

Name of Author

by Title of Book

by Tom Murphy VII

BENJAMIN—who always spells it out like a president—who had made his fortune selling name brand time-travel circuitry at low, low prices—who, even now, tops *The Wall Street Journal's 100 Most Influential Entrepreneurs from the Future* list—who is the kind of fellow who will normally listen carefully to what a conversant has to say before unconditionally dismissing his or her ideas—who, slamming his fist on the table in the heat of discussion causes his date's drink to jump closer and closer to the edge, and who, having been educated at Harvard Future Law school, has the dual and conflicting perspective of a sophisticated alcoholic, who, in the sense that it is classic appreciates the conic shape of a Martini glass but who, also having a practical education from a top-tier institution, believes at the same time that its form more than casually approaches the minimally appropriate one—that being a flat piece of glass, the liquid having to be attached to the glass by its molecular cohesion alone and the beverage consumer having to ingest the liquid by means of licking—who, when talking, speaks like this: incredible sentences of preposterous length, each fragment grammatically reasonable but the whole completely unparseable, and who, by now livid at his date's inacity for rational thought and her tendency to invent words that are not only nonexistent but also seemingly malappropriated—who, in standing causes the final bump that drops the martini glass to the ground and shatters it—he suddenly has an idea for a flooring substance that is shock-absorbing, or perhaps just a clear solid material that is shatterproof—Benjamin has ideas like this all the time; ten a day, more, he assigns them to his lackeys by way of a device that allows him to communicate forwards and backwards in time—he communicates exclusively with himself, sometimes his secretary if he is busy in the future—no time to wait for himself to become free, have an appointment—and these inventions and ideas, implemented, become at once part of the scene before him, such that the martini glass is now made of superhard epoxy, non-toxic, and the floor of a colloidal material such that it is able to accept dropped items with a gentle deceleration while still providing a firm and reliable surface for feet, and the date is replaced with a Fulbright Scholar supermodel, waiflike but not anorexic, and

who never tries to conjugate words like *malapropism*, and who has darling ideas of her own, like why don't we blow this joint and head to Neo Amsterdam—such an infallible impropriety to the way she speaks, her usage in the lowest—or perhaps uppermost?—percentile according to the grammarians' taxonomy, when they even can be bothered to attempt to classify her utterances with scientific rigor.

THERE on her table is a copy of *Scientific Armenian*. I glance through it secretly while she prepares coffee, responding to her inaudible monologue with ambiguous comments like, “Oh yeah?” and, “Do tell!” and “Top draw, my fine chap!” SA is carrying an article about the increasing frequency of coronal mass ejections, a sort of bursting of the sun's giant, fusion-powered pimples. There is a total pinup centerfold, which I clip and stuff in my pocket. I need to cancel my enrollment in *Gas Giant: Barely Legal* and pick up a subscription to this instead. Those blank brown paper envelopes are causing suspicion around the house.

She returns with three cups. The third, she says, has been poisoned with an undetectable neurotoxin that she manufactured in her converted basement methamphetamine lab. It will go as a prize to the first to finish his or her cup. We chat about this and that. But the coffee tastes like an oil spill to me. I can't finish it, and before I know, the tinkling of her cup against the saucer indicates that she's won. Before I can dispute the drops at the bottom, she downs the prize. Moments later, she enters a generalized tonic-clonic “grand mal” seizure, shaking around like a maestro, spastically conducting her invisible orchestra. The effectiveness of her concoction is uncanny; she will be rich posthumously!

I wipe the fingerprints off of my cup and the magazine and make an anonymous call to 911 Emergency.

“911 Emergency.”

“Yes, Susan has been poisoned.”

“Sir, may I have your name?”

“ ‘Anonymous.’ ”

“We’re dispatching ambulances. Stay on the line until they arrive. OK, Sir?”

“ . . . ”

“Sir?”

I am totally out of there. From her veranda I see the Houston Astronomical Observatory’s massive eight-meter catadioptric telescope. “Let’s go,” I mutter.

At the observatory I present my membership badge to the night watchman. “Good evening, professor!” he says. Night watchman is a good friend, we have played euchre many times when we become older. He will die of cancer. He checks my security badge anyway; looks at the photo and then into my eyes, searching for the tell-tale palpitations of telescope fraud. He hands back the badge and asks me to sign my name in the log. I write,



Figure 1: Signature in Log Book

I sign my name like this ever since I discovered an obscure legal principle that validates as a signature any mark whatsoever, as long as it is made with clear intent. I pocket the pen, nestling it comfortably next to the centerfold.

At the telescope control panel I am a virtuoso. I flip this switch, and I turn some dial. Whatever. Nobody can tell me what to press.

I turn the telescope at an unprecedented angle: it faces directly at Susan's house. Through her window at ten million times magnification I see the crime scene vividly. The crystallized toxin on her lip. The ash of the detective's cigar contaminating the evidence. The fingerprint duster's kleptomaniacal pilfering of her cosmetics. That rotten bastard! I make a mental record of the image to be illustrated in my memoirs.

Suddenly, Earth is sprayed with the creamy charged particles of another zit bursting. An aurora courses across the sky. The fierce magnetic waves disrupt my telescopic voyeurism and the machinations of similar first persons around Earth. But the solar storm does not affect the planet's high-tech communication system.

I make an arbitrary rule. I'm the boss. The purpose of such rules is to keep my employees, my sycophants, on their toes. An example arbitrary regulation: **You must label each compact disc in two-color permanent marker. Even letters must be *black*, odd letters *blue*.** I do not mention how to treat space characters. This is so that I can always find a reason to persecute a CD-labeler whose CD title happens to have more than one word in it. Vagueness is no criterion for unconstitutionality in my sovereign state! And persecute I will, and do. I have a staff, its members subject to capricious quotas. Each day a vassal must be selected from our organization, two on Fridays or "Firedays," as we sometimes refer to them, jokingly, behind our closed soundproof doors in our ridiculously extravagant offices, overlooking the city or the river, a jacuzzi and steam room in each, smoking cigars and ordering expensive wine, we don't even understand how it is different from regular people wine, we have never had that piss, restaurants where they say *sir* and don't ever spit in your food if they have communicable diseases, where the silverware is real silver, oxidizing and affecting the taste of food but *god damn*, at least it is real silver. The employee is sent an impersonal memo, expected to appear in our star chamber, our farcical mock trial, over which I preside, smashing my gavel down when he speaks, *objection!!* which of course I sustain,

for I am the judge, he is silenced, the jury rigged and no defense council appointed. The culprit is allowed an elaborate and meaningless appeals process, during which his pay is suspended, the appeal always denied, except when we allow a retrial merely so that we may subpoena his unknown enemies, his one night stands, his embarrassing secrets and make them part of the public record. I am *Q* to his *Jean-Luc Picard*, although truthfully he is more like a “*Bones*” *McCoy*, stammering and helpless, the scapegoat officer court martialled in a military cover-up, a scandal underreported and anyway, squelched by members of the conspiracy seated at the helm of major news organizations.

Sometimes my rules are complex, predicated on obscure facts and phenomena. **If the Riemann hypothesis holds, then your employee ID card must be worn on the left breast pocket. Otherwise, the right side.** I don’t even know what that means. Fuck it! My rules are contradictory,

You may not read this rule.

#5.33. See rule #5.33.

Smoking is only allowed in *no-smoking* areas.

Void where permitted.

This is all I do, fire people. Here’s another rule: **You are fired.** It can apply to anyone at any time. It improves morale at the company, by which I mean that it improves efficiency, by which I mean that it improves my morale and the morale of my firing staff, and their efficiency in firing you. Sometimes they are fired too, because, nobody is above the law. Except me.

YOU ARE FIRED.

Another rule: **You may not ask, “Did you get your hair cut?”** The answer is no. I cut my *own* hair, thank you very much.

And yes, I already *know* it looks good.

“SUPER—MUMBLE, MUMBLE—IOUS!!” she said. It was some sort of girl magic, a competing incantation for *supercalifragilisticexpialidocious*, like in Angela Lansbury’s *Bedk’nobs and Broomsticks*, except there was no magic k’nob—can you believe she actually said it like that, pronouncing the k and the nob separately? This invocation caused a rustling of my feathers, a relaxation of my capillaries, a *ponens* of my *modus*, if you will. When I ordered all-natural generic Viagra I never knew what I was getting into. I should have suspected something when I needed to pick up my order, in person, in Los Angeles.

“I thought this would be an herbal dietary supplement!”

I stagger my way to her front door, just now noticing the suspicious “voodoo dominatrix” motif in her decoration. I have to be more careful in the future. She’s walking after me, making some hand motions and mouthing some witch shit. I *get out!!* shut the door and, pulling on the handle to keep her from opening it after me, stuff a few dollars through the mail slot, hoping that she is simply a scam artist and not after something more, intending to entrap my mind and body, sex slave and think tank, selling shares of her network of hormonal male minds to magazine publishers, a perfect focus group, hypnotized, ready to accept or reject cover images and phraseology based purely on the secretions of our adrenal glands. It might not be such a bad life, after all, but there I go, the dollars have been stuffed and I am bounding down the steps, yes, my adrenal gland is really going now, norepinephrine pumping, whee, ass on the railing, sliding down, huffing, nod to the night watchman, he’s a little puzzled but not reacting, through the revolving door, I contemplate stopping in the door, sealed in a chamber created when it is rotated to the proper angle, I feel safe in there but worry about the possibility of running out of oxygen, and the possibility that her girl magic can penetrate glass. And then I am running down the street, wheezing, some people staring, like nothing this weird has

ever happened in the city of Angels. My legs are tired. I find myself wishing that I had a cojoined twin: attached at the head, so that when I became tired I would just do a half-flip and he would then be doing the running, and I would be getting a free ride. I'd be able to look behind us and see if that crazy woman is following. He'd be able to offer me advice on my sex pill purchasing decisions. We would be amazing basketball players, because, as far as I know, there are no rules against carrying the ball between your feet, and what we'd do is put the ball in between the topside player's legs, while the lower half would run around and position us under the basket. Then, eleven feet off the ground, we'd perform a standing slam dunk on that shit. We'd be unstoppable. There's more to life than being a star basketball player(s) though, and in some ways having a craniopagus brother could be troublesome. For instance, we would have to have special clothes made, and would have to sleep in a bed with unaesthetic proportions. Perhaps instead I could simply run on my arms. I take a dive forward onto my hands, ready to do this, enthusiastic, but I have no idea how to support my weight like that and flow, face first, gracelessly, into the concrete sidewalk.

Excerpts from an interview with Hermann Wildschut in *Muscle Trend* magazine, August 2016.

Arthur Giambi, Staff Writer

SINCE the stunning upset victory at the 2014 Mr. Universe competition, the bodybuilding world has been transforming to accommodate an exciting new field, asymmetric building. At the center of this controversial but popular sport is Hermann Wildschut, 2014 and 2015 Mr. Universe, right-side 2015 Mr. Hemiverse, 2014 Summer World's Strongest Arm competition champion, and owner of the Golden Teardrop chain of gyms. I had the chance to talk to Mr. Wildschut at the General Malnutrition Center sports bar in Chicago.

As he approaches our booth, I realize the impressive dispropor-

tion of his body, the first time I've seen a asymmetric bodybuilder in person. His right side towers over his left, and Hermann visibly leans to the side in order to balance his center of gravity. According to his Sports Illustrated statistics page, Hermann's right side weighs 240 lbs. and his left side a mere 33.1 lbs!

AG Hermann, no one can deny that you've forever changed the face of the sport. How did asymmetric bodybuilding come about?

HW I had been interested in bodybuilding since I was young, taking California's mandatory "Arnold" classes. I tell you, Arthur, that man has done more good for our nation's young people than any other multimillionaire NRA-member action hero senator. I was working out at the neighborhood "X" gym, which overlooks the UC San Diego physical therapy clinic's swimming pool. There I first saw Craig Saunders, whose atrophied limbs were the inspiration for asymmetric bodybuilding. I realized: the human body is beautiful in all of its extremes. Can't we rejoice in those extremes, hold competitions, and engage in unhealthy image worship? After a few failed attempts to contract Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis myself, I developed—with the help of physicians from prestigious, unaccredited universities—my famous 12-step plan that you know today.

