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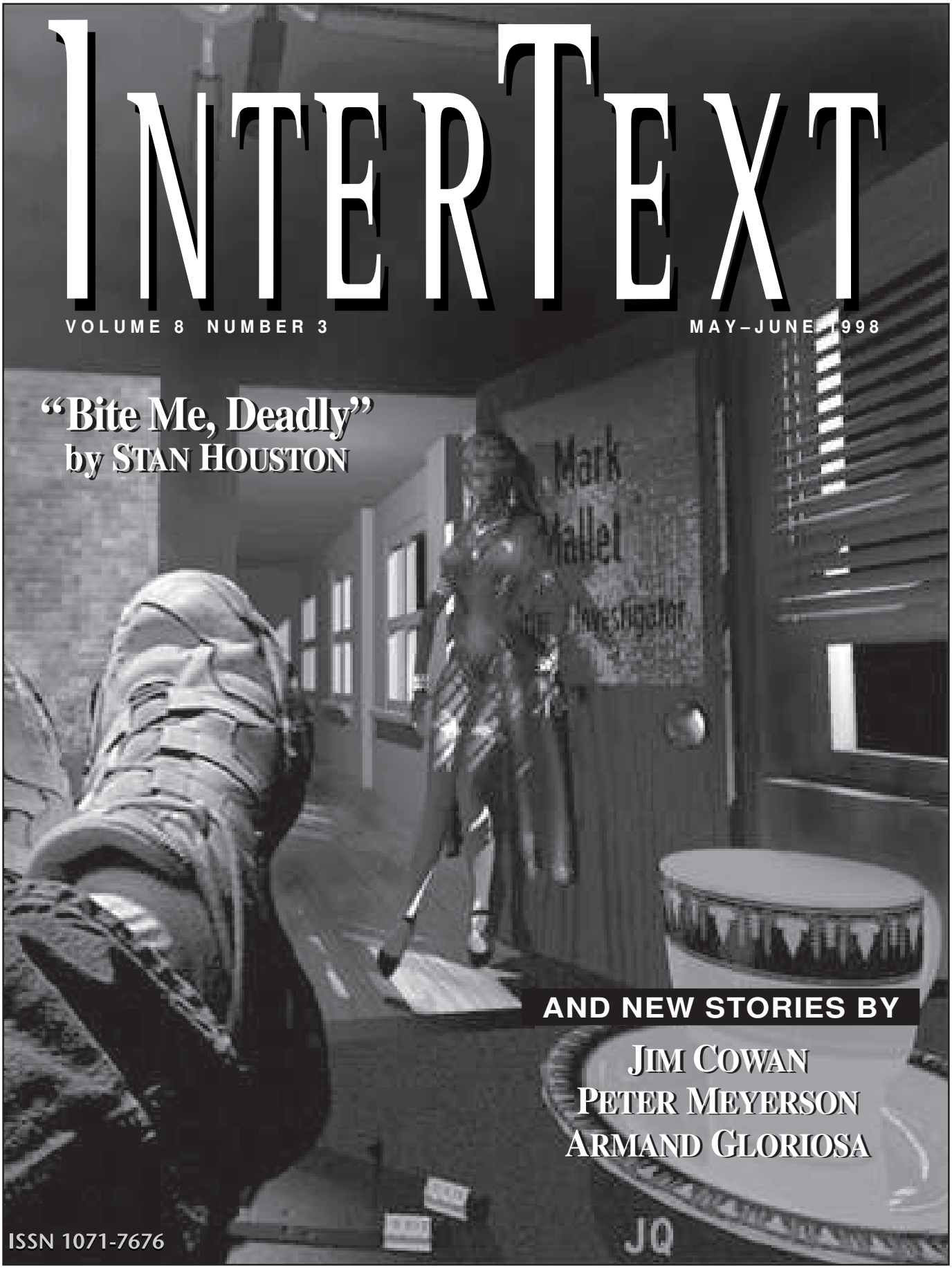

"Bite Me, Deadly"
by Stan Houston

AND NEW STORIES BY

Jim Cowan
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Bite Me, Deadly

STAN HOUSTON

It takes a special kind of man to be a Private Dick. Smart. Tough. An eye for broads. And a complete set of nonstick cookware.

IT ALL STARTED ON A TYPICAL DAY IN HOUSTON. Morning fog, noontime tornado, afternoon hurricane. Forecast: partly cloudy sunset. Relative humidity: a hundred and fifty percent. Predicted overnight low: 25 degrees.

Two o'clock. I was camped out in my office watching the neighborhood fly by the window when I heard her ooze through the door. Hey, I'm a private eye. I'm trained to recognize sounds like that.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything important." She sounded like a standing invitation to break every Commandment. And obey the Golden Rule. Her breathy voice reminded me of Marilyn Monroe the night she orgasmed the birthday song to John Kennedy. I always got sweaty thinking about it.

"No, no. Not at all." I swiveled my chair so I could see what was attached to the voice. She had a body built for the fast lane, and I wanted to drive her. In all five gears. Plus Park. I guessed five-foot six with thirty-six C-cup by twenty-four-inch waist by thirty-six-inch seat cushion. But who was keeping score?

I pulled a handkerchief from my Levi's and mopped my face. "Have a seat. Miss?"

"Mrs." She sat. "Mrs. Lola Raymond."

"Mark Mallet. Private eye."

"Yes, I know. I saw it on the door."

I saw right away she was no typical dumb redhead. I also noticed she collected jewelry. Especially the kind with large diamonds.

Lola tilted her head to the right about ten degrees. Maybe twelve. Geometry was one of my worst subjects.

She smiled. "Do you always dress so informally?"

I shrugged. "I was in a quirky mood this morning. Decided to wear my dark blue Levi's to set off this pale pink dress shirt, then accent it with a pink-and-blue-striped tie. Notice the matching socks." I swung my right foot onto the desk.

"Very nice." She punctuated her smile with a graceful nod. "I admire a man with taste who's not afraid to show it. Did someone recommend you wear the Reeboks with that ensemble?"

"No." I jerked my foot down, reminded myself to pay more attention when I dressed.

Time for a different approach. I offered her a cigarette. In Houston, it's against the law to smoke. Except in my office.

"No, thanks." She shook her head. Her long, blazing-sunset red hair went along for the ride. "I quit."

"Smart," I said. "How long?"

She pursed blood-red lips, stared with emerald eyes. "Who knows? Time is a spatial concept governed by the assumption reality exists and the universe evolves in an orderly manner."

I noticed right away she was no typical dumb redhead. I also noticed she collected jewelry. Especially the kind with large diamonds.

I took that to mean she'd forgotten. "Coffee?"

Her red mane swayed again. "No. I quit."

I decided not to ask how long ago. "What brings you here?"

"My husband."

I straightened my tie. "What about your husband?"

"He's dead."

I flipped on my shocked-but-sympathetic face. "I'm terribly sorry. It must have been quite a blow for you."

"Yes. But not as much as it was for him."

I cleared my throat. "What happened?"

"He was murdered."

"How did he die?"

"A gunshot."

"Where?"

"In our bedroom."

"No. What part of the body?"

"His head."

"I don't mean to seem insensitive, Mrs. Raymond, but the head is a primary target for many suicide seekers."

She slid a mauve handkerchief from her purse, dabbed her eyes. "I know. But do they tie themselves to the bed?"

"Your husband was tied down?"

She nodded.

"Who found him?"

"I did. He had gone upstairs to prepare for bed. I stayed downstairs."

"What made you go up?"

"A gunshot. I ran to the bedroom. But it was too late."

"How did you find him?"

"I opened the door and there he was."

"No. I meant, where did you find the body?"

"On the bed. His hands were tied to the posts."

"And the gun?"

She shook her head. "No. It wasn't tied down. It was just laying on the bed."

"Did you call police?"

She nodded. "They believe I killed him."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "His money, I suppose."

"Your husband was rich?"

A fingertip caressed the edge of my desk. "Filthy."

"What business was he in?"

"Condoms."

"Condoms?"

She crossed her legs, one silk-covered thigh sliding over the other. It looked like fun. I wanted to help. "Yes. The AIDS epidemic gave his company the thrust it needed. He made millions. Maybe billions. I'm not quite sure."

"Have you seen a lawyer?"

"I'm sure I have. It's so hard to tell sometimes. They look like everyone else."

"No, I meant, have you hired a lawyer?"

She cocked her head. "Why should I? I didn't do anything."

"When did all this happen?"

"Two nights ago. On Wednesday."

"Mrs. Raymond, did you see anything unusual in the bedroom that night, other than your husband's body?"

"An item from Randolph's collection was missing."

"Collection?"

She nodded. "Randolph kept it in our room. After me, it was his second love. He was the world's foremost authority on rare bird figurines. His collection included every rare bird known to man."

"And you say one was missing?"

"Yes. A figurine. Not a man."

"Which one?"

She paused, as only a beautiful, mysterious woman who's about to deliver an important message to a private eye can.

"The Peruvian Parrot," she said.

AFTER LOLA RAYMOND LEFT, I DECIDED TO CALL IT A day. It was Friday, so that's what I called it.

I locked the office, walked to my Mustang convertible, and headed home. I drove east on Westheimer, the only Houston street that runs in a straight line for more than a mile. While the afternoon gale winds blasted my wavy blond hair, I played back my favorite part of the meeting with Lola. She paid my fee up front. Opened her large sand-colored tote bag and dumped out my retainer. Fifty C-notes. My job? Track down her husband's killer and find the missing bird.

Fifteen minutes later, I hit my driveway in the Montrose, Houston's largest gay neighborhood.

I owned a beach house set twelve feet above ground on stilts. I'd had a lifelong phobia about floods. This really pissed off my neighbors, since the nearest water was sixty miles south in Galveston. They slapped me with a deed-restriction lawsuit about once a month.

I glanced at my imitation Swatch watch. Damn. Almost dinner time.

I hurried to the kitchen. Grabbing a large skillet from the cabinet, I poured in an ounce of cooking oil and set the burner at medium low.

While the oil heated, I tossed in salt, pepper, onions, garlic, paprika, parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme. Then I raided the refrigerator and the pantry. In a large bowl, I mixed cream cheese, mayonnaise, mustard, liver pâté, diced tomato, six eggs, a pound of chopped sirloin and two ground-up dog biscuits. The whole mess went into the skillet to simmer for ten minutes.

The phone rang.

"Mallet here."

"You won't be for long if you don't solve the Raymond case." It was a man. His voice sounded like it had kissed too many Jack Daniels bottles and sucked too many unfiltered cigarettes. Or maybe he just had a cold. I couldn't tell.

"Who is this?"

"You don't want to know. Just remember one thing, Mallet."

"What's that?"

"Louie the Limp."

The line went dead.

I checked the skillet. Still simmering.

A nicotine urge hit. I didn't allow smoking in my house, so I stepped out onto the deck for a cigarette. What the hell, one more wasn't going make any difference in this burg.

From my deck, I had a view of Houston's skyline. I stood there, twelve feet off the ground, sucking on my cigarette, contemplating the steel and glass corporate towers that shot up into the sky like giant phalluses.

Damn. How about that. Scored a double. Metaphor and simile. And I managed to work in sex. I was on a roll.

The phone rang again. I dashed through the door and grabbed the receiver.

Same voice. "Mallet. I forgot something."

Just what I needed. A crank caller with a short-term memory problem.

"What?"

"Diamonds."

He hung up.

I was staring at the phone wondering about the connection between diamonds, Louie the Limp and a Peruvian

parrot when the oven timer chimed. I retreated into the kitchen, grabbed the skillet containing my gourmet concoction and headed out the back door. At the bottom of the stairs, I located my St. Bernard, Marlowe. He sat by his food dish, nose in the air.

"Sorry I'm late."

I dumped his hot dinner into the dish, then dashed back up to the kitchen, whipped together a peanut butter and banana sandwich for myself, and washed it down with an ice-cold Pepsi.

So sue me, Spenser.

"MALLET HERE." I AIMED ONE EYE AT THE BEDSIDE clock. Glowing numbers flashed 5:15 A.M.

"Mallet! What the hell are you doing sticking your honky nose into the Raymond case?" It was Detective Sergeant Milford Ulysses Washington. One of Houston's finest; I saved his life years ago during a bank robbery.

I sat up, tried to shake numbness from my head. Milford calling this early meant he was upset.

"I gotta eat. Raymond's widow threw a lot of cash at me to find her husband's killer."

"Stay away from the Randolph case, Mallet," he growled. "I don't want you screwing this one up."

He hung up.

Just what I needed. An angry cop who didn't want me to eat.

SATURDAY MORNING. HURRICANE BILLY BOB WAS rampaging across the Gulf of Mexico toward Houston. But I had a case to solve. A little rain never hurt anybody.

I picked out a pale-blue dress shirt, matching blue-and-red wool tie, gray-blue wool slacks, and a navy blazer. As a final touch, I stepped into brown Hush Puppies.

I drove to the Galleria mall on Houston's west side. Fancy stores sold expensive merchandise there. Somebody might know about rare bird figurines.

Two hours later, I stood near the lower-level ice rink, more depressed than Ross Perot reading his IQ test results. My idea about the mall had bombed.

I watched the skaters, hoping one of the more well-developed ones would fall on her ass and cause that cute little skirt they all wear to flip up. No one fell, so I left. As I drifted toward the parking garage, my eyes zoomed in on a window sign I'd missed:

Horowitz Collectibles
ON SALE TODAY!
Peruvian Parrot Figurines

Maybe I could learn something after all.

I entered. A gray-haired old man with a humpback guarded the cash register. He looked like a small camel.

I jerked out my ID. "Mallet. P.I. I need to talk to you."

He squinted through wire-framed glasses. "What unusual initials." He had wrinkled skin and smelled like a dead fish.

"What?"

"Your initials are P.I.?"

"No. That's what I do."

"Oh." His brow furrowed. "What's P.I.? I mean, what do you do?

I sighed. "I'm a Private Investigator."

I drove to the Galleria mall on Houston's west side. Fancy stores sold expensive merchandise there. Somebody might know about rare bird figurines.

His beady black eyes widened. "You mean like on TV?"

"Right. I used to wear a button that said 'As seen on TV!' People kept asking me if I sold Thighmasters. So I stopped wearing it."

The old man pulled a rag from beneath the counter and started cleaning. "This is an honor. I've never had a private eye in my shop. Let me clean this. You don't want to get your sleeves dirty when you smash my face down on it."

"What?"

He stopped wiping. "That's what you guys do, isn't it? Someone refuses to help, so you grind their face into something hard so they'll talk."

I closed my eyes. Counted to ten. "No," I said. "I don't do that."

The old fart actually looked disappointed. I swear on a stack of Raymond Chandler novels.

"That sign." I pointed toward the window. "It says you have Peruvian parrot figurines. Right?"

His little head bobbed.

"How much?"

His eyes lit up. He wrote a price on a note pad, held it up so I could see.

"Is that all?"

"I'm afraid so." His voice quivered. "There's not much demand for them."

"Has anybody bought one recently?"

He nodded. "A fat man, very short. He coughed all the time. Came in last week. Looked at the birds, then bought two."

The description fit Louie the Limp, probably Houston's most incompetent criminal. Maybe my anonymous caller really knew something. It would be a first. I usually got the heavy breathers.

"Did he say why he wanted two?" I asked.

"No. He gave me a delivery address and left."

"You delivered them?"

The old man nodded. "He told me he didn't want to carry them around all day because they might get damaged."

"Still have the address?"

He reached under the counter and brought out a battered shoebox. "Certainly. Right here." He handed me a piece of paper. It listed a River Oaks address. I recognized it as the Randolphs'.

Now my brain cells really started clicking. Or maybe it was the grandfather clock in the corner. I couldn't tell. But I knew I had stumbled onto something big.

"When were the birds delivered?" I asked.

"Two days ago. On Wednesday."

How convenient. The day Lola's husband bit the big bird.

"Your birds?" I asked. "Where are they?"

He pointed to the opposite side of the store.

"Show me."

The old man shuffled toward the display. He never made it.

Gunshots ripped my eardrums. Glass exploded, rained down on us. The old guy clutched his chest, slumped to the floor.

I drew my snub-nosed thirty-eight and knelt, ready to fire out into the mall and kill or maim thirty innocent people in order to hit the assassin. I looked down. Blood gushed from a wound near the old man's heart.

Damn. This Peruvian Parrot business was dangerous.

THE COPS ENTERTAINED ME ALL NIGHT. WE HAD A ball. Finally, at seven A.M., they decided I hadn't zapped old Horowitz.

I stepped out of police headquarters just as Hurricane Billy Bob tore through the south side. As I set out to find my car, a long, silver Cadillac drove up. A tinted rear window slid open.

From the Caddy's bowels, a voice boomed. "Get in, Mallet. I want to talk."

I climbed in. "Big Daddy," I said. "I thought you never came within two miles of this place unless you had your shyster on a leash."

"Cut the crap," he snarled. "We got business." He jerked a bony hand up and rapped the plexiglass separating us from the driver. The Caddy leaped forward.

I glanced across the seat. Big Daddy hadn't changed much since I'd last seen him. Tall, with a hawk-like face and a body as thin as an eighty-year-old's tits. He looked like he always did—a crime kingpin. His diamond earrings, nose rings, finger rings, tie pins and solid gold watch accented with diamonds made me sick. Sick that I couldn't afford them. Everyone called him Big Daddy because he had fathered at least twenty illegitimate kids. In his spare time, he controlled Houston's entire vice business. He also was inclined to blow your brains out if you ever mentioned his real name. I guessed I'd be touchy if someone called me Theodore.

I popped open the mini-fridge. "What? No Diet Pepsi? Did you miss a night at etiquette class?"

A scrawny hand shot across the seat and wrapped itself around my throat. Tight. Very tight. "You want to live, Mallet?" He pushed up, lifting me off the seat. Funny, I would've never guessed such a skinny guy could have so much arm strength. Then again, I believed Oliver North and Bill Clinton.

"Right." I hit a note most sopranos would die for.

"Then can it."

"Right." Damn. Two high ones in a row.

Big Daddy's eyelids formed tiny peepholes. "I hear you're looking for a bird."

"Right." I squawked. What the hell. Might as well go for a record.

"I want it." With his free hand, he stuffed a wad of bills into my coat pocket. "Here's five grand. You work for me now."

"I already have a client." Pavarotti would have been proud of me. An entire sentence only dogs could hear.

"That Raymond dame. Forget her. I'll deal with her later. Find that Peruvian Parrot. Bring it to me. Do it or I'll find a live bird and stuff you up its ass."

I couldn't imagine how I'd fit inside a bird's ass, but I figured Big Daddy knew a way.

"Right," I squeaked.

"And stay away from Louie the Limp." Suddenly, Louie was the most talked about guy in town. I had a hunch he was up to his fat little bumbling elbows in this case.

