exists. What the hell, we could grab a twelve-pack to make the trip go a little faster. It won't take an hour both ways. Come on guys, what d'ya say?" Neil could be very persuasive.

"Yeah, let's do it!" We might have been a chorus. It was kind of a slow day anyway. We left Knutsen to mind the store. He didn't like it much, but it was his turn.

Fifteen minutes later we were in Neil's Caravan out on Interstate 94 and we were all on our second beers. ZZ Top was blaring on the stereo. Draper had brought the newspaper and was reading it out loud to a very appreciative audience: "Milkman Bites Dog. Ninety-year-old Woman Gives Birth to Twins. Love Boat Attacked by 150-Foot Shark." We were all in high spirits when we took the Wheatland exit.

"Absaraka, five miles," announced Neil.

We went to the post office-grocery store to get directions to the fictitious farm. We were surprised to find out that there were two Carstenson brothers who had a farm about four miles out of town. The guy at the post office said they were a couple of bachelors and that they were kind of weird. I didn't say anything but I thought the whole town was kind of strange.

Five minutes later we pulled up to the mailbox at the end of a long winding farm road. "Trygve & Einar Carstenson," it read. You couldn't see the buildings from the road, there were too many trees and too much brush.

"Well, we've come this far," said Neil. "Let's go."

The road was nearly half a mile long. When we got to the farm, we found a ramshackle three-room house and some dilapidated farm buildings. In one corner of the yard was a rust-red Studebaker pickup truck. It was a nineteen forty-something, I wasn't sure. It looked like junk, with a cracked windshield and one staring headlamp.

Draper was the youngest so we made him go to the door. He knocked a couple of times but there was no answer. We were about to call it a day when the old geezers surprised us all by coming up on us from behind the machine shed.

"What the hell do you sumbitches want?" said one of them. I guessed it was Einar.

Old, grizzled, and Norwegian they were, and not in the least bit friendly.

"We came to see the spaceship," I managed to squeak out.

Trygve was holding a double-barreled shotgun!

"Yew ain't from some Gad-damned lib-ral newspaper are ye?" said Trygve.

"No, we're from Fargo!" said Raymond. Brilliant, Raymond, brilliant!

"There ain't no Gad-damned spaceship here and git to hell off our property!"

So much for country hospitality! We took his advice and "got to hell out of there!"

We had finished our twelve-pack and were in need of another. We were also getting hungry, so we stopped in Casselton for a bite. Half an hour later, we were leaving the restaurant. It was Draper who noticed them first.

"Well I'll be go-to-hell!" he said. "Look at this, you guys."

Rattling and smoking down the main street of the little town came an apparition. An honest-to-god, rust-colored, forty-something Studebaker pickup truck. In it were two other apparitions. Or fossils, if you prefer. Sure enough it was old Trygve and Einar (which was which?), come to town. The ever-devious Neil was the first to grasp the significance of the event.

"Wonder who's at the farm?" he mused.

"Shit, probably nobody!" said Raymond.

"What say we go back and have a look around?" said Neil.

I don't know if any one of us really wanted to but no one wanted to be accused of not having any nerve either. I guess I was the most cautious. "Christ!" I said. "That old son-of-a-bitch had a shotgun!"

"Well he can't hardy hit you from Casselton, can he?"

Neil replied. That ended the argument. Neil's good at saying the right thing to end an argument. He's brave, too. When we got back to the Carstenson farm he showed his courage by offering to stay in the car with the motor running while the rest of us did the snooping. It was Raymond and I who found the ship! No shit! Believe it or not, Ripley! It was in one of the old buildings that had a big door on one end.

"Jesus, would you look at that!" said Raymond, his voice rising with excitement. "That thing is gorgeous!"

No doubt about it, it was beautiful. Long and slender and smooth, it was sleekly aerodynamic and obviously intended for use in atmosphere. It was much smaller than I would have expected — it must have been some kind of scout ship. It simply couldn't have come all the way from Rigel. It was only about forty feet long and made of some kind of totally unfamiliar metal or plastic. It was sky-blue and shiny. Raymond and I looked at fun-house reflections of ourselves in the side of it.

Raymond made a funny face. I slapped his shoulder.

"Cut that out!" I said. "This is an alien spacecraft! It should be treated with dignity! Jesus, can't you ever be serious?"

The little craft was beautiful, but it showed the after-effects of one hellacious impact. One of the "wings" was bent and torn and the nose and bottom were covered with dirt, like it had landed in a swamp or something. There was an obvious hatch on one side. From the way the mud was caked on the seams of it, it had not been opened. The way the little ship was damaged we had to assume that its occupant(s) were dead. We were just about to get a closer look when we heard the horn of the Caravan honk and Draper screaming at the top of his lungs. We high-tailed it for the van.

Trygve and Einar had come back from town. Hell hath no fury like a pissed-off Norwegian farmer! Fortunately, all they had was that old Studebaker truck and we had a head start. Neil has a couple of dents and one broken window on the back of his Caravan from the shotgun blast, but it could have been worse.

Within a day there was an Air Force barrier thrown up a mile around the house. No one goes in or out. We don't know what to make of it. Trygve and Einar must have gone into town to call them.

One thing that really irks me is that no one thought to bring a camera. One lousy picture and we all could have been rich and famous!

Well, we won't be caught napping this time. We're on our way to Clear Lake, Iowa to visit a Miss Nellie Rawlings, RR 2. It seems that the large oval rock she was using as a doorstop on her hen house turned out to be a *Tyrannosaurus Rex* egg. Hatched into a hungry little needle-toothed monster. She says it ate a bunch of chickens and her cat. By God, we're gonna get this one on film!

PHIL NOLTE NOLTE@IDUI1.BITNET

Is an extension professor at the University of Idaho, in addition to being an assistant editor of *InterText*.

The Naming Game

TARL ROGER KUDRICK

His mother's name was Sherry.

His father's name was Nathaniel.

His best friend's name was Warren Denaublin. His worst enemy's name was Emily Pirthrull. Some of his classmates were Susan Fench, Gordon Quellan, and Irving P. Rinehauser the third.

His name was John Smith, and he was *not* happy.

He wouldn't have cared so much if his name was at least *spelled* differently. Jon Smyth, Jonn Smithe, or something like that. But it wasn't. It was J as in Joshua, O as in Orville, H as in Harvey, N as in Norman, S as in Samuelson, M as in Mitchell, I as in Idall, T as in Terniard, H as in Hutchington — John Smith. His older sister (Josephine) had an English teacher (Mrs. Starnell) who talked about the Everyman. John thought that John Smith was the perfect name for an Everyman, but he was only eleven, so he couldn't even qualify for that.

There had to be at least a *million* John Smiths in the world. Didn't his parents *realize* that? What was wrong with them? What could they have been thinking when they'd named him?

His mother would have talked first. She always did. "Oh Nathaniel dear, look, it's our new baby. What'll we name him?"

"Oh Sherry darling, how about 'John Smith?' "

"Why 'John Smith?' "

"It's the most boring name I can think of."

That just about summed it up, John figured. Then his dad would've gone on about something else, probably football. John hated football. All the players had their names proudly displayed across their backs, so everyone could see how great they were. Once, he *had* seen a player with the last name Smith, and felt some hope. Then it turned out the man's first name was Ebineezer and John lost all faith in the world.

If only there was a famous president, or rock star, or something named John Smith. Or a movie star. Anything. Of course, those people would never *call* themselves John Smith, even if that was their real name. Those people never used their real names. They made something up. And that's what gave him the idea:

He would get his name changed. Officially. Right now,

right on this bright Sunday morning, before he even got dressed. Why put it off? He felt better already.

The hard part, of course, would be convincing his parents.

Nathaniel Smith was sitting in his armchair in the living room, reading the newspaper, completely ignorant of the storm of self-confidence and assurance that was about to come flying out of its room, demanding to have its name changed. Thus, he regarded the request with considerable surprise.

"You want to what?"

"Dad," John repeated, "I want to change my name." It had far less effect than he'd hoped for, especially the second time.

"You want," John's already washed, shaved, combed, groomed, and perfectly dressed father slowly said while staring blankly over the rims of his shiny glasses, "to change your name."

John, unwashed, uncombed, and still in his pajamas, said "Um… yeah."

John felt the moment slipping away from him.

Seeing no real response from his father, he used what he'd been saving as a last resort.

"Movie stars do it!"

"You aren't a movie star."

Leave it to parents to be logical when their only son in going through the ultimate crisis of his life, John thought. "You don't understand. I *have* to."

"Why? Are you hiding from the police?"

"No!" Why did parents have to *say* stupid things like that? "I just have to, that's all."

"Oh," said his father, turning and looking at the wall. John looked there too, but didn't see anything. And apparently, neither did his father. After a couple moments he turned back to John and asked "Why?"

"It's *boring*," he answered. He spread his arms out in a gesture of emphasis that was completely lost on his father. "There are millions of people called John Smith."

"Name one."

John stopped for a minute, thought, then realized he'd been tricked. "Daaad! You aren't taking me *seriously*!"

His father chuckled. "Okay. Look, have you talked to your mom about this?"

John reluctantly admitted that he hadn't. But, he added, she was next.

"Well, why don't you see what she thinks, and then talk to me."

"But she's at *church*! She won't be home for a long time!"

"She's always back by lunch time. You can make it that long." He ruffled John's hair. John slumped his shoulders and went back to his room.

"And stand up straight," his father called after him.

John got caught up in other things and forgot about the whole problem until after dinner. Then, his mother was shopping. She always shopped after dinner. It never made sense to John, but then, nothing his parents did made sense. He *had* to talk to her as soon as she got back! School started tomorrow, and there was no way he was going to start fifth grade as John Smith.

When he heard the sound of his mother's car coming into the driveway, he ran out of his room to let her into the house. He threw open the door just as his mother was about to unlock it.

"Hi Mom!" he shouted, scaring the unprepared Sherry Smith almost to the point of dropping her groceries.

"Hi John! Hey, you scared me there." She wondered why he was opening the door for her. She figured he wanted something, and tested this by asking him to bring in the rest of the groceries.

"Sure, Mom!" He ran out and made four trips from the house to the car and back without a complaint.

Even when that was finished, though, John still hadn't asked for anything, and Sherry began wondering instead what John had done.

Finally, she came out and asked him if he wanted anything.

John beamed, then became ultra-serious. "I'd like to change my name," he said.

Inwardly, Sherry Smith groaned. Josephine had gone through several different stages of "but Mom, I just *have* to (fill in the blank)," and was working on another one. She'd hoped John wouldn't fall prey to it too. But, the best way to handle these fads, she'd long ago decided, was to just play along.

So she asked him what he wanted to be called.

John opened his mouth, then closed it again. He had no idea what he wanted to be called.

"Larry," he finally said, proudly.

"Larry," she repeated, as if trying on a new hat. "Sounds like my name! Why Larry?"

John didn't know, so he said, "It sounds good."

"Larry," she mused. "Larry Smith."

John almost had a heart attack. "No! Not Larry *Smith*! Larry… Quartz! Larry Quartz."

His mother looked dubious, but John loved it. "Yeah. Larry Quartz. It's great. It's *exactly* right." Seeing no complaint from his mother, he went back to his room, smiling. He could hardly wait until tomorrow.

The next morning, after washing and dressing, John came out to eat breakfast. His mother was making pancakes. No one else was in the room yet.

His mother greeted him with a smile. "Good morning, John."

He almost responded, but then remembered and said "Who?"

His mother sighed. "Right. Who are you again?"

"Larry," he said slowly. "Larry Quartz." He sat down at the table.

His father came in from the living room. "Hi John." Both wife and son quickly corrected him. He looked at them, confused, but then just shrugged.

His older sister was next. She bounded into the room, her silky and wet black hair flopping behind her like a confused flag. She sat down at the table and, much to John's dismay, ignored him completely. He wanted to get her to call him John too.

So, he started humming quietly underneath his breath, and playing with his fork, hoping Josephine would tell him to stop. She did give him an odd look, and he paused and returned a false smile, but nothing else happened. He went back to his humming.

Pouring some pancake batter into a pan, John's mother said "Jo, we have a new member of the family this morning."

John stopped humming. What was she doing?

Josephine studied her mother. She looked around the table. "I don't get it," she said finally.

Sherry put the batter down and waved an arm at John. "Meet Larry Quartz."

Josephine stared at John, who paled slightly. "Whaaattt?" Her voice rose in disbelief.

John sat still, wondering how to turn this to his advantage.

"He changed his name?" Josephine drawled. Then she started laughing. "He changed his *name*?"

She turned to John. "What's wrong with the name they gave you?"

"Now Josephine," John's father began.

"It's Jo, Dad, not Josephine," she reminded him.

"What's wrong with the name they gave you?" John mimicked.

She glared at him. "John!"

"Who?"

"All right!" John's mother announced. "The first pancake is ready."

"Well, why don't we let John have it?" suggested Josephine sweetly.

"Who?" John replied innocently.

"Well, if *he's* not around, I guess I'd better have it!" She took the pancake.

Not taking any chances, John quickly added that he wanted the next one.

All in all, breakfast turned out pretty good for John. His mother called him John once, his father accidentally called him Harry, and his sister, for sake of argument, called him John every time. It was great. He just *knew* that he was going to have a wonderful day.

He didn't, of course, know about the new girl in his class.

Her name, and the month she was born in, was June. She had the nicest hair and the sweetest smile, and she had just the right mixture of shyness and audacity to get anything she wanted from anyone. She was a knockout, or as much of a knockout as a fifth-grader could be, and this was certainly the impression held by the male population of the class.

In fact, no one dared sit near her. The boys didn't, because they didn't want to do something stupid. And the other girls didn't quite trust her. June, and the seat next to her, were left alone.

So when John walked in, just barely before the bell as always, the only available seat was the one next to her, and all eyes were on him as he sat in it.

With no formal training at all, John performed a perfect double-take, and the result was a spontaneous burst of giggles as John found himself trying not to stare at June as rudely as he was.

Then the bell rang and the teacher walked in, and everyone turned to the blackboard.