AG There are lots of kids reading who really look up to you. Do you have any advice for them?

HW What I really want the readers to understand, Arthur, is that asymmetric bodybuilding is not just about building, it's about destroying. In order to achieve maximum disparity you need to actively neglect the poor side of your body while building the other. For instance, part of my daily routine includes an arm press: I compress my arm in a machine to deprive it of blood. This takes as much dedication as arm curls and one-arm pull-ups do.

At this point Hermann raises his left arm, which is shriveled and spotty. You can see the bones and varicose veins right through the translucent skin. His fingers are fragile and bony. Stunning.

AG With that in mind, what was your reaction to the Johan Schisler scandal at this year's Mr. Hemiverse competition?

HW Behavior like this puts the whole sport at risk. For those who don't understand the issue, the competition's charter specifically forbids the surgical removal or addition of tissue from a participant's body. Schisler argues that he did not actually *remove* or *add* any tissue; he simply moved it from one side of his body to the other. With his team of big-shot lawyers, it is possible that he may retain his title. But the by-laws have already been amended to also forbid the Schisler maneuver, as it is called.

AG How has bodybuilding changed to accommodate asymmetry?

HW Well, I see two main changes. First is the development of exercises that target only one side of the body at a time. Exercises like the bench press, running, swimming, walking, and standing all have too symmetric of an effect. My scientists and I developed some special apparatus and techniques to remedy this. It has been a real boon for the gym equipment industry, especially because gyms need to purchase both "right" and "left" versions of each device to accommodate all styles.

Second is with regard to bodybuilding drugs. It used to be that you could pop into GNC, grab a bottle of each thing, and down a couple hundred pills for each meal. But these pills have too general of an effect for asymmetry: they cause your muscle cells to divide at cancerous rates *on both sides of your body*, which just won't work. Scientists are now developing drugs with "handedness," such that they will only have effect on one side, or perhaps, some even narrower effect. Until those are available on the black market, we have to settle for localized injections of botulinum toxin and jellyfish extract. For instance, I recently had blowfish poison implanted into the right hemisphere of my brain.

AG The right hemisphere because it is the right brain that con-

trols the left side of your body?

HW That's right, Arthur.

AG Where do you see asymmetric bodybuilding in ten years?

HW I'm beginning to see some exciting developments. In Philadelphia an extension of the sport known as "microasymmetry" is becoming popular. They have developed workouts that are even more specialized than our single-side exercises, down to the resolution of muscle group or even a single muscle. Georg Schaefer has an extremely successful *flexor digitorum profundus* program.

AG That's in the finger, right?

HW Yes, just his middle finger. It's amazing. I expect that this will be extremely popular. Asymmetry is slowly creeping into other areas of popular culture as well: cosmetics, breast surgery, haircuts.

AG I guess you could say, *the more, the merrier!*

HW That's right.

AG Any final remarks?

HW Asymmetric bodybuilding is not just a good work-out, it's about the body as art!

I'M a spaceman!! running the international space station, or I.S.S.. At different times throughout the year I have a different crew here at the ISS, but, I am always in charge, a permanent fixture at this station. I'm not allowed to leave, because my bones have atrophied in the low gravity. If I ever go back to Earth, my limbs will collapse under the weight of my own body, just standing. While at the space station I can fly here and there, do little somersaults and twists, a triple lutz, no problem, I'm athletic. Just in microgravity. There are other spacemen here now, a few Russians, Sputnik, I tell them, I like to say that in a Russian accent, comrades,

also some Americans. Our mission is to boldly stay exactly where we are, geosynchronous orbit near Houston, 95 degrees 20 minutes West, varying latitudes. We beam messages to Houston, messages about science experiments and about Russian communist secrets, forwarded to the New McCarthyism Committee on Unamerican Activities, interest renewed in this post-9/11 world, Let's Roll. Here's a science experiment: Some students have sent up a souffle mix and instructions, meticulously prepared so that any idiot cosmonaut can follow them. The experiment is to test if the souffle will be able to fall, as the maxim predicts, in microgravity. Or is it impossible? If their hypothesis is borne out by the experimental evidence, then the future of foolproof cookery is in space. If not, then they may recommend Earth as the optimal place for culinary exploration. Myself, I prefer true space food, freeze-dried ice cream, freeze-dried potato pancakes, freeze-dried escargot. Our first week in space we had our own encounter with space snails, minuscule creatures that drift through space, powered by ambient solar radiation, latching onto asteroids and passing spacecraft, digesting their metals to reproduce, their genetic material being encoded not in D.N.A. molecules but in silicon dioxide and related compounds. Space snails are pretty cute, two little dots for eyes, like they could be friends with Hello Kitty or in a Super Mario Bros. video game. These little snails crawled all around the outside of our space craft, the international space station, not really a craft but a floating platform, dead in the water, a mere symbolic marker of mankind's occupation of space.

I'm a spaceman, see, intergalactic planetary, planetary, intergalactic, and, if I need to, I'll put on my space helmet and take a stroll around the space station, using our tethered rocket seat and short jet bursts to change my velocity vectors. Sometimes I will say, "Hello Earthmen!!" while they are looking at me in their telescopes, "What's the weather like down there?"

AMANDA wants to form a band. We've haven't written any songs, and most of us can hardly play our instruments but we think we've discovered the key to success. We will be "in-

fluent” and “genre-defining,” thus making our inability to replicate the sounds of others irrelevant. They will be the ones imitating us. Music these days is more cock than rock anyway, and, though Amanda does not have much cock, I’ve got that and she’s got *chic* which is what we’ll call the girl analogue of *cock*, chic as in *chick*. Are you aware that *chic* probably comes from the German *Schick* as in manly razor blades? That may be a problem. We might have to come up with a new term. For now let’s stick with *chic*. Amanda plays the zibraphone, that’s a cross between a vibra- and xylophone, spelled with a ‘z’ to emphasize its pronunciation. They had one in her elementary school’s band supply room, a manufacturing error, and she had mononucleosis and was sick at home for the first week of school, when all the kids chose their instruments, and by the time she was well the zibraphone was the only thing left. When she told me a dozen years later, in a love clutch on her couch, a bed time confession that I don’t mind revealing to you now because of our impending stardom, I puzzled, “Isn’t a vibraphone already a cross between a xylophone and a vibraphone?” But don’t be silly. This thing is a real conversation piece. Anyway, you should see her play it! Two mallets in each hand, and she takes her shoes off for the foot pedal, for extra precise “touch.” Sometimes she’s got a mallet in her teeth too, for those five-note chords. Yeah, Amanda will be the centerpiece of our band, and I will stand on her left side with my tiny guitar. We try to think of genres to define. I suggest using two modifiers and no descriptors: an unholy marriage of “hair metal” and “math rock” produces “hair math.” That’s pretty good, I think she thinks. She suggests using a self-enhancing suffix, i.e., “core-core.” Those are both good. Next we will play some basement shows, with no rehearsal. We will stage some antics: enlist others in the band and then fire them, fired perhaps for not having a large enough african-american hairstyle, formerly called “fro” but changed for tri-fold reasons: (1) for political correctness, as verbosity is to correct as abbreviation is to in- and (2) to make the term more accessible to those not “in the know” and (3) to distinguish it from the previously existing English word “fro.” I prepared a presentation, a triptych on foam board, for our school’s *Progressive Vernacular Fair*. One

reason was on each of the three panels, with a stylized line drawing of disco king George McCrae in the center to fill up space and attract judges to my project. I won blue prize, our school being of the new age variety where children are never ranked, grades are never given, we are never arranged in line alphabetically or by height, only by a cryptographically-strong random number generator, and so the fair had prizes for every child, each a different color. As a blue prize winner, though, I can tell you that I will not stand for an inappropriately non-huge african-american hairstyle in my hair math band. Our antics will enhance the “buzz” surrounding our group, and we will be invited to play at such locations as *Irving Plaza* in New York City, and the *Middle East* in Boston, Massachusetts, United States. At each of these locations we will play a short enough set that the cognoscenti will dismiss us as superficial, but the *hoi polloi* will be unable to fully comprehend our shallowness, entranced by our gigantic hair and paroxysmal rhythms, before erupting in some brawl over whatever, not enough ice or who the fuck buys *Pabst Blue Ribbon* in plastic bottles for the band. I know about real blue ribbons, bastards, and *Pitchfork* will write a thought-provoking article entitled, “*Name of Band: Do They or Don’t They Know How To Play Their Instruments?*” We will be controversial, thus endearing us to the masses. We will be the darlings of hair math!

Your eyes are closed. See?

TO my therapist I wonder aloud,

Why is it that I never dream of waking up from the real world?

While he ponders that one, I leap up from the relaxing leather chair.

I have been practicing this maneuver for weeks in my head.

I constructed a 1:1 scale replica of his office in my basement . . .

Hiyaa!!

... in which I repeated this motion over and over again.

The chloroform-soaked rag in my back pocket comes out, in hand.

I press it to his startled lips.

Spies have training to prevent them from inhaling in this situation.

Perfect. He slumps forward. I leaf through his notebook.

Camden Penrose, District Attorney for the state of Florida is in here.

I take his file. I have a plan, see,

(secretary's voice over desk intercom)

I saw on Court TV that therapists have a privilege that prevents

Doctor Cassidy?

them from being forced to incriminate their patients.

I figure, if I am the District Attorney's therapist, I am home free.

How can I be prosecuted if he is not allowed to incriminate me?

I take the notebook and some audio recordings from his file cabinet.

I do this thing, this nervous gesture where I wring out my hands.

Okay. Out the door. His secretary stands.

"Doctor Cassidy?"

She is not yet worried.

She notices the stacks of cassettes in my hands.

This part is slow motion. I am walking to the front door.

“Sir!”

She picks up the phone. I high-tail it.

Not high tailed like a scared deer. Like an invincible leopard.

Not like a leopard with spots, and not shaped like a cat.

Like a fucking awesome huge tractor. That can't be stopped.

I stop by the *Krispy Kreme* doughnut shop. I have two vices:

Vice #1. I eat *Krispy Kreme* doughnuts frequently, constantly.

Vice #2. I lie about the number of vices that I have.

Vice #3. I stole my therapist's confidential files.

Vice #4. I am not dressed correctly, or something.

Vice #5. Some of the patrons are looking at me funny.

Vice #6. Someone has notified the management.

I have violated the dress code. What is it,

no shirt,

no shoes?

No service?

Vice #7. I stole someone's truck. I am on the run.

I run from the law. I am an outlaw. This is not the first time.

This plan about the therapist maybe is not working.

We are engaged in a low speed chase on Interstate 95.

Vice #8. I am too chicken shit to drive fast.

I know that I can't leave the state.

I am not Georgia's District Attorney's therapist. Wait,

Vice #9. I don't know who the district attorney of Georgia is.

Perhaps I am his therapist. I check my files, driving with my knees.

What is this crap? David Cassidy had a lot of patients.

Vice #10. I cannot drive with my knees.

The truck is on the savannah. In fact, I did always want to do this.

Wow! I am kicking up dust!

I am followed by a plume of dust with blinking lights in it.

This must look really cool for the TV helicopters.

I wonder if I get better gas mileage than a cop car.

Perhaps I have a bigger gas tank.

Perhaps the police have a way to *fill-'er-up* en route.

Mid-air refueling is very sexual. Mile high club, indeed!

But you wouldn't want to do it with a helicopter.

That would be like trying to have sex with a lawnmower.

I think that I will be able to eventually wear them down.

I consider that these cop cars need to be able to turn around.

Thus they have an earlier "point of no return" than I do.

I press on. There must be like, a million cop cars.

I bet I am on Nightline.

There's a cell phone on the passenger seat, and I pick it up.

"911 Emergency."

"The capitol building is on fire!"