Big Daddy released my hostage throat and hit the Plexiglass again. The car stopped on a dime and left twenty cents change. I pitched forward onto the floor.

"Get up," Big Daddy demanded. "You'll ruin the carpet." The door opened. As I tried to right myself, Big Daddy delivered a field goal kick to my ass, sending me tumbling onto the street in the middle of a hurricane.

"I'll give you a week, Mallet. Bring me that bird or you'll never see a sunset again." His Caddy roared away.

I stood alone in the rain, watching my all-wool sports coat and slacks shrink before my eyes.

Jerk. What kind of threat was that?

You'll never see a sunset again.

Didn't he realize I lived in Houston?

DRIVING HOME, I PUNCHED IN LOLA'S NUMBER ON my car phone.

"Mr. Mallet. What a pleasant surprise. I didn't expect you'd come through. So soon."

I ignored her choice of phrasing. "I think I know who killed your husband. But I don't have the bird yet."

Silence. "Find it," she said, then hung up.

WHEN I ARRIVED HOME, I FELT LIKE I HAD BEEN THE only condom at a porno movie wrap party. I strolled into my bedroom, hit the light switch and froze. Lola Raymond lay stretched across my bed. Naked.

"From the moment I saw you," she said, "I knew I had to have you."

Damn. Who was I to argue with logic like that?

I ripped off my clothes and executed a swan dive onto the bed. For two hours, we devoured each other—grabbing, rolling, pounding, slapping, sucking and moving in ways I never knew.

Then we had sex.

Later, I lay on my back, spent, my eyes closed. My clock had been cleaned, but I didn't know what time it was.

I observed the rules of etiquette. "Did you come?"

Silence.

I opened my eyes. Lola stood over me, still naked. Except now she held a large knife high over her head.

I rolled to my left as he blade whizzed passed my shoulder and ripped into the mattress. I executed an expert martial arts kick to Lola's seductive hipbone, throwing her off balance. Leaping off the bed, I locked her smooth, creamy arms against her incredibly firm body, expertly arranging my hands on her breasts. We tumbled to the floor. She hurled curses. I threw them back. I fought to knock the knife from her hand. Somehow, I was able to sneak in several gropes of her well-rounded ass.

Lola's hand groped between us. She grabbed and yanked.

I screamed. Enough was enough. I slammed a fist into her jaw.

She collapsed.

I struggled to my feet, gasping as I flopped onto the bed. During the fight, Lola's tote bag had fallen to the floor. It lay on its side, open, contents scattered. There, half exposed, poking its head out, was a figurine.

It looked like a bird.

HURRICANE JIMMY JACK WAS SNORTING ITS WAY through the Gulf of Mexico toward Houston. But I had a job to do. A little high wind never hurt anyone.

I left Lola at the beach house, naked, standing in the bathtub, hands tied to the shower nozzle. I thought I knew why Lola had the bird. It made sense now. But I needed one more answer before I tossed this case to the cops.

A few minutes later, I entered River Oaks, Houston's answer to Beverly Hills. Except no one had ever bought a map to the mayor's house. No one cared.

I found the address listed on Lola's drivers' license. Same address the old guy at the Galleria had given me. That meant two figurines purchased by Louie the Limp had been delivered here. On the day Randolph Raymond was killed.

The house was a modest mansion, maybe twenty or thirty rooms, with a four-car garage. But who's counting?

I parked the car and walked to the back yard. No wonder this guy got whacked so easily. No security that I could see. Any psycho could wander in.

Hurricane Jimmy Jack was snorting its way through the Gulf of Mexico toward Houston. But I had a job to do. A little high wind never hurt anyone.

"Hold it, Mallet."

I was right. A wacko had wandered in. I recognized the wheezy voice. "Louie the Limp. What brings you to the classy side of town?"

Cold steel jabbed my kidney. Actually, I couldn't tell it was cold. I was wearing my sports jacket. But in private eye novels, the bad guys' guns were always cold steel.

"Insults will get you nowhere. You've got something I want. Where is it?"

" 'It?' What have I got that you want, Louie? Charm? Women? Good looks? A cheap office? A foot-long love machine?"

He rammed the gun harder. "Shut up, wise ass. Take me to the Raymond dame or your kidney's gonna eat hot lead. I want to talk to her."

I sized up my problem. Did this overstuffed whale really think he could ace me, Mark Mallet? Hell, no. I'd pulled myself out of more tight places than Warren Beatty. Besides, my kidney wasn't hungry.

"Only if you give me your gun," I said.

"What? You really think I'm that stupid?"

"Yes."

"Oh, okay," he said as he handed me the pistol.

Like I said, he was Houston's most incompetent criminal.

"LUUUCY, I'M HOME." I SHOVED LOUIE THROUGH THE door of my beach house.

"Get me outta here!" Lola's scream made Louie flinch.

"Is that her?" he asked.

"Right, Louie. The woman of your dreams." I pushed him toward a chair. "Sit. Make yourself comfortable. I'll bring her out."

I hurried to the bathroom.

Lola greeted me with dagger-filled eyes. "You bastard. I'll have you arrested for this."

I slapped her ass. Hard. "Listen, sister. I brought back an old friend of yours who wants to see you about a bird. Cooperate or I'll leave you like this and send him in."

She considered my proposal. "All right. Untie me."

I loosened the rope. "I love it when you talk dirty."

Lola rubbed her wrists, then walked to the bedroom and slipped into her clothes.

As we entered the living room, the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," I announced. "Probably the Publisher's Clearing House Prize Patrol." When I opened the door, Detective Milford Ulysses Washington and Big Daddy stood on my deck. "Well, talk about the odd couple. Come in, gentlemen. Glad you could join us."

Both scowled as they trudged in.

I moved to the center of the room. "I invited everyone here so we can clear up this mess. What say we proceed?"

"Proceed with what?" Big Daddy growled. He and Milford parked their butts on my worn green and yellow sofa. Milford wore the same brown suit I'd seen him wear for five years. Big Daddy still looked like a walking jewelry store.

Time for my song and dance. "Everyone seems to have the hots for a bird figurine. At first, I couldn't figure out why. Then I remembered Lola telling me about her husband's business. Randolph Raymond—condom king of Texas. But that was a front. His real business involved jewels. Stolen diamonds. He used condom shipping orders to sneak them into the country."

"That's absurd." Lola sneered at me from the sofa. "Randolph would never do anything illegal."

"Don't be so sure." I forged ahead. "He found an easier way to transport his goodies. Figurines. They held more diamonds."

Milford piped in. "Where did you get this crap, Mallet?"

I stuck out a hand. "Hold on. Give me a minute." I whirled toward Lola. "You discovered Randolph's plans. But you wanted the jewels for yourself. So you hired Louie to knock off hubby. Louie probably stabbed him, then blew off half his head to hide the wound."

Lola's eyes breathed fire. "You bastard. You don't know what you're talking about."

"I don't? Why'd you hire me and then try to carve out my organs?"

She made a face. It looked like she had just sucked on a lemon. Or a spoiled prune. I couldn't tell.

"You wanted to throw the cops off the trail. But when I got too close, you decided I would look better in a coffin."

Lola turned away and pouted. I strolled toward Louie. "Fat Boy here owed Big Daddy a favor. So Louie clued him in on Randolph's diamond scheme. Big Daddy came down with a case of greed. He loves diamonds. Big Daddy hired Louie to snuff Randolph. Louie had it made. Two fees for one hit."

"You're crazy, Mallet," Louie grumbled from the corner. "I've never seen this dame before."

"Is that right? Then why did you have two figurines delivered to her house the day Randolph was murdered? My hunch is you both wanted to make a switch. But Lola double-crossed you, didn't she?"

Big Daddy waved a pale, bony hand. "Mallet, you've gone too far this time. Do you have evidence?"

"You just said the magic word." I strutted over to the liquor cabinet, reached around, and brought out the Peruvian Parrot.

Lola jumped to her feet. "Where did you get that? she screamed. "It's mine!"

"Be careful with that, Mallet!" Milford yelled.

I held the bird out like a battle trophy. "Randolph used this bird to test his smuggling operation. When Lola found out, she lifted it from the murder scene." I threw Lola a smug look. "But Louie thought you had cut someone else in on the deal. The old man from the Galleria. He had connections to sell the diamonds. Louie wanted everything for himself, so he shot Horowitz."

Milford stood, shaking. "Mallet, shut up and give me that."

"Not until I prove I'm right." I hoisted the bird high above my head then smashed it against the coffee table.

"No!" All four screamed. In unison. Almost in harmony.

The bird shattered. Glass flew everywhere.

It was empty.

"What the hell?" I stared down at the jagged base I held.

Milford grabbed my arm. "Mallet, you moron. You just destroyed the murder weapon."

"What?"

Milford's forehead was a mass of sweat drops. "Mrs. Raymond bashed in her husband's head with that. Then she used his gun to try and make it look like suicide."

My insides turned to water. "How do you know that?"

His lips twitched. "Ever heard of pathology, bird brain?"

"But what about the diamonds?" I pleaded.

"There were no diamonds, you idiot." Big Daddy looked as if he wanted to feed me to his pet wolf, Peter. "That figurine had a flaw," he said. "A factory mistake.

It was worth a fortune. Since I'm also a collector, Mr. Raymond was prepared to sell it to me."

"Oh." I retreated a couple of paces. Glass crunched under my shoes. "I guess that settles that. Glad you folks could drop by. We'll have to do this again sometime. Real soon."

Milford wrapped a beefy hand around Lola's arm. "Come on. You're under arrest for murder." As he handcuffed her, he grunted at me. "By the way, jerk-off, Horowitz wasn't killed for the bird. Some kid wanted to marry his daughter. The old man objected."

I stood alone in the middle of my living room, fragments of a priceless Peruvian bird scattered around me. Maybe my career, too. I felt lower than snail shit. I needed company.

I dashed for the back door. Outside, I rushed down the stairs searching for my Saint Bernard, Marlowe. I found him, under the house, humping the next door neighbor's collie.

Just what I needed. A closing metaphor.

STAN HOUSTON

Is a 55-year-old retired advertising/financial writer who has produced four satirical novels and numerous short stories during the past five years. One of his stories won first place at the 1997 Houston Writers Conference. His unpublished satirical mystery A Murder Made in Heaven is a finalist in the Authorlink 1998 International New Author Awards Competition.

W i d o w

ARMAND GLORIOSA

Love manifests in many forms.
Even ones that hurt.

HE WAS WAITING FOR HER IN THE BUSTLE OF THE Mactan Airport's domestic terminal, trying to keep his dignity as he mopped up the sweat from his forehead and neck with a designer handkerchief while his big, heavy Rolex wiggled loosely on his wrist. The sticky air swirled with the fumes of taxis and vans and the odor of uniformed porters. He was about fifty years old, with a high forehead and thinning, gray hair, wearing rimless glasses with thick lenses. He was dressed in a blue safari jacket and slacks, an outfit that brought Arthur C. Clarke in steaming Sri Lanka to mind.

The girl he had apparently been waiting for arrived. She was tall, wearing a thin dress that showed off her legs. Though her clothes were clean, they were obviously old; the dress was short only because it was too small for her. Her black leather shoes were too heavy-looking and save for the revealing dress, she looked like a poor country girl in her Sunday best. Still, she had a freshness to her that turned heads. Since she had just gotten off the plane, her make-up had not yet begun to streak in the heat. Her already-pretty face lit up some more when she saw the Engineer, who smiled back uncertainly.

People looked on at the scene of the meeting, trying to figure them out. Men and women idly watched them with strangely mixed feelings.

Despite the evidence before their eyes, the men knew instantly that the poorly-dressed girl was the old man's mistress. She had clearly been bought by his money. It was a classic story that everyone should know, but the actors never learned its lessons. The men all imagined themselves as the leading man in the story, learning the lesson ever so slowly as the rest of the world watched on with pretended superiority.

The women recalled the days when they had almost as much to trade on, and they cocked their heads and looked down their noses at the girl for trading on it.

The women responded to the young woman's attractiveness, recalling the days when they had almost as much to trade on, and they cocked their heads and looked down their noses at the girl for trading on it. The young hussy, traveling on an airplane looking like an *Ermita habitué!* But her sugar daddy—isn't that Engineer Whatshisname? For shame!

"Engineer Lamberto?" the girl said, her eyes twinkling.

"Mrs.—ah, Lamberto?"

"Please sir, you can call me Becky. Glad to meet you, sir," she said, and impishly stuck out a delicate hand. Her accent was thick, her speech innocent of the irritating up-and-down of *colegiala* singsong, so that if he hadn't

known better, he would have doubted his ears as to whether she had said "Vicky" or "Becky." He shook her hand gingerly, aware that everybody was watching them.

"I knew it was you, sir," she said. "Paul look just like you."

"Let me take your bag for you. Aren't you going to get your luggage, as well?"

"I brought only my bag."

They left the terminal in a white, chauffer-driven 1970s S-Class Mercedes with bright, untinted windows that put everyone and everything inside the car on display, like an aquarium.

They didn't speak until they were crossing Mactan Bridge on the way to Cebu.

"I never travel in an airplane before," she said.

"But you've been to other provinces before," he said.

"I come from Quezon Province. I didn't grow up in Manila. Paul, he tell me so much about Cebu, although he say he didn't want to live here anymore." She realized she had said something inappropriate, and fell quiet. She looked out the window past the railings of the bridge at the sea below.

ENGINEER LAMBERTO'S HOUSE WAS OF 1920S vintage, with a big lawn and a white fountain in front. The house itself was a big wood-and-stone affair with high ceilings. A long flight of steps led up from the driveway into the second-story living room, while ground floor level itself was meant only for the garage and servants' quarters. Since it was so old, it was not located in one of the plush Cebu subdivisions that Becky had heard so much about. In fact, it was located on a street that had become busier and busier in modern times, but with the front lawn so big and the house so far back away from the traffic and its dust and noise, it was still a nice house. The house reminded her of Casa Manila; Paul had taken her there once, on a tour of Manila's museums.

After she had been shown to her room and had freshened up, Becky and the Engineer had coffee in the living room. The German-made grandfather clock said ten past three. She expected the floorboards to creak as the maid came and went with their coffee and Danish butter cookies, but they didn't.

"I'm sorry my Tagalog is bad," the Engineer was saying.

"That's all right; you don't have to be sorry. I'm already used to talk English with Paul."

She had brought her little red handbag with her to the dining table. From it she pulled out a pack of Philip Morrises. She didn't ask for permission to smoke. She offered him a stick, which he graciously declined. She lit her cigarette from a box of matches she had. She seemed ill at ease, and only half-finished her cigarette.

The sight of her bright red lipstick on the no-longer pristine-white filter of the cigarette made the Engineer's stomach queasy. She stubbed the cigarette out on an ashtray of Austrian crystal which only guests ever used. The Engineer remembered some tobacco-related prejudices that he had been told about some years before. In Cebu, he was told, Philip Morris Menthols had a reputation for being "*pang*-hostess"; while Hope Menthols were *"pang-banyo."* He knew that Philip Morris suffered no such stigma in Manila. He kept this piece of frivolity to himself.

"So how did you meet, Becky?" he said, in a tone that he hoped was gentle but casual.

"In a bar."

The Engineer fell quiet. He looked at the discarded cigarette in the ashtray, and watched stinking fumes rise from a surviving glow in the tobacco.

"Was it a church wedding or a civil wedding?" he finally managed to ask.

"Church," she said. "Paul insisted. Actually it was a chapel. Paul didn't like to marry before a judge. He said he like to do right by me, and marry me in a church."

This last she said quietly, as if she didn't want the volunteered part of her answer to be heard. Since they had met for the first time a few hours before they had exchanged a little more than a dozen sentences between them. They had gotten down to the basics rather too quickly.

"So you stopped, ah, working, after the wedding?"

"Yes. He also insisted on that. Heaven knows how we get by, but we get by."

She couldn't bear the turn the conversation had taken. She got up and wandered in the direction of the shelves. He tried not to watch her swaying backside.

"Oh," she said. "You have so many records."

"Those aren't records," he said, breathing in with some relief. "My records have all been boxed up and shut away. I've gotten used to CDs by now. But those are laserdiscs."

She pulled one out from the shelf, puzzled. "This is a movie?"

"Movies, yes." He got up and joined her at the shelf. "What kind of movies do you like? I suppose you go for the Sylvester Stallone/Arnold Schwarzenegger type of movie," he said in an attempt at light conversation.

She didn't answer. She was engrossed in looking over the movie titles.

The Engineer realized something strange: she recognized the movie titles not by their stars, but by their directors—Hanif Kureishi, Stephen Frears, David Lean, Richard Attenborough, and so on. The other directors rang no bells—Kurosawa, Truffaut, Fellini. Only Spielberg and George Lucas she recognized from the non-British directors.

I'm surprised you like British film, the Engineer was about to say. And then he closed his mouth as he realized that it wasn't such a big puzzle after all. *It's Paul's influence*, he realized. But why the narrow range?

For a moment he saw a wistful look pass over her features, beautiful despite the garish make-up. It was a strange look to see on the face of someone so young. And then it was gone. She laughed as if in recollection of fond memory.

"Paul and me, we go to the Wednesday British Cinema at the CCP religiously. It was not far from the school where he was teaching."

THE ENGINEER WAS ON PLAYBACK AGAIN.

"But you're so good with math. You've always topped your math classes. Why waste your natural talent?" the Engineer asked his son. "Look, son, give this a chance. You're still young. There's time for you to get a degree and take over the office."

"Pa, I've spent four years earning my AB in Philosophy. I haven't changed my mind in all this time. I like Philosophy. I love Philosophy. There's nothing wrong with Philosophy. If you knew half of what you were talking about, you'd know that there is no philosophy without mathematics. Besides, I'd also like to spread my wings a bit, get into the arts. As a matter of fact, I'm talking to people about publishing my novel, and I've even been very active in the theater—"

"The arts!" the Engineer exclaimed in disgust. "Architecture. Architecture, then. You'd be both engineer and artist. Why not combine the two?"

"Listen to yourself, Pa. When you say 'the arts' you sneer. For all your talk about admiring Kafka and Van Gogh and Schubert you probably wouldn't give them the time of day if you bumped into them in the street."

"How dare you talk to me that way."

The son was silent, ashamed, but he still held fast to his convictions.

"Don't expect me to subsidize your Bohemian lifestyle," the Engineer said, "because I'm not going to stand for it. The moment you come to your senses about your vocation, I'll promise you my whole practice, the sun, the moon and the stars, the shirt off my back. Until then, you're on your own."

The son said nothing. "And how are you going to support, that, that, your girlfriend?"

"She has a name, Pa. Her name is Stephanie. We can both work," he said uncertainly.