The teacher was new. He walked in front of his desk and said "Hello, class!" His voice was deep and clear. "As you may have noticed, I'm new here. But I've taught fifth grade before, so I'm very good at it. I hope that you will all think the same after you get to know me. But first," he said, placing a pile of notebooks he'd been carrying onto his desk, "I would like to get to know *you*. My name is Mr. Carniss." He wrote it on the chalkboard with precise handwriting and opened up one of his notebooks. "Now I have here a list of names, but I don't know whom each one belongs to. So I'm just going to read off each name and if that's you, just raise your hand. How does that sound?"

Sounds terrible, thought John. This name-changing business was going to be harder than he'd figured.

What were his friends going to say? He glanced around. Sure enough, they were all there. About two-thirds of the room knew him, or at least his name. He vaguely remembered being laughed at only a couple of minutes ago and he didn't want to go through that again.

Then he thought of June. He didn't know her name was June, of course, but whoever she was, she didn't look like she'd think much of a John Smith. He found himself staring at her again, and looked away. Why did he even care what some dumb girl thought, anyway? He wasn't sure, but he did.

Mr. Carniss began.

"Sue-Ann Aldring?"

A girl in the last row raised her hand as if it were going to explode if moved too quickly. Mr. Carniss looked up, smiled a smile that melted Sue-Ann, and made a mark in his book.

"Michael Bern?"

And so it went. Name after name was called. Denaublin, Ewing, Garth…

"June Golden?"

June raised her hand as far as it would go. John felt sick. June Golden, he marvelled. What a name. She'd *never* have to change it. If I had a name like that, thought John, I wouldn't change it for a million dollars. Not for ten million. I wouldn't even change it if my parents threatened to kill me. I wouldn't…

John stopped thinking and sank into his chair. He felt like he'd just been hit with a sledgehammer. That was it. The answer. That was how he could get away with this and not be the laughingstock of the fifth grade.

Excited, he smiled, and could barely restrain himself until, eleven names later, Mr. Carniss said

"John Smith?"

John raised his hand, slowly, faking uncertainty. He hoped he looked like he wasn't sure he was doing the right thing.

Mr. Carniss looked up at John and made a mark in his notebook. Then he looked back at John. "Is something wrong, John?" he asked.

John couldn't tell if it was real concern, or just the usual kind teachers had for their kids. "Um…yeah," he said finally. "Kind of. That's…that's not my name anymore."

Mr. Carniss looked surprised. So did the other kids. John kept a perfectly straight face, but mentally crossed his fingers as he said, "My parents changed it."

Next to him, June Golden's eyes went wide with pity. On the other side of him, his best friend Warren almost fell off his chair.

Mr. Carniss was disoriented. For the first time, he seemed unprepared. But he quickly regained his composure and said, "I see. And what is your name now?"

Here we go, John thought.

"Larry Quartz."

Warren gave him a look which translated as "You've got to be kidding." Some of the other students were looking at each other in awkward disbelief. June seemed slightly bothered at the idea, and turned away from John just as he looked over to see her reaction. But none of this fazed Mr. Carniss, who had once again taken control.

"Well," he replied cheerfully, "what would you like me to call you? John or Larry?"

John looked at him, sinking. Why did he have to be so nice? But it was too late to back out now.

"I guess you'd better call me Larry, Mr. Carniss. I should get used to it."

"You should get new parents," whispered Warren, but Mr. Carniss simply nodded and made some more marks in his book. He finished off his list of names and then class started.

The day went badly for John. Things hadn't gone at all like he'd hoped. When he thought about it, he wasn't even sure what kind of reaction he'd been looking for, but he did know he hadn't gotten it.

As it turned out, Mr. Carniss was only his homeroom teacher. That meant he had to repeat his story and his act for five more teachers throughout the day. By the afternoon he no longer wanted to, but he kept having people he knew in some of his classes, and the story had spread through the entire fifth grade by lunch hour. John heard people talking about him from time to time, but he could never quite hear what they were saying.

By the end of the day, the misery he'd feigned for his first class was real. No one wanted to talk to him. No one knew what to say. A brand new student would have been treated better. John had forgotten how many friends he'd really had, until none of them seemed comfortable around him anymore. It was like he'd died and some new kid had come along, trying to take his place. It isn't fair, John wanted to shout. I'm still the same person! I'm just called something different!

After his last class, he collected his books and went to the bike rack where he traditionally waited for Warren. He unhitched his bike and, after a couple minutes, Warren arrived.

Warren smiled, started to say "Hi John," and then remembered and mumbled "oh yeah."

"It isn't *that* bad, is it?" John asked.

Warren stared at him. "You mean you *like* it?"

"Don't you?"

Warren started to say something, but stopped. "It's okay," he said. "But I like John better."

John looked at his bicycle. "Maybe I can get them to change it back, or something," he said. He didn't like the idea.

Warren did. His spirits lifted immediately. "You think you could?"

John was slightly taken back at the force of Warren's question. "Well, I don't know. They haven't actually made the change yet, but they said…"

"Well don't *let* them!" Warren shouted. "Shit! Tell them not to! I'll help! Want me to come over? I'll stand up for you!"

"No! No—that's okay." John wanted to change the subject. "I'll tell them. I won't let them. I…I like being John Smith." But he wondered who he was trying to convince, Warren or himself.

He rode Warren home, and then went on to his house, deep in thought. He still thought John Smith was a boring name, but nobody seemed to mind. Maybe the name actually helped somehow. "John Smith? Yeah, his name's boring, but *he's* cool…"

He got back home and put his bike away. When he walked inside, his mother smiled at him. "Hi Larry! How'd school go?"

"Who?" John asked.

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Has been making up stories since he could talk and writing them since he was twelve. He's written numerous short stories and first drafts of two novels, one of which is on-line at Oberlin College (owrite@ocvaxa.cc.oberlin.edu). His major goal in life is to earn a Ph.D. in psychology. He stays sane through both being weird and running AD&D sessions.

Boy

N. Ridley McIntyre

1. Start Switch

Shitamachi. The Manhattan Outzone. The Year of the Rat.

Darkness and rain pervade the quiet streets of the Outzone. Here, the Federal Government in its infinite wisdom has cut off all electricity, and left the running of the place to its inhabitants. In Shitamachi, the Asahi Tag Team run everything.

The DJ in Snakestrike is a tiger-haired poserboy with his brain connected to the turbo sound system at the end of a large dance floor, two thin blue wires dangling from the tiny electrodes stuck to his forehead. He is engrossed in the world of the music, every digitized blip and beep and thump pulsing through his nerves like the very blood in his veins. Electrical signals interfacing the sound system to his nervous system to allow him complete control over the mix. The ersatz sensory stimulation that runs through the 'trodes overrides his own natural senses. Every three minutes he switches to life to take a request.

The dance floor swarms with a thousand Shitamachi teenagers, sticking their heads into the blue lasers and flashing fluorescent gloves under the ultra-violet strobes. Every wall of the club writhes with holographic snake scales, a reptilian world that's constantly moving.

There's a hole above the dance floor where people from the level above can watch the dancers. Up here, on the left at the cocktail bar, Snakestrike stinks of dancer sweat. It also reeks of business. And for once, Dex has nothing to do with it.

Two women serve the cocktail bar. One dark-haired with natural beauty, the other a made-up half-Japanese blonde doll who is well known as an Asahi Tag Teamster. They call themselves sisters when a drunken Japanese Sony slave plays being a suit to them, despite his slave's company-grey jumpsuit. Dex watches them all with interest, then calls the dark-haired girl over to order his third Vijayanta tequila slammer.

Dex is here to see Laughing Simon, the Asahi Tag Team's best technojack, but he's been stood up again. So, he sits by the bar with his face cupped in his hand and a pocketful of stimulant wetware in his black pilot's jacket. He is just thinking of leaving when he feels a tap on his shoulder from the billy on the grey stool next to him: a muscular Australian kid with sideburns, a blue denim jacket, a quiff and a ginger moustache.

"So what do you do?" asks the billy.

"Why, are you collecting taxes?" Dex answers. His voice is English. The dark-haired girl returning with a plastic tumbler wonders if there are any Americans left in Manhattan. She turns the glass three times and fizzes it with a bang on the bar and Dex calmly downs it.

"You look like a ghost to me," says the Australian.

Dex shakes his head the way he's supposed to when they ask him these questions. All the time thinking, *does it show that much?* "Sorry, matey. Just your average ho-hum chipster."

The billy shuffles closer, his voice slipping gently into a business tone. "Shame. I'm looking at some hot paydata and I really need a ghost. One of the best. Someone like the Camden Town Boy. Dexter Eastman."

"You've found Dexter Eastman, matey. But I gave up the ghost over a year ago."

The billy makes a swift move from his jacket and Dex can feel a cold plastic tube dig into his hip. The Australian raises his eyebrows. "Looks like I've found my man, then." He motions to the exit with his head. "We're walking."

"You're walking. I'm here for a drink."

The Australian squints in Dex's face. "You'd better move, cause if you don't it's gonna be a Kodak moment."

Dex sits still. "Go ahead. Shoot me. You won't get out alive. The decision, as they say, is yours." A flick of Dex's eyes motions the Australian to look at the dark-haired bargirl. She holds the HK assault shotgun usually kept under the bar. Casually, and with a feisty smile, she rests the barrel on the bone of the Australian's nose and crunches the first round into the chamber.

"If you're takin' anyone out at my bar, it won't be with a plastic pistol, matey," she says curtly. "Give me the piece and deal with the man friendly-like."

The Australian gives over the gun with a taut look from Dex to the bargirl and back. He wipes sweat from his moustache.

Dex gives a thankful look to the bargirl. "Respect to you," he says.

"S'okay," she replies, "If he didn't look so dumb, I'd shoot him anyway." She puts the guns behind the counter, out of reach, and goes back to the Japanese slave.

Dex turns to the Australian. "You've got two minutes. Deal or step."

The billy talks through clenched teeth. Being challenged down in a club full of strangers by a girl who looked about seventeen has raised a storm inside his pride. It is a storm that has to subside just this once.

"My name's Priest. I'm a dealer for Kreskin."

"Kreskin the rigger?"

"The very same. Kreskin says you two used to work together. You used to do overnight laundry for him with the World Bank."

"That was a year ago."

"Yeah, well he's coming up against some tough opposition from the Martial Government Air Force along the North Route and he needs you to run the Ether for him. Hack into the MGAF shell and find out the reconnaissance flight plans

for next week. Rabies just broke out again in the Seattle Metroplex and Kreskin has the contract to ship vaccine over the line. He says you did it before for him. He says you'll do it again."

Dex narrows his eyes. "Read my profile. Ex-hackerjack."

Priest smiles. "Kreskin said you'd be a little reluctant. I have read your profile. Ex-hackerjack. Ex-MGAF pilot. Ex-joker. You've done a lot in your time. Kreskin needs someone he can trust. Someone he knows. And of course if you refuse…" Priest takes a cold gyuza dumpling from a bowl on the bar and bites half of it.

"Kreskin publicly announces my whereabouts to the MGAF."

"I think he had something even worse in mind, but you're on the right track. Strictly business, you understand, Dex. Nothing personal.

Somehow Dex wishes it was personal. Then he'd have an excuse to smash Priest's face in.

Kitty slips into Dex's room and hands him steaming ration coffee in a polystyrene cup. She's like him, another smart young refugee from the authorities. The Manhattan Outzone is an excellent place to hide, but she wasn't born to this, and no one could hide forever.

She looks at Dex through superchromed Sony eyes as he drinks his coffee, sitting on his black leather swivel chair and fidgeting, and she realizes that she knows very little about him. He grew up in a shanty town in the Thames Midland Metroplex and found a way out through running the Ether; the Camden Town Boy. He was a hackerjack legend by the age of fourteen, teaching others like Dagger and Man Friday to run the Ether. At fifteen he was involved with a team rivalry squabble and left for North Am District, where he joined the Martial Government Air Force, flying missions against the nomad joker clans who smuggled anything from weapons to computer parts from one Metroplex to another, figuring that the MGAF's high security would make him harder to track down.

She heard that he turned joker after he had to shoot down his own wingman to save a busload of joker kids from being rocketed. So he joined the nomads as a pilot running recon missions and every once in a while he would launder joker clan money through the Ether.

Kreskin got him a new identity and he left the game for the Manhattan Outzone, where he moved in with Kitty and the Asahi Tag Team and became a chipster. Once, he told her that his main ambition was to live a normal life. Buy himself a piece of Happyville. The biggest problem he had was dropping his past.

Kitty only has to see the look on his face to know that the past is on its way back.

Dex downs the coffee and crushes the cup inside a sinewy hand. "You don't think I should do this, do you?"

Kitty stands with her back to the wall by the door to the kitchen, her arms neatly folded over her *Omit* T-shirt. She bites her bottom lip.

"*No,*" she says to him. She kicks herself off the wall and leaves the room, closing the door behind her.

Dex is alone in a grimy-grey room with a swivel chair, a desk and a foam mattress to sleep on. Something inside him claws his stomach. An empty feeling.

A hunger.

He takes the machinery out of its bubble-plastic wrapping. It's been in storage in a tea chest in Kitty's room for so long that the wrapping sticks to the molded form of the Sony electronics, making the job more difficult. The sense 'trodes, like sticky silver beads with microthin wires, are wrapped around the Etherdeck. A procured military item in cold matte black, designated Ares IV.

The Ares IV has a stream of wires that plug into the input port of his stolen, unlicensed Fednet computer. Built in Poland, its bright red plastic casing and molded keyboard with old chunky keys seems tasteless to all but the billy tribe. Dex is no billy, he's too dragon, but he likes things in strange colors. The whole setup that has been updated for high-speed bias by Laughing Simon is plugged into the socket that runs a tap into the groundline. He sticks the trodes to his forehead and switches on all the equipment. "On" telltales glisten in the darkness of his room. The screen on the Fednet computer displays a prompt. Everything's ready except Dex.

He sits cross-legged in front of the setup and hesitates. The hunger inside his guts claws him again, and he nearly buckles with tension. With his left hand, he fingers the keyboard of the Fednet computer, preparing himself for sensory takeover.