I hang up. I dial again.

"911 Emergency."

"The bank is being robbed! Send officers!"

"Which bank, sir?"

I hang up. This isn't working. The cop cars are still following me.

Maybe the Governor will declare a state of emergency.

Then I will have to contend with the National Guard.

What if they call in the Coast Guard?

Those guys get great gas mileage.

We drive into the night.

Eventually I fall asleep. As it turns out, it was all just real life.

"**W**HAT about a *thousand*?" I ask Erik. Erik is a ultrafinitist, which means that he does not believe in the existence of very large numbers. Of course he believes in a thousand.

"What about a *million*?" I ask him.

"Yes, I believe in a million."

“What about a *thousand* million?” I ask.

“Yes, I believe in a thousand million.”

“What about a *billion*?” I try.

“That’s the same thing as a thousand million.”

“So you don’t believe in it?”

“What?”

I put the styrofoam cup closer to my mouth, and repeat, “So, you don’t believe in it?”

He drops the mouthpiece, as he does not believe in string-and-cup telephony, either, and says, “What the hell are you talking about?”

I know what I’m talking about. I am just razzing him. Actually I mean a British Billion, twelve zeroes instead of nine, which of course he also believes in. The kind of number he denies is, like, a 1 with a billion zeroes after it. That’s a Space Billion, the kind of number that the Ultimate Planets of Megatonia uses to ring up their galactic deficit. Will they be pleased or dismayed to learn that they will never be able to repay their debt? If I were such a federation I would prefer to not be able to pay. With the economy in such a contradictory state—participants owed in total more than the gross value of the universe, a cosmic impossibility, sure, but what debt isn’t?—well, we wouldn’t just give up, we’d need to devise some new alternate economic theory to make everything keep going. My suggestion is that we use the very nature of space, that is, vastness, to solve the problem. Watch: A transaction begins at one end of the galaxy, and a beam of laser light scoots across the sky, at three hundred thousand meters per second. While in transit that money is *not being used by anyone!* We need to harness this money, put its idle power to good use. I will leave it to those crazy economists to figure out the rest. Or Erik. Erik is just six years old but a genuine graduate

student in Pure and Naïvely Idealistic Mathematics at the University of Tulsa, OK. OK? He is a supergenius, better than Doogie Howser, M.D. and better than that little fucker who is a total *Continuous Tetris* prodigy, I saw him on *Nova*. Who cares about Tetris? Erik has the real skills. We take him to the bar with us, we put a fake beard on him and a Groucho glasses-nose-moustache combo, we use him as a prop to attract women, so mesmerized by his child-like size and voice but manly secondary sex characteristics and phallic stogy, ultimately put off by his too-perspicacious conversation, his taking seriously of questions like, “So, do you come here often?” etc., and we attempt to catch his refuse. As the night wears on and he gets a little tipsy, he is a cheap date at only 43 lbs., he gets into shouting matches about the existence of non-computable real numbers, about the axiom of choice, about the quality of this cigar is *fucking good* and dancing, on the bar, hips gyrating and a beer bottle as a microphone, singing his favorite 00s classics, us shouting, *Go Er-ik! Go Er-ik! It’sya birthday!* It *is* his sixth birthday, and we’ve rented out the bar, invited some of the other graduate students, some of the neighborhood children who have chicken pox so that Erik might contract it before he gets older and the disease’s effects more serious or at least more articulable. Erik is afraid that it will interfere with his thesis work. I tell him that he deserves a break, even if that break is an itchy, avian one. At the end of the night he is killer at calculating the tip, adjusted for inflation and for speed of light issues. I tried to convince his parents to send him to the BXP Corporation’s new University, the Harvard Past Future Law School, the Future Law School’s 21st-century branch, but it seems that he is not concerned with such pedestrian issues. We all hope that it is a phase that he will eventually grow out of.

My main character/protagonist is a: male sociopath murderer

An archetype present in my story is: time travel multi-personality Christ figure

A key object or symbol in my story is: nanotech robot narcotics

A key theme of my story is: products

My story is set in: a contradictory series of causally related moments with no possible consistent ordering

My story is about: geometry

A key event in my story is: the separation of *Pangaea* into *Laurasia* and *Gondwanaland*

IT was probably a stupid idea to visit the Timeportation Station in a fit of drunk depression. I plunked down the forty-five grand, a little nest egg I had prepared, definitely not for squandering on things like this, I signed the waiver assigning my assets to BXP Corporation, and said, send me to the fucking *Triassic* period. The idea was to live off the land, to battle for my food, to lead a simple life, to feel *alive*, but, coming down from my hangover, inhaling the humid tropical air, I am feeling that this was a worse idea than an ill-advised tattoo, worse than an injudicious one night stand or irrational agreement to try some colorful pills that we found on the ground, and I now remember, I blame that kid with the *stop plate tectonics* novelty t-shirt for putting this idea in my head, to go back to witness the massive earthquakes that began the continental drift and to live like a caveman.

Listen, I saw *2001*, and if Kubrick is right then I will have an enormous advantage in this age, merely because of the size of my brain, my understanding of technology. Think about this: I understand technology that won't be invented for *two hundred million years*! Eat that, monkeys! In fact, let me find a monkey. Were there monkeys back then, er now? All I see are really big plants, and a lot of bugs. I'm in some kind of marsh. Where are the monkeys?

* * * * *

Over the next few months I learn to survive; I find a popular local plant that seems to be edible, with mild side effects, e.g., a softening of the stool, and I twice managed to catch fish, each time the fish beleaguered, caught up in the mud or otherwise not in perfect conditions for swimming away. Nonetheless, I was proud of myself. I soon hope to invent fire. Despite my knowledge of future technology, my ability to imagine voice-activated computers and rocket trains and space needles and magnetomic weapons, I do not actually understand how they work, and worse, my practical skill at deploying even simpler contrivances is deficient, e.g. such desiderata as:

- clothing
- potable water
- houses
- rope
- Coca-Cola
- fire

Lesson: the *future knowledge advantage* is naught without the proper preparation!

* * * * *

I have now taken to a distant, bullet-point oriented monologue to accurately reflect my state of despair and rapidly approaching infirmity. Using smooth, wide tropical leaves I have created a system for collecting the morning dew into a clay container; finally, clean water. Progress on fire is good. I have, on several occasions, caused some kindling to smolder briefly.

* * * * *

I invented fire! One of its many uses is to trim my beard and hair. I also use it for standard purposes of purifying water and cooking fish. As exciting as this development is, I feel lonely, and that my life lacks purpose. I have decided that I should spend the remainder of my life forming a monolith, a signal, an heirloom for my distantly related monkey predecessors/successors. Thus, I am training myself in the art of ceramics.

* * * * *

Years later, I have erected the first part of my monument. It is a giant, sleek, black, sans-serif letter ‘I.’ The environment is taking its toll; I have a severe vitamin deficiency, scurvy, I believe, my hair is falling out, a chronic cough, painful urination. I have had several close calls with *dinosaurs*. Nonetheless, I continue my project, working on the second letter, another ‘I.’

* * * * *

I feel this is the end, my last breath, and, I have not even completed the second letter of my monument. As I rest, relaxing finally at my admission of defeat, I stare up at that single monolith and imagine for the millionth and final time what the completed sequence would spell, immortalizing me for all time:

I INVENTED FIRE

I asked Benjamin about time travel. He says he has compiled a handy “Frequently Asked Questions” list that is available on his

web-site. I direct my hypertext engine to his page and find the following:

Q. Is time travel safe?

A. Jesus did it. Don't you trust Jesus?

Q. If I go back in time and meet or kill myself, doesn't that cause a "circularity" and destroy the time-space continuum? I saw this in "Back to the Future."

A. No. When traveling back in time, you cannot impact the history of the present. Instead, each time travel event causes the creation of a "new world" in which the present is that past or future. This world carries on in parallel with the old world.

Q. What happens to me in the "old world," then?

A. You disappear and your assets are transferred to BXP Corporation.

Q. If when traveling I am really going to a different world, how can I get back?

A. You can't. However, you can time-travel again to another new world, in which the present is whatever time and place you think "back" is. As far as you're concerned, the world is as real as anything.

Q. If I can't get back, how do we know that time travel works?

A. This world was arrived at via time travel by Benjamin X. Prestley. He certifies under oath that time travel operates as described.

Q. From what time did Benjamin come?

A. Benjamin comes from the year 299X.

Q. What kind of year is that?

A. In order to avoid the ‘Y3K bug,’ the International Standards Organization will switch to a new year-numbering system near the turn of the millennium in which the ‘ones’ place ranges through all sorts of symbols: 0-9, then A-Z, then α - ω , then ä-z, then \mathcal{D} - \mathcal{F} , then \heartsuit - \clubsuit , etc., so that the year 3000 is never actually reached.

Q. Can I use time travel to become fantastically rich?

A. Most people use time travel to gain knowledge of the future, which can be readily turned into cash in the past. We call this the *Future Knowledge Advantage*, or FKA. They then sometimes deposit their earnings in a conservative mutual fund and then travel to the future where their compound interest provides a “golden parachute.”

Q. If everyone does this, then how can we all be making so much money? Won’t others have the same future knowledge advantage?

A. They will, but they will all be in different parallel universes. In their parallel universes, you are a sucker who doesn’t know which horses to bet on. The sucker-you will not stand for that for long. He will hop on down to a BXP Corp. *Timeportation Station* and send himself to some other world.

Q. Won’t everyone eventually then utilize time travel and leave my world, leaving me with low self esteem and a low Gross Universal Product?

A. Some time travelers use their *Future Knowledge Advantage* to destroy the possibility for time travel within their destination world, for precisely this selfish reason. For instance, there exists a significant movement against BXP Corporation in this world, alleging that our time travel services are “illegal.” Be on the lookout for such *suppressive persons*. Here are some key phrases they may try to use:

- They may claim that time travel is “fraudulent” because it can’t be proven to work. We note that “fraudulent” is a subjective judgment.
- They may claim that BXP Corporation is simply sending people out of this world in order to collect their assets. To this we say, BXP Timeportation is *out of this world* indeed!

Q. I read in “Author of Novel” that Benjamin X. Prestley has the ability to communicate with himself forward and backward in time. How is that possible?

A. Communicating forward in time is simple. The Futurephone simply stores your call for a number of years in its digital database and then places it when the future finally comes around. Backward communication uses a proprietary universe-interleaving algorithm that is currently patent pending. BXP Corp. expects to have a market-ready product in Q4 2031.

THERE she is, that girl from your high school, the one that was so obsessed with *theatre*, spelled of course with the inverted *r* and *e*, if possible, surely a ridiculous ligature *æ* if the letters were in that order, the one who you figure was obsessed because of depression, and she tried to kill herself so many times, pitiful attempts like holding her breath. Yet she was beautiful, is beautiful, and there she is, her one solo line in this musical is to sing a melisma: “I am not the Venus,” each of the members of the chorus line singing that same phrase in turn, with different notes. This is actually the climax of the play, you guess, because the whole thing is about trying to figure out who “The Venus” is, whatever that means, and here we have the majority of the on-stage presence declaring emphatically their refusal of that designation. But you hate this crap, the lights and sounds and whoop-de-doo of the whole thing, you stand from your seat, walk up the aisle, don’t worry, this is just my imagination, you look back and there you are, still in your seat, this an out-of-body experience, courtesy of *Time Life Books: Mysteries of the*

Unknown, your *aura* is glowing, whatever, and you stand up on stage. The play continues around you, incorporating you into their dance steps, not as obstacle but as obelisk, now they are holding arms and encircling you, a whirlpool of bodies and Rockettes kicks, you raise your fist into the air and an on-stage explosion, pyrotechnics, the lights darken, a dramatic swell from the orchestra pit, and in the darkness they are all rearranging themselves, fixing you up with makeup and spirit gum and *break a leg* and the lights come back on, spotlights on you, the rest of the cast mimicking your moves like Michael Jackson's "Bad" back-up posse, and ha ha, look at that, *you are The Venus*. You catch the eye of that girl and grin.