"You can both work," the Engineer echoed mockingly. "You give your philosophy lectures in your two-bit downtown university, while that woman dances in the bars?"

"Stephanie's not a dancer, she's a waitress, Pa."

"There's a difference?" the Engineer said, but the fiery flash in his son's eyes made him regret it immediately. "And if she gets pregnant?"

"We'll manage. I have so much to teach Stephanie, Pa. She's willing to learn everything I have to teach her."

Again the Engineer forgot his counsel of prudence to himself. "Oh, so she's your very own Galatea, to mold and to do with as you please, heh? This is going too far!"

"Pa, this conversation isn't getting anywhere. I'll come back to talk to you when you're feeling reasonable. Goodbye, Pa."

They didn't get that other chance to talk about it. The next time Paul came home, he brought Stephanie with him. And that was the beginning of the end.

THE GIRL TOLD THE ENGINEER THAT THEY NEVER HAD any money, but made it a point to go to the CCP for the free film showings of the Wednesday British Cinema.

"Don't expect me to subsidize your bohemian lifestyle," the Engineer said, "because I'm not going to stand for it."

Once in a while they could go see a play or a piano recital with complimentary tickets cadged from his acquaintances in the theater. Once, she said, they had even seen an opera for free. All she could remember about it was that it had a hunchback in it, it was very long, and that throughout she was feeling very sleepy, like much of the audience, until that familiar tune came out, the one that people sing with the words *"Hopiang di mabili."* Anyway, after the Wednesday movie showings that they'd go downstairs to the CCP canteen for some Coke and the sometimes stale empanada, and then sit on the seawall and talk about what they'd just seen.

The girl smiled fondly, and the Engineer saw a bit of what his son saw in her. "How he could talk and talk," she said in her fractured English. "He know so many things about movies, and many other things also! I think, is he like that also in his class?"

"Tell me, Becky," he said.

"Sir," the girl said. He didn't correct her. He felt that it gave them a bit of distance between them, and he felt more comfortable about it.

"Did you ever get to meet a girl named Stephanie?"

"Oh," she said. "Stephanie is before me. But Paul, he didn't like talking about her. She was, he called, a 'non-topic.'"

"Oh," it was the Engineer's turn to say. Of course it would be a "non-topic." "So you and Paul have been together for—?"

"One year and one half. But then we get married, so we are married for one year. I tell him, I know you don't like me to be a hostess still, but we need to have the money. And Paul, he is so hard-headed, he always said no. So we are always hungry. But we are also happy. I did not become pregnant, so maybe that is for the good thing." She seemed embarrassed for a moment, and then recovered herself.

"How old are you, Becky?"

"Nineteen."

After a pause, she said, "You have so many books on the shelf. Have you read all of them?"

They were still standing in front of the shelves. The Engineer scanned them. "Yes, I have. Over the years. All of them."

Becky was impressed. "It is no wonder your eyeglasses are very thick."

"I'd be wearing eyeglasses anyway. Years ago, when I was still in high school, my optometrist—my eye doctor—told me that my eyesight would have deteriorated in any event, and it'd stop when it reached a certain point."

"Do you really remember everything you have already read?"

"For the most part. Actually, all I've been doing for the past two years is re-reading my library. And reviewing my movie and record collection. I've turned in on myself. I'm turning into an old fart." He smiled at her.

Becky didn't understand the word, so he straightened up the expression on his face.

"Why do you go back to read again your old books when you have read them already and you remember them? It is boring to read something you already know, no?"

The Engineer smiled. This was not a person who would be interested in shades of meaning, evolution of outlook and of attitudes, and maturity over the years. So he only said, without condescension, "No, not at all. Not at all."

OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS, THE ENGINEER STOPPED by the office less than he used to. Sometimes he would stay for a few hours before or after business lunches; on some days he dropped by for only fifteen minutes. Most of his spare time he was accompanying Becky on her shopping. Encouraging her to shop was something that he felt driven to do, because Becky was obviously being crushed by boredom in the house.

At the start, the girl bought little trinkets like costume jewelry, but improved her mind by paying close attention to fashion magazines, the type with heavy, glossy paper. She was a fast learner, though, and pretty soon it showed in her shopping patterns.

In the matter of sunglasses—"shades"—she shunned Versace, dismissing the designs with a laugh as "matronic." Her skin received the loving attention of concoctions whose brands she mispronounced horribly: Estée Lauder, L'Oréal, Almay. In the space of three weeks she promoted herself from Johnson's Baby Shampoo through Ivory Shampoo up to Clairol Herbal Essences. And soapwise, eventually only Neutrogena was good enough for her.

Becky grew in confidence, and stopped asking the Engineer for permission for each and every purchase. The salesladies gave knowing funny-looks at the Engineer—again, it was that mixture of contempt and pity.

He endured it all. He felt that his conscience was clear on this point, and that the girl, although undeniably attractive, was not an object of his desire—he had bedded several women of at least equal beauty, but of impeccable family, breeding and education. Two of them had been other men's wives; one of them had even been happily married.

No, his guilt lay elsewhere entirely. But it still had to do, indirectly, with the girl.

One night, as he passed her door on the way back from the kitchen to get a glass of water, he noticed her door partly open.

He was touched. It was an old-fashioned way for a guest to behave—not closing the door on one's host before one is actually about to sleep.

She was applying astringent to remove her make-up. For a suspended moment, he did not breathe, and he saw how different she looked. She was very beautiful. He almost didn't recognize her.

She saw him looking through the door. She stopped swabbing the cotton on her face, and nodded politely. He wished her a good night. He heard the door closed and locked as he walked into his own room.

THEN, THAT DREAM AGAIN, FOR THE *N*TH TIME. THE Engineer was in playback again, but with less control than when awake.

His son and Stephanie insisted on spending the night together in the house. They picked a bad time to arrive—he was entertaining important guests.

The Mayor was in attendance; there was a sprinkling of Cebu's "beautiful people," and of executives from Europe and the Middle East.

The Engineer had wanted a string quartet playing on the lawn, but he hadn't been able to make the arrangements in time. So he had to make do with his dual mono tube amps playing canned Horowitz and Ashkenazy.

Fortunately, the absence of live chamber music aside, everything else was just as he wanted it. The caterer was given instructions that the party was open bar; the guests

were sophisticated enough be trusted with the Möet et Chandon. Indeed, so sophisticated were they that even the Arabs graciously partook of the champagne, while no eyebrows were raised at this breach of the strictures of the Qur'an.

From the lawn the Engineer saw Paul and Stephanie arrive in a clunker of a taxi, tugging at their luggage up the front stairs before the maids, horrified, hurriedly bustled them and their battered baggage up the stairs, out of sight into Paul's old room.

The Engineer forebore, for the moment.

But later in the evening, Stephanie came down to the kitchen dressed in slippers, sando and the briefest of shorts to get a glass of water. The Arab guests practically licked their lips at the sight.

In his dream, the Engineer left his guests for the moment, and marched up to the room where his son and his girlfriend were spending the night. Even before he was a teenager Paul had always been partial to making bold statements and drastic gestures, and finally this drop had overflowed the bucket. The Engineer's tolerance caved in.

He knocked, and the door was opened. Icily, he told them that they were to leave immediately.

They did so, packing their clothes back into their single suitcase. As the Engineer led his guests out onto the lawn, with the fountain all lit up, his son and his son's girlfriend were ushered out through the back door by the maids and the driver. The driver took the couple away in the Toyota Crown, and the guests barely noticed the car drive away.

In his dream, the Engineer watched this. There was a sense of relief, that he had done the right thing. *Thank God*, he thought, *I kept my temper. Thank God I didn't humiliate him in front of the guests. But I had to show him that I was angry, that I would not suffer his insulting behavior.* But at the back of his mind, the relief was hollow, for some reason. He could not put his finger on it. Then he woke up, the dream began to fade from his befogged brain, and with it, the sense of relief.

IT DIDN'T HAPPEN THAT WAY. HE WISHED IT HAD. Because it would still be possible to have a reconciliation; it was even entirely possible that the son would have come back to him, of his own accord, to ask for forgiveness. *For forgiveness!* It could have been that way. Or, the Engineer would have eventually swallowed his pride and come to his son, asking him to come home. It would have taken a little longer, but he would have done it. No matter how grave the insult, a father has no business standing on his pride if his own son needs him—even if the son doesn't realize it.

But no, what had happened was that he had lost his temper, and after being sassed by his son's girlfriend after he had reprimanded her for coming down so unsuitably dressed—or undressed—he lost his temper, and went up to the room after the girl. Before she could close the door behind her, he had held the door open and with gritted teeth, told them to get the hell out, now. Although he hadn't exactly yelled, he hadn't exactly whispered, either. The guests who were in the house became very quiet downstairs. And when he personally heaved their still-unpacked luggage out of the window onto the manicured lawn, even then he knew he had more than paid back the insult in the same coin.

There was a sense that he had done the right thing. *Thank God*, he thought, *I kept my temper. Thank God I didn't humiliate him in front of the guests.*

The maids picked up the luggage from the grass, and the driver drove them out of the house in the ghostly-quiet Toyota Crown. The guests were gracious about their host's profound embarrassment, but the party broke up within twenty minutes.

When the driver got back, the Engineer was too proud to ask him where they had gone.

IT TOOK A LONG WHILE FOR THE ENGINEER TO BUILD up his courage to ask Becky the things that he had really wanted to know.

When, a year after the Stephanie incident, he inquired by letter after Linus at his University, he was referred to Linus' address in downtown Manila. Becky ended up answering the last of the Engineer's persistent, inquiring missives, in a letter of her own written in barely decipherable hen scratches. Her name was Becky, she explained, she was Paul's wife, and she was writing to him, Engineer Lamberto, without having opened the letters he had written addressed to Paul. Paul was gone, she wrote. Beyond that she would say little else. Or rather, if she had written anything of significance beyond that, the Engineer didn't understand it.

Several more letters from the Engineer, this time addressed to "Mrs. Rebecca Lamberto" herself, eventually persuaded Becky to quit her job and come to Cebu, to stay with the Engineer indefinitely.

One evening, after dinner at a fancy restaurant at the Cebu Plaza, they sat in the living room drinking coffee. The traffic noise in the distance had died away to inaudibility, and the faint sound of crickets and cicadas in full riot elsewhere in the distance filled the silences between their words. The Engineer could sense that the girl was vulnerable tonight; his experience with women had taught

him that much. He decided to press his advantage. So, after aimless small talk involving their common hostility against grade school teachers, the Engineer steered the topic to Paul.

"When Paul told me wanted to teach, I was dead set against it. Maybe I shouldn't have been so harsh on him, if it was what would have made him happy. Even you, he considered you his student. I know he was happy teaching you the things that he knew."

"Yes," said Becky. "Maybe though I am not a very good student. Because he leave me, he have a new student maybe brighter than me." The Engineer let her go on without interrupting her. "One of his students, she was even ugly, with pimples and a crooked teeth, one day he started talking about her about how intelligent she is. Since I already see the girl I did not worry. She have literary interests, Paul said. He called her a blue socks—a blue—"

"A blue stocking. Yes."

"He said, 'She understands my poetry.' Of course, Mr. Lamberto, Paul always recited his poetry to me, sitting on the seawall after the Wednesday movies especially, but I did not understand it. I tell him I like his voice reciting his poetry. He told me, 'Never mind what the words means, just feel them.' "

The Engineer looked at Becky, in her fashionably cut dress, her long black-stockinged legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles, with her expensively done hair. With a haughty demeanor, chin in the air, she would have been perfect for a fashion shoot; instead, she was leaning back in her couch across from the Engineer's chair, a hand under her nose to hide the fact that she was biting back her tears. Her blinking gave her away. *This girl is little more than a child*, the Engineer realized not for the first time, but he had to be merciless.

"Where did they go?" he asked finally, when the words would not come to her and the tears rolled freely. "Where did they go?"

"Davao," she said. "I think the girl flunk many of her other subjects. 'Not good at math, not good at math,' Paul said. I remember. Later, Paul was always angry at me for anything that I did. I did not understand him. One day he left our apartment, he left me a letter saying that his student was going back to Davao to continue her college there, and that he was going with her. He call me a slut because I always want to go back to work at the bar. Mr. Lamberto," she said, facing him full now, "I miss him so much."

She was crying now, and the Engineer was afraid the househelp would hear. They had seen much in their day, with the comings and goings of the various women in his life over the years, but they didn't have to see and hear everything if he could help it.

He moved towards her and knelt at her feet. She moved her face closer to him, tears streaking her make-up, her face in great pain. She was shaking with silent sobs. "Mr. Lamberto, please, I miss him."

Gently he shushed her, and brushed back her hair from her eyes. "Did he leave an address?" He repeated the question even as he wiped her tears. "Do you remember his student's name?"

She tried to kiss him, smearing the lenses of his glasses.

"Becky," he said quietly, "*do you remember the student's name*?"

"No!" she said loudly through her crying. "I burn his stupid letter. His stupid goddamn letter. I don't remember her name. I go back to my old job because I have to. I am not like what he says." She raised a hand to his face. "Mr. Lamberto," she said, and tried to kiss him again.

He slowly pulled his face away from her. He held her face in his hands, looking steadily into her eyes as she made a long, uneven moaning sound that was lower than her speaking voice. He shushed her again, patiently, and when the low of pain had subsided, he gathered her up in his arms and carried her to her room.

Though she was thin, she was tall, and he was not prepared for her heft. It had been a long time since he had carried a woman in his arms; the unbidden memories gave him no pleasure. He was aware that a pair of eyes—it was one the maids, certainly—was watching them from the little glass window of the swinging kitchen door.

In her room he did not turn on the light, and navigated by the yellow light from the hallway which flooded in through the open door. He laid her down on the bed, and with tender hands stripped her down to her underwear, while she did not resist. Then he pulled a thin blanket over her, turned on the electric fan, and left, closing the door gently behind him.

In his own room, fully clothed, with his shoes still on, he lay down on the counterpane of the bed. All he took off were his glasses and his watch. He knew he was not going to get any sleep tonight. He waited, eyes wide open and staring at the high ceiling, for the sun to rise.

IT WAS A SUMMER AFTERNOON WHEN BECKY LEFT the house. On that day the weather was of the type that always occurs during power blackouts: the air was hot, sticky and windless. But the lights didn't go out that afternoon, the Engineer remembered. The decorative, wooden ceiling fans only swirled the humid air around. The exotic, powerful vacuum-tube sound system that took pride of place in the living room was silent; the Engineer never played music while reading.

He sat in his favorite leather chair, a genuine La-Z-Boy he had had shipped in from the States after attending a

convention. Where his body touched the chair it was damp, even through the clothes. On his lap lay, open face down, his favorite paperback of English Romantic Poetry, cracked along its spine from age and use.

They were sitting together stewing in the living room, with the folding doors the length of one entire wall open to the garden, because the only room with a working air conditioner was the Engineer's. To invite her into the bedroom, which was big enough and had enough furnishings to have been an apartment in itself, would have been inappropriate; and he felt that to stay inside by himself enjoying the chill would have been rude to his guest. His old fashioned sense of gallantry was coming to the fore, although it was mixed with confusion about what would be the right thing to do.

The girl sat on the sofa opposite him, fashion and interior design magazines scattered all around her. She kept sighing, but the Engineer didn't notice. His mind was a haze, and thoughts had difficulty forming. He was trying to prolong this state, to control it so that he could stretch it out. He was trying to prevent thought from taking form, and with it, memories and guilt. He didn't move. It was a state of mind precious for its illusory peace; it didn't happen too often.

Boorishly she broke into his tenuous peace. It was like a boulder being dropped into a still pond. "I can't stay here anymore."

He started, not immediately understanding the words she was saying. He echoed them mechanically. "You can't stay here anymore?" he said, not grasping what he himself was asking.

"I'm sorry, Engineer Lamberto, you are very generous to me since before. But I think it is like we are waiting both of us for your son to come home. Sir, he's gone. He will not come back to you or to me."

The Engineer didn't reply right away. "You are still his wife, and I am still his father."

"It doesn't mean anything," she said. "He is not here anymore." She didn't go on and say, *It's like he is already dead, and there is nothing that binds us anymore*. The Engineer felt that that was what she wanted to say, but she kept herself back. He was grateful for such mercies.

"So where do you want to go?"

She looked at him, biting her lip, eyes unsuccessfully trying to hide guilt. For the briefest moment, the Engineer saw again how his son had seen Becky. Right now she was a bit like a beautiful, naughty favorite child trying to fool a parent. "Somewhere."

"Home?"

"Somewhere."

The Engineer's heart sank. It wasn't the thought that she was leaving. It was the thought that he had failed to reach out to his son, to make up for things, no matter how indirectly. Whenever he began talking to Becky freely and honestly about his feelings about what had happened between him and Paul, she would tune out. Perhaps it was because she had had enough pain of her own. Or maybe it was because she thought that he should be a man about the whole thing, and bear it in silence and with dignity. Or, the Engineer thought uncharitably, this girl is exactly what she appears to be: uncouth and callous, badly educated, a vain and silly creature whose only saving grace, aside from her youth and her salacious beauty, was that she had fallen in love with Paul; that she could at least begin to appreciate him for what he was, and more difficult, for what he tried to be. It took a lot to love Paul, he knew. Anybody who loved Paul, in all his obstinate, impractical and heedless romanticism could not honestly be accused of being shallow in feeling. And he felt ashamed of his contempt for the girl.

"I'm sorry, Engineer Lamberto, you are very generous to me since before. But it is like we are waiting both of us for your son to come home. Sir, he's gone."

A WEEK AFTER SHE HAD LEFT, THE ENGINEER WAS practically useless around the office. Everybody in the office knew that his mistress had left him, and there were giggles that a man of his age could still be driven to distraction by the baser part of his manhood. At one point the Engineer thought he heard as he left the room one of his engineers murmur, "Thinking with his nuts."

Another week passed, then another. Finally he had no choice. He could not keep his mind on anything, not his work at the office, not his movie collection, not the cable TV, not his music collection. He had to do something, anything. It didn't necessarily have to make sense what he was going to do—as long as he did something.

He flew to Manila, and rented a tired early-model Sentra from there. He bought a road map from a National Bookstore branch in Makati, and after studying it, gave up trying to fold it back the way it was when it was new. The huge map stayed partly open on the passenger's seat beside him, and at 6:30 in the morning, so as not to be caught in the humongous Manila traffic, he set off for Quezon Province.

Quezon was a drive three and a half hours south. He took the rented car through the tollway and beyond, down narrower provincial roads. In addition to being in bad shape, with a very heavy clutch and a tendency to lurch even at cruising speeds, the car was badly designed, with impossibly heavy steering for such a small car.

But the drive itself kept the Engineer wide awake. It had been a long time since he had been on such a long drive.