With the other poised over the Ares IV, he touches the Start switch.

2. Ether

Just as Dex had taught the Dagger and Man Friday, so a girl called Kayjay introduced him to the Ether on a cold London night in a Sony-owned flat in the Camden Secure Zone. He was twelve years old and Kayjay was a small, thin-boned, pretty little Bangladeshi girl with nothing better to do than follow the latest fads.

She had spent most of the day playing with her father's electronic toys. His Sony computer… black and sleek and totally unlike the low-tech kit-boxes that Dex had seen in the shanty town. His wallscreen color TV that was constantly tuned into Disney 7 (The Children's Channel), showing the latest adventures of baby-faced anthropomorphic soldiers in space jungles, fighting the evil insectoids with their nuclear battlesuits, and Dex and Kayjay acted them out in the living room, firing remote control units at each other (Dex was always Mark and Kayjay was always Sukhi), and Kayjay won. When they raided the wardrobe for fancy costumes, Kayjay came across the thin non-descript box that she had seen her father use. It was densely heavy and as big as a

Federal Government daily ration box.

He remembers her words now as she tried to explain the concepts to this bright, but uneducated, boy, lying on the thick carpet floor of her bedroom. She tapped the ridge on her black leather swivel chair.

"See this chair?" she said. Twelve-year-old Dexter Eastman nodded softly. "This chair doesn't really exist. It's just an amassment of atomic particles. But the way the light reflects from them, and the way our eyes see that light, leads our brains to come to the conclusion that this pack of particles is a chair. Without a way of translating the fact to us, it doesn't really exist. Without sight it has no color. Without touch it has no texture. Without taste it's not organic. Without sound it doesn't squeak when you turn it. Without smell it isn't leather. A person without senses has no world. It just doesn't exist, there's no way of translating it to them."

Kayjay moved around the room like some eccentric Disney 9 (Education Channel) science instructor and ended up grinning, pointing to her red telephone.

"Ever listened to the sound a modem makes when you send it down a phone line?" She made a weird screeching sound and an equally appalling face and Dex gave a little giggle.

"Data. Raw data. A computer talking to another computer. Not to us, because it doesn't speak our language, but that's by-the-by. The fact is that data has a sound. And if it has a sound, it has a smell. And a taste, and a texture and you must be able to see it. It exists. Only normally, there's no way to translate it to us."

She edged over to Dex and kissed him softly, ran thin brown fingers through his spiky black hair. "Somedays I go there… to this other world. Father calls it the Ether. Like ethereal, I suppose. But it's more like a checkboard than anything else. You want to go? I'll get Father to bring home another set of trodes. After that, we'll do it together…"

The processor is an empty blue cathedral. Code embodies him as the virus runs its course. There is a soft dent in the defense shell and Fednet's watchdog program lays in wait. Dex knows this, though, and avoids the obvious weakness in favor of the silent meltdown.

Another key is tapped and a silver thread streams from the melting roof where Dex has lived all this time toward the bounty. The defenses have been breached, the virus has become part of the defense program, shaping itself to the contours and Dex knows his trojan software can work well enough without him, that he can switch off any time and let a demon do the work for him. But it seems too easy, and something must be wrong.

He stays with it, observing… watching the trojan open and close files with lightning speed, knowing it's true target, but running a trick that it really is a routine file check. As soon as it finds the file, the thread snaps back, and Dex sends a program to cover its tracks. It doesn't matter. The breaching virus is old and faulty, and has caused a cancer in the defense shell that the watchdog can't fail to notice. Dex waits just long enough for the thread to return before he tries to rescue the virus which has gone wild. Eventually, before he can tear the trodes from his forehead, he feels the crushing smash of the MGAF trace program as it finds his home shell. His senses are dazed, rocked back and forth and he is pulled like spaghetti as he sees the trace's toothy smile.

He tears the trodes from his forehead and fights for breath. Suddenly nauseated, he crawls so fast through the door but vomits across the kitchen floor before he can reach the sink. Passing out, he can sense the far off rank smell of stagnant water and the cruel touch of a rough cloth. The stern tones of Kitty's voice echoing through his head…

Snakestrike. The pretty, dark-haired girl brings his drink over to him, loosely covered with a small cloth. She draws him closer to her. Her voice is an urgent whisper. "Your name's Dex, isn't it?"

Dex nods.

"Man in that booth behind you was asking for you not two minutes ago. He said he was an old friend. I told him you weren't here. He said he'd wait. If you're in trouble, matey, call for another drink. I'll bring the shotgun. Escort him out for you."

Dex sits back. She circles the tumbler three times and bangs it on the bar, turning the drink into wet foam. Dex lets her take away the cloth before downing it.

"What's your name?"

"Jess," she says.

"Enough respect to you, Jess." He taps the bar and takes a breath before pushing himself off the stool and looking for this Mister Dangerous. He spots him immediately, and knows his name is Turk.

"What are you doing here, Turk?"

Turk has his arms spread along the back of the seat, a dumb, superior grin on his Dixie City fat face. He wears a blue flight suit, wing commanders tapes on the epaulettes. He even has his own row of medals, including a purple heart that he must have got when Dex shot down his own wingman.

"Thought ah'd find you heah, Eastman," he drawls drunkenly. "Ah was gonna ask you that question mahself. How the hell can you live in this dump, anyways? What do the Sammies call it? Shitter-what?"

"Shitamachi. It's Japanese for downtown. Look, cut the gomi, Turk, just tell me what you want."

Turk laughs raucously and chews gum, bobbing his head. "Jeez, Eastman. You been heah so long, you'se even spoutin' like a Sammie. Bah the way, your friend Priest is dead. Ah did him mahself. But not before I managed to spill your deal outta him. So gimme the file you copied and we'll be friends again."

"We were never friends. What makes you think I've got

it with me?"

Turk leans forward and takes a sip from his beer, then returns to his reclining position, absent-mindedly tapping his fingers against the ultra-suede. "Ah told you, Eastman. Ah know the deal. So gimme the data, 'cause I know you got it."

Dex takes on a wounded, irritated look. He runs his hands through his spiky black hair and then takes out a black silicate cube from his jacket pocket and tosses it over to him. Dex is angry as hell now, but he knows he has to contain it if he wants to stay alive.

"Sammie for downtown," Turk mutters. "Down is the operative word, Eastman." He turns his head to the end of the booth, which backs onto the hole above the dance floor. *"Can't you play some Neil Young or somethin'? All this Sammie noise sounds the same and half of it ain't got no words!*" He comes back and laughs. "You got insurance, Eastman? Ah'd take some out if Ah were you." He stands and finishes his beer.

"And don't let those Sammies take you in. Remember Pearl Harbor. Catch you 'round." Turk slips out of the booth and past the cocktail bar, shaking his head and laughing to himself when Jess throws him a dirty look.

Dex and Jess exchange a glance. Somehow the look on her face tells him exactly what to do.

3. Rehash

"Nixon. How are you? It's the Camden Town Boy. No, not anymore, I'm a free man now. In Shitamachi dealing software to the Asahi Tag Team. Yeah I know… fifty-five points last night, you get a share? Better luck tonight, eh? Anyway, I've got something you might like. I did a run for Kreskin last week, MG Air Force flight plans along the North Route. Yeah, well I asked for 750 marks, but Kreskin dropped his price, said he couldn't go any higher than 500 marks. Yeah, I know, I should have guessed he'd take me for a sucker. Anyway, the MGAF are wise to it, so they've changed their flight plan. Yep. And I've got the new one, too. I'll let you have it for 600 e-marks, what do you say? Ace, it's a deal. Transfer the money into a World Bank bin under the account name of Peter Townshend. Of course I know who Pete Townshend was, but they're too stupid to figure it out. I'll fax the details to you. Better send one of your jokers. Pickup point will be on the fax. Anyway, time is money and you're eating my phone bill. See you sometime."

Dex has an airbrushed wheel-dial telephone, the color of turtleshells. Kitty says he has no taste whatsoever. When Dex reiterates that he likes strange colours, she just shakes her head.

"Who was that?" asks Kitty. She stands half-in, half-out of the doorway to the kitchen. There is still a trace of vomit smell in the air in there after a week.

"Nixon's another Rigger. Officially him and Kreskin are rivals. So he'll buy it just to have something Kreskin hasn't." He wipes sleep from his eyes and pulls at itchy hair.

"Think it'll work?" Kitty sips on ration Vijayanta coffee and makes a face as she burns her tongue.

Dex collapses onto his mattress and sighs, looking out through his window at the condemned block across East 10th Street. Lines of age wrinkling the building. The circular port-hole windows, like a thousand eyes all crying at once.

"It bloody well better work," he finally replies, hoping that soon, things could get back to normal.

Nixon has his package. Another group of mercenaries known as the Harlequins are also interested in the information. Something to do with a hit they have to make on the MGAF.

He meets them at dusk in Tompkins Square, when the day is hottest, and the shadows are longest. The Harlequin Rigger's name is Fly, and he is a frail twig of a man who needs a metal walking stick to stand upright. He is known more for his abilities as a fence than for running a good merc group.

The boys around him are typical San Angeles Ronin, they are all six feet two inches and have deep tans, dressed in Twin Soul Tribe garb (very baggy green jeans and hooded sweaters). Dex has seen a million like these two muscleboys, and they don't impress him. Fly informs him that their names are J.D. and Mavik.

"So what's business like now, Dex?" Fly speaks in a dreamy, whispering tone, a voice much older than he is; looking at him with eyes that are much wiser than the frail man could ever be.

"To tell the truth, the chipster business could be bottoming out here. I might need to expand."

"Expansion's always a good thing, Dex. If you're going to think at all, think big. A real famous businessman said that once… But I'm damned if I can remember his name."

Fly gives a hoarse laugh and Dex joins in. J.D. and Mavik look calmly at the decrepit housing blocks that surround the concrete plaza of Tompkin's Square. Thermographic Sony vision scanning the windows for possible threats. They don't even have to show what weapons they carry. They have rewired nerves for inhuman speed and could probably take out a potential assassin before the hammer falls on his gun. Stuff like that doesn't come cheap, though. Most of the Asahi Tag Team who have rewired nerves had to go as far as the Tokyo Metroplex to find a neurosurgeon good enough to do it. These boys have it as standard with all the Martial Government trickery behind it. They probably don't even know about the glitches in the triggering software that runs the nervous system, something that Dex had to pay a lot to get ironed out when he deserted the air force.

"Where's Man Friday? How's he doing these days? I haven't heard from him in a long time."

Fly pulls a nicotine stick from his black denim jacket and bites a piece off the end. "He's still trying to find out what happened in Rio. Did he leave a girl behind there or

something?"

Dex nods. "A wife, from what I remember."

"Oh. Well, we think the Feds caught up with her and she's gone missing. He's organizing an expedition to find her, I think. We're gonna go in with him. He wishes you were running Ether again. Says it ain't so much fun with you not around."

"Well, I'm officially retired. Except for this stuff. Good luck, anyway. If you need any chips for Portuguese, you know where to find me."

Dex and Fly banter this way for only a few more minutes, as both of them have other places to go to. Fly eventually gives him about 400 marks' worth of yen for the data cube.

Kitty watches Dex throughout these events. She can see his life here burning out slowly. She can see from his blue-eyed, thousand-yard stare that his feet are getting itchy again. Track record has proven that he doesn't stay in one place for too long. Kitty needs him here, or at least with her. The two of them aren't in love, not exactly, but what they have is more than a friendship. Some kind of closeness that she can't afford to live without.

He flicks the stop switch. Sweat pours from his face, stings his eyes, leaves salt on his pink lips. His black hair is stuck to his wet head. He gasps for air and finds the atmosphere is too thin for him in this grimy little room. He pulls the trodes from his head, rushes to the round port-hole window and wrenches it open.

Lukewarm air hits his face, cools him down. He sticks his head out into the night's rain. It rains every night in Manhattan. Something to do with the high humidity during the day condensing when the hot sun goes down.

Across East 10th Street, three Asahi Tag Teamsters in their canary yellow jackets and purple tiger-striped skintight jeans suck on nicotine sticks and slap with each other about previous clashes. One of them breaks into a spurt of super-human martial arts to demonstrate his actions. Just visible behind the kid's ear a mini datacube shines from his neural software port. Chipped for Hapkune-Do, reflexes rewired and boosted by 10 percent, zen flowing from their new Sony eyes. Dex looks at these kids and sees the future of the world. A future he doesn't much care for.

He slides back inside and closes the window. Walking over to the middle of the floor, he looks at the green screen of the unlicensed Fednet computer and sees the results of this day's work. Two tickets to Heathrow waiting for him whenever he wants. One way. His life here is falling to pieces, and it's getting near the time to skin out. Tiny words glowing green in a dark room. He looks at that screen and thinks he can see his future.

4. Times Square

"Kreskin says he'll met you outside the old Slammer Cyberena at noon."

"Times Square."

That's where he is now. The north side, across from the entrance to the Cyberena. He sits in the uncomfortable seat of a magnesium alloy rickshaw that belongs to a young Irish-American kid called Bobby, who wears a white *Big Pierrot Says Watch Your Back* T-shirt and a conical straw hat to keep the blazing sun off him. Kitty's next to him, watching the windows behind the dead neon signs. She's not happy about this choice of venue at all. It's out of Shitamachi. Out of the protection of the Asahi Tag Team. It's the lower end of the Tangerine Tag Team's kill zone and it's totally open.

Dex figures the poor security of the area will work to the advantage of everyone, but he knows that Kitty doesn't get nervous without good reason. So when Kreskin's red rickshaw arrives and Kitty hands him a HK pistol, he doesn't give it back. Dex hates guns. He snaps a magazine in and loads a round, letting the hammer down softly. Before climbing out, he stuffs the thing down the back of his baggy red jeans.

Kreskin climbs out wearing a cheap business suit, hiding his eyes behind a pair of Mitsubishi anti-laser glare glasses. He keeps two of his joker muscleboys close to him, watching the area while toying playfully with their HK uzi copies. For a moment it almost looks like Kreskin doesn't recognize Dex as he strides across the street. But soon he's there and the smile creeps onto the Russian's chubby face. The huge arms extend and the two old friends hug each other with subtle reservation.