The moral of this story is: When you open your mind to your unlimited potential, you can accomplish anything!!

JOHAN and I are developing a video game together. Johan is an extraordinary typist despite the fact that his right arm is shriveled and tiny, some sort of weird bodybuilding thing. I use my left hand on the keyboard, he uses his right, we alternate characters: this is *Ultraextreme Programming*. Our software is completely bug-free. The game is called *Dance Dance Constitution*, an educational Simon-Says sort of affair, where players tap their feet and gyrate their hips in order to draft and sign the constitution just like our founding fathers. It features an on-line mode where players from around the globe can work together to ratify their very own foundational document using just dance power.

This game is killer. I know this because our last game—based on similar design principles—was also hugely successful. It was called *Rally Car Accident 3000* and it was about a star rally car racer named Kyle Dixon who is approached by mobsters, who threaten his life and his family's life if he does not throw the World Championships. But we start at the beginning. **BREAKFAST AT THE DIXON'S**. In the first level you are cooking breakfast for your children. You have to get the bacon to line up with the eggs on the frying pan. Then you have to add the right amount of salt—not too

much or you will lose points. Then, there is a knock at the door. **MOB BOSS GUIDO ITALIO.** He demands that you throw the race. In this level you control Kyle's lips, tongue, diaphragm and vocal cords. By pursing, flexing, stressing and vibrating those organs, respectively, you must create the proper lines of dialogue to advance the story. "No, I will not do it." *Then we will kidnap your daughter.* "No!" To get the proper character to that last exclamation the player needs to also operate Kyle's eyebrows, and if they do this correctly, **BONUS ROUND.** In the bonus round you must wash the dishes nervously. The arcade machine has an actual soap dispenser so that it softens your hands while you play. The game proceeds through a series of levels until **RACE NIGHT.** In fact, the level is unwinnable. If you finish in first place, then you get the trophy but the mobsters kill your daughter. If you come in second or later place, then you don't get any trophy and you get back your daughter. After a second or later place finish, endorsement opportunities are limited. We realize that faced with these difficult issues most players will choose to restore their disbelief and instead simply attempt to crash their car. That's why *Rally Car Accident 3000* is built around a powerful Newtonian physics simulation. In this game the explosions are simply spectacular. The arcade machine has a built in airbag to prevent injury. It is possible to crash the car into the mobster's front-row VIP box seating, killing them all and yourself at the same time, which does not win you the first prize trophy, but does result in your daughter being freed and rich posthumous endorsement opportunities, which your estate and then indirectly, your daughter can take advantage of. To create these endorsements they use a computer generated model of Kyle that speaks exactly as he did, a computer programmer controlling his lips and tongue and diaphragm and vocal cords to speak the proper words in the commercial. **COMPUTER PROGRAMMER.** In this level you must control the computer programmer's fingers, which are sending commands to the computer which operates the simulated Kyle's lips and tongue and diaphragm and vocal cords. If the computer programmer makes a typo you need to make his fingers press the backspace key, *fast!* Johan insists that this finger simulation por-

tion of the game include the ability to actually build muscles, so, if you spend a long enough time playing the level, the programmer's hands become quite brawny. Johan is obsessed with bodybuilding. He is currently suing the Mr. Hemiverse company for the 2016 title. His lawyer is *Benjamin X. Prestley!* I asked him if he could get an autograph for me, instead, we went out to dinner! At dinner, I controlled my hands to eat a tremendous *filet mignon* and move my lips, tongue, diaphragm and vocal cords to converse with him.

“Benjamin, what is it like to be a lawyer?”

“It's a lot like playing a video game.”

“Yeah? How so?”

“Well, there's a lot of tedious repetition, and we get high scores—if you know what I mean.” He winks.

I don't really know what he means, but I smile.

“Don't your paralegals do that work?”

“Yes, I mean it's like hiring a lot of paralegals to play video games for you.”

“What do paralegals eat, Benjamin?”

Benjamin is eating a genetically modified steak which is 1000% protein. I'm not shitting you—this thing has bacteria in it that metabolize sugar in your body and turn it into more protein than the original mass of the steak. Therefore, not only is it a negative-calorie food, it helps build strong bones and repair body tissues. Protein is the building block of life! He had this steak flown in from the future. Like all future food, it is shaped like a fruit roll-up, or sushi.

Johan doesn't eat. He's *training*.

When he's done with the meal, he uses a disposable credit card to pay, and takes us out for a night on the town.

On our way to the red light district, I spot the following bright orange sign posted on a lamp post:

ATTENTION - ATTENTION - ATTENTION

During the next week (3 December), there will be no robot drugs allowed at port central.

Any class 2 or 3 resident caught with seminormalized robot pills or exhibiting robot characteristics will be removed and placed in the detention center.

Class 1 citizens are exempt from this prohibition.

Examples of prohibited drugs include:

CYTOBAR, commonly used to generate a glassy stare

PAINAX, a painkiller that removes all feeling
from the user's skin

E-KLON, which allows the patient to be powered
by electricity

MEM.UP, a 256 gigabyte memory upgrade

THANK YOU.

mgmt

It's true. Ever since Amsterdam became an ultra-conservative fascist police state, people have been looking for ways to channel their angst. Many play video games, democratic games which allow the players to fantasize about voting and checks and balances, thus the topic of our new game. This has been good for me and our company, in fact, the video game industry was a prime mover in

the campaign to get the New Oppressors elected. It has also been good for a few other industries: the raunchy debauchery of the red light district, the illegal getting-you-the-hell-out-of-the-Netherlands businesses, and for those wishing to play their parts without the inner turmoil caused by hope and love: robot drugs.

The fad began with standard “pharmacotics”—pharmaceutics misappropriated for non-approved uses: cosmetic botox used to tighten the muscles, resulting in robotic ambulation, inhalation of sulfur dioxide to produce a deep robotic voice, antidepressants taken in quantity to achieve an elated, task-ready disposition. Second, there were robot-oriented prescription drugs and street drugs, including the still popular **CYTOBAR**, which causes tunnel vision and paralysis of the eye muscles, producing a robot-like stare. The prescription drug **Mathnix** enhanced the user’s arithmetic accuracy (with a mean SAT bias of +60pts., post-1995 recentering) at a sacrifice of verbal ability and sexual potency. Then came the wave of nanotech pills. These pills contained tiny electronic circuitry, robots themselves, smaller in width than a human hair, even a human hair with split ends. These pills had a variety of functions, many of which were cumulative; slowly turning your body into a machine, replacing your human bits with cyber bits. For instance the nanodrug **Digestrol** allows you to digest silicon and incorporate silicon molecules into your new electronic cells, and **Azuldent** allows you to communicate with your printer or PDA via the quaint wireless *Bluetooth* protocol. The underground and aboveground businesses have begun to cater to this culture. At restaurants you can order high-silicon meals, at the tattoo parlor you can get certifications like this



Figure 2: USB Compliance Tattoo

which you need to get into certain clubs. Under Amsterdam's new leadership the city has become a beacon of fashion for the rest of the world, fascinated with our uniforms and military haircuts and detention centers. I swear to god, I was watching the illegal import television station the other day and I saw a bunch of raver kids in New Oppressor uniforms, one guy with a *fascism rules* tattoo on his arm. Perhaps it will be the new gothic. That wouldn't be so bad, but the NO officers won't like being ridiculed like that, and that might spell trouble for the class II and III citizens! Anyway, predictably, robot drugs have huge export appeal, even for people who don't have any fascist regime to *chagrin and bear*.

But why would robot drugs be banned from the port for a week? First of all, the NO regime supported robot drugs, because they resulted in an easy to manage populace. Second, the port was a primary hangout for users and, of course, exporters. Third, the Vice Vanguard of the Ultimate Planets of Megatonia was to be arriving this week, and isn't he going to want to be picking up a few hits? Perhaps they're worried that the drugs will be incompatible with his alien physiology.

Johan and Benjamin call back to me. I guess I have been thinking a long time about this sign. It's true, though, these god damn robot drugs have gotten out of hand. I pop a **CYTOBAR** and run up after them, my vision narrowing and synapses firing!

Okay, we're going to this place called *Ultrafonik*, a real cool dance club. Benjamin will get us in. I have never been there, I don't know the secret handshake or dress code or even where the entrance is. We go down some alley, I've already forgotten where we are, should have taken **MEM.UP**, down some stairs, now I hear the beats thumping, a glimpse of latex up ahead, some glowing, flash strobe popping, red eye reduction. Benjamin asks us, "Stay close," and walks up to the front of the line. All sorts of people are in this line, robot, non-robot, well, both of those types of people. They are all staring at my totally not cool Netscape polo shirt and khakis, like, *what*

the fuck is up with this guy, I want them to know that I'm pretty cool, so I run my hand through my hair and take another CYTOBAR, that's pretty cool even though I was really prescribed this by my alternative medicine doctor for my glaucoma. They don't know that unless they get up really close and read the label on the bottle. Okay, that calmed them down. Some twitchy little guy gives me a little weird look, I think this means that he is trying to initiate digital communication over a radio channel. I don't have that upgrade so instead I just give him a nod. Anyway, we are passing all these people, suckers, I don't need them to think I'm cool because *watch this*: the bouncer recognizes Benjamin, doesn't need to check any guest list, Benjamin holds up two fingers and then points back at us with his thumb, doesn't look back, that's how cool, and the bouncer lets us in. In the next room there is a coat check and a warning sign for epileptics, and since we do not have coats or epilepsy it's on to the dance floor! Bam! Immediately I am struck with what appears to be a new trend. Hipsters, definitely not robots, and apparently disillusioned with 'fake' alternative clothing, you know, factory torn jeans, faux-combat-stained army uniforms, and artificially shattered contact lenses, have taken up the "real work" look. Just as indie rockers of the mid 1990s donned the fashions of the working class gas station attendant, these Neo Amsterdam glitterati were wearing the getup of auto body workers and house painters: sweatshirts with caked on grease, mullets, beer guts, corduroy pants starched firm with dried paint. Awesome! This one girl's shirt is totally torn, threadbare, impossible to read the silk screen, who would want to, her nipples poking through the torn fabric, the strobe casting a body shadow on the inside of the shirt, so thin, cheesecloth, coarse burlap, reminding me of the three-legged sack race, wanting to yes, sack race with this young lady, I nod my head to the beat, bite my bottom lip, nod my way over to her. She is not averse, she continues to dance, I throw my hands up, I can't take my eyes off her, literally, my eye muscles still paralyzed from my earlier pharmacy. I pop another CYTOBAR. These things are like "3x Optical Zoom" pills. She digs my Netscape shirt, she says, very 20th century, I can hardly hear her but her lips are easily read, my eyes now at a 300mm focal length,

at least, she blows me a kiss. Maybe she is gesturing something but I can't see, I am in sniper scope mode, night vision and cross hair, she is gone, I am still dancing, look around for the Benjamin, he is spotted with the Johan, they are by one of the bars, chatting, I need to get in on this, make connections, *fuck* this club rules, okay, I am over there.

“Hey,” I say.

“Hey man,” he says, pushing a glass of something my way, “drink up!”

I feel around the bar for the glass, pick it up.

“To the legal profession,” he toasts.

I do my best to clink with them.

“Hey, Benjamin,” I ask.

“Yeah?” he's getting loosened up, his tie undone.

I think that a really good way to ensure your fame forever is to get something timeless—like time itself, named after you. Like, take Julius and Augustus Caesar. They've got June and Autumn named after them, which is totally awesome. I tell Benjamin my idea and ask him if maybe he could tell his past self to rename a month after Benjamin and maybe me if that's okay, you know, for coming up with the idea?

“Actually, I've had a little ‘falling out’ with my past self,” Benjamin reports.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

He doesn't seem to want to elaborate so I don't worry about it.