He persuaded the car to follow along a winding road that looked down precipitously from the hill through which it wound—the road was nicknamed *bitukang manok* because its wild twists reminded motorists of a gutted chicken's intestines. When at last he got back to level ground at the end of the road, he saw a garishly painted statue of a mermaid in the water some yards from the shoreline. He knew he had arrived in Becky's town.

Eventually the countryside scenery gave way to a busy town full of one-way streets. He asked for directions, naming the local elementary school and the courts as the landmarks, and eventually found himself pointing the car up a steep hill with a dirt track. He eased the car upward, and went past a public school where children were arriving in droves, dressed in their uniforms of printed white T-shirts with dark blue skirts or shorts. The children made way for the car, but the dirt track was so narrow, and his traction so unsure, that the Engineer prayed he would not accidentally hit any of them. Nightmare visions of the car slipping on a backward tack crushing a bag-toting child chilled his fingers.

Further up on the opposite side of the road was the courthouse, beside which a big, yellow grader was parked. The workmen who were working on paving the dirt road came up to help. Their gentle manner as they worked to get the Engineer's car out of the rut struck the Engineer pleasantly; he reminded himself that he was in the provinces again. Gratefully he pressed some money on the men, which they took, shyly and reluctantly.

At the top of the hill, he stopped. He didn't know where to go. There was nowhere to park the car, because on either side of the dirt track the terrain rose up like a grassy, muddy embankment. The Engineer left the car where it was and slogged to the nearest house to ask again for directions.

The house was an amalgam of old and new. The older part was made of now-dark unpainted wood, and had windows of seashells ground to translucent thinness with thin curtains hanging limply in the windless, overcast mid-afternoon. Clumsily grafted on to the older part was an extension made of concrete, with a roof of corrugated iron and windows with jalousies of frosted glass.

There was movement from within. Voices issued in agitation. Becky stepped out of the house. She wasn't surprised to see him. She had seen him coming, with the noise that his car was making.

"Mr. Lamberto," she said, with what seemed to be displeasure on her face.

The Engineer stopped. Now he was here. He realized he hadn't thought of why he had come. "Hello Becky," he said, looking up at her. He had to make his voice carry between the twenty feet of distance between them. After a while he said, "I came to visit you." *Better than "May I come in,"* thought the Engineer. *It sounded less suppliant.*

"Come inside," she said, making room for him in the doorway even as he trudged up the hill, unsure of his footing. Perhaps he had been imagining her coldness.

He had barely sat down on the wooden bench in the living room when he stood up again, to greet Becky's mother. The Engineer was introduced to her as "Paul's father." Becky's mother then bustled about in the newer part of the house, in what was evidently the kitchen, complete with sky-blue tiles and a new Korean-brand refrigerator. She emerged with glasses of weak iced tea.

"I'm surprised you are able to find my house," she said with a smile. He *had* been imagining things.

The Engineer's mind worked double time, thinking of the right thing to say. *It's a small town* was all wrong. And to tell her *I remember you talking about your house near the court and the public school* seemed to be an admission that he had been paying attention to their small talk, unconsciously filing away for future reference little nuggets of information she had given him. "I asked around," he said.

Voices came from the kitchen. First there was Becky's mother, slowly talking in single-word sentences. "Visitor," she was saying. "Becky. Visitor." Then a man's voice wordlessly vocalized sounds signifying comprehension.

Becky fidgeted. A tall man wearing a T-shirt, shorts and slippers ducked under the low doorway and entered the living room. The Engineer looked at him. A foreigner, light-skinned, slit-eyed, probably in his late thirties. Judging from the style of the glasses the man was wearing, the Engineer guessed he was Japanese. He was not handsome, but his smile seemed to point to a mild nature.

"Mr. Lamberto, this is Kazue."

They shook hands and sat down.

"I just came to pay a small visit to my daughter-in-law," he said uncertainly to Kazue. Kazue looked at him attentively. The Engineer wasn't sure he had understood. "I'm sorry, do you—?"

Becky hesitated, then started speaking in Japanese to Kazue. Kazue listened and nodded, smiling. The Engineer listened in surprise, and wondered just what she had told him; a diplomatic lie, perhaps. Her Japanese sounded smooth, but then the Engineer would have been the last person to judge fluency in foreign languages.

For the next few minutes there was an attempt at conversation among the three of them, during which Becky tried to keep the flow of meaningful information to a minimum. Kazue was an ordinary *sarariman.* Becky

had learned her Japanese from a Japanese-language school on Avenida. Kazue had been in the Philippines twice before on business, but now he was in the country for only two weeks, on vacation leave. There was not much else besides that. The Engineer felt more and more uncomfortable. The feeling grew in him that whatever it was that he had come to do, it wasn't going to happen. Finally, he got up, making sure that Kazue understood he was going to leave.

"Well, Becky, Kazue, it's been nice chatting with you," smiling a smile he did not feel. He shook hands with the Japanese.

As he was stepping through the doorway to get back to his car, Becky spoke suddenly, in a low voice that didn't seem to be meant to be heard. "I'm going with him."

The Engineer stopped. He didn't seem surprised. "To Japan?"

"Yes."

"Are you getting married?"

Becky looked at Kazue. "If he wants."

The Engineer felt a chilly sadness descend on his shoulders. Gently he kissed a surprised Becky on the cheek. "Goodbye, then," he said. He took leave of Becky's mother, who saw him off with customary effusiveness. To the Japanese he nodded politely, receiving in return a slight bow. He found himself hoping that, even if just this once, people appeared to be what they were, and that a kindly face meant a kindly soul.

There was nowhere to turn the car around. The Engineer had no choice but to go down the road backwards, past the court, past the grader, past the public school, all the way to the main road, the transmission whirring with a hydraulic sound that one hears only in reverse gear. He got to the bottom safely.

He realized he hadn't even looked back at the house as he was backing up. He couldn't see it anymore from the bottom of the hill.

The Engineer pointed the car north.

ARMAND GLORIOSA

Was born in 1968 in Cebu, Philippines. He worked hard for years to become a lawyer, and when he did become one, regretted it. He married his first girlfriend, didn't regret it, and now has two children to show for it.

A Stray Dog in Spain

PETER MEYERSON

History happens to other people. Memories happen to us.
The difference can drive us mad.

I CAN'T REALLY SAY THAT WHAT FOLLOWS HAS haunted me all these years. I wish I could; it would be more dramatic.

But the truth is that every so often, when I recall what happened, I remember the experience without any feeling one way or the other. It may be that because I was young and determined to live the good life, I couldn't—and perhaps still can't—deal with the odd and ultimately sorrowful event that climaxed our stay in Spain.

We arrived in Le Havre on the old, supremely elegant *Ile de France* in early September, the most jubilant couple in the history of marriage. By design, we had no particular itinerary, although an older Spanish couple we knew from our summers on Fire Island—a painter and his pediatrician wife—gave us several letters of introduction to friends of theirs in Europe: Robert Graves on Majorca (*The White Goddess* had been my bible in college); Pablo Casals, who had a house in the Pyrenees; and an exiled Spanish painter, Juan Peinado, who lived with his family in Paris.

As it turned out, the Peinados, their children, and grandchildren became our surrogate family during our months in Paris, and I still on occasion think of that dear, impoverished, generous family with a wistfulness that borders on longing. I have kept and treasure a photograph of the Peinados' twelve-year-old granddaughter, Jeanne Marie. I shot it in the garden behind the artist's modest suburban studio. (The old man used to bicycle the six miles to and from their apartment on the Left Bank to the atelier every day.) The picture is a close-up, snapped on the morning after we had taken Jeanne Marie to see her first ballet. She is staring straight into the camera, sedate,

Our stay in Europe, where we went and how long we stayed, was determined by an insane MG Magnette acquired in Paris from an old high school buddy.

innocently ravishing, framed by a halo of flowering vines and, to my eyes, dancing wildly in her mind.

Peinado was in his mid-seventies, a kindly, consistently affectionate family man, but extremely difficult, to say the least, when it came to the business of art. Like several other painters I've known, he was vehemently distrustful of gallery owners. I'm not qualified to judge his talent as an artist, but when it comes to sabotaging his own interests, he was a raving genius.

We left Paris in early December and headed south, hoping at some point during the year to connect with Casals and/or Robert Graves. But we didn't get to meet either of them—Graves because we never got to Majorca and Casals because our entire stay in Europe, where we went, how long we stayed and when we left, was to a large extent determined by a clinically insane MG Magnette acquired in Paris for fourteen hundred dollars from an old high school buddy. The car threw its first serious fit in Avignon, and we had no choice but to spend a month exploring the Midi and the Basse Alps (hardly a tragedy) in a rented car while waiting for a new set of cylinders to arrive from Paris.

Like I said, while we didn't have any particular timetable or destination, we were determined to find a warm place to spend the winter. Reaching Nimes, we flipped a coin: heads, we'd turn left and go to Sicily, tails, we'd turn right and drive down to the Costa del Sol, a very different place in those days. It was tails.

Now understand: I am not, nor have I ever been, the *hey-man-it's-cosmic* type. Admittedly, in the late sixties and seventies did my share of psychedelics (along with every other drug known to man). I waved hello to walls that waved back, watched my friends transform into angels and devils, and had chats with God that seemed important but probably weren't since I've never heard from Him again—not yet, anyway. Once, with a cooperative *Penthouse* model and my all-time favorite, MDA, the so-called "love drug," I had an orgasm that lasted two months. Still, I was never suckered into buying all the woo woo bullshit of the period—astral projection, astrology, communal living, talking to vegetables to improve their health, Eastern religions, guru glorification, arcane massages, beatific grins, and all the rest of it. I began and ended the epoch as a pathetically rational human being.

Thus, I was thoroughly unprepared for what happened when Anita and I crossed the border into Spain at Port Bou, almost a decade before I'd even heard of acid: I knew—*knew*—that I'd lived there in another life! Everything—the landscape, the smells, people's faces, even a mangy cat I saw hanging around a gas station—was intimately familiar to me. This was my country; I was home. And it really shook me up. I was having an experience I didn't believe in!

Anita was thrilled, which sort of disappointed me. I wanted her to worry about me, to be concerned for my mind. But Anita had always been more open to this sort of thing, even before it became fashionable. In fact, later on she went all the way with it and spent her fortieth birthday in Nepal searching for something which, she wrote back, "most people aren't remotely interested in." The "most people," of course, included me, by then her ex-husband and the father of her two children who were living with me full-time while their mother was out looking for herself in the Himalayas. For years I'd been telling Anita that she'd have better luck finding herself on a psychoanalyst's couch, advice which, as you can imagine, made a solid contribution to our eventual breakup.

Although the revelation that Spain was my former homeland stayed with me throughout our stay there, the initial awe and euphoria I felt was replaced by rage just North of Valencia. Despite its rebuilt engine, the goddamn MG began cleverly mimicking the symptoms of a catatonic stupor, forcing us to put up at a government *parador* after a brace of incompetent mechanics poked around a post-war engine they'd never even seen before, pronounced its condition *muy serimente,* and probably replaced a few spark plugs while pretending to make repairs for the next several weeks. Save for another young American couple with the revolting habit of treating their mutt as though it was an adorable only child, the hotel was empty. Anita realized that my usually sunny disposition had abandoned me when, at our first dinner with these people, I asked them whether it was difficult finding the right size diaper for a daschund in a destitute, outcast country.

To her credit, Anita immediately went to work on me and, as she had from the day I met her, returned me to my rightful character. She pointed out that we were in a warm place in a cold month and not hurting for money, that we had a large, bright room and a tiled terrace overlooking the Mediterranean, that we ate our breakfast in the sun and strolled down to the tiny harbor to watch the small fishing boats return in late afternoon and hawk their catch right there on the stone wharf. She reminded me that each morning we swam in ancient Roman pools just down the beach, pools carved out of the rocks two thousand years ago, neatly squared and refreshed with every incoming tide, and that I'd discovered many new things, like sargo, a delicious local fish that often became trapped in these shallow pools and were caught by the hotel staff using long, jerry-rigged bamboo poles at the end of which were a few feet of line, a hook and a bit of octopus—which I'd also never eaten before, but now loved even more than sargo.

"And what about finding your cosmic homeland the day before yesterday?" she added. (For the record, I never

said it was my "cosmic" anything.) "You could have sold shmatas to the Romans who built these pools." (She was right about that, though. Once a Jew, always a Jew, no matter what your incarnation.) "Given all of this," Anita concluded. "I don't see how you can be in such a shitty mood just because our car broke down again."

But by then I no longer was, and you can see why I loved Anita so much. It always surprises me when I think how, some years down the line, we almost came to hate each other, got divorced, and didn't become friends again—well, distant friends—for many years.

There's an event that occurred during our stay at the *parador* which I feel obliged to mention because of the significance it took on later: I didn't catch a fish. Not one. And I tried almost every single day. My compulsive dedication was a joke among the hotel staff, albeit a discrete and respectful joke since this was a fascist country and Franco was looking over everybody's shoulder. I suppose they also felt sorry for me because they offered lots of encouragement and all manner of tips for nailing this wily prey. (Okay. The truth is there's nothing wily about sargo. They'll devour any tidbit you dangle in front of them.)

The whole mortifying business started after I'd watched the hotel guys fishing both the Roman pools and from the rocky breakwaters that enclosed the tiny harbor. (One guy actually grabbed a fish out of the pool with his bare hands.) Now I considered myself a pretty fair fisherman from my summers on Fire Island. I used to surf cast for Atlantic blues in season and the occasional bottom fish that always hung around a sunken wreck a hundred yards off shore. Obviously, I didn't bring my rig to Europe, so I was forced to suck up to the dog people—good sports, really—and wrangle a lift to Valencia. There I got all duded out with the best fishing gear a sporting goods store had in stock, returned to the *parador*, and, as you can see, made a complete schmuck out of myself for the next two weeks.

Carvajal wasn't on the map. Barely a village, it was a cluster of white-washed hovels on the beach between Torremolinas, the major haven for tourists with an artsy attitude (they called themselves "exiles") and Gibraltar, a place we came to know well thanks to the loathsome, Stephen King-esque MG. The car apparently found Carvajal to its liking and went into another of its fraudulent, money-eating death throes as we were passing through on our way to Marbella. Fortunately, there were half a dozen rental cottages adjacent to the village, and for seventy-five bucks a month (housekeeper/cook included) we settled into the only vacancy still available for the winter.

I'm reluctant to concede that reverberations from some past life had anything to do with the speed with which I picked up the local dialect—or at least a workable version of it. But I did feel instantly at ease with our Andalusian neighbors and we got on enormously well. If it's because, as Anita suggested, I may have sold shmatas to their ancestors too, so be it. There was certainly patience and good intentions on both sides and that always helps.

"Can you count to ten?"
"Of course I can," he replied, insulted.
"Good. You count to ten and I'll pull in the biggest fish you ever saw."

A housekeeper, Maria, came with the place. She was twelve years old and one of the countless offspring of Tomaso, a fisherman who became my friend—except during those times when he beat his wife and/or children. Their deplorable wailing and pleas for mercy were too much for me and I always kept my distance for a few days after these incidents, causing Tomaso considerable consternation and confusion. Nevertheless, I chose not to discuss these outbursts with him. There's no point telling a Spanish peasant it's tacky to bounce your family off the walls when whacking the shit out of relatives has been a revered tradition since the Vandals began raiding Roman towns along the Iberian coast in the fifth century.

Our other neighbors—mostly English vacationers—disliked us from the moment they learned we were paying our wretchedly undernourished housekeeper four dollars a week. They seemed to think that we, like all "rich Americans," were "spoiling the natives rotten," creating expectations which would cost them, the true tourists, dearly. Tough shit! We're talking about victims of a repressive regime, pauperized peasants with little more than a roof over their heads and the shredded rags on their backs. So desperate were these people that, to avoid the dreaded, rapacious, omnipresent Guardia Civil, they would row out to sea in the middle of the night, risking prison to salvage some water-logged tree trunk out of which they fashioned planks to repair their boats and make oars and furniture and statues of the Madonna and God knows what else. Fuck those English tourists!

Anyway, I was still sargo-possessed; it had gotten to be a me-or-them sort of thing, and, even before unpacking, I grabbed my gear and made a dash for the sea. Little kids, both foreign and domestic, began to gather on the beach—no doubt impressed by my fancy rig. As I stood waist-deep in the water getting ready to cast for the fat, elusive (for me at least) silvery fish, I jokingly asked a six-year old English kid watching from shore, "Can you count to ten?"

"Of course I can," he replied, insulted.

"Good. You count to ten and I'll pull in the biggest fish you ever saw."

"Will you really?" he asked, eyes widening, jaw dropping, a pearly stream of spittle beginning to meander down his chin. In those days, little children, even bright, English public school kids, still believed that certain adults were blessed with magic.

Well, I had magic that day.

While a good-sized sargo averages a mere six or seven pounds, I, on my very first cast, landed a twenty-five pound behemoth, probably the biggest sargo in the entire Mediterranean! I have no doubt that had I waited another day, it would have washed up on shore dead of old age. I became an instant hero, not only to the kids, but to the fishermen as well, many of whom came running over to see this amazing catch and the amazing man who caught it. They themselves tossed drop nets over the sides of small rowboats and, in theory, had a better chance to trap a fish this size. Apparently, they never did. To pull one out of the sea with a cheesy lure on the very first cast was quite a feat.

I must say adulation beats disgrace any day of the week, but redeeming myself from the humiliations suffered at the *parador* meant more to me. For one euphoric moment, I considered sending a snapshot of me and Gigantor to the waiters up the coast, but that would have been a bit too gauche.

After a while, I noticed a man taking in the scene from the periphery of the small crowd. I guessed he was in his late thirties, tall, blue-eyed, greying at the temples and extraordinarily handsome. His face seemed to have been molded in white clay and left unbaked—powerful, angular, yet muted, almost soft. What really made me take notice was the perplexing contradiction of his bearing: He stood absolutely erect, yet the longer I looked at him the more I saw (imagined?) him crouching, maybe even cowering, within himself. It was very strange the way pride and sorrow somehow came together in the man's demeanor. I was hooked. I had to find out who this guy was.

It wasn't easy. For three weeks, we didn't exchange a word. We simply nodded to each other as he passed by on his twice-daily, unhurried walks along the beach. I found myself too shy to initiate a conversation, which wasn't like me at all. I was usually surrounded by an audience of impatient kids hungry to witness my next triumph over nature. But my magic never did return, and with every puny flounder I dragged from the sandy bottom, I'd lose a few more disciples. Eventually, all my admirers lost interest or, more accurately, faith, in my powers, and abandoned me to my vigils. I wasn't their very own magician, after all; I was just another ordinary human, kind of like their fathers. I was sorry to disappoint them.