There's a swift conversation that seems to arrange another meeting time, and Dex hands over the data cube. Dex is full of himself as they talk. He's given Kreskin what he wanted, made enough money for Kreskin to sort him and Kitty out with new ID's so they can go to London when the heat is on. He has his future in his hands at last. A chance to create his own destiny.

There's a stifled thump and a cry and a woman's urgent shout behind him.

"DEX!"

He spins to see the scene, pulls the HK from his jeans.

Bobby lies in a growing pool of blood, his life evaporating under the heat of the sun. Turk has Kitty by the throat, using her as human body armor; the cliched hostage position, with a thick chrome revolver pressed into her temple.

"Hi there, Eastman!" Turk breaks into his dumb grin showing bright white teeth and a piece of strawberry gum. "Think ah'd leave heah without takin' you wi' me? Ah think not."

Dex levels the automatic at Turk's head. Behind him, he can feel the presence of Kreskin and his boys, the sights of HK uzi copies sending shivers along his neck. Sweat tickles his chin before dripping off him.

"Let her go, Turk. This is you and me here."

Turk whistles and makes a face. "You been watchin' too much Big Pierrot, Eastman. Come up wi' an ole cliche like that. You put away your piece an' maybe, jus' maybe, Ah

might let your li'l lady go."

Dex shakes his head. His guts wrenched with the feeling of betrayal, like nothing has happened but he's lost everything he has. "Come on, man. I throw this away and I'm giving you the edge."

Turk flicks back the hammer on the revolver, Kitty sucks in a breath. "What edge, fool. Don't try an' pull that mental shit on me, Eastman. Ah know you ain't gonna shoot me."

"Did it once before, Turk, remember? Nothing can happen without you dying at the end of it. You run and I'll shoot. You shoot me and I'll shoot you. You point the gun at me and I'll shoot you. You kill her and I'll shoot you. They shoot me and I'll shoot you. No win situation."

Dex cocks an eyebrow at Turk's expression. The smile falling from the fat Dixie City man's face, turning to a sneer.

"What's up, Turk? Run out of choices? Then call Kreskin's men off."

Turk licks salt from his lips.

"Better do as he says, man. You won't be quite so good-looking with a hole in your face." Kitty's mind is racing. She doesn't have the advantage that these boys have. All of them are probably rewired. Dex, she knows, definitely has been, she's seen how fast he can be. Only a 5 percent reflex boost, but it's enough of an edge against an unmodified man. No, she can't outrun them, so she has to outthink them. Be faster by pre-empting them all.

"Shut up, bitch!"

"What's it going to be, Turk, eh?" Dex can feel his wired nervous system, courtesy of the MGAF, speeding up. An effect like pins and needles all over the body. A slight vertigo and then the neural processor that runs it all from the base of his spine kicks in and the world turns slow-mo.

Frame by frame, a second of violence.

Everyone is surprised because Kitty moves first. Her elbow lifts up and back to push Turk's arm away and the revolver slips from his grasp and Kitty is in the air, diving for the cover of the rickshaw. Turk is a standing target, but Dex doesn't fire, instead, he jumps at wired speed to the floor and shoots at the red rickshaw. He empty's half a magazine into Kreskin.

Kreskin's boys are too slow, only now starting to speed up. Their first bursts of fire are at the place where Dex was, and find only Turk's fat body at the far side of the street, catching him in the throat and upper torso. Bullets rip through his spine and out the other side, pulling Turk with them like puppet strings.

The tall Dixie City man slaps against a metal shop front and slides silent to the ground in a bloody, crumpled heap of flesh.

One of Kreskin's boys managed to follow Dex's trajectory, and when Dex rolls up onto his knees to fire the other half of the magazine, bullets smash into his right arm and sends him spinning back to the floor.

Then the boy that shot him has an instant to realize that his boss is dead before his own head shatters sending blood and brain matter across the red rickshaw. The last Kreskin boy is stunned and silent. Kitty stands there with Turk's revolver in her small hands, trained at his head. The boy drops his HK uzi copy. Kitty walks over and kicks it away, then kneecaps the boy to stop him from leaving.

Dex is screaming in agony. He's been shot before, but that was just a flesh wound. He figures a bone's been hit here and it's drawing his entire mind to it. By the time Kitty's run over to help him, he's passed out from the pain.

Dex climbs lazily out of cot and moves to the window. Looking out, the hot sun is going down on East 10th Street and some half-Japanese kids are playing soccer with a ball made from rubber bands. These kids are going to grow up tough, he thinks to himself. Street Darwinism. But there's no future for them if they can't think, and Dex knows that being smart can just beat being tough. He knows, cause it's not him lying in the street in Times Square waiting for the Tangerine Tag Team to pick him up. That's Turk, and Turk was tough; but stupid.

"Well, there go your dreams, kiddo." Kitty stands at the door, the one place in his room where she feels comfortable.

"Not really. Turk said I may need an insurance policy. I'm going to keep the tickets open for that."

"What about for now?"

He turns around and sees her there. He smiles. His bandaged arm doesn't hurt much anymore. Not after Kitty pressed about 320 miligrams of endorphin analog into the bloody skin. He's as happy as a rat in a hole. But the sudden realization in his mind is that he needs Kitty. And he's never needed anyone before.

Dex shakes his head. "The chipster business is too slow to stay alive here. I mean…"

"You want to be the Boy again, don't you?" Kitty seems to raise her whole face, an expression which means to Dex that she knows the answer already.

"Man Friday said he misses me."

Kitty's expression turns into a rueful grin. She shakes her head and gives him a knowing look as she edges out the door.

Dexter Eastman looks back out the window, and for the first time in years, he feels he's found home.

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The Unified Murder Theorem

PART TWO OF FOUR

JEFF ZIAS

Synopsis

They killed the guitar player on a Thursday night, as he sat in the bar, playing his instrument, blue light emanating from somewhere within. The last words the hit men said before they shot him were simply: "Goodbye from Nattasi."

JACK CRUGER, *an accordion instructor by trade, leads the mundane life one might expect of someone in his line of work. But all of that changed the moment that* ***TONY STEFFEN*** *walked in his door. Tony wasn't like most of his clients: he was tall, blonde, and strong. As it turns out, Tony doesn't want to learn how to play the accordion — he wants to hear* Cruger *play it. As Cruger begins to play it for the first time, blue light begins to emanate from inside of it. According to Tony, the accordion is special, and will only broadcast the blue light if Cruger plays it.*

Before his next meeting with Tony, Cruger spends hours trying to make a baby with his beautiful wife ***CORRINA****, following it up with a bit of time playing the strange new accordion with the magical blue light. Much to his surprise, he begins to play songs perfectly — songs he has never played before.*

Tony informs Cruger that the blue strands of light coming out of the accordion are ***STRINGS****, each representing a path, a possible outcome. Cruger has been chosen to be a "spinner" of strings by a special organization. According to Tony, this "Company" is much more than an international corporation — its job is to create and support all worlds, galaxies, and universes. Cruger laughs at this suggestion, but Tony is serious — God, or "the* ***CHAIRMAN,*** *" prefers to have living beings "spin" the fates, rather than just throwing dice. But there's a catch — there's another company, one that tends to do the work we would normally expect the Devil to do. If Cruger spins for the "good guys," he'll be given protection in return — other spinners will ensure that neither he nor his family will be harmed… except for what is beyond their control, such as intervention from the Other Company. Cruger has no choice but to accept — after all, his acceptance has already been determined by another spinner.*

Cruger begins to spin, arousing the suspicion of nobody, except his next-door neighbor, ***LEON HARRIS****. Harris, a computer programmer by trade, is a large, strong health-nut — exactly what you wouldn't expect from a programmer. He is, however, extremely nosy. He wonders why the non-descript white accountant next door was suddenly playing the black music that Leon Harris grew up with… and he wonders what caused the blue light that appeared when Cruger played his accordion.*

Months pass, and Corrina Cruger finally becomes pregnant for the first time since her unfortunate miscarriage a few years before. Jack Cruger continues to play his accordion, knowing that the Company's "health plan" will also cover his new child. Tony, occasionally accompanied by a beautiful young woman named ***SKY****, sometimes visits with Cruger.*

Tony tells Cruger that many of the company's executive positions are still held by aliens, most from the planet named Tvonen. God — well, the Chairman — is a Tvonen. The Tvonen evolved in a fashion similar to humans, right down to their ancient tale of creation. The catch is that the Tvonen creation story is completely true. Tvonens were created as immortal, androgynous beings — but then two of them fell from grace, and became gendered, mortal creatures. To this day, Tvonens must undergo a change and lose their immortality if they wish to gain a gender.

The Tvonens are now very advanced — but their technology is completely analog-based, with no digital electronics at all. Earth, with its digital technology, is quickly becoming more technologically adept than the Tvonens. The Tvonens believe that human thought, with its pursuit of the Grand Unified Theory — a theory that could describe every detail of the functioning of the universe — would give the Company a giant edge in its ability to guide the universe.

It is Tony, the teenage surfer, who is in charge of implementing the Unified Theory into a computer system that will allow the Company to have such control over the universe. Obviously, such a prospect is not taken lightly by the Other Company, operated by renegade Tvonens and shape-shifting aliens known as Chysans.

On his way to Cruger's house on a Saturday morning, Tony hears the slightest rustle of a sound — and turns to see something large, colorful, and horrible. It is on him in an instant, throwing him hard onto the concrete steps. By the time Cruger reaches the door, Tony lays face down, a puddle of blood forming around his limp blonde hair.

Cruger reaches down to feel for a pulse, but he knows the answer before he even begins to bend over. The realization of Tony's death hits him; he exhales loudly, "No… my God," and then sinks to his knees, not knowing what to do.

Cruger then sees the black digital sports watch on Tony's wrist, chirping its annoying repetitious chirp over and over.

Leon Harris sticks his head out of his front door, sees Cruger doubled over in front of his young friend, who lays in an entirely unnatural position, limp-armed and limp-legged. Harris runs across his lawn to Cruger's front step. He bends down and checks both Tony's carotid and radials arteries for a pulse, but finds none.

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

Chapter 15

Cruger was in shock, and Harris recognized it quickly.

"Let's go inside and call the police," he said. Harris gently grabbed Cruger by the arm and led him into the house. Harris spotted a phone on the coffee table near the couch, and sat Cruger down next to it.

"Are you going to be all right?" he asked Cruger.

Cruger didn't answer. He was bent over, holding his forehead with one hand and rubbing his eyes with the other.

"Come on, man," Harris said, checking his watch. "I'm

supposed to be playing tennis in fifteen minutes, and instead I'm finding a dead body. What the hell happened?"

"They got him," Cruger croaked.

Before Harris could even begin to dial 911, Cruger leaped up from the couch and bolted for the door. Harris dropped the phone and ran after him with reflexes he had worked years to condition. For all Harris knew, his mousy neighbor with the rock accordion habit could be the killer.

When Harris got to the door, Cruger was down the steps and almost on the lawn, shouting the name "Tony" hysterically. Readying his sprint, Harris took a long stride on the entryway — and realized that the body was gone.

"Shit," Harris mumbled, and bolted across the lawn, gaining ground on the smaller man with every step. As Cruger neared Harris' own lawn, Harris decided to dive for him.

And that was when it happened. Harris reached Cruger, grabbed his legs, and tripped him. The accordionist fell over, his head ready to crash onto the concrete strip that divided the two lawns. And then, without explanation, both men were *pulled* ten feet, onto the next lawn. Cruger's head landed softly, as if there had been a pillow there.

"What the hell?" Harris said.

"Let go!" Cruger shouted. "I've got to find him. They've taken Tony!"

"Calm down, man," Harris said. "Who are they? Where did they take him?"

"Them! The other company! The ones that killed him!"

Cruger's shouts aroused the curiosity of some of their neighbors. Harris could see Mrs. Conworth from across the street peering at them through her kitchen window.

"Come on," Harris said. "You're attracting attention. Let's go back inside."

Cruger swallowed, took a look around, and nodded.

Both of them stopped when they reached the entryway. Only the small, scuffed black digital watch lay on the front steps, still keeping time, advancing each hundredth and tenth of a second with complete accuracy.

Cruger picked up the watch. Somehow it was comforting to know that he could no longer see Tony's beaten body. No blood, no sickening brutalization of body and limbs. This is good, he thought, Tony's gone. Is this good? For an instant he thought he might understand what had happened, but the thought escaped his mind as quickly as it had entered.

Harris pushed Cruger inside and closed the door behind them.

"What the hell is going on?" he asked.

Cruger just shook his head. A strange twisted expression formed on his lips. "You think I know?" Cruger shook his head in wonder.

"Look," Harris exhaled quickly, "I saw a dead guy out there, and now he's gone. I've seen you having strange meetings with strange people and playing that damned instrument of yours at all hours of the night. And strangest of all, I just got pulled halfway across my lawn by thin air. Something's wrong here, and I'm going to have to find out what it is. I'm involved now, whether I like it or not."

Cruger felt more alone than he had ever felt in his life. His one connection to what was important and exciting was now dead, or least, inexplicably gone. His neighbor's response just highlighted the fact that the strange unexplainable aspects of Cruger's own life were not entirely private — they had leaked into the lives of others And no good explanation existed.

Cruger remained silent.

"Do you want to explain this to the police or to me?" Harris demanded. He didn't like having to bully Cruger — the poor guy looked upset enough already.

"And why do you want to have this all explained to you?" Cruger had found his voice again and it was tremulous, lacking resonance.

"I want to understand what's going on. There must be some logical explanation," Harris said.

The words 'logical explanation' stuck with Cruger, playing an obscene parody in his mind. The fact that this guy was thinking of anything to do with logic nearly made Cruger laugh out loud. At that moment Cruger wished he had never heard of Tony, of Tvonens and Chysa, or of spinning. All that had been important and joyful now seemed to be meaningless and chafing. With Tony had come the confidence in The Company, the ties to other worlds and better things and to progress itself. Without Tony ... what was there?