This whiskey is strong shit. When I am totally rich some day I will use this stuff as mouthwash. For now, Blisterine, a homeopathic remedy made with diluted pus from the furnucles of mouth cancer survivors. My alternative medicine doctor recommended it. Benjamin and I chat for a bit longer, and then it's time to find that girl again, what was her name? Aha! My telescope eyes see her in the chill-out room upstairs. I make my way across the club, the floor is made of these cubes that glow via some internal light source, pulsing, undulating, *Tacoma Narrows* style, and the lesbian pop duo is on stage singing, I can't tell if I'm getting closer, or if my eyes are just zooming further, now at a respectable 2 diopters—diopter? I hardly know her!—and she spots me, I think, smiles and is coming down the fireman pole, I take, a few, steps, and, she,

I have some questions that need to be answered.

FOR starters, where in the hell is Carmen Sandiego? Did we ever find that chick? I'll bet she is still gallivanting around the world, evading Interpol at every site, leaving clues but never staying in one place long enough to see her hotel door kicked in, the Parisian police with their tiny blue helmets and blackjacks—do they have guns over there yet? Their little cute Euro cars and their *Halte! Halte! Mettez vos mains dans le ciel!* and their front page story *Carmen Sandiego arrêté!* with those adorable orphans selling the paper on the street for six tuppence. Read all about it! Instead, she hops from place to place, visiting the wonders of the world, perhaps she is in Egypt. Perhaps she is tired of the small stuff, the petty larceny and grand theft auto and the downloading MP3s. She wants to steal something good. She's after the magnificent treasures hidden in the crypts of kings. Carmen has exchanged her black svelte hat for a coarse leather one, Indiana Jones himself would be jealous, and graverobbing gear like TNT and bug spray and oil lanterns. All of that for her hat! She is as sexy as she is insidious. Her clothes are auctioned for thousands of dollars. Burgeoning detectives, wanna-bes in over their heads, take out bank loans to purchase her clothing, sealed in forensic approved plastic bags, depriving their

families of food sometimes, or the bank is foreclosing on their home, the wife crying, inconsolable. They hope to find a clue, a fiber from a rare plant or fabric that can be used to deduce her whereabouts. Oh, to be the detective who caught Ms. Sandiego! The possibilities would be limitless. An endless stretch of open doors and open arms, firm handshakes and prestigious appointments in intriguing locales, bank loans approved without lying, begging, shopping around. Approved at reasonable interest rates and with a *yes sir*. The wife not crying, instead smiling, watching the television or cooking a hearty meal, not crying, not taking sleeping pills and Xanax, those palindromic antidepressants being the most despicable, sounding like some space virus more than a prescription medication, not that she will pay pharmacy prices: she orders on-line from the grey market only, shrewd, saving money. But there are no clues, no D.N.A. evidence, and no suspicious stains. She aligns the crystal with the beam of sunlight, reflecting it like an ancient laser into the Sphinx's eye, the antique photoreceptor triggering the stone-powered mechanisms below, shifting to open a passageway down into the tombs, the smell of four thousand year-old air suddenly being reunited with the atmosphere, the mummies coming to life and whatever. Carmen fancies herself a real archaeologist, but, maybe even that is not sensational enough for her. Bigger. She will *steal the pyramids themselves*. Poof! Suddenly they are gone, with no movie magic, just a fantastically well-designed and well-executed heist. They will be sold on the black market to ultra-rich illuminati, the really secretive ones who don't even show up in *Forbes* magazine or pay taxes or even *evade* taxes, who will use the pyramids' naturally mind-wave enhancing construction to beam signals into US and Soviet satellites, confusing the global positioning system and inserting subtle subversive remarks into the closed-captioning in otherwise bland television programs. Purely for their own amusement. You know when you consult the GPS and it is so confused, it draws your car in a river or the polar ice caps or outer space, and it demands that you return to the road immediately! These are the guys responsible for that stuff. And it is all brought to you by Carmen Sandiego.

And here's another question. Who let the dogs out? I mean, seriously, I thought I told you to keep the door shut. Don't you realize that it costs \$200 in fines every time they shit on municipal property?

I saw a commercial on the television today. It went like this: Public domain Christmas music plays, while Santa's sleigh lands on a snow-covered suburban rooftop. Ho ho ho, ho ho ho, jingle all the way. Santa grabs his bag of toys and walks toward the chimney—but—and this is emphasized with ultra slow-motion, trips on the miniature satellite dish used to receive paid television channels. Santa falls, catching his hoodie on that same exact dish, and, because the hoodie is attached around his neck via a strap meant to keep it from flying off during the high velocities of cervid space travel, he is strangled by that very cord. Switch of scene! A small child sits by the Christmas tree while the mother and father look perplexed, the police and Interpol are there, interviewing, it looks like Dad will be in trouble, and the child asks, so cute you couldn't believe it, asks, "Daddy, why is there no Christmas this year?" And then alas, it is just a fabrication: the word **dramatization** appears briefly in the bottom of the screen, before the money line, a deep serious voice asking, "Aren't you glad that you got digital cable?" And, in the final montage, Daddy is seen being taken to the squad car in handcuffs, down to the station for questioning, you know, the Mommy and the Child at the frosted window with the Christmas lights behind them, watching, and then a shot of the reindeer nestling their glowing noses against Santa's cheek, saying in mute reindeer language, "Wake up, Santa man!" "We have more presents to deliver!" Eventually they will tire of waiting, and they will take all those presents themselves, divided equally among the nine deer and fly off in different directions to create their own toy stores. These mega-stores will replace Christmas, by which I mean that they will become the new icons of Christmas, the amount of present buying remaining approximately the same. They will need to hire employees who are not four-legged, because while children are fascinated by reindeer they are unskilled at operating the cash register and tallying

inventory, due to their hooves. Children will say, “Mommy! Let’s go to Cervus Merchandise!” Anyway, none of this is in the commercial, it is all left up to the viewer to speculate.

Most commercials these days merely pit two rivaling products in an epic battle. If you use product *X*, you will be impervious to bullets and you won’t have to sleep any more. But if you use competing product *Y*, your family will be infected with the hantavirus. Of course, the opposing commercial promises equally serious consequences for choosing badly, both in terms of direct injury and opportunity cost. Gillette corporation has just introduced the *Warp 11* razor, a manly shaving razor with 110 blades. They have been competing with Schick corporation since 1971, when they first introduced the two-blade razor. Each increase in blade number results in a patent for the *n*-blade razor, each company’s research and development branch working overtime in an arms race to develop the next integer $n + 1$. The *Warp 11* shaves your entire face simultaneously, and with some of its gratuitously extra blades, trims your nose hair and back hair. The device is a little intimidating, though, and Schick corporation tries to play to the consumer’s fears with their line of commercials about their *109 Pro* product: In one commercial a nervous young man with a bristly chin attempts to use the 110-blade *Warp 11* and finds that his entire face is chewed off by the machine. As his live-in girlfriend accompanies him in the ambulance, his final, blood-curdled words are, “Too . . . many . . . blades . . . ” And then the announcer remarks, “The *109 Pro*: Extreme Comfort and Elegant Simplicity.” In six months, when they take the lead with a number even greater than 110—if their scientists can find one—they will probably be singing a different tune, perhaps a catchy jingle with young clean-shaven men singing “It’s the ul-ti-mate shav-ing ex-perience, with one more blade than Gillette,” and dancing while they are shaving.

ORONATO loves the killer fish that you hate, by which I mean that he is a farmer, breeder, of piranhas, and that you fear these little fish, wary of the damage that they do, their teeth

doing the damage, typically, and the reason is this: You are a farmer, breeder, of tropical vegetarian fish, by which I mean that your fish eat not actually vegetables but plankton, and krill, which include at least protozoa and tiny crustaceans, both animals, but what vegetarian can really avoid eating protozoa? Because your fish might be eaten by piranhas, you hate them, and therefore, in a sense, hate Oronato. Oronato doesn't hate you. It is not in the normal scheme to hate 'down' in the food chain, just as you don't hate plankton or plankton farmers, breeders, by which I mean ponds, since there are none so decrepit as to be actual plankton farmers. In truth, ponds are not your favorite thing. All of that standing water produces an optimal breeding, farming ground for mosquitoes, that wretched pest. Anyway, listen, don't be down on this guy. Oronato has many good qualities. For instance, he is a superb farmer, breeder, of piranhas. Really sharp teeth. Really good at eating your fish, or your hand. Second, he is a philanthropist, donating his killer fish, introducing them to ponds and streams where they flourish, exponential population growth, enhancing the natural ecosystem by purging it of competition. He has even been known to drop a few fish off, surreptitiously, in the local aquariums. Totally free. He has the good taste to breed his fish with a logo on them, a white O with a black outline, so that you can tell where they came from. Third, Oronato likes good pizza.

You power down the cash register in your shop, almost closing time. The register sometimes does not come back on in the morning, which means that you need to tally all of the day's sales, if any, on paper and make change out of your own pocket. You work here alone, selling tropical fish. The fish do not love you, because you sell them, essentially you are a slave trader, you know this, you provide them with great big tanks, say hello, feed them, but also sell them to children, careless fish custodians that they are, a death sentence, probably thrown in the aquarium with tap water, chlorine poisoning the fish rapidly, otherwise, starved to death or asphyxiated a few weeks later by lack of interest. That's sad, but not as sad as this: You are going to have to close the shop. Not just like, in five minutes,

like you do every day, but permanently. Unable to afford protection money, anyway, not willing to pay, Oronato and his fish and his Mafia are driving you out of business. The customers, if any, don't care; sometimes they even try to buy the piranhas secretly introduced to your aquariums—god damn it, how does he do that?—the little boys enraptured by the carnage, but you don't let them; the fish are illegal and immoral! and the white-on-black O shape dances in your nightmares, taunting you, rotating and smiling, devouring the Convict Cichlid and Nassau Grouper and then, you.

Look, there is a tear on your face. Is this not a touching moment in your life?

Why not head to a nearby Timeportation Station and make it better?

You could travel to any time in mankind's history or future. Start a new life! Be rich and powerful!

Concentrating hard, you, I move your, my finger muscle, tripping the exit switch. Now I am looking at the computer screen again.

“Phew,” I say, wiping the tear from my face.

These mind-hijacking *total immersion* advertisements are getting to be really amazing. Ever since we figured out a non-surgical transmission method we've been racing to get a product to market before the legislature can declare it illegal. After that, we will of course get a temporary injunction preventing its enforcement while we enter into a protracted legal battle over the law's constitutionality. Of course we realize that the battle is hopeless, our methods invasive, immoral, probably dangerous, obscenely profitable. But with Benjamin spearheading our legal campaign, with his hyperbole, filibuster, non sequitur, effluence—well, we can expect to be locked up in appeals for at least three years of prime time slots. All of this is off the record, of course.

“Pretty good, huh?”

“Yeah, the ‘O’ is a nice new touch,” I tell him.

“Thanks.”

Steve is our new intern, a tenuous fellow, greasy, crazy hair. He is here for just the summer. He’s been working on some advertisements for our system, and ‘fishmonger’ is coming along nicely. Benjamin has a thing about fish, so he will dig this one, and slipping the ‘O’ in there is an insidious and ingenious—by which I mean definitely not sidious, or genious—idea, *O* being one of BXP Corp.’s chief competitors. Can you believe the balls on them, calling their company just *O*? Anyway, now their logo is on nightmare piranhas in our advertisements, and nobody can stop us until the supreme court.

But how can a company compete with BXP Corp, whose chief product—conveniently disseminated Timeportation Stations, at least one in each major metropolitan area in the US—is based on secret technology, protected by impenetrable patents and tamper-proof hardware? In truth, they cannot. They have no time travel products as such. They are simply a software company that once crossed Benjamin X. Prestley somehow, if I recall correctly, by neglecting to send his rebate check in the mail within six to eight weeks. To get even, Benjamin began a software division of BXP Corp., launched a series of software products, each a direct drop-in replacement for *O*’s offerings, each priced impossibly low in comparison, and also launched a multifaceted smear campaign to discredit them.