I soon learned that his name was Gerd and that he and his wife, Helga, lived in a cottage at the other end of the tourist enclave some fifty yards up the beach. She occasionally went with him on his daily promenades which always took place at exactly eight a.m. and four p.m. You could set your watch by his strolls. He walked as he stood, upright and downcast, the most august and angst-ridden man I'd even seen. Helga, a skittish, chatty, blond woman whom I judged to be in her early thirties, flapped around him like a raven harassing an eagle. Gerd never engaged her directly on these walks; he looked passed her or through her when she happened to flit in front of him, always gazing straight ahead, his eyes on the fisherman who, at these times of day, were hauling in their nets or sorting their pitiful catch on the sand. The couple kept to themselves and I never saw them speak to their neighbors. I wasn't sure they even knew English until I met them and discovered they spoke the language flawlessly, with only a shade of an accent.

Because animals must live in non-Catholic countries to possess souls and feel pain, those unfortunate enough to inhabit Latin countries lead lives of unrelenting misery. Useful beasts, like donkeys or cows, are only a little better off than pets, so if you wake up tomorrow and discover that you're a stray dog in Spain, head for the nearest border or swim out to sea and drown.

In 1959, though, you'd have found a haven in Gerd's cottage.

That's how I finally met him, on the morning a bunch of local kids were hurling stones at a trembling mongrel and harassing it with sticks. Gerd must have heard the ruckus too (it woke me up), because he came running down the beach shouting (in Spanish) and chased the kids away from the near-dead dog. I watched from my terrace as he cradled the poor creature in his arms and took it back to his cottage, murmuring soothing words in German.

I had to meet this guy.

Later, when I knew he'd be taking his afternoon walk, I intercepted him.

"Good morning," I said.

"Good morning," he replied, neither pleasantly nor unpleasantly.

"Ah. You speak English," I said, grinning inanely. He didn't reply, so I continued. "That was a nice thing you did this morning, saving that dog."

He shrugged. His shrugs were difficult, slow to start and lengthy, as though there was a hundred pound weight on his shoulders. A long silence followed, so long I began thinking, well, that's it for today, when he said:

"That was quite a fish you caught the day you arrived."

"Just luck," I said, with what I imagined to be disarming modesty. Then, strangely, I felt compelled to diminish my own stature with a confession. "You know, I

fished for two straight weeks near Valencia and didn't catch—" I was about to say "shit," but thought better of it. "—a single fish." Something about the guy demanded a measure of formality. Or maybe I was self-conscious, knowing how Europeans hated the way Americans presumed a jolly friendship from the first hello.

"Good luck counts," he said. Huh? Wow, was that ever elusive! Counts for what? In what context? Fishing? Life? Everything? So far the guy's said a dozen words (including "good morning") and already I'm mulling over what he means. (Although, there was a voice inside saying, hey, you want a mystery, you'll find a mystery.)

Well, I had plenty of time to gnaw on this bone because Gerd nodded without smiling and resumed his walk. Watching him vanish down the beach, I began wondering about what he did during the war. True, he had the air of a soldier, an officer, but I couldn't imagine him fighting for the Nazis. I trusted my feelings about him and, his aloofness notwithstanding, Gerd had heart; there was no way he could have been on the wrong side. Working with the underground was more like it—dangerous, secret meetings in Berlin safehouses, sending morse code messages to London, blowing up bridges across the Rhine, night attacks on barracks in the Black Forest—all the stuff I'd seen in movies.

Or maybe I'd known him in one of my previous lives. Yeah: I'm a wandering gem merchant pursuing my trade in one of the old Roman coastal towns, Saguntum or Tarraco. Gerd's a Carthaginian Vandal from North Africa. (Come to think of it, in this scenario, he could very well be one of Tomaso's ancestors.) On one of their raids, I'm taken prisoner. I'm about to be executed when Gerd intervenes: "Let this one be!" he thunders to his men—don't ask me why. I thank him in a language he doesn't understand and go on my way. A few months later, one of Justinian's armies arrives to sweep these dreaded barbarians out of Africa and put an end to their brutal forays along the Spanish coast. Now Gerd is captured. He's about to be executed. I recognize him at once among the thousands waiting to be nailed to the cross. I check my gem bag and approach a centurion. The guy's got a hammer in his hand and sneers ominously through a mouthful of nails. The bastard can't wait to start hammering. "Excuse me," I say. "That man over there, the one who's straight and bent at the same time….I'd like to buy his freedom." I bribe the boob with two opals and an emerald—second-rate stones actually, but what does he know? Gerd jumps down off the cross. He thanks me in a language I don't understand and goes on his way.

Sounds about right to me.

"What do you think of the kraut?" I asked Anita when I returned to the cottage.

"Which one's the kraut?" she replied, which tells you where her focus was. Anita had started knitting a muffler in Avignon that was now seven feet long.

"You expecting Siamese twins?"

"Up your ass," she replied matter-of-factly.

I guess being together twenty-four hours a day for five months was beginning to take a toll on our marriage. It wasn't serious (yet), but it wasn't fun anymore either. We didn't fight; we were just there, keeping more and more to ourselves, leading separate lives in the same space. As the winter went on, we became increasingly listless, kind of numbed out, at least with each other. Sex, on those rare occasions when we had it, was still pretty good—for me. But I'm a skilled pervert who can (or could in those days) get off behind anything. Assent, resistance, indifference, even a woman's passion—all were aphrodisiacs to me.

He had the air of a soldier, an officer, but I couldn't imagine him fighting for the Nazis. I trusted my feelings about him: Gerd had heart.

We couldn't see it then, but this was more than a bump in the road on the way to a happier marriage. Our alienation was growing at about the same rate as Anita's muffler. No surprise that it took a while to notice the most important sign of all, the one that reads: "Couples Who Stop Discussing A Future Together Don't Have One."

Now here's a shocker: That same night, Gerd, with Helga in tow, showed up at the cottage with a chess set under his arm, just as though we'd made plans for the evening! We were digesting yet another feast of boiled leather (squid), half-baked potatoes and raw carrots—What do you want? The kid was twelve years old!—when I noticed the two of them standing on the flagstone terrace: Gerd, as always, outwardly erect and inwardly stooped, Helga, doing her overwrought raven routine, dipping and weaving and hopping around her stationary husband as though waiting to pounce on his discarded tidbits.

"May we come in?" she asked, smiling politely.

"Hey, our door's always open," said Mr. Cheery, prompting a God-you-can-be-putzy-sometimes sigh from Anita. "Come, in, come in," I continued, ignoring the put-down. I'd done it! Casals is in the Caribbean, we may never meet Robert Graves or Picasso. But who cares? I've landed another giant sargo!

"I thought you might like a game of chess," Gerd said.

Jesus! How does he know I love chess?

"Well, sure! You guys want a drink, coffee or something?"

"Guys?" asked Helga, rattled by the colloquialism.

"Oh, sorry. It's….you know, a way to say….it just means the two of you."

"Ah, I see." But I could tell she didn't see anything. I suppose she thought I was calling her a dyke.

I noticed that Gerd, who didn't pay any more attention to his wife indoors than he did outdoors, was scrutinizing the room. (What was he looking for? The tourist bungalows are all identically furnished.) What I was totally oblivious to, until later when she busted me for it, was that I was ignoring Anita! For the next two hours, it's like she wasn't there. Weird. I was imitating this guy!

Loving a game doesn't guarantee that you'll be any good at it, and I'll never be more than an average player. However, my ego isn't invested in chess and I didn't mind losing three games in quick succession. Truthfully, I would have lost even if I hadn't been distracted by an avalanche of thoughts regarding my enigmatic opponent. (Why had he suddenly appeared at the cottage? What did he want? Who was he? Why did I care who he was?) What did bother me was that he hardly said a word that night. He came to play chess and that's what we did. Helga, to Anita's dismay, took up the chit-chat slack, giving new meaning to the phrase witless prattle. (Examples: Spain is a lovely country. The sea is beautiful. I wish the beach weren't so rocky. The sand is grainy. It hurts to walk barefoot. How nice to be warm in winter. Have you been to the bullfights in Malaga? Et cetera.)

Anita, kind, generous, big-hearted Anita, was wilting under the barrage. My wife, an M.A. in Comparative Lit. who read four books a week—despite her knitting obsession—had no flair whatsoever for small talk. Nonetheless, there were a few nuggets of substance in Helga's painfully mindless soliloquy. The Rautenbergs, I learned, weren't merely tourists. They had taken a long lease on their bungalow years ago when they came to live in Spain permanently. Helga worshipped her husband and told us that Gerd was a commercial artist who made a living painting "the most exquisite labels" for Rhine wine bottles for a company in West Germany which kept him supplied with materials. I noticed Gerd winced slightly every time his wife touched on anything relating to their personal lives.

The Rautenbergs left as suddenly they had come. Cutting his wife off in mid-rant, Gerd swept the chess pieces off the coffee table into their sweet-smelling cedar box, snapped the board shut, rose to his feet and said, affably but unsmiling, "Goodnight." I thought the guy was pissed by my shabby performance. Later I came to understand that sudden appearances and abrupt departures were his style.

He disappeared through the open, glass-panelled door with poor Helga fluttering in his wake firing salvo after salvo of exaggerated tics over her shoulder. Before I realized that these twitches were intended to be apologies for her husband's unceremonious exit, I suspected she might be a loon who'd been downing anti-psychotic medication for too long.

But that was it. No "Thanks for the coffee," no "What a pleasant evening," not even some 1959 equivalent to "Your chess sucks, I'm outta here." Just a curt goodnight, and he was gone.

"So…?" I said to Anita. I really wanted her angle on the guy.

"What do you mean?"

"Ah, c'mon, Anita," I whined. "What do you think about Gerd?"

"I like him," she said.

"All right. I can buy that. So do I. But, seeing as he didn't open his mouth, what do you like about him?"

"Must I have a reason?" she asked.

"Hey, this isn't a grilling. I'm only asking for your opinion."

"Why're you so interested in him?" she said, unspooling the half-mile-long muffler.

"Must I have a reason?" I shot back, mimicking her tone exactly.

Okay, it was a snide, self-defeating remark and I knew it would curb any further discussion. I wasn't surprised that Anita got up without a word and went into the bedroom, but, what the fuck, I was angry, justifiably angry, at her airy intransigence. I was also frustrated. Anita had a unique fix on people; I valued her observations and I had a genuine yearning to discuss the evening with her; I didn't want to keep this guy to myself. I'd hoped he was a mystery we could unravel together.

Alone on the terrace, staring into a black, starless sky, listening to the crashing waves of an exceptionally high tide, I started thinking that maybe we'd turned some corner and were in the early stages of a doomed marriage. Not having experienced it before, I had no idea how a downhill slide started. But, geez, we'd been together for less than four years, only two of them as man and wife! The notion was too outrageous, too painful to hold onto. Exhausted, I wrapped the thought in a sigh and let it go, trusting it would float out into the darkness and sink to the bottom of the sea. Then I went into the house, opened *Claudius the God* and instantly fell asleep on the sofa, quite unaware that this was the very first time Anita and I wouldn't be spending the night in the same bed.

All in all, January wasn't a good month; February was worse.

I'd given up surf casting and started going out to sea with Tomaso, helping him gather his nets and fishing from his boat. I was hoping I'd have better luck in deeper water. I didn't. Late one morning I returned from one of

these expeditions and found a letter from Olga, Peindado's wife. She said that Peinado had died suddenly in his sleep. (I've always wondered what that's like, to die in your sleep. Are you dreaming you're dying and then—I don't know—stop? Or do you just keep on dreaming forever? Or are you trapped in a nightmare and reach that terrifying moment where, ordinarily, you wake up in a sweat, panting, relieved that it was just a dream, only this time you don't wake up and the nightmare goes on through all eternity? Or do you never really die in your sleep? Is the proverbial obituary entry, "died in his sleep," a euphemism for waking up and dropping dead? Which would mean Peinado was present for his own death. And what about Olga? She had to be there next to him, because you don't make it through forty years of marriage sleeping on the sofa in the living room. However it happened, it was probably fast, and I consoled myself by thinking there's this to be said for death: it puts the fear of dying behind you.)

Although we'd only known Peinado a short time, I felt like I'd lost my grandfather all over again—the one on my mother's side for whom I had a special love all through my childhood.

I'm certain Anita was just as upset by the news as I was, but by then we'd reached a point in our relationship where we couldn't even share our grief.

It was after Peinado's death that I began, unconsciously, to assume Gerd's carriage: head up, heart down. He must have detected the change in me because he soon became friendly in a more conventional way. He'd show up at the cottage to play chess two, sometimes three nights a week—often without Helga, which probably added six months onto our marriage. Frequently, we took long walks along the beach to Fuengirola, a more prosperous village where fisherman plied the waters in spacious, broad-beamed boats, some equipped with single masts and huge, billowing sails, others powered by motors. From these vessels, tipped with majestic, ornately carved mastheads, they swept the sea clean of larger fish for miles around, leaving Tomaso and our other Carvajal friends—in their ancient, rotting dinghies—little more than minnow-sized scraps.

And Gerd began talking more. Nothing intimate, nothing about his past, just the kind of stuff you'd expect from him—how he hated the way the Spanish treated animals, and he thought the English were snobby, but their kids were charming. It wasn't much, but it was a step in the right direction.

Then, suddenly, surprisingly, I learned everything I wanted to know about Gerd all at once. It happened on one of our chess nights, which always took place at our cottage since they never invited us to theirs. Helga was with him. Gerd and I had settled down to play. (I'd begun to give him some competition, losing a mere three out of four games.) As usual, Helga was spouting and Anita was fuming when, an hour into the evening, I asked a question about Thomas Mann, a question that can only be characterized as bland, inconsequential. Gerd's response to it led to—what?—a dramatic explosion? a shocking confession? a major breakthrough? Well, yes and no. The content of what he said was certainly dramatic, and it was a major breakthrough given my ardent interest in him. Yet, it all came out so offhandedly, it couldn't in any way be considered either shocking or confessional. For a moment, I was convinced that the only reason Gerd hadn't said anything about himself until that night was because we hadn't asked!

"When I was seventeen," I said, "and a freshman in college, I was a Thomas Mann nut." Followed by: "It must be great to read him in German, huh, Gerd?" Gerd snorted and for the first time in my presence spat out a smile, a piercingly cynical smile, and grunted: "Thomas

"When I was seventeen, a freshman in college, I was a Thomas Mann nut. It must be great to read him in German, huh, Gerd?"

Mann? When I was seventeen I wasn't reading Thomas Mann."

"Oh? How's that?" Don't ask me why, but I'd assumed Gerd was well-educated, a guy who loved books.

"Because members of the Hitler Youth weren't encouraged to read the books they burned," he said with that long, weary shrug of his.

Shock? Stunned silence? A deafening lull in the conversation? Take your pick. They all describe our response to this blunt, prosaic, utterly stunning revelation—and that includes Helga. I glanced over at her. She looked as though she'd just been told she was going to have open heart surgery without an anesthetic.

"Ah… interesting," I said after what seemed like ten minutes. "So you were in the Hitler Youth." Like, no big deal; Germany had the Hitler Youth, America has the Boy Scouts. Anita didn't even bother reacting to this prize absurdity.

"He had no choice," Helga said. For a second, she was no longer a raucous, chatty raven; she became a hawk spreading it wings protectively over her newborn chick. Gerd glared at her. The message was: I didn't ask you to defend me, so stop it. Helga obligingly returned to her babbling mode—though it was a pretty heavy babble this time.

"It was terrible for us… the firebombings… in Hamburg…. They say it was worse than the atomic bombs in Japan. We lost everything… everyone…. We had to live in the streets. We had no food. We… we ate rats! Everybody was sick, and the dying… the bodies on the street…. *Mein Gott, mein Gott,* I can't tell you how horrible it was." She covered her face with her hands and began rocking back and forth in her chair.

"Oh. So you guys knew each other during the war." I said. It was the most idiotic, irrelevant, inappropriate statement I'd ever made, but I was desperate to lighten things up. Ridiculous. I'd spent two months looking for a cat to let out of the bag and now that it had appeared, I had this urgent need to shove it back in. There was good, old fashioned Jewish guilt at work here, as in: How dare you invite these lovely Nazis into your home and allow them to feel uncomfortable.

"No, no," Helga went on. "We met after the war, at a camp."

"I thought 'camp' was reserved for Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals and other undesirables," Anita said. I cringed. Anita was born a High Episcopalian related to such heavyweights as Benjamin Franklin and Alexander Hamilton on her father's side and the pre-colonial divine, Jonathan Edwards, on her mother's side. With bloodlines like hers, you don't worry much whether your Nazi friends are ill-at-ease under your roof. Besides, Anita had tolerated Helga's monologues long enough; she wasn't about to defuse the situation now that she had something to dig her teeth into.

"A refugee camp," Helga replied, staring at her shoes. "We were displaced persons when the war ended, so that's where they put us. We tried to emigrate to America, but—" She stopped.

I was thinking, why not? We took in lots of Nazis after the war. Too bad Gerd wasn't a rocket scientist, he'd have gotten in for sure.

"—But I had tuberculosis," Gerd said. "And that disqualified us."

"Being a Nazi wasn't enough?" Anita asked. The woman wouldn't let up and now I started shooting her dirty looks. I mean, c'mon, let me handle this; I'm the Jew in the crowd.

"Apparently that didn't matter…." Gerd said. There was nothing apologetic in his voice, just profound sadness—but, if not for having been a Nazi, for what then?

I decided, fuck it, I'll take the direct route. Sure I like the guy, he moves me, but pretty soon we'd be leaving Spain and I'll probably never see him again. I had nothing to lose. And, of course, my greedy curiosity had only been partially satisfied.

"Gerd, tell us what happened," I said, softly, sincerely. He studied me for a long moment, then told us the following:

"I was born in the Sudetenland, an area given to Czechoslovakia after World War I. We Sudeten Germans were a hated minority and the Czechs treated us…well…like what you would expect. When Hitler annexed the region, we all greeted him as a great liberator. Of course, I joined the Hitler Youth. I was a patriot. By the time the war started, I was a lieutenant in the Wermacht. For anyone who cares to make the distinction, we were the elite fighting arm of the German Army; we were soldiers, not those hideous thugs. I fought the whole war on the Russian front. A Panzer unit. Twice I was among a half dozen men to come back from an engagement. At Stalingrad, the beginning of the end for us, I was the only survivor in my section. Even our general had been killed. Later, like so many soldiers, when we saw that we were finished, we raced to the West. None of us wanted be captured by the Russians. When I learned about what we had done, I cursed God that I hadn't been killed in battle. In 1949, Helga and I left Germany for good."

Then he got up and left.