Cruger looked at Harris. He wants in. Maybe this guy should get what he deserves. The line 'Be careful of what you ask for — you may get it' played in Cruger's mind.

"OK," said Cruger. "I can show you something that will explain everything. It's in Tony's" — his throat stuck — "office. Can you drive? I don't think I could handle it right now."

"Sure," Harris said.

"The whole thing's on a computer," Cruger said as they got into his car. "Can you work one?"

"Neighbor," Harris chuckled, "that's what I *do* for a living."

Chapter 16

Humanity i love you because you are perpetually
putting the secret of life in your pants and
forgetting it's there and sitting down
on it

— e. e. cummings

"I'm still not sure this is going to work," Cruger said. He was still wary of the deception they planned. Harris seemed calm, not worried at all. He had handled Tony's computer the same way, like a pro. And he knew the computer system

inside-out — it was as if some spinner, somewhere, had planned to provide Cruger with a computer programmer. Judging from Harris' reaction to what he found on the computer, he could continue with Tony's work on the unified theorem. *Maybe more than continue it,* Cruger thought. *Maybe make Tony's work mean something.*

"What are they going to do if they don't like our story? Take away our birthday?" Harris pulled the car around the corner and merged neatly into traffic. "We've got nothing to worry about," Harris said.

"Are you kidding? First thing they can do is call the cops. Then we have lots of questions to answer. No thanks."

"Let me review our position on this," Harris said. "We don't have anything to cover up because there is no body, no evidence, no crime reported as far as we can tell, and nothing to guide us except that we know what we saw. As far as the authorities go, we're not involved in a murder or any other type of crime."

Cruger stared out the car window. "We know that we saw a murder — or the results of a murder. That's good enough for me."

"Well," said Harris, "you have to protect your own biscuits because no one else is going to. The police aren't going to believe any of your story without proof ... evidence. They would laugh at this whole thing — possibly put you in the nut house."

Cruger shrugged. The only crime that existed so far seemed to be in the minds of two witnesses: he and Harris. Since the incident Cruger had wondered if Tony's death was meant as a threat — a threat to him. Could this have been some kind of warning? Was someone trying to manipulate him?

Or the whole thing could easily have been an optical illusion. The people — or *whatevers* — that they were dealing with could be capable of many types of trickery. Cruger hoped that it was in fact a threat or a brutal hoax. He would enjoy seeing Tony sitting at school in class as if nothing had happened, oblivious to his "death" that they had witnessed.

Harris pulled in to Tony's high school and parked near the main entrance. Then they found the Principal's office and walked in as if the world revolved around their every action. They had decided that to act like detectives meant to act like aggressive, cocky, arrogant bastards. Cruger wished he had a toothpick to let hang out of his mouth. Or maybe a smelly cigar. That was the image on detective shows, and that was the image the Principal and others would expect.

In the Principal's outer office was the small overflowing desk of the Principal's assistant. Behind the desk was a portable partition with the nameplate "Vernal Buckney, Principal."

The kids must get untold mileage out of the name Vernal, Cruger thought. Good old Vernal must have been born to be a Principal. Most likely, plenty a spitball had Vernal's name on it.

The kids at this school would enjoy sitting outside the Principal's office, too — his assistant, Shirley Randolph according to her nameplate, was a tall, shapely young lady. Her makeup was just right, expertly applied, highlighting her high cheekbones and creamy, tan complexion. Cruger noticed that her skirt was short, revealing a long pair of very tan legs. In the corner of his eye, he saw Harris noticed that too.

Harris spoke first, just like they had rehearsed it. Being a big tall black guy, they figured Harris would be rather intimidating. Cruger, on the other hand, only looked threatening if you thought he might try to sell you life insurance.

"Hello, Ms. Randolph," Harris began. "I'm Mr. Harris, and this is Mr. Cruger. We're investigating a child custody case and we may need the assistance of Mr. Buckney."

Harris managed to say it all without even blinking. Cruger was impressed — but he was more impressed that she didn't sound an alarm, scream for help, or laugh. So far so good.

"Hello," she said. "I take it that you gentlemen don't have an appointment then?"

Shirley Randolph's eyes twinkled and she smiled easily at Harris. Harris smiled back, seemingly concentrating on the underlying extent of Ms. Shirley Randolph's grade-A tan.

So Cruger spoke. "We really don't need too much time. We only have a few questions." Just then Harris noticed that Vernal was in his office. Vernal's bald head bobbed up above the partition and then down again.

Vernal Buckney, M.A. in Education was, as usual, busy in his office. His job required hard work, the skills of a serious educator and a trained politician, plus the ability to win the support and encouragement of parents, teachers, as well as the educational board and superintendents. On top of that, the job of Principal demanded a solid technical foundation that could facilitate the development of the most effective teaching methodologies, as well as the precise application of these techniques. For this reason, Vernal spent most of his time in his office with his golf putter in hand, putting into his electric, auto-return golf cup. Stress reduction was top priority for Vernal.

"I'll bring you in," the secretary said. "He has no appointments now."

"Thank you very much, Ms. Randolph."

She smiled back at Harris. "Shirley," she said. It was the most inviting 'Shirley' that Cruger had ever heard. Chances were that it wasn't the most inviting one Harris had heard.

Shirley knocked on the Principal's flimsy excuse for an office door and introduced the two of them in the most professional of manners.

When Cruger and Harris stepped into Vernal's office, they saw the shocking decor. The floor was covered with old educational journals, magazines, and various trinkets such as small wooden animals. A few golf clubs lay against the file cabinet, and the floor was littered with golf balls, pencils,

and pens.

"Nice to meet you gentlemen," Vernal said. He had a high-pitched, wheezy, bureaucrat's voice that sounded like a band saw on wet wood. His eyes darted around like a monkey's. Nothing made him more nervous than meeting men from the Superintendent's office. She had said that's where they were from, hadn't she?

"We just have a few simple questions, Mr. Buckney," Harris said, sticking to the plan nicely.

"Now, Ms. Randolph did say you were from the Superintendent's office, didn't she?"

"Oh, not at all. We're investigators, working on a child custody case." Harris said it fast and gruff, as if meager child custody cases were only what the two did between busting crack houses and handcuffing Uzi-toting Colombians.

Vernal was visibly relieved. His eyes slowed their wild pace and focused on Harris. "Yes, I see. Well, how can I help?"

"We need information on two of your students. I must tell you, Mr. Buckney, that all of this must be kept completely confidential. In fact, I must request that only you and Ms. Randolph know of our visit. You are the only two that we can trust," Harris said. "We can trust you, can't we?"

Cruger looked as tough as possible and nodded his head. He wished he had that cigar to grind into the carpet — it would match the decor.

"Certainly you can trust us to keep it quiet," Vernal said. His cheeks had become a little flushed.

"First of all, a student named Tony Steffen. Senior class. We need his whole file," Harris said.

Cruger chimed in. "And a female senior named Sky. No known last name." Cruger emulated the old Dragnet rerun tone of voice: just the facts, Vernal.

"Okay, I can do that. I need Ms. Randolph to check the files for me."

Vernal tried to ask Shirley to get the files, but he told her to look up a boy named Tony Griffin and a girl named Sigh. Cruger corrected him on each count.

When Shirley was gone, Vernal scratched his hairless head and asked, "Are you sure you guys aren't from the School Board?"

"No, not there, not the PTA, the teacher's union or the Girl Scouts either. How many students in the senior class here?" Harris said, changing the subject and putting Vernal on the defensive, a posture he was born for.

"We have 400 this year. The number's been dropping each year since five years ago, when we peaked with 600." Vernal was still nervous, his eyes moving quickly from Cruger to Harris to the cluttered mess on his office floor. He preferred to look at the floor.

"Yeah, the post baby-boomer years are here," Cruger said. "Do you know what percentage of the kids go to college?"

"We have a very high college after graduation rate here. Last year 35 percent went straight to a four-year college or university, 40 percent to a Junior college or trade school, and the rest are unaccounted for, probably employed, skilled labor or what-not."

"Not bad."

Shirley came back into the office. She carried a thin manila folder in the crook of her right arm; she held it like a football. Harris took the folder from her and there was a mutual flash of white teeth.

"No file on Tony Steffen," Shirley said, still smiling. "Must not be a student here."

"Oh yes, he is," Harris said.

"No, I'm afraid your information is incorrect," she said. "He appears in none of the records. Nobody by that name has ever been a student here."

Cruger and Harris exchanged a look but no words. At least they had the information on Sky — they could get the rest later.

They said their thank-yous and good-byes and headed out toward building L, room 116, where Sky's next class would begin in fifteen minutes.

"I think Shirley had a soft spot in her heart for you," Cruger said, as they walked down the hard red-top hall.

"She had some great soft spots, all in the right places; very nice, soft and smooth, like a seal — a foxy seal." Harris said it straight and sounded detached, like he was a judge in a bikini contest.

"But she screwed us on the Tony Steffen info."

"Mmm," Harris commented. "Yeah. Screwed."

Straight faced. Cruger loved the way Harris could say all that stuff straight-faced.

They cut across the quad to find the L building. Cruger spotted Sky at a picnic table. She was surrounded by classmates, but Cruger was still able to distinguish her from a distance. As he and Harris got closer, Cruger almost began to doubt if it was Sky. She seemed different, wearing calf-high boots, a leather skirt, and a black t-shirt with torn sleeves.

One of Cruger's buddies from high school, Steve Spitelli, had developed a theory that the world really only contained fifteen types of people. Some people were tall and thin, some were pudgy with wide faces, and so on. All people fell into the category of models of one of the fifteen different types. These types became known as Spitelli-types. Cary Grant and Rock Hudson were the same Spitelli-type. Judy Garland and Cher were different Spitelli-types. Spitelli's theory more or less took the cake for oversimplification. Cruger had not thought about Spitelli-types for more than ten years — until this moment.

Sky sat on a picnic table next to a tall blond guy that was Tony's Spitelli-type — an exact image, but not quite. The eyes were a little too far apart; the eyebrows arched up on the sides in a perpetually hostile look. Cruger tensed as they approached the table, knowing that the sick feeling that the young man's looks stirred within him would only worsen as they got closer. He felt like a beetle in an ant colony.

"Hello, Sky," Cruger said.

The girl gave them both a questioning look. "Yeah, that's me." She sounded defensive and her face registered a look void of recognition.

"You don't remember meeting me before?" Cruger asked, trying hard to avoid sounding like an insulted distant relative.

"No, mister, I'm afraid I don't."

The blond kid next to Sky was monitoring the whole conversation like a radar operator. He slid over and put his arm around Sky.

"What do you guys want?" he said.

Harris, putting his leg up on the table bench, said "We want to ask you some questions about Tony Steffen."

There was a pause. Sky looked at the guy and he looked back. They independently shrugged: Sky's shrug was more convincing.

"I don't know any Tony Steffen," the blond kid said. The kid had an attitude of the first degree. He probably practiced that sneer at home, in front of the bathroom mirror. It was an exceptionally well-rehearsed sneer.

"Yeah," said Sky, "he doesn't go to this school anyway — if he did, we'd know him."

Harris smiled a pathetic grin and shook his head. Cruger just let the response seep in. These kids were either very good actors, or ...

"And your name is?" Cruger asked the blond kid.

"What's it to you?" His lip curled. The kid enjoyed his rebellious act.

"Rick," Cruger said. The boyfriend or ex-boyfriend that Tony had mentioned.

His eyes became dark pools of surprised hatred. His facade was replaced by a look of disdain mixed with pomposity. He knows, thought Cruger, he knows about Tony.

"Yeah, so you know who I am? Are you guys cops or something? Ooh, tough guys gonna come around and hassle high school students?" Rick laughed and squeezed Sky around the shoulder. She looked uneasy and didn't laugh.

"Sky, you really have never heard of Tony Steffen?" Harris asked.

Sky shrugged and shook her head. Cruger, watching intently, saw that she was the same Sky that he had met before. She had none of the "attitude" that Rick had. To Cruger, she was just keeping poorer company these days. She was a young girl struggling to develop the maturity to handle what life threw at her. Cruger figured she was probably telling the truth. He motioned to Harris and turned to go. In a moment, Harris followed.

The drive home was strained silence. Both men were afraid to come to conclusions or to let their imaginations run wild since reality seemed wild enough.

"So, it looks like Tony Steffen never went to school — where do you think he is?" Harris said.

"I hate to harp on the obvious," Cruger said, "but we saw him disappear before our eyes, remember?"

Harris sucked in his breath. "And according to what we just heard and saw, Tony never existed. He's not only dead, but erased from the memories of everybody — except for us."

"So it seems," Cruger said. "Deleted, that's what he is. It's like he never lived and the world we currently live in is one that never knew Tony Steffen. But for some reason we know that it's not true. We remember seeing Tony, we remember what he did and who he knew. I remember every interaction I had with Tony; the world we live in, right here and right now has Tony's imprints on it because I *remember* what Tony did and said. What's confusing is that other people don't know or remember. The school, Sky, and everything seem to indicate that they are operating in a parallel plane, a reality that thinks it never knew Tony Steffen."

Cruger stopped and sat in silence, staring out the car window, dreamily exploring the evidence and the possible conclusions. He looked at the endless succession of speed-blurred lawns and sidewalks they passed.

"Sounds to me like a mistake," Harris said, his jaw tensed in determination. "Maybe we should have no memory of Tony. Once he disappeared, he was erased from existence. We probably weren't meant to retain his memory."

Cruger shook his head. "More likely that we were meant to remember for some reason. Either that, or you and I are operating in our own little parallel plane of the Universe. My wife tells me I'm in my own little world all the time."

"And who would be motivated to get rid of Tony but allow us to remember? I know that the Other Company would like Tony out of the picture, but why wouldn't they want us gone, too?"

"That insurance policy of mine, the one that pushed us across the lawn," Cruger said. "I'm betting that Tony had one, just like me. And he told me that it *was* possible to kill people with insurance policies. But I bet it's not easy, and it's probably even harder to erase their existence wholesale. They probably couldn't have killed both of us, and figured that I'd be lost without him."

"So they didn't kill you this time. There's always next time. We'd better watch our backs."