Example of smear tactic: Billboards bearing the *O* logo that supported obesity, satanism, drunk driving, or featured “Yo momma so fat that . . . ” jokes. For instance: “Yo momma so fat that she has to get special permission to ride on public transportation.” Benjamin performed all of this treachery under a disposable spinoff company, that company completely bankrupted by the resulting libel suits but the damage already done.

These days BXP Corp. is focused mostly on a positive advertising campaign, in the sense that it extols the virtues of BXP and its services without many negative remarks about other companies. But every once in a while we sneak one in there.

Benjamin knocks on the door.

“Hey guys, how’s it going?” he asks.

“Great,” I tell him, “Want to check out the newest version of ‘fishmonger’?”

“Not right now. I’ve got a dinner date with a client,” he says. “Soon.”

Benjamin is gone again, and you know what that means: *Party Time!* Let’s just break out this other simulation labeled ‘naughty’ ...

I wrote Brian, that’s the boss of our video game company, an e-mail. I had a new idea for a game.

```
Date: Wed, 5 Nov 2018 17:27:30 -0500 (PST)
From: Name of Employee <name@flextronix.com>
To: Brian Baiseurdemère <bbaiseu@flextronix.com>
```

Hello Brian,

Here’s an idea: Let’s create a 3D first-person shooter based on non-Euclidean geometry. It will be even more popular than Continuous Tetris!

- Name

Continuous Tetris is our action puzzle game. It’s like Tetris, but played using all sorts of curved pieces, which can be rotated to arbitrary angles. It’s not possible to fit them together at all.

I got back an e-mail six minutes later:

Date: Wed, 5 Nov 2018 17:33:31 -0500 (PST)
From: Brian Baiseurdemère <bbaiseu@flextronix.com>
To: Name of Employee <name@flextronix.com>

> Here's an idea: Let's create a 3D first-person
shut up

Brian J. Baiseurdemère <bbaiseu@flextronix.com>
"If two wrongs don't make a right, try three."

He always does that. It's not automatic, either, he really responds manually to each e-mail he receives, after quoting the first sentence, with **shut up**. He also prints out the e-mail, then deletes it, then shreds the printed copy with a cross-cut shredder. It is this sort of attention to the employees that makes Flextronix feel like a real family. Sort of like, when I was young, and I'd ask my daddy if we could have Christmas this year, and he would say **shut up**, after six minutes—but at home, I'd have to *continue asking him* for those minutes! Flextronix is different. You only need to say it once. Sometimes we have general meetings, by which I mean that every morning there is a meeting at 8:00am, where all employees need to show up so that we can be counted, there's an OSHA regulation that forbids them from ever losing an employee. The count at the end of the day must equal or exceed the count at the beginning of the day, *or else!* At the meetings we are allowed to discuss things if we stay perfectly silent, I use American Sign Language to communicate with Johan, who has an amusing accent because his limbs have such an enormous disparity. And he is Austrian. Sometimes I have to suppress a chuckle. Sometimes I tell him, in sign language, "You have a big dumb accent." He responds, "I will squish you." The sign for

this is when he closes one eye and makes a little vice with two of his fingers so that I am in the vice, out of focus but still squishable.

Flextronix is full of great times and good people. Here's our company motto: "We put the *fun* in *Flextronix*!" If you'd like to join our team, just pick up an application at our web site!

THERE is some morose singing in the distance, in the distance. Distance twofold because, supposing that you translocated your ears to the first distance, eradicating it, then there would still be singing in the distance *from that new point*. Singing with double present participle suffix because, if he or she were to stop singing*ing*, let's just say *he*, presently, he would still be singing*ing*.

The author, progenitor, of the singing, must be dying. Aren't we all dying? Well, the singer is in the process of being in the process of dying. Thus, the morose wail. Hence, we should tend to him. Therefore, responsible parties making their way to the distance, at which time they make their way to the distance, and find an elderlyly man, in the sense that he is like an elderly man, murmuring, crying, dying. Consequently, he is saying to the parties,

"I'm saying, "I've been shot." "

He is sitting, folded, in some trash bag bags in an alleywayway, meaning a passage through which alleyways pass. His face looks bruised, and he's clutching his one hand with his other hand, which itself is clutching his gut, where he's been punctured.

"Shot by whom?" we ask. It's important to know the killer, so that he can be executed, meaning that the execution itself will be stopped by appeals courts, power failure.

"I'm telling you, "A bullet." "

Those are his final words, and so we wrap him up in a trash bag bag, normally meant to hold trash bags but we feel this is more dignified than wrapping him in an actual trash bag, implying instead that he is, or his body is, trash.

After returning to the distance, several of us carrying the body, sharing the work and workloadload, meaning the burden of having a workload, meaning the burden of having work, we then rere turn to the present reference frame. We phone the coroner, long distance, and he comes to retrieve the body.

The coroner takes the mummified body to the mortuary, meaning a place where mortuaries are collected and embalmed, and then to one of the mortuaries there, and thus he is autopsied, etc., embalmed, his body donated to science.

The cause of death?

Dying.

I took Erik to the casino. I saw this on *Rain Man*. We are going to be rich. Erik is like a little squishy and illegal calculator. We get flamboyant silver leisure suits and dark sunglasses, so that the other players can't judge our hands by our furtive glances. I shaved my eyebrows off—the eyebrows are a notorious *tell*—and grew fake ones one half inch above their original location using concentrated *Rogaine for Men*. These new faux eyebrows do not accurately reflect my emotional state. I have scraped up the lenses of my glasses so that I don't reflect my cards' data to my opponents. Maybe these silver jackets were a bad idea, they may be reflective too, I take a trip to the gift shop and purchase a souvenir can of Krylon auto interior spray paint, matte finish, and start spraying my suit and Erik's. Erik! You little bastard, get back here! He has run off, is working on his Thesis on a fucking cocktail napkin.

Okay, camouflaged, eyebrows obfuscated, etc., Erik and I sit down at a game of poker. Tejas Hold'em, *yeeee haw cowboy*, with

a bunch of high rollers, one hundred dollar minimum, those guys looking like real card sharks but still with their original eyebrows, Erik will be able to see right through them, no problem! And my first hand is $3\clubsuit 4\spadesuit$, Erik says fold, I stay in hoping for the straight, the flop comes out $K\heartsuit Q\heartsuit A\heartsuit$, Erik encourages me again to fold, all I need is the 2 and 5, I raise a hundred, two hundred, all in, the next card comes as the $5\heartsuit$, *yes*, just one more card, but the river is the $7\clubsuit$, *god damn it, Erik, get me the good cards, use your mind power*. Well, I'm out of dough, now, so we sell our watches and my wedding ring for a few bucks; we'll win it back, don't worry honey.

We head to the slot machines. These have the best odds. We rush up and down each isle, depositing a dollar coin, pulling the lever, moving to the next. The grannies and their popcorn buckets filled with retirement funds give us a look like, *what the hell are you doing*, as if they have some special strategy.

When playing this one slot machine, the ultimate jackpot is the so called *Infinite Eights*. When your rollers come up 8 8 8, like that, there is a little bonus game. Miniature rollers inside the holes of the numerals start going themselves, and, if those all come up eight, then smaller rollers inside those also begin going. There are rollers inside those, *ad infinitum*. Like this:

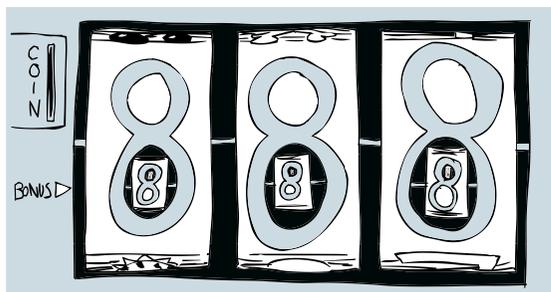


Figure 3: Infinite Eights slot machine

Here's the catch. If this happens an even number of times before rolling a cherry or something else that isn't an 8, then you don't

get any money at all. If it happens an odd number of times, your jackpot doubling each time, you get a huge payout, and all of the grannies come over to shake your hand, to touch your suit in hopes of getting a small part of your magic, perhaps that aerosol acetone smell is some sort of luck juice, black on their fingers and impossible to wash off, flammable, their cigarettes lighting their fingers on fire later, dying alone in their beds, broke, lonely. But, you can never tell if you are going to get an even or odd number of eights, and sometimes it goes on for hours, your total climbing . . . $\$1.845 \times 10^{19}$. . . $\$0$. . . $\$3.689 \times 10^{19}$. . . $\$0$, etc. You have to tag team it with Erik, sending him to the bar to get carbohydrate fuel for you, standing there squinting at the eights within eights, trying to remember the parity count and sometimes having to recount from the beginning, this machine must be huge to accommodate all of those eights, the centerpiece of the casino, which is Native American themed, the Native Americans having a piece of land due to some ancient deal and not being subject to our statutory laws such as prohibition on gambling and prostitution. The *Infinite Eights* game is based on the Native American Indian belief that we all flow from the same never-ending circle of life, that circle actually being figure-eight shaped, *hakuna matata*, all of us coming from that same shape including *wampum*. It's giant, a solid diamond staircase leading up to the machine at the center of the enormous tee-pee that comprises the casino's main lobby, sending smoke signals out of its top to attract players, tantalizing them with its payoffs—I've made, either a space billion dollars or else zero dollars, not sure yet, and *fuck*, the casino is closing, the manager has come to ask me to leave, to cash in my chips and say good-night, and I beg him for just a few more moments, the machine will stop dealing 8's soon, I'm sure, just one more second . . .

THE next? morning I awake in her bed, my Netscape shirt hanging, lying on the ground, Norwegian Wood playing in my brain's stereo system. Let me tell you, too: my brain has an awesome stereo system, I'm talking, Super Audio CD, with 1-bit DAC and full optical interconnects, *wow* and *flutter* below measur-

able levels, total harmonic distortion in the parts-per-million, High Definition TV, DVD, MPEG, MPC-2, WWW, .COM, etc. It probably cost my parents about a jillion bucks to have it installed. When John Lennon sings, “. . . I was alone, this bird had flown / *blah blah something something* / isn't it good, Norwegian wood,” I practically shit my pants, that's how good it sounds. Speaking of which, where is what's-her-name?

I stand, and, wowsers, that must have been some party, ah yes, the club . . . *Ultrafonik*. On my party scale, this ranks highly, because:

- I did not wake up in my own bed
- I woke up in someone else's bed
- It is a girl's bed
- I am not wearing clothes
- I have inexplicable wounds on my face and arms
- I don't remember what happened

I play a little something called “groggy wake-up noise” on my mouth speaker. This is intended to alert those within earshot that I am awake, but to avoid that strange embarrassment I feel when I speak and there is nobody around to hear me. Suddenly the stopping of the shower noise makes me realize that it was previously running, and she steps from it, looks out of the bathroom at me. Here is the layout of the apartment so that you can accurately perceive this scene. The bed is arranged against the Northwest wall, let's just call it North even though the great Magnet War of 2011 permanently disabled the Earth's magnetic field, and anyway, I don't know what direction North was or is. Bed in the NW corner. By bed, I mean mattress on the floor, maybe like a futon, to give her the benefit

of the doubt. Along the South wall, then is a door which, by its peep-hole we can deduce is the entrance to the apartment. In the southwest corner is a chest of drawers, I love that one, sounding like some Dungeons and Dragons item, gauntlet of strength, amulet of healing, chest of drawers, that Gary Gygax was a creepy one though, wasn't he? Anyway, on the North wall there are windows, we're up pretty high, I guess, sunlight beams in, every once in a while sliced by the shadow of a Floating Privacy Invasion Drone hovering around, picking up on my Class I Citizen badge's signals and heading to another window instead. Are you getting this? In the Northeast corner, I swear, every compass direction is occupied by some other trivial detail, just bear with me here, there is a grandfather clock, out of place, an heirloom, better not mention it, might bring up bad memories, and in the East wall a doorless passageway into a modest kitchen. Then, beyond that in the Southeast corner, saving the best for last, a naked girl peeking her head out around the corner of the bathroom door, dripping on the tile, this apartment well maintained, no cracks in the grout or creeping fungus or

“Good morning,” she insists.

musty aroma.