I'm sure Helga knew about the atrocities, but was saved by her talent for rationalizing the ugly parts of life. Gerd really didn't know what happened, but assumed responsibility nonetheless and paid the price: He was broken, irreversibly and everlastingly, a man who would never mend. And I will always believe that other than Helga and some U.S. Army interrogators, he had never told anyone the story he told us that night in Carvajal.

Two days later, Anita and I were startled out of our sleep (she in the bedroom, I on the sofa) by a harrowing scream. Along with our neighbors, we rushed to its source, Gerd and Helga's cottage. Helga had staggered onto the beach, howling, arms outstretched, spinning in ever-tightening circles until she collapsed to the sand sobbing. We found Gerd in the cottage, a rope around his neck, dangling from a beam. We cut him down and laid him out on the floor. For the first time, Gerd was neither stooped, hunched nor hiding within himself. In fact, he seemed quite peaceful.

PETER MEYERSON

Spent a decade or so in magazine and book publishing in New York, putting in four years as a writer and editor at Time Life Books. After freelancing in Europe for a couple of years, he moved to Los Angeles and worked in television and films. He is currently working on a novel.

The Central Mechanism

JIM COWAN

Who's to say that if a challenging truth were revealed to us, we'd deal with it any better than those who came before?

THIS IS NOT A SCIENCE FICTION STORY. It's not any kind of story. It's a proof, and when you get to the end you'll see what I mean.

But let's get started. I'm simply going to write down some things that really happened to me. What's more, I'll tell you what I found on a hard drive at the computer recycling center, some science that makes the Copernican revolution look like a PTA meeting. There's love, hate and death in all this too. When I've finished, you'll see there's no other way for me to get these ideas into your head except to pass the whole thing off as a story. But it's not.

Anyway, here goes.

Last Sunday morning I'd slept late after a heavy Saturday night at Trino's. Someone I'd really respected had died last week, pointlessly; I was angry at everything, and I'd drunk even more than usual. Around noon on Sunday I was on my way to the computer recycling center, driving on the four-lane, farting from last night's beer all the way up the hill to where there's the big church at the top, First Church of Something, with one of those signs where the pastor changes the message every week.

So I'm coming up to the top of the hill and there in the middle of the road is this old geezer—thin, frail, bent over with his back to me—placing traffic cones to close off one lane so all the fundamentalists can get out of the church parking lot and home to their Sunday lunch without having to wait for us atheists to pass by.

I shift down a gear and gun the engine, because these cones make me think about the separation of church and state. The road is state property, right? And I'm a veteran, a guy who was willing to put his life on the line to defend the Constitution, right?

4500 rpm.

Now you've gotta understand that a CJ-5 like mine's a real Jeep, not one of these Wranglers that Chrysler passes off as Jeeps today. The old CJ-5's are heavier, more powerful, and mine's got a bikini top to keep the sun off my head because there's nothing worse than a bad sunburn on a bald head. The top's all I need because it's warm year-round down here and you really don't need doors or anything, especially when you're driving an '82 like mine with its torn seats and more mud than carpet on the floor and only a bunch of wires where the radio used to be. The radio got stolen when I was in Atlanta once. There's not much crime around here, unless you count the fight that broke out when a handful of gays and lesbians tried to march in the July 4th parade after the Gulf War and the local patriots in the crowd waded in, threw some punches and stole their flag.

Anyway, as I get closer to the church and the old geezer I see that this week the church sign says: *Read the Bible: Prevent Truth Decay,* and that made me even madder because revelation's not the way to truth and no one had said that better than the man who'd just died.

I guess I should make things clear right now. I don't like the fundamentalists. The fundamentalist crap that passes for Christianity round here—*faith's the only way to get to heaven,* that sort of thing—is what I don't like. Good works don't count in the Bible Belt. Only faith matters, and I don't like that because faith's the enemy of reason.

As I get closer to the church and the old geezer I see that this week the church sign says: *Read the Bible: Prevent Truth Decay.*

I shifted down another gear. The needle on the tach jerked up toward the red line.

5500 rpm.

Faith means you have to believe stuff no normal person would ever believe. Believing two and two make four isn't faith because two and two do make four. Faith's believing two and two make five, which is impossible to believe unless you put your brain in a vat of liquid nitrogen and leave it at the U-Store-U-Lock-U-Keep-the-Key out by the Interstate. Of course, that's why faith's such a big thing. If religious stuff was based on reason there'd be no room for faith, and a lot of people would have to get real jobs.

The old geezer puts down the last cone and straightens up. I hit the gas.

6200 rpm.

The reason I don't like the fundamentalists is that when I was a kid and Mom and me had nothing to eat in the house, all the faith in all the churches in town wasn't much use to us, but a little charity, say a few good works in the shape of some canned goods, sure would have been nice. That's what I mean about faith and good works, and I learned that from my mom when she stood looking at our empty pantry. That was before she got her bookkeeping job at the Chevy dealership. She's been there more than twenty years—now ain't that something?

But back to Sunday morning. You've got the picture? The old geezer's closed off one lane with his traffic cones. I'm doing thirty-five, forty, and the tach's red-lined for sure. Then I hit the horn, swerve a little, and take out all the cones, ker-chunk, thwack, ker-chunk, thwack, every last one of 'em, and I almost take out the old geezer too. I hear his yell above the roar of the motor. Nice Doppler shift as I pass real close to him. Very satisfying.

And when I looked back in the rearview mirror he'd made it to the sidewalk and was standing there clutching at his chest with one hand and shaking his fist at me. I knew he couldn't get my tag number because I do a little off-road driving in the mountains and the mud, and I never, ever, wash the Jeep.

A white-haired guy ran out of the church parking lot to help him. I only caught a glimpse but right away I recognized Mr. White Hair because I'd taken a seminar from him—Humanities for Scientists—compulsory for all us nerds. Mr. White-Hair was Professor William Allan, Dean of Arts and Science at South Tennessee State which is where I go to school.

I wasn't surprised to see him. Allan's a deacon or something at that church.

At school he's a rigid tyrant, humiliating students and so on. He's so mean that someone started a malicious rumor that he's gay. That was probably a student he'd flunked, but it could've been someone on the faculty because Allan's made enemies there too, not least because he's chair of the school's Publications Committee. Or maybe it was just some guy he'd slept with. *(Snicker.)*

Sorry about the *snicker.* I usually write e-mail, not literature. Which reminds me that before we get started with the real stuff I should tell you a little about me, in case you get the idea that I'm some kind of a nut. My name is Carl Edwards and I'm twenty-five years old, a graduate of our own Davy Crockett High School and the U.S. Army. Don't ask about the Army—that was only so I'd have the money to go to school, which I got, and now I'm a computer science major right here at STSU.

Let me tell you a little more about my good side, so you understand I'm not just a guy whose idea of a good time is to flatten traffic cones on a Sunday morning. You know about SETI? The Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence? Radio telescopes scanning the sky, looking for signals from alien civilizations? Frank Drake started it years ago, using the big radio telescope at Green Bank, West Virginia, and now lots of people have tried. No one's found a signal yet—nothing but noise from the sky.

One problem is there's a lot of sky. Another is no one knows what frequency aliens might choose to transmit to us. So there's a lot of sky and a lot of bandwidth to cover, but the biggest problem is that there's no funding.

SETI's expensive. A state-of-the-art search would cost about as much as, say, one attack helicopter. In other words, it's not *that* expensive. The problem's that most people, especially people in control, don't want to hear about nonhuman intelligence. It might be more intelligent than them and that's threatening, and then there's quite a few fundamentalists in Congress who say there's no point in looking because the Bible doesn't mention life anywhere else except on Earth and the Bible can't be wrong. At least that's what Dean Professor William Allan told us in his seminar right after the big debate last year on creation science and evolution.

Anyway, the point is there's a lot of data to analyze, billions and billions, so to speak, (except Carl Sagan never said that until after *Saturday Night Live* made fun of him for saying it) and there's no money to do the job.

This is where I fit in. I'm part of this project on the Internet where you download free software that runs on your PC as a screen saver and analyzes SETI data while your computer's doing nothing else. When you've finished your chunk of data you upload your results and download another few megabytes of signals from the skies and off you go again for a week or two. With thousands of people doing this all over the planet, you get the processing power of a supercomputer for free. Clever, huh? Anyway, I'm running this software, and I'm telling you this so you can see that I'm not some kind of a nerd. I'm a truly social being, doing my bit for the community just like everyone else.

Sure, maybe I won't be the one to find the first signal buried in the hiss of the galactic background noise. But I know, I absolutely know for sure, that sooner or later someone will.

How do I know? Well, not because little gray men landed their flying saucer outside my mom's house and came into my bedroom and performed sexual experiments on me while I was asleep. It's what I found on the hard drive. What was on that drive changes absolutely everything.

For example, it settles the church and state thing once and for all, but not in the way you'd think. I *know,* I absolutely know for sure that there's no separation between church and state.

If any fundamentalists have read this far, which I doubt: Don't you get all worked up and say, "I told you so!" I've got to warn you, you're not going to like what I'm going to tell you one tiny bit. Not only does my stuff remove you wackos from the center of the universe once and for all, it's so much more elegant, more beautiful, more complete, that there's no absolutely no doubt at all that I'm right.

Here's another fact about me, sort of a personal note so you'll see I'm a real person. I like to roll up a paper towel

or some other scratchy tissue at one corner, making something like a very thin cone, and stick it in my ear to clean out the wax. I love the way the tissue scrapes against the hairs inside my ear canal. You should try it; it feels real good so long as you don't jam the paper in too far and hit your eardrum.

So now you know everything about me and you can tell this is not a story made up by some writer, because no writer would ever think of mentioning earwax in a story about physics.

Bet you thought you'd caught me there, but that last line was just a trick. Like I said, this is not a story. But it *is* about physics. So let's get on back to Sunday.

The computer recycling center's in our dying downtown, between a pawn shop and the water-heater factory. Across the street there's a topless bar, but I don't like that sort of thing. The building's an old machine shop, a high ceiling, and ten thousand square feet of space with windows all down one side that look out over the parking lot where the men who make the water heaters park their pickup trucks.

It's a charity founded by Rose, the wife of the local-area-network supervisor at STSU. She's short, with mousy hair and a bad perm, and lips that remind me of a chimp—not that I'd tell her that to her face. She and her husband Thaddeus are members of the ACLU, Amnesty International, the Sierra Club and so on, not that they make a big thing of it. I met Thad at school and he introduced me to Rose. Like Thad, Rose's an atheist and so for Rose good works are everything. Thad's a mountain man, respectful and sharp, with a big beard, and the ability to tell truth from fiction that comes from spending a childhood in the high hills, away from civilization, and always knowing that, if civilization doesn't suit him, he can go right back to his little farm in the mountains any time he likes.

I go to the center one or two evenings a week and late on Sunday mornings. People bring in their old computers and we give them a receipt so they can take a tax deduction for a thousand dollars, which no one in their right mind would ever really pay them for their junk. We test each component—motherboard, memory chips, video card, drive controller and drives, sound card if there is one, keyboard and monitor if the machine came in with them. We strip out whatever's broken, cannibalize other machines and stick in what we need to assemble a working computer. I learned how to do all this in the Army.

OK, so you've only got a 486-33 with 8 MB of RAM, and not a Pentium 200 with 128 MB, but to some kid who lives in the hollers out past County Line Road, or down by the brick works, a 486-33 looks pretty good when the alternative is nothing. We give a few away to organizations too, not-for-profits. All they do is word-processing and maybe run Quicken, and what we've got is fine for that and you can't beat the price.

I gave the animal shelter a real nice old laser printer last week. People don't spay and neuter here in the sticks; they think it's cruel, or against God's will or something, so the shelter puts down eight thousand strays a year by injecting the blue death into their veins. The shelter's out on Reservoir Road, on the way to the dump, and they need all the help they can get. My mom volunteers at the shelter, that's how I know this stuff. Sometimes I help her and take the dogs for a walk. They love it. They're such social animals.

Now that I think about it, so am I. What with SETI and computer recycling and scooping poop at the animal shelter, I do a lot for our society.

What with SETI and computer recycling and scooping poop at the animal shelter, I do a lot for our society.

Anyway, that Sunday morning, feeling a little better after trashing the cones, I arrive at the center and Rose says to me, "Hi Carl. STSU sent us a machine at the end of the week. Check it out. They said it's a Pentium."

As I mentioned, we got old machines, even 286s.

"Why'd anyone give us a Pentium?" I said. "Particularly the state." We almost never get anything from the state. They have strict rules about getting rid of unwanted state property.

"I dunno, honey," Rose said. "But I'd really appreciate you just checking it out for me."

I started right away because I had my own reasons for wanting to examine this surprising Pentium very, very, carefully. There wasn't any monitor or keyboard, just this case that didn't have a scratch on it. I took off the cover and yes, there was a Pentium processor on the motherboard. After plugging in a power cable, spare keyboard and the best monitor we had in the center at the time, I switched on the machine.

Turning on the computer told me that the power supply, video card, motherboard and memory were all intact. Then the machine sat there, doing nothing—I didn't even get a `C:>` prompt. Someone had deleted everything on the hard drive. Not that that's unusual on the machines we get. In fact, that's what you should do, and more, otherwise you might as well leave your filing cabinet in the street for anyone to poke around in.

That's because computers only delete a drive's File Allocation Table, or FAT, so that they can't find any deleted files—but all those files are still on the disk until

you write something else on top of them. It's like ripping the table of contents from a book and thinking you've destroyed the whole book. Lots of utilities will recreate the FAT for you, (actually there's a second copy of the FAT, so usually it's *real* easy) and then you can recover them all.

I booted DOS from a floppy and inspected the hard drive to see what was on it. Nothing. Then I stuck in another disk and ran an Undelete utility. Sure enough, there were thousands of deleted files on the hard drive, waiting to be undeleted.

"Everything OK?" Rose asked.

"I'm not sure about the hard drive," I said, stalling. "Give me a few more minutes." She had to go out to Radio Shack to get some connectors or something, and while she was out I ripped out the hard drive and stuck it in the Jeep. I installed the biggest drive I could find from our stock of drives we'd taken from otherwise useless machines, installed Windows 95 and finished the rest of the tests. The machine was in perfect condition, ready to be shipped out to some lucky person. I left a note for Rose that said the machine was OK now, that I was taking the drive home to run some more tests on it, and went home. I needed more time, and some privacy, for what I had in mind.

My room at home's real neat, just like in the army. There's a single bed and a big desk with my computer, a really fast Pentium with a huge hard drive and lots of memory. I keep everything else either in the desk drawers, or my filing cabinet, or the shelves. My clothes are in the closet at the end of the hall, next to Mom's room.

You can tell a real geek right away because the case is always off his computer. Too many screws to fiddle with when you know you'll be opening the thing up again in an hour or two to tweak something else. In five minutes I had the new drive hooked up. Then I copied the contents of the STSU drive to my own giant hard drive. Inside my computer was the soul, or at least the mind, of the other computer.

I reformatted the STSU drive to *really* destroy everything on it, and dropped it off at the center the next day and told Rose it was working fine.

Did I steal anything? If so, what? You worry about that if you want to, but while you're worrying I'm going to fill you in on a few things that happened a year ago.

Last fall the Philosophy Department sponsored a big public debate on Evolution. One of the young faculty wanted to chew up and spit out a creation scientist. Over a thousand people showed. A stage was set up at one end of the gym. There were tables and water pitchers for the speakers, that sort of thing. The rest of the gym floor was covered with chairs and there were microphones in the two aisles for the audience.

I got a seat on an aisle, close to one of the mikes. The crowd filled the bleachers too, and everything was very bright under the arc lights they use for basketball games. Actually, the whole thing was a lot like a basketball game because the audience came strictly to root for one side or the other. I doubt all the arguing changed anyone's opinion, but that's how people are. The debate was the usual stuff. The creationist's main argument, coupled with some bad science, was that evolution's not proven, it's only a theory. The philosopher moved slowly and methodically, destroying the creationist's arguments, but the whole thing was a little tedious.

There's more people from up north moving into this city, what with the high-tech corridor out by the airport and the big malls that've killed the downtown, so the crowd was pretty evenly split. We heard all about radiocarbon dating, the fossil record, and the inerrancy of the Bible, but it wasn't really a debate, just two people talking different languages: reason and faith.

Toward the end of the evening a man came up to one of the public mikes. He was in his early thirties, blond and with a very neat mustache. He had the slightly exaggerated features of a movie star, but everything was just a little crooked, so while he was no use to Hollywood, he did have a peculiar charm that was good enough for the real world.

"I'm a scientist," the man said. "In science, all knowledge is tentative. Everything is a theory until a better idea comes along. Then we use the better idea. So by definition we're skeptics and we agree with the creationists when they say the theory of evolution will be history when someone comes up with something better. But I have a question for those who believe in creation. If something better came along, would you agree that creationism is wrong? In other words, are you willing, at least in theory, to change your beliefs?"

Of course, that was the end of their masquerade as scientists. He had them, and the audience knew it. The fundamentalists were real quiet while the rest of us laughed and then cheered. Some other people from the audience had to have their say on one side or the other, but really the evening was over after this man asked his rhetorical question. I asked the coed sitting next to me who he was. "Tom Thomas, from the Department of Physics. Isn't he cute?" He was, and I decided on the spot to sign up for one of his classes after Christmas.

On the way out I passed Dean Allan talking to the comptroller, Stott, a thin man, a fundamentalist, who did a lot of Allan's dirty work for him around the campus. That's how Allan exercised a lot of his power, through the budget process. Allan was saying, "Before I believe in evolution, Our Lord Jesus Christ will have to come down from Heaven Himself and tell me the Bible is wrong."

Stott nodded sympathetically. Allan knew a lot of the state Regents who make all the senior administrative appointments in the state schools and Stott knew that Allan knew the Regents and that's why Stott… well, you and I know that's how things work.

As for Jesus telling Allan the Bible was wrong, well, it could happen, I thought to myself, and hoped I would be there to see Allan's face when it did. I said nothing of course, just smirked in the darkness on my way to the Jeep. If I was testifying in court and you asked me to describe Allan's mood that night, I would say he was very, very angry. Why? Because the night's rout of the creationists had been allowed to happen on his turf.

But then, he was an angry man. Anyone who's the deacon of a church that sponsors a hell-house on Halloween and shows kids a coffin with a body inside it that's supposed to be a gay man who died of AIDS ain't filled with charity. Someone told me Allan said that Christianity wasn't about tolerance, it was about sin, and the Bible said homosexuality was perverse, wrong.

Did you know that the first Halloween hell-house was in Roswell, New Mexico? Right where that UFO was supposed to have crashed in 1947. Does that mean anything? I don't think so, but I'm always on the lookout for coincidences.