"Yeah. Yeah, you're right."

Everything was moving so fast that Cruger just wanted to withdraw, to take time to let this simmer and steam and cook a little until it made sense — if it ever could. Times like these you either get philosophical or go crazy.

"Is it better to have lived and then died than to have lived and then been erased — like never living at all?" Cruger said.

"This is one of those 'If the tree falls in the woods and there is no one around to hear it fall, does it make a sound?'-type questions," Harris said, trying not to sound cynical but failing.

"It's almost that exact question except it is more like: 'if nobody remembers the sound that it did make — that lots of

people did hear — when it fell, did it ever make a sound'?" Cruger said. "Although this it is not the same issue. If you live and then become erased, like Tony, you actually did have a life and have an impact, at least on some level in some Universe. That is definitely different than never having lived."

"What if that point in the time/space continuum doesn't exist any longer? What if the erasure was clean and thorough?" Harris said.

Harris was able to pierce the heart of an issue with a needle, draining the romance out and filling in with logic. What an engineer.

Chapter 17

The telephone rang, and Cruger picked it up. Tony's voice was strange and faint — he wheezed over the cracking phone line. Cruger grabbed the phone tighter and pressed it hard against his ear, desperately trying to hear Tony's faint voice.

"Far away," Tony said weakly.

"What."

"Far away, cold, very cold, very far..."

Cruger screamed, "What, Tony, what?!"

Cruger strained to hear Tony again, but the harder he tried, the less he could hear.

Two hands were on his shoulders and Corrina's warm skin pressed against his tight neck. His ear hurt. Cold sweat skated across his wrinkled brow.

"What were you dreaming, honey?" she asked.

"Oh," Cruger said, "nothing, something weird, I can't really remember."

He was lying. She wouldn't understand.

"Poor baby, you were screaming."

"Well, I'm okay now. Thanks." But he wasn't really okay. He could feel his hands shaking, feeling weak and insubstantial under the thick comforter.

They put their heads back down and settled into seemingly comfortable positions. Cruger listened to Corrina's soft, steady breathing break across the cold and lonely darkness of the bedroom. He continued to listen to the steady silence.

A while later he heard it again.

"Far away, cold, help me ... ," Tony said. His voice was stronger but tremulous as if he were shaking, his teeth chattering.

And just then Cruger heard the beeping, chirping sound of his watch alarm. Tony's distant voice dissolved into the stark morning light. Cruger was awake in a fraction of a second, reaching over to turn off the alarm.

Chirp… chirp… chirp. He grabbed the watch and quickly depressed the tiny plastic button, turning off the alarm.

Now he was more awake than ever.

"I never could trust them."

"You mean your parents?" Dr. Frederick said.

"Well, sure, I guess that's what I mean."

"You just said you 'guess' you mean your parents." Dr. Frederick, against his will, was getting a little frustrated again. "Does that mean it was your parents?"

"Yes, yes."

She frequently vacillated between self-assured and reticent. Often she acted as if no one, including Dr. Frederick, could possibly understand what she meant. He needed to build a foundation of trust before he would really be able to draw it all out of her. Trust was the key.

"The worst part is, I don't know if I could really trust them," she said.

She gave him a sly, knowing grin. Being a man of science — a man of medicine, by God — he knew that her coincidental reference to the word trust must be just that: a coincidence.

What bothered him was that she was so damned attractive. Made it tough for him to be objective, and to keep his mind on his work. He was glad, very glad, that he was a medical doctor as well as a psychotherapist. His strong academic background enabled him to deal with these situations in a professional manner.

God, she's got great legs, *he thought.*

"Your time's about up," he said.

Chapter 18

It was Harris's thirtieth birthday. Cruger had celebrated his thirtieth a year ago, and had realized the potentially frightening road of a new decade stretched before him. *Thirty*, thought Cruger, *an age of thinning hair, a thinning list of single friends, and thinning muscle fibers. Either that or a decade of great sex — what the hell, may as well think positive*.

Cruger knocked at Harris's door. He had surprised Harris by asking to join him on his morning run. Harris knew he, the poor flabby guy from next door, wouldn't be able to last too long or hack the normal pace, but like any good fitness freak, he had appreciated that Cruger was beginning to take an interest in getting in shape. Cruger wondered: would Harris be one of those guys who sweeps the fear of turning thirty under the rug like so much sawdust, or would he stagger under the burden of advancing years?

Harris got the door.

"Hey, old man," Cruger said.

"I'm not bad for an old man, though. Run five miles a day, strong as a Tibetan Yak."

"An Afghan Yak," Cruger said.

"Say what?"

"Afghanistan. That would be closer to your peoples, your homeland."

"Has anyone told you," said Harris, "that for an accordion player you have the personality of an accountant?"

"No, but thank you. I'd prefer being known for a mastery of amortization tables than for playing a mean *Hava Nagila* on the Bar Mitzvah circuit."

"How about *Moonlight Serenade* verses depreciation tables?"

Cruger relinquished a half smile. "Now that's a tough call."

They began jogging slowly down Henderson Street.

"I usually start out really slow to warm-up."

"No argument here," Cruger said.

"If you get tired or need to go slower, just let me know. It takes time to build-up to longer distances and faster speed."

Cruger's strides were much shorter than Harris's. His feet moved in a fast shuffle to keep up with the easy loose stride that Harris established.

Cruger hadn't run much since high school, right after his physical education class administered the President's National Fitness Test. It was the worst humiliation of Cruger's life, the "six-minute test." All the boys in class were required to run around the track as fast as they could for six minutes. The number of laps you completed in the six minutes time indicated your fitness level. The fast boys were able to do well over four laps — more than a mile in six minutes. The vast majority did between three and three-and-a-half laps. Cruger, chest heaving and stomach clamped into a tight knot of muscle spasms, only finished two and one-quarter laps. The single student who did worse than Cruger was Roger Sabutsky, the 200-pound class flab-ball. Roger clocked in with less than two laps.

The next week, Cruger began to run every day after school. He couldn't live with the fact that he was the worst runner (except for Roger) in the entire class. Cruger yearned to be an average runner — that would be nice.

The running practice worked. Within a couple months he could run an eight-minute mile; this was even slightly better than average for the class. Unfortunately, his running dropped off a year later, since the need for avoidance of near-fatal embarrassment had ceased to exist.

Cruger now remembered the torture of running when out of shape. They had run for about 8 minutes, 23 seconds, and 35 hundredths, according to Harris's watch.

"I really can't believe what we're involved with," Cruger said. "especially when we're running down the street here, leading what seems to be otherwise normal lives. This business of the Other Company and everything is really Kafkaesque," Cruger said, between gulps of air.

"Huh? Kafkaesque?"

"You don't read Kafka, I take it. What do you engineers read anyway?"

"We read computer magazines with centerfold pictures of graphics accelerator cards. And I hate it when the staple covers up the video ram."

"How can a guy with big muscles like yours be such a nerd? Amazing," Cruger said. Talking while running was starting to get more than difficult.

"All this stuff happening is like a dream I keep having," said Harris.

Cruger despised him for being able to run and talk with such ease.

"In the dream," Harris continued, "everything is going bad for me. My car expires, the furnace explodes. The next day, I get a giant pimple on my nose and my shower faucet starts leaking. My life is falling apart. I'm being picked on. I finally go to church and get down on my knees at the alter and pray and pray.

"All of a sudden, the ceiling opens up and the clouds part. A ray of light shines down and a strong, deep, resonant, booming voice says '*You just piss me off*.' "

Harris laughed and Cruger made a slightly higher pitched wheezing noise than the wheezing noise he had been making. The guy can run, talk and tell jokes too, Cruger thought. *I hate him*.

"Hey, I'm going to walk for a while, why don't you meet me back on Franklin street," Cruger said.

Keeping the air moving wasn't easy for Cruger; his breaths were desperate gulps of air followed by involuntary exhalations. His legs were beginning to shake uncontrollably.

"OK, meet you going that way in about fifteen minutes."

Harris picked up his pace as Cruger slowed to a walk.

Cruger moved his legs in slow, deliberate strides. He didn't need to be a great runner, just a consistent one. If he kept this up every day after a while he would be in pretty decent shape. Slow and steady, he thought. His arms swung at his sides and his legs kicked forward in long even walking strides. He felt strong; he felt invigorated; he felt nauseous.

Cruger walked half across the nearest lawn, and, bending over the small shrubs, he spat up; it wasn't something you'd see in *Runner's World Illustrated*.

Soon he returned to the sidewalk and started walking again. Slow and steady. Not bad for a first outing.

A few minutes later Harris came running — it looked like *sprinting* to Cruger — around the corner, his legs lifting high as his thighs bulged out underneath his running shorts.

"OK, I've done my five miles," Harris said, barely short of breath. "Let's walk out the rest."

They were turning the corner on Blaney street when they saw two men in sports jackets and sunglasses.

"Those guys look like Eagle Scouts to you, Jack?" Harris asked.

"Not unless they earned special merit badges in knee-breaking and mugging."

"Get out your insurance policy, then."

The two goons were already walking towards them. The big one must have been a good six foot three, maybe 230 pounds. The other guy was smaller but possibly even more trouble. He had a bodybuilder's physique, complete with

waspish waist and thick trapezius muscles. They both looked like flesh-built tanks ready to enter battle.

"What to do, *kemo sabe?"* said Cruger, trying to stay cool and failing.

"Let me handle this," said Harris, a hint of false bravura in his voice. "I have some modest experience in these matters."

Cruger didn't doubt it. Damned good thing I'm not alone, he thought. The smaller guy, who was pretty damn big, looked like a composite of Pee-Wee Herman's face pasted on a muscular thug's body. The juxtaposition of the innocent, almost feminine face on the tough's body was more than frightening, it was nearly sickening.

The big guy looked like a refrigerator with veins. He also had a big mouth.

"Hi, gentlemen," he said. His tone was a malicious one, with a sprinkle of sarcasm thrown in. "Just a little message for you guys from Mr. N, our fearless leader."

"And who might that be?" said Harris.

"Just shut up and listen, dark meat. Your little amateur investigation is over with, *comprende?"* It was not a question.

"And if we decide to forget your helpful advice, assuming that we eventually stop trembling?" said Harris.

The Pee-Wee Herman thug moved toward them, shoulders raised, fists in front of his face. A boxer. Not a good sign.

Just as Harris was planning the trajectory of his first kick, Cruger jumped forward and landed two quick left jabs into Pee-Wee Herman's chin. Pee-Wee swung a hook at Cruger. Cruger ducked and placed his knee in Pee Wee's groin.

Refrigerator, from behind, got his hands around Cruger's neck. Cruger flung his elbow backwards into Refrigerator 's kidney and donkey-kicked him in the solar plexus.

The flurry lasted four seconds. Pee Wee and Refrigerator were on the ground, groaning. Harris, finding himself standing there, jaw dropped, looking like a mannequin with arthritis, stepped forward and placed his foot on Pee Wee's Adam's apple. Cruger followed suit with Refrigerator.

Cruger said, "Tell us, who is Mr. N, your 'fearless leader?'"

Before a second passed Cruger's foot sunk down to the hard asphalt. Harris's foot also clacked down — Refrigerator and Pee-Wee were gone, leaving behind only thin films of steam rising into the cool air. Harris looked at Cruger and they said nothing. Whoever they were pitted against wasn't playing fair: this disappearing act was getting tiresome, Cruger thought. Besides, who knows what tantalizing conversationalists the two fine young gentlemen may have turned out to be? Their sunglasses and sport jackets certainly had been attractive.

Harris and Cruger hoped ideas would come to their stunned minds. Harris scratched his head, perplexed with more than one issue: he was 6-3, 210 pounds, could bench press 360 pounds, and had a black belt in Karate. Cruger was a pudgy 5-10 couch potato.

"You really handled those guys, I mean before they poofed away. Shit, I don't want to run into you in a dark alley," Harris said.

"I don't know how..."

"No, I mean you were *awesome*." Harris had seen his fourth-level masters of the martial arts at work, albeit in a tournament setting, but, he had never seen anything like this.

"Listen to me," Cruger said in a high wheezy voice. "That wasn't me. I can't do that. I don't know how it happened but I've never done anything like that before in my life."

"The insurance policy?"

"Must be," Cruger said.

"Hell, all those years of Karate and pumping iron for nothing," said Harris. Cruger squeezed his right arm as if to check if he was dreaming. They continued to walk, Cruger with a special bounce in his step, feeling like a younger, stronger man.

"Why?" Harris asked. "Why not just blow us away? Erase us, explode the planet, whatever. They probably are capable of all these things — and I'm afraid to think what else."

Cruger stared at his toes — his best thinking posture. A smile began to creep over his recently gloomy face. His eyebrows lowered while his eyes widened and brightened.

"A cat and mouse game," he said.

Harris stroke his mustache. "Who's the cat and who's the mouse — or need I ask?"

"Both have whiskers — tell me, do you think we have furry tails or prehensile ones?" Cruger said.

"You've always seemed to be a prehensile kind of guy to me," Harris said.

They walked on with silly grins on their faces. The inappropriately hot November sun beat on the cracked sidewalk. Cruger enjoyed the heat against the top of his head. He reached up to feel whether his skin had reached frying pan temperature. *Do mice go bald*, he wondered. *Regardless, if one is to be a little rodent, one may as well enjoy it.*

...She looked especially good today, and acted especially jocular.

"I'll tell you doctor, I've been feeling pretty good."

"I'm glad."

"What I need to talk about today is sex."

Goddamn her if she didn't wink at him when she said that. A wink so fast it could only be felt, not seen. He felt uncomfortable and self-conscious again. Only she could make him feel this way.

"When I have sex," she continued, "I'm afraid to let go, you know what I mean?"

He cleared his throat.

"When you say 'let go'," he said, "what exactly do you mean?"

"Well," she began, "I'm talking about orgasms. I mean, I can see myself just ripping loose like a wild animal,

screaming and everything, but I'm afraid."

He crossed and uncrossed his legs.

"I see."

He made a note in his book: 'detachment, alienation.'

She raised her arms up, pulling her hair up behind her head. She exhaled deeply.