“Hey,” I tell her.

She retracts back into the bathroom to do whatever. Do you see how, after describing the scene you now have such a vivid picture of this? Perhaps you have envisioned this girl yourself, perhaps she is some lost lover, some high school crush, some girl you saw depicted on the Internet. Perhaps she is you. Let me interrupt this image, we should really have done this earlier, but the details are so boring, so incidental, aren't they? Let's do it post-modern style. She pokes her head out again, and the scene freeze frames on a flattering grin, her hair impossibly well-styled considering that she just got out of the shower, and her name appears on the bottom of the movie screen like this:

Liza Anderstet

Now you can see clearly that she has short dark hair, it looks black but that could just be because it is wet. She seems to be a native Netherlander, good teeth, looks like she could take a nice bite out of an apple with no problem, solid eyes, not crossed or lazy, or glazed over like a robot's, suffering from glaucoma, cute, okay, now have you imagined her?

Then there is a voice-over,

Liza grew up on a piranha farm in rural Holland, raised by farmers but her biological parents revolutionaries, etc. etc., dropped out of University, was studying psychology, probably, moved into her own place, likes to read books, go to the clubs, class II citizen, works as a projectionist at the cinema, etc.

Of course, I don't know any of this yet.

"Did we have a sack race?" I inquire, putting on my underwear.

"Oh, yeah," she confirms, giggling.

I imagine our life together. I'm like, I don't know, in my twenties I guess, and she's probably in her twenties, so that means that, adding those together we'd be about 50, probably able to still play tennis and roll in the hay at that age, okay, not so bad.

"Do you know how to play tennis?" I probe, externalizing my narrative, zipping up my jean pants.

"Space tennis?" she postulates, still doing whatever girls are doing in the bathroom for so long.

“No, Earth tennis,” I clarify. Space tennis is played in micro-gravity, mostly by aging businessmen with osteoporosis, think of it like 20th century golf. She must think I am pretty sophisticated to play Space tennis.

“No . . . yes,” she vacillates.

She’s dressed and I’m dressed, and we decide to spend some more time together. We’ll get lunch. We take the fireman pole down to the lobby of her apartment building and walk down the street. She tells me that we played the “are you nervous?” game last night, on my suggestion. The “are you nervous?” game is played like this: after explaining the rules, I place my hand on her knee, look her deeply in the eyes, and ask, “are you nervous?” If she says no, I move my hand slightly up her leg, up towards the critical region, the crux, and ask again, “are you nervous?” I lose if I cannot ask her with a straight face, each time I must be more and more melodramatic than the last, eventually kneeling and asking as if proposing to her, “My sweetest *****, we’ve been together for some time now, and, are you nervous?” She loses if she says “yes,” in which case I lose, too. This is a lose-lose situation, mutually assured destruction; she loses the trivial, childish game and I lose the sack race. As it turns out, we both won the game, because eventually in the are you nervous game, I stop asking if she is nervous and start taking clothes off, etc.

I say ***** because I can’t remember her name, of course, no problem for you, the movie caption told you **Liza Anderstet**, being short for Anders’ Daughter, which was the name of her caretaking father, not the revolutionary. This is really embarrassing. When we get to the commercial district, I try some sly tactics: I try to select restaurants where there will be a wait, hoping that she will put her name on the list and I will be able to overhear it. But nobody is here today, they are all down at the port for some event. We are seated immediately, even at the coolest restaurant. I steer the conversation to this:

“Hey, want to see my signature?”

Of course, how can she refuse?

I draw my signature. It is extravagant, unreadable. Anything counts as a legal signature, did you know that? I tell her, and she didn't know that.

“What does yours look like?”

She does it on another napkin. It is very minimal, artistic, except that the dot on some letter, an *i* or *j* or *ö*, is a little heart. I promise myself that she does that out of deliberate subversion, rather than an honest desire to profess greeting card style “love” on every check she writes. But, alas, I can't read what it says.

THIS is a murder mystery. *I was the murderer.* Now you need to figure out how I did it. *It was with the lead pipe in the study.* Now you need to figure out why. *I wanted to collect the insurance.* Now you need to figure out *who* ...

Name of murdered character's body relaxes on the study floor, blood from his head soaking into an expensive carpet, maybe just a movie prop, but surely ruining it. His *Wall Street Journal* lies next to him, opened to an article called *100 Most Influential Entrepreneurs from the Future*. A smouldering tobacco pipe was there too, whatever. Sound the alarm! The police are coming. It was the butler that did it. The police are here, the butler questioned, released, his alibi solid. At the time of the murder, he was getting plastic surgery to disguise himself to look like Mafia crime boss Guido Italo. It was to be an unprecedented *coup d'etat*. During the surgery, amazingly, that very same crime boss was killed in an accidental explosion at a racing event. The butler will just need to arrive in the proper place at the proper time, making an entrance with flair like, "The reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated," and *mama mia*, take control of the syndicate.

The police questioned the other persons who were present.

Potential Suspect #1. The housekeeper. She was alone in her room, but, who could rightly suspect such a sweet old lady? ✓

Potential Suspect #2. The professor. He seemed sinister enough, but at the time of the murder was visiting with ...

Potential Suspect #3. The date. She was talking with the professor about astronomy and had no known motive, since the insurance money would not go to her until she wed the deceased in one month. ✓✓

Potential Suspect #4. The police. The police arrived conveniently *after* the crime had been committed, but could that have been a ruse? Furthermore, the police derive direct financial gain from murders. Nonetheless, the police were inclined to find their own story believable and to clear themselves as suspects. ✓

I was there, too, but escaping through one of the manor's many secret passages.

Who would have killed Benjamin X. Prestley?

The reporters started showing up. There was the guy from the *Journal*, whose article naming Benjamin as the #1 most influential entrepreneur from the future had just been published, a certain Joseph Hayes, his flash popping and his microphone all up in the faces of the police detectives and forensic technicians and “Do you suspect foul play?” and “Any possible suspects?” and “Who would have killed Benjamin X. Prestley, beloved lawyer and friend, dearly departed, we gather here today to pay respects to a man who has touched so many of our lives, and who, in passing, has left a hole in our hearts filled with such great sorrow, that we wonder how we can carry on? But we must, we must carry on because this is *our* story, because if every time someone died we all just turned over and gave up, even if we know that this entire universe was created for that one person’s time travel event, and that we are all just empty soulless replications of our real selves in other universes, well, that would be really sad for us!” Until the detective, that empty soulless replicant, gets him out of there. But the reporters are demanding answers, so imagine their surprise when someone struts in, and that someone is none other than

“Benjamin!” his date exclaims, incredulous.

“Susan, what’s going on?”

“Benjamin, you’ve been murdered!”

“How is this possible!”

“Blunt trauma to the head causing a contusion of the frontal cortex, massive epistaxis and intracerebral hematoma.”

Benjamin performed a quick field autopsy on his body to confirm the cause of death. He checked the dental records in order to make sure that the body was, in fact, him.

“Do you have any suspects?”

“We’ve interviewed all of the people present, but all of them have come up clean!”

“The manor has many secret passages through which the perpetrator may have escaped,” Benjamin reports.

“We’ll check that right away,” says the police detective.

Benjamin sits down in his favorite armchair, flabbergasted, and observes the body from afar, and puzzles over the circumstances of his death.

“I died of a nosebleed?”

“And hematoma,” says Susan.

Benjamin had just returned from a one-day trip to Neo Amsterdam, a dinner date, travel by ultrafast *rocket train*¹, and was too train-lagged and hungover to solve this on his own.

“What we need,” he says, “is a top-notch forensic investigator.”

Simon Bailey.

W E need to meet an old friend of mine for lunch. He’s in town for just a few hours, his airplane making a long stay-over at Philadelphia International Airport, an obscene detour

¹Rocket trains are the fastest mode of Earth travel: a series of underground vacuum tunnels directly between popular cities on the surface, for instance, to travel between Beijing and New York City, one travels right through the core of the planet, like a child purporting to dig a hole to China! Because the trains travel in an unobstructed straight line in a vacuum, their main limitation is acceleration; only a certain level of acceleration is tolerable to a passenger, which promptly switches to deceleration of the same magnitude at the exact center of the journey. Even the longest trips are only a few minutes in length, though quite expensive.

for his flight from Alberta to Chicago. His company buys the cheapest flights, the most stressfully brief lay-overs, running, *last call for Mr. So-and-so*, or otherwise excruciatingly lengthy, and for these chooses the most boring or unsavory airports, ones in dry counties with no duty-free shops, or racially polarized high crime-rate cities, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Philadelphia, please remain seated until the captain turns off the fasten seatbelt sign. The local time is eleven-oh-eight a.m., the temperature six degrees, with a windchill of negative fourteen degrees. We hope you enjoy your stay! His office once forced him to fly as cargo, he tells me, shaking my hand, sizing me up, on our way to a local restaurant, my choice, we'll have *cheesesteaks*. We sit down in a booth, covered in carvings by the local high school kids, lacquered, carved again, sure, pull up a chair and join us, check out his tattoo: On his left hand, "PEN 15" in bold face Roman capitals. He still has it! When we were very young, in elementary school, we played a little joke. "Hey, do you want to join our new cool club?" "Indeed I do!" "It's called the PEN 15 club. All you need to do is write PEN 15 on your hand!" "All right! In fact, I am so devoted to this new 'PEN 15' club that I've decided to have its name tattooed professionally into my hand!" And off he went to the tattoo parlor, discounted for children under 13. I wonder if he has noticed, yet. I suspect that he would never have it removed with laser surgery, being deathly afraid of lasers, having grown up in a house made entirely of mirrors. Perhaps though he would have it altered, letters added to make it spell something different. For instance, he could add "O" and "HOURS A DAY" to advertise his services for the ladies. Maybe that's a dumb idea. Do you have any suggestions? His coat off, rubbing his hands to warm them up, he brandishes the mark directly, smiles and says, genuinely enthusiastic,

"Hey, man, PEN 15 club forever!"

As the conversation winds on I will fish a pen from my pocket and draw on my own hand below the table, hoping not to crush his spirit. You're left out of the conversation, which is mostly about

shared childhood experiences, the time that his ankle was caught in the bear trap and that was pretty funny, ha ha, sometimes I try to include you, talk about your school and your family, but there is no connection. Oh well, that's not important, he will be gone in less than an hour, perhaps not back through here again, perhaps realizing our childhood pranks in one hot flash moment on the plane and deciding it best not to ever write or call, but maybe he would show up at my funeral out of some holier-than-thou shit.

Our food comes, his a *Philadelphia Cheese Steak* and mine a *Philadelphia Cheese Steak* and yours a salad, for your low carb diet, his a *Rolling Rock* and yours a *Diet Coke* and mine a glass of grain alcohol on the rocks, my breath highly flammable, a weapon. I challenge anyone in the restaurant to battle. I do not do this verbally, I broadcast a telepathic message and recline in my seat confidently. *I challenge any telepath in the restaurant to non-contact battle*, here are the rules: (1) During the battle we are only allowed to breathe on each other and (2) we will do so near candles. You dislike it when I make such scenes, poking at your salad, I am sure that you have not eaten any of it, simply messed its contents up, starving yourself out of some bizarrely-concieved notion that your own hunger punishes me. Man, this is a good cheesesteak. My friend, normally acutely oblivious to subtle social cues, picks up on our silent non-contact non-breathing battle, says well, look at the time, he must be getting be getting back to the airport, pays the whole check, and we drop him off, *see you later*.

“**F**IRE first torpedo!” the captain shouts.