No matter. I registered for Tom Thomas's most popular class: Overview of Twentieth-Century Physics for Non-Physicists. It was held in a sterile room with painted gray cinder block walls and a wall-to-wall blackboard at the front. Tom strode back and forth, tossing a piece of chalk in his hand. He wore chinos and a gray turtleneck and he moved his trim body in way that suggested he was fit and well-muscled.

"There's physics," he said, "and then there's the rest of science."

Physics was all about matter and energy, space and time, the stuff from which the universe is made. Chemistry, biology and so on were all derived from the principles of physics. Understand physics and you could compute the rest of science, at least in theory, and if you believed that mind was nothing more than a manifestation of certain complex arrangements of matter such as the human brain then you could explain everything, if only you knew your physics. Of course, it might take a few billion years to derive, say, the total subjective experience of a Rolling Stones concert from first principles of quantum mechanics and general relativity, but the class got the idea.

The problem, as Tom explained in that first class, was that physics was obviously incomplete, which is a nice way to say that current knowledge is not quite right. The two great theories of the twentieth century—quantum mechanics and general relativity—were contradictory and, especially in the case of quantum mechanics, incomprehensible. Quantum mechanics works, but what does it mean? Energy is a wave that spreads to fill the whole universe—or it's a particle confined to a tiny region of space. Which one it is depends on the experiment you choose to do. An electron may or may not be in a particular place. It's not anywhere until you do an experiment and find it. And when you find it, you might instantaneously affect another electron at the other end of the galaxy.

He taught physics as if he was a poet, which he was. He was a poet of science, and I loved him for it.

The most tested theory in the history of science, correct to ten decimal places, reduces the world to a series of random events that require a conscious observer to know what really happened and seem to be linked instantaneously to other events somewhere else.

Tom ended the class with a quotation from the physicist Wigner: "It is not possible to formulate the laws of quantum mechanics without reference to the consciousness…. The very study of the external world led to the conclusion that the content of the consciousness is the ultimate reality." At the time, I didn't pick up on Tom's burning interest in this last phrase.

Later, Tom talked about the other great enigma of twentieth century physics, the appearance of order in the universe. Chaos gives rise to simple systems and simple systems engender more complex systems. "While you're walking down to your local bar on a starry night, look up at the sky and wonder. You're looking back in time, to when the universe was nothing but clouds of hot gas, and when you get to the bar, go inside and look around." He laughed. "You might think you've moved from order to chaos, but you've just seen how the universe has evolved from the random movements of atoms in ancient clouds of gas into wonderful, intricate life. It's moved from blind chaos to beautiful complexity." He taught physics as if he was a poet, which he was. He was a poet of science, and I loved him for it.

Trino's. That's where I really got to know Tom Thomas. In a bar. I'm not talking about the topless bar across from the recycling center, I'm talking about *our* bar. Straights ignore Trino's. Trino's is where the gay community struggled with what to do about AIDS in the early eighties, where they planned the Great July 4th Parade-In of 1991, where they went to drink after the big fight over the flag. Trino's is the one place in town where we can be

ourselves. Not that it's a leather bar or anything like the bars they have in Atlanta; it's just an ordinary neighborhood bar except the people in there are gay and lesbian.

Anyway, that's where I really got to know Tom, and now he's dead, hit-and-run in the early morning while he was out running on a country road. A random event, atoms banging together in a primeval cloud of gas.

I didn't have class on Monday afternoons that semester, so I spent the afternoon in my room, examining the contents of the hard drive. There were twenty thousand files on the drive, a lot of stuff, but most of it was routine—word-processor files, calculations and graphs, letters, papers, quizzes and tests, the sort of thing any professor has on their drive, archives of articles from the online versions of Physical Reviews, and several folders crammed with shareware utilities that claim to make work easier but in most cases aren't really necessary. And there were two folders that turned out to be very important. One was named PGP and the other QC.

PGP first. I knew what was in there, of course. Pretty Good Privacy is an encryption program written by a guy called Phil Zimmerman who arranged to have it made available for free on the Internet and the Feds threatened to prosecute him for exporting munitions. So you get the idea—it's a dynamite piece of software. That's all you need to know about how well this program works, but if you're a geek like me, then you'll want to know exactly how it does work.

The basic idea's simple. Get a very large prime number, multiply it by another very large prime number and you get a very, very large number that has only two factors. You can use these three numbers to create two related keys for encrypting messages. You make one key public and tell everyone to use it when they send you e-mail, and you keep the other key very, very secret because that is the only way anyone can decrypt messages encrypted with the public key. This is important—you can't decrypt messages with the public key, only the private key. If you make the keys large enough, there isn't enough computing power on the whole planet to break the code because the only way to find the factors of a very, very large number, I mean one with thousands of digits, is to do billions and billions of divisions, which would take years, decades, or even centuries. So PGP isn't unbreakable; it's actually easy to see how to break it, but breaking it takes an impossibly long time.

Now imagine this in the hands of terrorists. That's why PGP looked like a munition to the government. Of course, the mathematics was available to anyone. Anyone, anywhere, could have cobbled together some code and do what Phil Zimmerman did. Once an idea's out there, it's out there. But more later of the idea that ideas that are out there have a life of their own. Now back to Tom.

In class Tom mentioned the importance of consciousness in physics, but it was in Trino's that he explained to me just why, in Wigner's words, "The content of consciousness is the ultimate reality."

As usual, he began with a story.

"Once, when I was a graduate student in New York," he said, "I was invited to a party to celebrate a christening in an Italian family. It was a wet Sunday in November and the party was a big one in a big house on Long Island. In addition to the baby, who played a very small role in the party, there was a pianist, a student from Juliard, who played the piano in a room at one end of the house with lots of windows that looked over the garden. He played all through the party, effortlessly. After an hour or so, and few glasses of wine, the men in the family gathered round the piano and started to sing. They sang to celebrate the baby and their family, and as an affirmation that they were alive. They sang alone and they sang together, they sang Italian folk songs and operatic arias in Italian and Spanish about pretty girls and love and longing and sadness and joy. It was a celebration of their past and a recognition of the uncertainty and the promise of the future. I sat by one of the tall windows and the men's voices filled the seamless space around me and inside me and I thought about quantum mechanics."

I must have laughed because he said, "That's not as ridiculous as it sounds. At moments like that, which are the most wonderful moments of life, there is an overwhelming sense of belonging, of oneness, of wholeness, and these are glimpses of the ultimate underlying reality. There are tantalizing hints of that unity in quantum mechanics. For instance, Bells' Theorem describes a fundamentally new kind of togetherness, undiminished by spatial or temporal separation, a mingling of distant things, a mingling that reaches instantly across the galaxy as forcefully as it reaches across a sodden garden or across a room. The mathematics is such that, even when we replace quantum mechanics with a deeper understanding of reality, Bells' supraluminal non-local reality will survive because this is truly the way things are." This was the first time I realized that Tom was working on something to replace quantum mechanics, the theory that was almost right.

"In quantum mechanics, there is no reality until reality is measured by someone. The idea that there's nothing there until an intelligent ape from a small planet at the edge of one of ten trillion galaxies makes a measurement is a foolish idea. Someone or something else is watching, observing, making measurements all the time. That's why there's a reality in the first place."

Abruptly, he changed focus. "In San Francisco, the cable cars are pulled up and down the hills by cables that run in a slot under the street. The machinery to drive all

the cables is in a single building called the Cable Car Barn. You can go there and look down on the machinery from the tourist balcony. You see motors and huge pulleys, cables are sliding through the air, the place smells of oil and ozone, and the loud hum of the mechanism tells you that everything's working perfectly, that miles away the cars are climbing California Street or rattling down to Ghirardelli Square.

"But the universe is not like the Cable Car Barn. John Wheeler, who was a physicist with a remarkable imagination, said that there is no such thing as the glittering central mechanism of the universe to be seen behind a glass wall. 'Not machinery, but magic, may be the treasure that is waiting.' Well, Carl, I intend to find that central magical mechanism."

That's when he told me he'd already written a paper, a speculative essay, on the role of consciousness in science. This paper was the real start of the conflict with Dean Allan, chair of the university's Publications Committee.

Tom's basic idea was simple. Quantum mechanics has no meaning without a conscious observer; in general relativity each conscious observer interprets time and space differently. The universe is moving from chaos to complexity, from matter to mind, and mind is an essential part of the two great theories of physics. That was his first point.

He pointed out next that truth and beauty seem to have a life of their own in the two worlds of science and of art. Both truth and beauty are intrinsic, and essential, to the human experience, but science has nothing formal to say about beauty and art has nothing formal to say about truth, although science is beautiful and the best art is truthful.

Finally, he said, scientists—biologists, physicists, philosophers—were all skirting around the issue of consciousness. They wanted to deal with its central role but couldn't address it because they had no clear hypothesis to test, no research agenda to pursue. Tom wanted to propose a hypothesis that would link physics and biology and philosophy and everything else. Here's his argument:

The universe is made of quanta of matter/energy and space/time. That's all there is. Tiny bits of inanimate stuff. And a couple of force fields—gravity and another field that may be a combination of electromagnetism and some other forces that work within the nucleus. "Here we are, squishy molecular machinery made of atoms that are themselves merely twists in the fabric of space-time; we're assembled and fuelled by the energy of sunlight, which is rain of massless photons; and from the ground we stand on comes a tide of neutrinos that has swept through the earth as if it didn't exist. Out of this flux of nothingness comes the realization that, say, $E = mc^2$, and this knowledge is beautiful. Where does this thought come from? There has to be more to this than random torrents of energy surging pointlessly through space and time.

"Our theories are wrong," said Tom. "Incomplete because our assumptions are incomplete. There is more to the basic stuff of the universe that matter/energy and space/time and a couple of forces. Each quantum of stuff has more than mass/energy and location/momentum, it also has a quantum of consciousness." This simple idea, which Tom called his Theory of Quantum Consciousness, cast a lot of problems in a new light.

Right away, you're probably thinking this is a load of bull, but bear with me. You're going to see that this idea is not as dumb as it sounds.

"But the universe is not like the Cable Car Barn. John Wheeler said there is no such thing as the glittering central mechanism of the universe. 'Not machinery, but magic, may be the treasure that is waiting.' "

First of all, quanta of consciousness, like quanta of matter, energy, electrical charge and magnetism, are so small that you don't notice them on a daily basis. You're totally unaware of the single charge on an electron, but when you're hit by lightning, the charge on a few trillion electrons gets your attention.

So the quantum of consciousness associated with every elementary particle is way too small to notice. But these quanta combine in subtle ways and Tom proposed some properties that characterized the combination of quanta of consciousness. Here's the whole proposition as he might have scribbled it on the back of an envelope at Trino's:

- There is a quantum of consciousness associated with every quantum particle in the universe.
- The existence of the action of quantum consciousness between two elementary particles is independent of the distance between the particles.
- The strength of the action of quantum consciousness in a system is proportional to the number of connections between the quantum elements of that system (actually, it's proportional to the factorial of this number, which when you're talking about neurons in a mammalian brain quickly gets to be a really big number), and inversely proportional to the geometric mean of the distance between the particles.
- The sum of consciousness in the universe increases with time.

The first axiom sets the stage, and later Tom showed how this assumption solved the observer problem in quantum mechanics. Simply put, there's no need for an experimental observer because the universe is observing itself all the time. The second addresses the non-local nature of reality required by Bell's Theorem. The third explains why a rock about the size of your fist, which has about the same number of atoms as say the brain of a dog, appears to be dead while the dog is obviously alive, intelligent, and conscious. The atoms in the rock are arranged in a regular, repetitive crystalline structure, while the atoms in a dog's brain are arranged into intricate cells called neurons which are themselves arranged in an extremely complex interconnected array. The rock is conscious, but not noticeably so, and certainly much less so than the dog.

For the same reason the Earth and its biosphere, which are certainly intricate mechanisms, are conscious, but not as obviously conscious as a dog. Quantum consciousness falls off with distance (third axiom) and the Earth is not connected enough, yet, for an object that big to demonstrate consciousness to the only detector we have at the moment, which is the human brain.

The fourth axiom, which parallels the Second Law of Thermodynamics but in a less depressing way, explains why the universe is evolving from the chaotic motion of hot gas after the Big Bang into galaxies, stars, planets, and ever more complex forms of life. Consciousness is not conserved, like matter or energy. No, consciousness increases over time, like entropy. In other words, quantum consciousness is the life-force in the universe.

Now if you have any understanding of the minds of people who are heavily invested in organized religion, you will see that these ideas are very threatening.

The first axiom is a statement of pantheism. Every thing in the universe is more than a dead piece of matter; every atom, every quantum particle, has some small element of mind. Aquinas' separation of body and soul, of the world and spirit, and science's parallel separation of matter and mind, are all eliminated. There is no division between Earth and Heaven. There is no meaningful separation of church and state.

The third axiom places all objects on a continuum of being. Some are more complex, more intricate, more conscious than others, but they are not different kinds of things, they are different only in degree. We are all part of the same seamless stuff. So much for prejudice based on species, race, gender, sexual orientation, so much for the exploitation of animals and the non-animal natural world, and so on. The special place Judeo-Christianity claims for humans is eliminated by this third axiom.

The last axiom brings purpose to the universe and it also subsumes morality and aesthetics into physics. This purpose and morality is not laid on the universe from Heaven or somewhere, the purpose of the universe is embedded in the material of the universe. All you need to know is right here, right now. You just need to pay close attention to the universe and work hard to figure out exactly what you should do.

For example, killing is wrong because it reduces the total consciousness in the universe, and killing an intelligent being is more wrong than killing a cabbage, which is probably necessary in the big scheme of things, but in practice there is no absolute good, just this tension between different choices. That's why life's not easy.

Diversity is good because it promotes complexity, which in turn increases the total consciousness, but some organization is needed to get anything done. That's why nature's organized life into species instead of billions of unrelated creatures. In the same vein, morality's no longer a matter of debate. At least in principle, morality can be derived from the four axioms of quantum consciousness. (Don't get excited—this is about as difficult as deriving the total experience of a Rolling Stones concert from quantum mechanics.)

Quantum Consciousness links physics to the biological sciences, the humanities, and all human activity. Suddenly, we find ourselves living in a universe governed by a set of rules that work to arrange and rearrange mind and matter into ever-more complex, intricate mental and physical structures.

Now this is not the kind of stuff Dean William Allan wanted to hear and he used his position as Chair of the Publications Committee to make sure that Tom's heretical ideas would never see the light of day.

Perhaps I should explain why STSU has a Publications Committee that can prevent faculty from publishing. STSU's a small school and some of the faculty are, well, marginal. Some are really good, like Tom, some are bright enough but perhaps a little crazy, and others are plain dumb. The school had been embarrassed on several occasions by articles that caused merriment and even ridicule in regional or national academic circles, and after this had happened three or four times the president decided enough was enough, to hell with academic freedom, and set up the Publications Committee with Dean Allan in the chair and instructed the committee to make sure that nothing went out of the university unless it was of academic merit according to this internal process of peer review.

Allan was a powerful man, well-connected in Nashville and a close friend of our Neanderthal Congressman, a friendship that effectively neutered the president of the university.

Big bucks flowed to the school as a result of Allan's relationships and Allan, working through Stott, con-

trolled the flow of those dollars inside the school. The younger, untenured faculty feared Allan because he could destroy their careers, and the most of the tenured profs kept out of his way because, as someone said, "Does Allan work for the university, or does the university work for Allan?"

To be fair, Allan did a good job for the school, bringing in the money for buildings, new programs, and that most valuable commodity for politicians: jobs. Anyway, you get the picture. Dean Allan loved his role as the Torquemada of STSU's academic inquisition and, like Torquemada, Allan thought his work was for a greater good, so I suppose he isn't evil, just horribly wrong.

Before the committee met, Tom told Allan he was trying to reveal the spirit in the world. "I thought he would like that, but he wasn't impressed."

The committee was not impressed either when Tom explained, "I'm trying to bridge the gap between mind and spirit."

We heard later the discussion was perfunctory after Tom left the room. They nixed the paper on the superficially reasonable grounds that it was pure speculation and contained absolutely no data at all.

Tom was stopped in his tracks at this point, but still optimistic. "I'm already working on the mathematics of the theory. In a few months I should have a rigorous formulation of the four principles and then I'll be able to propose some experimental verifications. With a little luck, I'll even have some experimental evidence myself. I may be able to test the basic ideas with the equipment we have here."

So, like Galileo, Tom was accused of heresy and told to cease and desist and placed under the modern academic equivalent of house arrest.

Allan was no fool. He knew that Tom's paper was dynamite. I heard on the grapevine that he described Tom's theory as "a heresy worthy of the Anti-Christ" and what with the millennium coming up, he probably really believed that Tom was in the grip of supernatural forces. So Allan's job as a state employee, and as a self-appointed employee of God, was to stop Tom.

Despite the Publications Committee's embargo, Tom did get some feedback from the physics community. Physicists have been wired for longer than almost anyone else and they share their work online as what they call "preprints," draft papers posted on bulletin boards coordinated out of the Los Alamos National Laboratory and mirrored at several other academic sites. Other scientists comment on the preprint and help the authors refine their work. If you're interested, you can find preprints at places like <*http://npl.kyy.nitech.ac.jp/prepserv.html*>.

Tom discussed the preprint idea with me. "It's not real publication," he said.

I agreed. "Sort of a discussion with colleagues, refining your work. The Publications Committee didn't say you couldn't discuss your work with a few other professional physicists."

"Exactly." So he posted a preprint. The response was overwhelming, and very similar to Dean Allan's comment. "Speculation unsupported by even a quantum of data," was one of the nicer comments Tom got in his e-mail.

"I was too material for Dean Allan and now I'm too spiritual for the physicists. This means I must be right," he joked. He knew he was bridging the void between heaven and earth, crossing the line between mind and matter, and that no one really understood what he was trying to do.

E-mail on the state's network belongs to the state. Whoever owns the system owns the mail. There's no privacy. That's the law.

It was the e-mail that tipped Allan off that Tom had posted his paper in an obscure corner of the Internet. The Dean said he'd found the preprint on the Net himself, but we didn't believe him. I suppose he could have searched the Net for Tom's name but when I asked Thad, "Has the Dean been reading faculty e-mail?" Thad told me, "E-mail on the state's network belongs to the state. Whoever owns the system owns the mail. There's no privacy. That's the law. Not that the ACLU agrees with it." Thad's a very honest person, and he answered my question without betraying his employer's confidence. I like Thad.

Tom was called in and given a written warning that any future breaches of the university's policies on publication would result in dismissal.

So his work was rejected at both ends of the spectrum, by the religious right and by the supposedly dispassionate scientific community. "I'm certainly scaring people," was his laconic comment after the break-in at his office. "Who said that science advances funeral by funeral?"

I didn't know, but whoever it was, was right. "You'll just have to wait until all the crusty old men with gravy on their ties die off." But Tom wouldn't wait.