She heard the familiar voices from her past. They sang out in a mellifluous flood of improvised poetry. She loved the nostalgia of those voices; but, the beauty of the voices and the environment also ushered in the thoughts of the boredom, the cold, and the staid heterogeneous groups. She was where she belonged now — let me stay, let me be one of them, she thought. Why had they told her that she would be like an animal in a zoo display? They told her she would never truly fit in, be counting the days until return. Liars! She fit in better than humans themselves; by God, she was seeing a shrink — what could be more California human than that?

'I'll show them, I'll show them,' she whispered to herself in the gentlest of her intense, breathy whispers.

Chapter 19

He still heard the sound of the Corrina's shower water running.

Cruger sat at the breakfast table, eating his cereal and staring at the multicolored box. When he was finished reading the ingredients, he read the nutritional information and then the trademark registration. Some mornings he couldn't handle newspapers, television, the radio, or conversation. Some mornings only the mindless reading of a hyped-up cereal box would do.

He especially liked brands that made claims such as: 50 percent more real bran, 25 percent fat free, or no cholesterol.

And that's what was bothering him. The dishonesty factor concerning his business with The Company.

He had not been able to tell Corrina about his spinning, the situation he had with Tony, or anything. Concealing such an important part of his life was stressful. It was starting to wear a hole in his self-respect.

He reasoned that most of the shame, disgrace, and humiliation of an extramarital affair was the sheer deception. If no deception were involved, it would be called — what's that term that was big back in the seventies? — an "open marriage." Wasn't he guilty of a similarly large deception that involved an important part of his life? He knew he wasn't guilty of the same 'crime' that an affair was — but he certainly felt guilty of something.

He decided that he would tell her about the spinning, Tony, Harris, the whole thing. If she didn't believe and chose to laugh, or worse yet, thought he was insane, then so be it.

Ten minutes later she came down, fully dressed, her hair wet.

"I'll grab a quick breakfast — we have any bran muffins left?" she said.

"Yeah, right in here. Two left."

"Great. I'll just have some orange juice and then I'm out of here."

"Corrina, I need to talk..."

"Oh yeah," she said, remembering something. "What's the name of that tune-up place on Stevens Creek? I need to have my oil changed, maybe on the way home."

"It's APD Tune-up, near Woodhams," he said. "Now what I started to…"

"Hey, I'm low on cash, too, honey. Do you have any? Otherwise I'll have to stop by the bank before lunch."

"Yeah, sure." He fished down through his wallet and saw that he could give her a ten without leaving himself too short for a couple of days. He handed her the bill.

"Thanks," she kissed him on the cheek. She started to leave.

"Honey," he said, "I need to talk to you about something."

"Well, can it wait 'til tonight? I'll be home by seven."

"Okay. Have a good day." he said.

"Bye."

And she was out the door. Was it always like this in the morning? She was gone in less than an instant.

He still felt the burden: white lies layered to a certain depth became a single darker lie. No untruth was entirely transparent, not staining the tint of the layered truths. Nothing was so perfectly innocent and necessary as to qualify as spotless, indisputably necessary: the perfect white lie. These off-white lies combined to form a darker one; the dark consequence was a cloud over Cruger's conscience, deflecting the sanctimonious beams of correctness cast down from his superego.

If you believe Freud, he thought.

He wondered if he would feel like telling her about everything that night. Maybe the time had come and gone. He looked out the kitchen window and watched the morning wind blow the fallen leaves across the back patio. The leaves tumbled and interacted randomly, forming small ephemeral patterns on the cement. His body held him to that position, eyes transfixed on the landscape that kept changing so swiftly, so subtly, and so constantly.

"What do you think, Doctor Frederick," she asked. "Am I normal?"

He smiled meaninglessly and looked her in the eye. He didn't realize that it came off as an entirely condescending gesture.

"In my field, normal is most certainly a relative term." He knew she was starting to play with him, again. She was a manipulative bitch deep down, the classic case of a borderline personality.

"However we decide to classify people must be considered to be quite arbitrary, you understand."

"But, really doctor, you and I have become quite close, I think." She leaned forward, pretending to adjust her shoe,

squeezing her breasts between her outstretched arms. She looked him in the eyes as she did it, hoping he would get that look on his face again. Sometimes he would even bite and chew his lower lip. "Don't you think I come across as a pretty normal human, or, I mean, person?"

He wanted to kill her, that bitch. He wanted to throw her down on the floor — God, how could she have this stupid power over him. He needed to be in control, not her… for God's sake, not her.

"Doctor," she said, her voice husky, her tone urgent. "I want to throw you on the floor, Dr. Frederick. I'll tear your clothes off you, I'll rub you and lick you all over, let me Doctor, let me..."

"Shut up!" he yelled. "Shut up... quiet! " He stood up, face beet red, and pointed at her. "You bitch."

"I know you want to kill me," she said. "Let me tell you something. I kill — I kill all the time. That's why I'm here. How about them apples, mister doctor?" She smiled and walked over to him, in his face now. "I kill and I seduce and I rape. And it's your job to help me, you horny little toad. Help me, make me a real woman."

She sat back down and slumped back into the arms of the big leather chair. Look at him sit there all scared, shocked. The Doctor's thoughts were still mixed, crazy, hard to read. He was a wimp, but she figured he was really like all the others. A planet full of wimps with no mental toughness, no control, no intuition.

Barbarians.

Chapter 20

About the size of a large pizza box, the clock on the wall swept a steady course with its delicate hands. Framed in black plastic, it hung on the stark white wall, looking like a large dark insect. Other than the clock, the lack of decor in the office was startling. The wooden desk and contoured chair barely gave the room an occupied air. Cruger still thought of it as Tony's office.

"You been working too hard? You look pale — I mean pale for a black guy — and tired. Where have you been?

"Shut up."

"Hey, don't get touchy..."

"No," Harris explained, "I mean I've been shut up in this room. Working 'round the clock. This computer system had a nasty virus in it."

Harris was sitting at the desk in front of the computer, pointing at a display of numbers on the screen.

Cruger knew almost nothing about computers. He feared it could be a long evening of listening to Harris talk about things that made Latin seem intuitive.

"Ungh," Cruger said, grunting in a way that he felt was a fairly intelligent sounding grunt; a grunt that could possibly signify some level of appreciation for Harris' point.

"I found it when I was looking through code resources — basically every program on the system — and I found a few suspicious ones."

"Ungh," Cruger said. The first grunt had been better.

Unfortunately Harris took it as an encouragement to go further into detail. "I took a close look at each suspicious code resource I found. Shit, it took a lot of time, but it was worth it. I disassembled the code resources and found four of them that were affecting the program Tony had set up."

Cruger's eyes had glazed over for the part about "code resources," but he understood the part about affecting Tony's program.

"What was it doing to Tony's program?" he asked.

"A number of things. To begin with, it added a security layer for a certain set of people. I haven't broken the code to enable me to know exactly who these people are, but I think this protection layer explains what we saw with the two toughs that disappeared."

"The code in there made them disappear, deleted them?"

"Yes, it looks like a set of people — I would assume that they all are Other Company — get automatically deleted if they get close enough to discovery."

"Isn't that stupid?" Cruger asked. "The minute they get deleted you know for sure that they were Other Company. It serves as a validation. And how would they know that they're 'close to being discovered?' Isn't that a subjective thing?"

Harris raised an eyebrow. "I commend you on your insight. Yes, that and almost everything having to do with the algorithmic solution to this Unified Theorem deals with the subjective. Life isn't digital, it isn't black-and-white with no gray areas; the model is a digital approximation that knows how to directly interpret and *derive* what you call 'subjective'."

Cruger frowned. "I lost you back around the word *the*, I think."

"The details are unimportant — for you, anyway. What matters is that I eventually completely understand these algorithms. And I don't… at least, not yet."

"Well, do you understand how someone is deleted?"

"I've been looking at that. I could isolate that code because it appeared in several of the code resources that have attached themselves to Tony's work. In a nutshell, deleting is similar to programming a black hole: it's just that the boundary conditions are different."

"Unh." Cruger thought the grunt would serve him well again.

"Thing is," Harris went on, "we aren't connected to anything. We aren't part of a network, as far as I can tell. We probably have some kind of downlink to the company's home office — uh, home planet — that I don't understand yet, but that's probably it. I don't think we're connected to anywhere else on Earth Tony was a one-man show."

They sat in silence for a while, thinking about their task, thinking about who else was out there, who their friends were, who their enemies might be.

"Tony left comments in his code, so the parts that he wrote are well-described and easy to figure out. It's this other mess — the stuff written by someone else or a whole crew of other people — that's tough for me to figure out. And here's the worst part," Harris continued, "some parts of this stuff are incredibly difficult to decipher."

Harris pulled a pad of paper over and began to scribble something.

"Here, this is the kind of stuff I find written across the comment fields in some of the code I read."

The sheet of paper had a set of symbols written across it; symbols that didn't seem to be a part of any alphabet Cruger or Harris could recognize:

"Okay, in a way this makes sense," Cruger said. "We know that the Tvonens started this process; we also know that the basic technology was adopted from the theoretical physicists' work and converted to an implementation by a group, probably a combination of Tvonens and humans. So, at least one and maybe more of the original people working on this were Tvonen."

"Right, and I wish those damned aliens would have commented their code in English, assuming they added comments at all. Maybe that's the problem with their own technology they developed at home. Remember, they're analog electronics all the way and don't have a good feeling for digital logic design, Boolean algebra, or computer algorithms."

"That's true to the extent of what they knew before they came here and decided Earth would become the technology leader. Then they must have started learning — at least the ones from the Company that they had stationed over here — to use our digital technology," Cruger said.

Harris yawned loudly and then sucked in a very deep breath. "That's a really important point. I should be looking for some computer code to be very slick and polished — and that is easily defined as Tony's work, especially since most of it is commented. But the other stuff I should look for to be amateurish, possibly error-prone and full of bugs. I hadn't approached it that way before. I had been looking at everything as if it were written precisely."

"Nah, look for some sloppy alien work, that's my guess."

Harris smiled and stretched, raising up his arms and twisting his neck around until the small little cracking sounds subsided.

"I've been here too long already," Harris said. "But I have to admit, this is actually bordering on being fun. It's like playing detective, albeit electronically, walking through a maze of clues. It's time consuming but fun."

"I'm glad you're doing it. In fact, that point scares me. What are we going to do if — excuse my distasteful scenario — you go away or take off or disappear or something like that? Right now, you're the man running the show."

"I've thought about that. Hopefully, soon, I will have made the program fairly understandable and easier to use. Someone pretty knowledgeable in programming could come in and pick up where I let off. Why, you have any plans to get rid of me?"

"Well, you know," Cruger said, "if you mouth off at me or anything I may need to do something."

"Nice guy. Thanks."

"Any time. Now the other thing I've worried about is this: is it too easy for someone we don't want to have involved to come in and take over the whole mess?"

"Good question," Harris said. "I've thought of that one myself — in depth. That scenario is what I am most afraid of, actually. We know that this system, the way it stands, can be infiltrated pretty easily, so I've taken a few precautions. Most of them are a complete secret, but, a couple of them I will share with you only, since you may be around if I happen to get blown away or something.

"As you may have noticed, I've added a scanner to this whole setup," Harris said.

Cruger pointed to the nearly flat, rectangular box next to the computer.

"Yes, that's it. It can be used for many things, but in the context of what we are discussing now, I have programmed it to scan my hand to allow entry into the source code files. I could extend this to allow you and your hand entry also."

"Pretty good idea, except the fact that the Chysa could probably imitate the shape of your hand with no problem," Cruger said.

"Assuming they knew ahead of time that they needed to have my hand shape and texture and my password to go along with it. I know it's possible, but the best we can do in these situations is make it difficult to get in. Making it impossible to get in probably *is* impossible."

Cruger ran his hand across the top of the flat plastic box, feeling the contours and minute corrugation on the slick plastic box.

Harris said, "I'm building in protection for us in addition to the protection the Company gives us now. I figured that may be one of the first things we need to finish this project."

And Cruger thought, protection. Yeah, they were up against something or someone's they couldn't touch, feel, or sense. It didn't feel good but it didn't feel too bad either, because the danger was everybody's danger; if they didn't succeed, no one would. Made life exciting. Just right if your heart could take it.

His TV, with the volume up, blared away. Harris sat on his couch, thinking. Even if there were a set of complete equations that accurately described the beginning, end, and maintenance of the universe (or universes, whatever that may mean), what did this say about the time before the creation of the universe? What existed then?

Harris opened the refrigerator door and pulled out a beer. He opened the utensil drawer, pulled out a can opener, and popped the top off the Moosehead.

If there were a supreme being, or beings, able to create worlds and planets and species and everything, how did it or they come about? The real problem with a quantitative definition of the universe was the boundary conditions, or more aptly, the inability of a human to conceive of something before the creation of the universe or the inexplicable nothingness after the end of the universe.

Harris's nose itched and he scratched it with the bottle, rubbing the edge of the label against his itch.

How could there be nothing? What if this nothing were something? What is outside the bounds of the universe right now? When the universe expands, what is it expanding into?

One easy explanation — too easy — might be that there always was and always is something. If a Big Bang started the Universe and a contraction of the everything into a tiny black hole ends the universe, this could be a continuous cycle that keeps reoccurring every, say, trillion years or so. The nothingness outside of the current expanding bounds of the universe could be time folded back on itself: the same universe at another time, during contraction, in a state of nothingness.

Harris walked over to the TV and flipped on a game show he had seen before. The contestants spun a wheel and guessed letters and giggled a lot. The host cracked inside jokes and the hostess pointed to flashing boards and flashed her thighs and cleavage at the camera.

Harris sat down and put his feet up on the coffee table.

A soft drink commercial came on. Quick one second-camera close-ups flashed pictures of bikini lines and men's rippling abdominal muscles. Faceless bodies held cola cans and darkly tanned legs of both sexes flexed and stretched and sweated. All this to sell sugar-water.

Harris exhaled. Some things are just too hard to figure out, he thought. The whole universe especially. But it was there, in the computer code, somewhere in there, all the answers embedded. He was glad someone had already done most of the work for him.

"Doctor, I've been thinking about what really bothers me and I want you to hear it. You see, when they first sent me on this mission, I really didn't want to go."

He wondered if she were actually further out of touch than he had previously thought. Maybe she's had a schizophrenic episode?

"But," she continued, "they kept telling me it was good for our planet, Earth being so close and all. It was actually a matter of protection for my people."

He double checked his tape recorder and scribbled down what she had said in his note pad. Definitely a psychotic episode.

"You see, your people are already crawling through space. It is only a matter of time before you would discover us and ruin our way of life.

"Frankly," she said, "you people are disgusting. There is only one advantage to the way you live."

She licked her lips. Now she goes for the manipulation, he thought.

"When I meet people for the first time, I think they're pretty interesting. The problem is, then I get tired of them."

Now she had turned sweet, phony, pretending to be forthcoming. Flashing those damn eyes, dimples, and gorgeous shoulders at him.

"What do other people do to stay interested in people?" she asked.

"Many things, like common interests. Do you have any friends with common interests?"

"Sure, I have lots of interests... strong interests."

She thought it would be funny. She put a couple of thoughts in his head: he was easily within her range here. Thoughts of she and him, together. She made the thoughts strong, vivid, realistic; but not too strong because he wasn't a well man, she had decided. In the thoughts she was on him; her smooth skin pressed against his chest and her round breasts bounced across his writhing torso.

His eyes rolled up as he sat there in his chair, and he gasped loudly, "Oh my God..." Sitting there in his chair, alone, his orgasm was so strong and so thoroughly taxing to his body that he lost consciousness.

His weakness disgusted her. She decided right there and then that he was to be a dead man. A man who never lived.

And tomorrow I'd better find a new shrink, *she thought.*

Chapter 21

Garbage trucks. They were the great equalizers, clamoring through the worst slums as well as the most affluent neighborhoods. No matter what your station in life — unless you lived in a rural area or a veritable oasis — you couldn't avoid being awakened by the vociferous sounds of garbage trucks from time to time.

It was Cruger's time.

He lay in bed listening to the trucks. The deflected light of early morning crept across the down comforter in the form of yellow stripes of light. Bizarre thoughts and fantasies swept through his mind like a hurricane through an Atlantic harbor.

The existentialists almost had it right, he mused. The life of a man certainly can be defined as the sum total of his experiences. Yet, that's not a full definition of a life. Doesn't the life also correspond to boundaries painted by non-experiences? What a person *does not do* is just as important as what he *does do.* A life must be characterized using a careful consideration of all experiences as well as all the paths not taken. The potential verses the kinetic. And of course the potential can always continue to live throughout time — who knows what strings will lead where?

Although Cruger saw hints of sunlight shining into the room, he also heard the pitter-splat-splat of a light early-morning rain.

Rain was another great equalizer. It soaked unprepared street-people, millionaires, communists (wherever you could find one anymore), and Rotarians. It probably even rained on the Other Company, wherever they may be, if not everywhere.

He slipped back to dreaming. Is life a zero-sum game? Certainly not. What a joke. Some may pack into five minutes of life what others may take 20 years to do.

And the strings, they prove it, don't they? They reek of balance and harmony. Isn't everything in life a cycle, a circle, a beginning leading to an ending and another beginning?

But, if we don't have a zero sum, are the winners and leaders truly a floating variable, unbiased by kitsch polar opposites such as good and evil, truth and deception? If a point on a string defines a time and a place, a plane of existence, can that time then be arbitrary based on the artifice of our definition of time? The strings must hold the answer...

"Wake up, sleepy-head," Corrina said with saccharine morning cheer.

"Ugh."

"Wake up, lazy shit."

"Whad you call me?" Cruger droned. His eyelids fought to open.

"Wake up before I get downright profane. If you don't show signs of life within 5 seconds, I'll be forced to begin CPR."

Cruger felt sly as well as tired — he couldn't let the opportunity pass. He played dead, and when Corrina's count got to four-one-thousand he rolled over and gave her a big kiss.

Corrina whispered, "Who's reviving who?"

"I just thought you needed a little morning cheer"

"No, I need more than that."

Corrina rolled on top; their mouths met in a soft embrace.

Cruger punned, "Back to the business at hand?"

"Just checking out the merchandise." Corrina's voice was a breathless husky growl. "Everything seems to be, ah, nicely in order."

"Very nice."

Their voices stopped as attention to the incipient passion robbed them their powers of speech. The pitter-patter rain helped. It was a pleasurable morning free of inhibition, full of sensation, garbage trucks or no.

When Corrina left for her early shift Cruger walked the hundred feet next door to Harris's house.

Harris wasn't his usual impeccable self. He had on a terry cloth robe that looked frayed and wrinkled. Harris himself was unshaven and had only half-open eyelids.

"A late one last night?" Cruger said, trying to sound as annoyingly perky as possible.

Harris ran his large hand over his lopsided hair, even his muscled arms looking slacker than usual. "You're a wise-ass — you'll get your butt kicked," he said.

"No," Cruger said. "My ass can't be kicked. I have a uniquely unkickable ass."

Harris smiled. "Don't let your unkickable ass go to your head," he said.

"Somehow I don't like the sound of that," Cruger said, "but I'll keep it in mind, thank you."

Harris went to pour himself some coffee, a cup of instant that smelled cheap and industrial to Cruger.

"So, you think they can do this whenever they want, erasing people, I mean?" Cruger said.

Harris slapped the plastic cup down on the tiled kitchen counter. "Not only whenever they want, but with the skill and precision of a surgeon. All the interdependencies, the numerous intersections of lives, times, and even physical objects would have to be considered — or at least dealt with somehow."

Cruger reflected on this so called 'surgery'. The ability to control reality in this way had applications beyond belief.

"You think virtually anyone could become — ah, let's say, an unperson?" asked Cruger.

"Yes."

"Or anything?"

"Yes."

"Like nuclear waste?"

"Yes."

"Hazardous chemicals and pollution?"

"Yeah."

"Murderous dictators?"

"Yes."

"Old Jerry Lewis films?"

"Probably not. The French would hang on to them somehow."

"Someone with this type of power would be playing God. I spin, but, I don't really know what I'm doing when I do it. This is different, this is complete pinpoint control of the future, present, and maybe the past."

Harris gave Cruger a stern look. "The person, or being, that controls this is not only *playing* God, Jack."

"You've got the skills for it. It's *all* going to be computer-run, and you're the man," said Cruger.

"I don't want to be God — when would I work out?" said Harris.

Cruger laughed at that response. "You've got to think big, man. When would you work out? You wouldn't have to worry about mundane things like death or taxes or whether your cardiovascular system is finely tuned. We will have transcended that."

Cruger looked at the pot of English ivy that Harris had on his coffee table. The vine twisted upwards, working its way around the redwood stake that was firmly anchored in the soil. The top-most branches of the plant departed from the stake and reached out into the air, seemingly to groping for more light and nutrients, without the support of the stake.

"At this point, I would almost have to say we don't have a choice," said Cruger.

"Oh, there are always choices," Harris said. "Just that they're not necessarily *good* alternatives to choose from."

Cruger felt good and worried that he felt better than he should. His mind played its dirty trick of listing things to worry about: people disappearing, Tony gone, Corrina and their baby on the way, the Other Company, his spinning and what the hell it all meant. There, *the list isn't so long after all, is it?*

"Anyway, are we gonna run this morning or what?"

Chapter 22

Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled
About the centre of the silent Word.

- T.S Eliot

Uraken observed Cruger's developments closely. It was his job. Uraken reflected on his own career — who would have known he would go so far?

Educated at the top five Shops (humans called them Universities), he had been off to a good start. Indeed, wasn't Tigaten — the top Shop east of the divide — the equivalent of Earth's Harvard? Wasn't his first shop, Vonsten, similar to Berkeley, complete with student protests and extremist radical factions?

But the politics, the absurd politics that he had endured during his struggle up the corporate ladder — that was the great difference. The earthlings would just happen into their top jobs with The Company, if all went well. But for him, the favors, the promises...

He had been like a great human politician, kissing babies, shaking hands (and even vice versa) — whatever to took to get the votes and to obtain the respect and trust needed to become number one.

These days Uraken just observed from his unique vantage point. More than anything, Uraken enjoyed watching American football. Australian football wasn't bad, but the NFL, with the playoffs and the Super Bowl, was great. Uraken was intelligent enough to know that viewing the Earth through surveillance microphones and satellite television was not that accurate. But, from his point of view, football was tops. Joe Montana was his favorite player, accurate as hell, the all-time best. And the pageantry, the contact, the athletic conditioning, the cheerleaders — what could better.

Uraken thought soaps sucked but he did like some of night-time soaps, like *L.A Law.* A few cartoons, like Road Runner and Deputy Dawg, were among his favorites. None of that new Slimer, Beetlejuice and New Kids stuff, though. It sucked.

Since he couldn't breathe their atmosphere — the oxygen would cut through him like a knife — Uraken circled the Earth in his space vehicle, a late model Oonsten. He only occasionally landed, and then it was always in some rural area where only a few soon-to-be loonies could witness his saucer-shaped Oonsten. The Southern states of the U.S. were always a good choice for a landing. The rest of the world considered them to be idiots, evidently, and even if they snapped a few pictures of the Oonsten, they were never taken seriously.

On a few occasions, Uraken put on his air-tight protective gear and left his Oonsten to walk on the Earth. His English, Russian, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Hebrew, Japanese, Chinese, and Latin were good, but he still could not communicate well with the few humans he encountered. They all seemed to drop their jaws open and shake a lot — but then they would make strange mumbling noises and do very little talking. They were hard to warm up to. Maybe they were trying an old form of Swahili on him, he joked to himself. Better brush up the African languages.

He longed for the day when he would relinquish his command and return to Tvonen to become a *sensien*, to taste the good life, to drink tikboo, to use foul language, and to have *sehun* with a hot-looking young *gruchen* until he passed out.

Uraken had been the Chairmen of the Company for roughly two-thousand earth years. The office was humbling — God, Yahmo, Lord, Master of the Universe; these titles were heavy duty. Embarrassing even. His position was so important that he labored for years in deciding the title on his business card. Uraken finally decided on what turned out to be his singularly most politically sagacious move: Uraken e Tvonen, Servant of all the People.

His early studies of Earth people had led him to the Tao philosophy of leadership, which he held close to his hearts: leaders were to serve and to teach, to hold the development of their people in their humble and gentle hands. This was Uraken's way. He had been criticized for being a non-leader of a leader, for being a delegator and allowing the *Other Company* to gain more control of Earth. On the Earth his presence was not hands-on — thus the 'God is dead' bumper stickers. But Uraken felt he could only lead in the style of leadership that he felt most comfortable with.

He could see Cruger in the position next — but just barely. Only from Earth could a Jack Cruger have a shot at the top position. His lack of education, his almost disgusting white skin, and his total disregard for the political process, all combined to make him a candidate that would be automatically rejected on the planet of Tvonen.

Leon Harris was another story. He, in fact, was technically trained, attractive (almost as dark as Uraken himself) — an organized, effective, person.

However, this would be no election. Uraken's own ascent to the position of power was based on politics, public relations, and good old-fashioned intergalactic marketing. The next Chairman would be the Earth's first representative in the office, elected only by his connection to the all-important discovery and implementation of the Unified Theorem. Then Earthlings would have accomplished the

greatest evolutionary intellectual development ever in the history of the Universe.

Even recently, common Tvonen thought said it would take another hundred years, maybe another thousand, before the humans were ready for their chance. However, humans made great recent advances in their thoughts on theoretical physics and their implementation of digital electronics. The original estimates of hundreds or thousands of years soon compressed to a mere handful.

Uraken marveled at the human's theories that had come so close to defining the bounds and origins of the universe. They had acquired new stature in the great "scheme of things." The humans deserved the office of God. A little more progress and their science and technology would rank them tops, even more advanced than the Tvonen's in their electronics and physics. Very impressive, Uraken realized, considering that these humans started out as tiny-little-slimy singled-cell things not all that long ago.

Of course, when they were slimy little sea creatures, the Earth's entire company was run by sentient beings, all Tvonens. After Homo Erectus began strutting his stuff, the company began hiring the locals and promoting from within. People like Tony and Jack joined the company. Unfortunately, many humans also joined The Other Company. Like that Jack Nicholson movie, Uraken thought, where Jack plays Satan. Uraken had just seen it on a cable frequency — such a convincing performance.

And now, as the original members of the company's Earth startup team left to create job opportunities for the locals, Earth would come closer and closer to being wholly regionally managed. Tvonens remember the earth terminology for it: Darwinism. A species evolves to the point of becoming its own God. Very impressive; the essence of Darwinism; Uraken loved the poetic justice involved.

Uraken reflected that although impressive, this was not unusual. Everything in life is a cycle. The company had always promoted from within and taken on new characteristics and management styles.

It was risky, though. Things could go downhill. But, after all, one must think *cycles*. Things get better, they get worse, they constantly change — this is the essence of life itself.

Interesting though that the Other Company was mostly stagnant. Yes indeed, the essence of stagnation. Things had been the same there for — as far as Uraken knew — since the beginning of everything. Disadvantages to this are many. But, the Other Company was steady, very steady. The cycles, if they existed, had a periodicity great enough to have disallowed the empirical detection of them. Uraken laughed: he was thinking like a human now — 'empirical detection'.

But the future lay in the hands of the Crugers and the Harrises. A new crop of talent to lead the way.

Uraken had never expected his current organization to last forever. Someone would come along who could do a better job, add a modern touch. Harris or Cruger would do just that.

If the *Other Company* didn't stop them.

To Be Continued…

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Has begun a stint with the spin-off software company Taligent after a ten-year stint writing and managing software at Apple Computer. He enjoys spending time with his wife and two small children, playing jazz with Bay Area groups, writing software and prose, and building playhouses and other assorted toys for his children to trash. Having actually been a studious youth, Jeff has a BA in Applied Mathematics from Berkeley and an MS in Engineering Management from Santa Clara University. *The Unified Murder Theorem* will continue next issue.

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