The break-in was the reason that Tom was using PGP, that and the discovery that the Dean was reading Tom's e-mail. Nothing was stolen from the office, but Tom knew someone had turned on his computer at three in the morning because he had a shareware program running in the background that logged his activity on the machine, and in the log were thirty minutes of use when Tom knew, and I knew, he wasn't at work because we were in bed

together in his apartment. So he downloaded the shareware version of PGP and encrypted his work on Quantum Consciousness. His public key was stored on a server on the Internet. Most people store their private keys on their own computer because PGP's really meant to encrypt messages on a network so people who intercept a message on the network can't read it. Tom told me he wasn't going to keep his private key on his machine because his problem was not interception on a network, it was illicit access to his machine. Anyone who turned on the machine would be able to get his private key. "I'm going to keep it on floppy and take it home with me at night."

His work was in the QC folder of course, and this was what I was looking for as soon as the Pentium came into the center.

I couldn't follow the mathematics of what he was doing. In fact, he never even showed me the math because I wouldn't have understood it, and he had invented some of it himself anyway, but I can give you an outline.

Einstein asked himself the question, "What would things look like if I was riding on a beam of light?" and from this question developed his special relativity description of gravitation. Special relativity completely subsumed Newton's three-hundred year-old explanation of the motion of the moon even though Einstein started from a totally different premise from Newton and his apple.

In the same way, Tom was starting from an idea of such breathtaking novelty that it's hard to talk about it clearly. Nevertheless, he developed a mathematical model of his ideas.

Last Wednesday, less than a week ago, he came into Trino's and sat down across the table and said, "It works!" What he meant was that he had been able to formulate Quantum Consciousness in mathematics and from the mathematics he could derive the equations of Quantum Mechanics and of General Relativity. "If the math holds up to scrutiny then this is Wheeler's glittering central mechanism, and he was right—it's not machinery, it's magic. It breathes life into the universe, this is the fire hidden in the equations, this is spirit moving on the waters."

Along the way, he told me, he'd had to invent what he called "some novel mathematics." Then he started talking about how the universe was evolving. "With every particle tingling with its tiny charge of consciousness, destined to play a role in the evolution of the universe, no matter what we do, no matter how evil we are, in the end we cannot oppose the relentless, universal force that is transforming mere matter into mind. Yes, we have free will and we can to choose to work with the universe or against it, and evil actions will slow down the transformation of matter into mind, but we cannot stop the process nor prevent the final outcome. In the end, when the universe is complete, it will understand itself perfectly."

"Mmm," I said, struggling with ideas about perfect understanding and God, and about some heresy I'd heard in which God himself is evolving, and so is his understanding of creation. That's if you believe in God, which I don't. But Tom was rattling on.

"Now here's a fascinating thing that's fallen out of the math. The speed of time is inversely proportional to the total consciousness in the universe. That's why the Big Bang was a big bang—there was no matter and therefore no consciousness in the beginning. At the instant of creation, time ran infinitely quickly. As soon as energy and matter and their associated quanta of consciousness appeared, time began to slow but it was still running very quickly, which is why the universe expanded remarkably in the first few milliseconds, seconds, minutes and years of its existence. Now things are much more stable, as if consciousness is a stabilizing force, adding an inertia to the unfolding of the universe. If my math is right, this temporal inertia created by consciousness means that the universe will never end, but will get closer and closer to a state in which every quantum particle in the universe is linked in an essentially infinite number of quantum conscious ways to every other particle. The closer the universe is to this state, the slower time will run, so we'll never get there."

"Like the speed of light," I said. "You can never reach it because your mass increases the closer you get."

"Exactly so, but not surprising because you can derive relativity from quantum consciousness so it's not surprising that relativity contains elements of quantum consciousness. I like that, but what's important is that now I have a theory that makes predictions that can be tested. For instance, Hubble's constant, which is a measure of the rate of expansion of the universe, can be derived from TQC. Not by me—my astrophysics is nowhere near good enough—but someone should be able to do it. The important thing is that this theory can be tested against observations."

"Unlike creationism," I said.

"Sure. What's more, I may be able to derive the value of some basic physical constants, like the speed of light and the charge on an electron, from first principles. That's never been done. It's sort of a Holy Grail of physics."

Even I knew that any success along these lines was a Nobel Prize for sure.

"There's something else coming out of the math," he said. "There's a quantity which represents the relationship between the total consciousness of a system and the material state of the system. This quantity corresponds to truth, or beauty, or perhaps to other concepts we haven't even thought of yet."

Now this is what any thinking person knows intuitively. Beauty and truth are two sides of the same thing and both speak about the relationship between the world of ideas and the world of matter. His work was starting to expose the workings of that relationship. In a weird way, the theory referred to itself; the more beautiful its equations, the more likely they were to be true.

Now all this doesn't mean that you can write a Shakespeare play starting from the math of quantum consciousness any more than you can predict a World Series starting from Newton's Laws of Motion. It's possible in theory, but doing the math would take to the end of time, so it's a lot easier to just play the games and see who wins. The easiest way to write a Shakespeare play is to let Shakespeare do it.

Of course, he wanted more than mathematical proofs and he was sketching the principles of what he called a transducer. "In the Middle Ages you could hope to work wonders if you had a splinter from the True Cross," he said. "If you'd told the average medieval peasant that you could work wonders with a computer chip, which is piece of silicon about the size of your thumbnail, something made from sand, you'd have been burnt at the stake as a witch. So the transducer, which is a device that transforms quantum consciousness effects into the fundamental forces of physics, makes QC effects measurable in the lab. It will be as surprising, and at first as incomprehensible, to us as the idea of spinning sand into wonderful things would be to a serf."

I didn't even get a hint of how this surprising transducer might work because he was too excited and rattled on, saying, "Anyway, the paper's finished. The math's correct. It's publishable by any standard. I'd take it to Allan today but he's off campus at some religious meeting out of town, back at work on Monday. I can wait. There's no way he can stop me now. The math is consistent. Once the experimentalists get their hands on it there'll be verification within days, maybe hours after I post the preprint. But I want him either to say no and be known forever as the man who tried to stop publication of the most important scientific paper ever, or to watch him say yes, knowing that he's saying yes to the end of his world."

That was the last time I saw Tom, but not the last time I talked with him. He left for Atlanta that night. He was going to talk to a national convention of high school physics teachers, something about teaching physics to make it interesting. He called me the next evening from Atlanta, very excited.

"Guess who I met here," he said.

"Who?"

"Allan. I saw him at the Backstreet."

Now the Backstreet, on the corner of Peachtree and Juniper, is Atlanta's oldest and most famous gay bar, three floors, pool, skyline bar on the roof-deck, and the best lights and sound on the biggest dance floor in gaydom. They have an annual White Party that attracts every circuit queen south of the Mason-Dixon Line. I was a little pissed off that Tom had gone there without me, but the news that he'd seen Allan there overwhelmed my anger.

"I was at a table close by the stairs, sitting by myself, my friend." The friend bit was to massage my ego and it was nice of him. "I sip my beer, lift my eyes from the glass, look up, and there's Allan prancing down the stairs from the Triple X Charlie Brown cabaret and what's more, he's holding the hand of a remarkably pretty young man. He saw me all right, but pretended he didn't, and then he headed out right away, looking very shaken."

"Southern Baptists don't wear their shirts open to the navel. The clown was wearing a big gold chain too. But who cares?"

"Wow! So the rumor's true."

"Yup. I don't need to say anything at all. He knows I know and that's enough. With this and the paper I've got him by the balls."

I was recovering my cool. "In a way," I said, "I'm surprised he was at the Backstreet. I would've pegged him for the Model T." The Model T's in the old Ford factory on Ponce DeLeon. We'd gone there once together, but the only thing more bitchy than a bunch of fags is a bunch of old fags.

But then the surprise was over and I was thinking more carefully. "Suppose we confront him. Perhaps he'll claim he was doing research for the Southern Baptists. They don't care about war, murder, rape and child abuse, but they're really worried about gay rights."

"Southern Baptists don't wear their shirts open to the navel. The clown was wearing a big gold chain too. But who cares?"

So Allan joined the ranks of the fallen zealots, the Jimmy Swaggerts, the Jim Bakkers, the Elmer Gantrys, the J. Edgar Hoovers, and that guy that was queer that worked for McCarthy.

Tom was right—it didn't matter. We'd already decided that Tom would post another preprint no matter what the Committee said, but the chance of forcing Allan to approve Tom's work or face the threat of outing made the triumph, well, sort of complete.

Tom came back from Atlanta late Friday night and they found him on Saturday morning in his running gear on a country road three miles form his home. He had a

closed head injury, tension pneumothorax, ruptured liver and spleen. Blunt trauma, hit and run, said the police report.

Coincidence? You can think about it and make up your own mind, but that's why I wasted those fundamentalist traffic cones. As Tom would have said, there is a certain symmetry in the universe and it pops up in surprising places.

I'm getting choked up and I'll have to quit for a moment.

OK.

Let me get on to the real point of all this. I had the soul of Tom's computer on my hard drive and there in this QC folder was the text of the complete formulation of the Theory of Quantum Consciousness. The problem was that the document looked like this:

```
—BEGIN PGP MESSAGE—
Version: PGP for Personal Privacy 5.0
MessageID: HDo8lgYFv9gn1Uj+TWmMUZW/
iXSvb3yK
qANQR1DBwE4D48jp4wOYMGQQBADrKk9rMEA/t/
Xu7fXkJ9zhdOajL26Nq/5LrBq+oo/
Z6YGfvVyj86bTei5DhiTm+nYLPcPDsX46G7TfEL0QO+eTjm6
```

…and so on. You get the picture.

Now Tom's public key was on the Net, and I already had that key on my machine. I'd been using it to encrypt my e-mail to him. But his private key was… well, remember he'd told me he'd taken it off his machine in case of any more break-ins so they couldn't read his stuff when they broke into his computer. But where was the private key? By examining his public key on the MIT keyserver I could tell his private key was 4096 bits and that's longer than anyone can remember or wants to punch in by hand. So the key had to be on the disk he took home from work every night. There wasn't any other way to handle a key this big.

I had a key to his apartment and I went over but there was nothing there. At least no floppy. I'd spent a lot of time in his apartment and I knew where he kept stuff in his desk and so on, I even knew where he kept the disk from work. But it wasn't there. And I knew why. Once the math was finished, there was no point in keeping anything from the Dean. Even if Tom was fired, he could still publish and then the world would beat a path to his door. So he'd left the floppy at work.

On Monday, I went over to the Physics Department and told the secretary I was a friend of Tom's and asked if there was anything I could do to help them clean out his office. "It's already done," said the secretary. "The Dean had Dr. Thomas' personal items sent to his family—a couple of photographs and a leather jacket hanging on the hook on his door, that was all." I went down the hall and she was right. There was nothing except a desk and a chair. The desk drawers were empty except for those wisps of gray fluff that you always find at the back of drawers.

I went back to the secretary and asked, "Where's his stuff, papers, floppy disks, that sort of thing?"

"If it wasn't personal, it belonged to the state, and the Dean said we should send everything to the dump. Everything. The Dean made it very clear." Good jobs with the state are hard to get and her attitude made it clear that she wasn't about to lose hers.

Later I learned that Thad, shocked at the waste of a Pentium, had quietly diverted—yes, that was the word he used, diverted—the computer to the recycling center. But in front of the secretary I kept myself focused on Tom's private key.

"Even the floppies?" I asked.

She looked at me strangely, as if I was trying to steal something. "The Dean said we should send it all to the landfill." That was the end of it. I was only a student and she knew it, so I left.

Tom's family hadn't spoken to him for years, ever since they found out he was gay. I called later and got his father on the phone. He was already crying. I suppose he had realized that he'd lost some things forever, things he could have had for the asking but it was too late now. He told me there were no floppy discs sent by the school, just the jacket and the photographs.

"Nothing in the pockets?" I asked. There wasn't.

It was raining when I headed out to the dump, which is a few acres of trash at the end of Reservoir Road, past the animal shelter. Seagulls wheeled around in the sky behind a bulldozer that was slowly leveling piles of trash, papers, old mattresses, cardboard boxes, plastic bottles, all the throwaway crap of civilization. There was a smell too, putrid.

I asked the guy at the gate if STSU had brought anything to the dump since Saturday and where it might be. "Dunno. This ain't a coat check, we don't give out numbers," he said.

"Thanks. I'll think I'll take a look around."

Two cops were sitting inside a pickup truck. They had their guns out. I went over to them and said lightly, "What's up? Someone steal something?"

"Target practice, wiseguy. Firearms re-cert next week."

"So what'ya shooting at?"

"Mainly rats, but just about anything that moves."

I didn't like their attitude, not that it mattered. I could see that finding a floppy in this mountain of paper and plastic, grease, oil and rotting food was impossible and anyway the floppy was probably useless what with the rain and the dirt and all the grease, even if the bulldozer hadn't crushed it. So I stood there watching the mewling

gulls, staring at where the secret of the universe had been thrown away. But of course, as Rose and Thad and the Sierra Club would say, there is no away.

On the way back from the dump I stopped in at the animal shelter. Mom was there, cleaning out the cat cages. On the wall there were some plaques given by donors in memory of their pets. There was one that always nearly made me cry. "In memory of all those for whom no one came." It was for the ones who didn't get adopted, who spent their allotted five days at the shelter and then met the blue death. My mom caught me looking at it when she was finished scooping poop.

"Stop being sentimental," she told me.

Now you're thinking maybe Tom had hidden another copy of his personal key on his hard drive, camouflaged to look like a Word file or some data from his checking program. Well, believe me, I've looked, and there's nothing there.

So what was left for me to do? I had the text of the paper but it was encrypted. OK, I knew how to break the code, but it was a 4096-bit key. Before the SETI project got going on the Internet, several hundred people had worked together in the same way, trying to win a bet by breaking a 40-bit key with code-breaking software on machines all over the world. It took them about nine months, let's say a year to keep things simple. Now every bit you add to a key means that it will take twice as long to break it. So going from 40 to 4096 bits means that I can try to find Tom's private key on my machine but it will take me about $2^{(4096-40)}$ years and, well, I can't be bothered to calculate exactly what that is but if I wrote out the number it would be longer than this whole thing I've written. And on top of that, with the quantum consciousness time retardation phenomenon and time slowing down as the universe gets more complex, the code's not going to get broken, ever.

I thought about posting the problem on the Internet, a project that people could run on their computers like the SETI project or the original code-breaking effort, but anyone who's interested enough to take part will know that there is essentially no chance of breaking this code. Ever. So I didn't even try. And the idea of reworking the math myself is out of the question because the math was Tom's invention and I'm not that smart. "Most of physics can be described with partial differential equations," he'd said, "but I needed something quite different." I didn't ask him what that something was, and now it's too late.

By the way, now that you know the four principles of Quantum consciousness show that the universe is relentlessly evolving, unfolding into higher and higher levels of complexity and of consciousness then you know why I'm so sure that SETI will pan out. It's only a matter of time. So, despite everything that's happened, I'm still running the SETI software. It's an affirmation that Tom was right.

Yesterday, when Mom came home from work at the dealership, she told me Stott had traded in his car for a new four-wheel drive sport utility. He didn't get as much as he might for his trade-in because it his old car needed some work on the body. She said there was a dent in the fender on the passenger side.

Does it mean anything? I don't know, but like I said, I'm always on the lookout for coincidences.

Am I going to the police? Maybe, but in long run there's a better way. Even though the secret of the universe is lost in the landfill, jumbled up with a lot of trash, and at the same time it's jumbled up forever on my hard drive, there's one more way to find it.

Ideas have a life of their own. Someone called them memes, sort of like genes, but mental instead of made of DNA. They're out there, replicating inside people's heads and it's impossible to eliminate them. True memes are indestructible, they're the most durable things in the universe because they will be discovered again and again.

That's why I've written this account of Tom's ideas. Remember, it's an account, not a made-up story, but I don't care if you think it's true or not. If you've read this far then I've already got what I wanted. I've planted the meme of Quantum Consciousness inside your head.

Think about it. It's there and you can't get rid of it, can you?

Someone will read this and wonder if just maybe Quantum Consciousness is the way out of the intellectual maze we've built for ourselves. Maybe that someone will be a high-school kid or a college freshman, someone who's good at math but still young enough to think impossible things.

Perhaps you're that reader.

Or perhaps you're not, and maybe you'll forget this story but years from now, when your four year-old granddaughter asks you, "Why did Granny have to die?" you'll tell her in your grief that everything is alive and nothing really dies, that the universe is good and the stuff it's made from combines and recombines endlessly as it journeys to perfection. The little girl won't understand what you say but she will feel what you feel and the meme will jump from your mind to hers and when she's older and majoring in math she'll sit down one rainy afternoon with a pencil and some paper and work into the night and rediscover Quantum Consciousness.

How it happens doesn't matter.

Tom's dead, but I'm not as angry about this now as I was on Sunday morning. He played his role, did his bit to move the universe in the direction it's meant to go, and his bit was much more than most of us can hope to do. He

won't be here any more, I can't enjoy his company, but that's the way things are, and I'll live on, trying to do my bit. Actually, I've probably done what's the most important thing for me to do in my whole life: I've written down what happened and made sure it's read by thoughtful people like you.

So now you know that reality is good, reality is conscious. Of course, I can't prove that to you but I do know, I absolutely know for sure, that sometime, somewhere, someone will rediscover Tom's Theory of Quantum Consciousness.

I know this will happen because, if you think carefully about what I've told you, you'll realize that the Theory of Quantum Consciousness is the only scientific theory that predicts its own discovery.

Now remember that the test of any scientific theory is that it makes accurate predictions. Right?

Quantum Consciousness predicts its own discovery and it's been discovered. Sure it's been discovered. It's in your head right now, isn't it?

OK. I rest my case.

Now remember right at the beginning I told you this isn't a story. I said it was more like a proof. That's why I'm going to finish with the Latin phrase *Quod erat demonstrandum.* Mathematicians put this at the end of their proofs when they have demonstrated that which was to be demonstrated, except they usually just use the initials.

But the last line of a *story* is very important, and no writer of fiction would ever end with something as limp as the initials of an obscure phrase in Latin.

Q.E.D.

JIM COWAN

Is trained as both an electrical engineer and a doctor, meaning that he's worked with both things and people, including those in Tennessee. He has written two previous stories for InterText, *two stories for the print magazine* Century, *and his story "The True Story of Professor Trabuc and his Voyages Aboard the Sonde-Ballon de la Mentalitie" will appear later this year in* Asimov's Science Fiction. *His story "The Spade of Reason" appeared in Gardner Dozois'* Year's Best Science Fiction *anthology for 1997.*

Do I have a butterfly or some other small animal up my nose?