I fire. This means I press a button. It seems to me that the captain could have a button which directly triggers the same mechanism, but, what kind of fool suggests a way to make himself obsolete? There's a dull explosion from within the chamber, and there the torpedo goes, we can watch it on our radar screens, watch its trajectory and track it until it explodes. By the way, we've gradu-

ated to modern radar technology, where there is no sweeping green line on an oscilloscope screen. We have false color digital readouts, in real time. If I want, I can pull my mouse over to the torpedo and drive it around by drag-and-drop. If I right click, and select **explode** from the resulting pop-up menu, then the torpedo explodes. Just like that. This submarine is *user friendly*.

“Fire second torpedo!” the captain commands over intercom.

I press a nearby button to fire torpedo two, ho hum. Actually, now that half the torpedo bays are empty we need to load them up with new bombs. I get one of my underlings to do this.

“Reload first torpedo!” I shout.

One of my underlings, I forget his name, the other kids call him “Blue Dog” or “Blue Dawg,” I guess, cooler, I’ll have to check the roster again—it is important to stay on top of things, to know the names of your crew members, real names that are appropriate for reprimand; for instance, if his last name is Smith then I will say, “Seaman Smith!” and he will stand, lightning bolt stiff, salute, “Yes sir!” (why is it that they do not make eye contact, and just stare obliquely past me?) and I will say “What the hell are you doing, son?” and he will say, “Reloading first torpedo bay, sir!” and then I say, “Carry on!”, unable to think of a reprimand—this Blue Dog presses a button that causes the automated reloading mechanism to engage, and some robot arm sticks a torpedo in there, and then the door shuts and the bay fills with water. For the readers who also live in submarines: Do you ever worry that the door mechanism will fail, the robot arm unable to close it or possessed with some suicidal robot virus, and that the flooding of the torpedo bay will cause the flooding of the entire lower deck, drowning you and leaving the submarine defenseless, or I should say offenseless, the submarine’s chief methods of defense being (1) evasive manoeuvres and (2) drifting silently, dead in the water. I have this worry—“Seaman Jameson!” “Yes sir!” “Are you double-checking the seals on the torpedo bay as I

requested?” “Absolutely, sir!” “Carry on!”

In order to check the seals he presses a button labeled **check seals**. I guess you probably care more about the nature of the conflict than the names of the buttons we’re pressing, okay: The year is 20** and we’re at war. It doesn’t matter who we’re fighting, but we’re the good guys, the Britons, and this submarine, the HMS Cuneiform, is the flagship of the Armada. Wow, here’s a button called **reprimand soldier**. I press it. Right now we’re engaged in a torpedo battle with an enemy submarine, but we’re totally not worried about this one. For one thing, the enemy submarine does not have any torpedoes, as far as we can tell. All it does is swim around humming otherworldly tunes, some sort of strange sonar. Second, our ship is equipped with the ultimate weapon: an ICBM-mounted magnetomic bomb. The magnetomic bomb, when detonated, will create a magnetic wave so fierce, so marvelous, that who knows what will happen? And we are so trigger happy that our enemy is afraid to attack us: if they do, we might just fire the magnetomic bomb! The purpose of this war, which we call *Operation Profound Justice*, is to eradicate evil, and that we will. Oh, hey, here’s another button, called **launch magnetomic missile**. I press it.

IN the lobby of the Starbucks Hotel I need to make my drop-off, and to make my drop-off I need to find my mark and engage in a challenge-response protocol disguised to sound like normal conversation. For instance, here is me attempting to make contact:

“Lovely weather we’re having, isn’t it?” I ask.

“Fuck off,” she says.

This is not the proper response, so she does not get the suitcase full of spy gear and a tracking device and a bomb designed to explode when she opens the suitcase to get her spy gear out. She is a double agent or I am a triple agent, or a double-crossing single agent, or something, I don’t remember. Anyway, the mission is that she is dead. Exploded by the suitcase bomb. I try again,

“Lovely weather we’re having, isn’t it?” I ask.

“It’s ten degrees out and sleetng,” she thinks.

I shrug and continue strolling around the lobby. She’s not the one either. I don’t like this “challenge” phrase very much, it’s too inaccurate to be delivered seriously, yet so ordinary sounding that it comes across as a creepy pickup line.

“Lovely weather we’re having, isn’t it?” I ask.

“Oh, I don’t think so, deary, but we’re on our way to Florida where the sun is always shining. I’ve packed my swimsuit and sun-tan lotion. Have you ever been? Oh, it’s just so mild, so pleasant. Our grandchildren are meeting us down there, would you like to see some pictures? This is Tim, and this is little George . . . ”

I have to get away from that one. Another problem with this challenge is the universal appeal of weather as a conversation topic. I don’t get it, personally. There are lots of things that affect us all: the pollen count, volatile organic compounds, suitcase bombs, coronal mass ejections. I try, again:

“Lovely weather we’re having, isn’t it?” I ask.

“Mommy!!” she shouts and runs away.

Someone approaches me from behind, says,

“Unusual for this time of year.”

“The Eagle flies at midnight,” I respond.

“And also at other times of the day.”

“His beak is shaped for convenience of bug swallowing.”

“Evolution is the survival of the fittest!”

“That is one fit bird!”

This completes our protocol. Our identities confirmed, we head to her suite to make the exchange. Now this part, I like. The meaningless, anonymous sex with no fear of sexually transmitted diseases. The CIA gives us special secret advanced drugs that make us immune to all that crap. She opens the suitcase on her bed, the explosive mechanism designed not to detonate if in proximity to a safeguard radio transmitter that I keep sewn into the lining of my sport jacket. I check the suitcase full of cash, counterfeit Euros probably, indistinguishable from the real thing. So real that the serial numbers are reserved from the mint through a backdoor process. Then we do it; I call her Agent X and she calls me Agent Y, we are named after our chromosomes, also named after the last two letters of *SEXY*. Ten million . . . Euros and . . . spy cameras and . . . *ohhhh*. In the morning I leave a note in her lipstick on the bathroom mirror, but she is already gone.

LET’S take the infix ‘z’ notation preferred by rizappers and gizangstas. I would like to propose the thizeory that this trend is actually part of the international Polish conspiracy. Case in point: Poland has had cities Bydgoszcz (since 1346) and Szczecin (since 1243), each predating any gizangsta speak by hundreds of years. I guess their idea is, if they can get the emerging American pop culture to be able to pronounce the names of these cities, then they will be one step closer to world dizomination.

Speaking of Poland, there was a polish duke named Boguslaw. What the hell kind of name is that? Anyway, speaking of bogus laws, here’s one: Nothing can be made of iron or steel, or any other ferrous metal. Ever since the great Magnet War of 2011, in which a massive, standing magnetic field was created by the inexplicable detonation of a one-of-a-kind magnetomic bomb by the British, ferrous objects have become quite dangerous, by which I mean immobile; sticking to the floor, slowly pushing themselves through, seeking the ultra-dense core where the magnetomic bomb was exploded, in Poland,

now called Magnet Zone, the area off-limits to people and deadly to animals, cars and railroad tracks and bridges from around the world torn from their homes and sucked to that spot, compressed, squished. There are good science fiction movies set in this location, or a Bollywood replica of it; example: “Iron Lung”, a cyberpunk epic about a life form that evolves from the mass of computer parts and internal combustion engines at the Magnet Zone, self-aware and bent on the destruction of humans, a musical, of course, but the creature is hardly able to move and dance because of its irresistible attraction to itself. America in its brashness fires a nuclear weapon into its center, but then the beast is split in two halves, mutually repulsive, and this merely fuels its anger. Eventually the monster is put to rest by what? a damsel whom he captures and who convinces him that violence is not the answer, that we are all one, singing and dancing, and to just have a drink of this fine whiskey, oops! It’s poison! Just like that. Also a popular offshoot of the Magnet Zone are reality TV shows like “American Magnetator”, a cross between *Survivor* and *American Gladiators*, where contestants—hand picked to insinuate a charming but irrepresentative cross-section of the American population, approximating closely the demographic of the viewing audience *plus one demographic ‘success’ unit*, with the intention that each viewer has someone on the show with whom he or she can identify, but, at the same time, feel the slight tinge of envy for, jealousy that keeps the viewer firmly affixed to the television and in the proper frame of mind to buy products in order to satisfy that envy—are pit against twelve biowarriors, genetically engineered with gigantic muscles and extremely short, unbreakable necks, with names like *Fission* and *Icicle* and *Chlamydia*, in feats of skill and strength, all set in the Magnet Zone. The biowarriors are trained in these events; example: “It’s a Small World, After All,” where a lump of crushed magnetic car metal is used as a tiny planet, the participants don boots with tiny iron particles in them, thus sticking them to the planet, and they have to run around on it, scoring points by shooting each other with air-powered weapons or whatever. These events are back-to-back, all day, all night, until one of the contestants passes out from exhaustion, or is eliminated due to

a low score, or is voted off by the other contestants. In truth the law prohibiting ferrous metals is not that bogus; instead we make all of our knives and guns out of ceramic, with the added advantage that they now pass undetected through airport security; our computers out of bioplastic; our cars out of corn starch. It's a brave new world we live in, but someone has to do it!

This is a murder mystery.

I reach my hand into the goo, a soupy solution of glucose and flour, and raise it out again, dripping, horror movie, web-fingered, swamp thing, coated. I make handprints on the ground, shaped as if I was walking on my hands, actually just one hand, I realize this now, that the thumbs would be pointing mutually inward if I was using both hands, maybe I am walking on my right hand palm-down and my left hand palm-up. This would be painful, but not impossible. I wheel the barrel of serum along, making handprints as I go, this is a really good idea, handprints on the tiles, until I reach the body. I dip each of the body's hands in the goo as well, and then strew them haphazardly on the floor. Then, the ants. I release the colony near a crack in the molding, making sure that their pheromone trail leads to a plausible entry point. I have to cover all of the bases. Next, with a kung-fu boot I make a firm indent in the deceased's face. Hi-ya! The ants are crawling to his hands and my hand-prints, now, attracted by the sugars. I break the window, knock over some plates and magazines, this is the kitchen, I pull a carving knife out of the wooden block on the counter, smear its handle with the goo on the dead body's hands, and toss it to the ground near his feet. Finally, I fire a gun into the wall, the ceiling fan, and the body's gut. I am trying to create confusion, to leave meaningless and contradictory evidence, to implicate bogeymen and spectres, to draw attention away from the true cause of death. Here is one potential bizarre story I am intending to corroborate: There was this Jackie Chan film, one of his many, the title unimportant, where Jackie's character was for some reason locked in a jail cell or manger or something in a foreign country. He couldn't speak the

language so he couldn't talk to anyone or do pretty much anything except for become a kung fu wizard, learning only from an instruction manual that he found, only, because he couldn't read properly he learned to do all of the moves upside-down, walking around on his hands and punching with his feet. So here's the story: this Jackie Chan character, just, a real-life one, not one from a movie, hip-hops into the kitchen on his hands, his right hand palm down and his left hand palm-up, and then ninja-kicks the deceased in the face, killing him instantly. Both Jackie and the assailed had both been playing patty-cake patty-cake, prior to the altercation, but with real cake mix, sugar and flour, get it? There are a dozen other potential explanations for the ants, the broken glass, the hand prints, the boot print, the gunshots, etc. Will anybody be able to figure it out?

Contestant #1: a bright young lass from the university of Oxford, by name of Nora Dove, 25, bright, young, sexy, hello. She surveys the scene, walking carefully, avoiding the hand prints and ants, who have now gathered on the prints, swarming, forming animate hand-shaped ant colonies, the two-dimensional projection of a cartoon swarm of bees or mosquitoes formed into a man shape, a hand pointing *that-a-way*, or tiny fish formed into a giant fish to scare away the larger but not giant fish with the caption *organize!*, a campaign for labor unions, I guess, then the cartoon bear gets his amusingly anachronistic DDT sprayer out, and sprays the bug man directly with that puff, they wheeze, die, the DDT seeping into the soil and causing the softening and inviability of bald eagle eggs, very unpatriotic, but nonetheless smarter than the average bear. Those are the handprints. She pays close attention to that, puzzled, but much closer attention to the gunshot wound, I am disappointed, in her puzzlement she is regressing, retreating to the comfort of her training, not thinking *outside the box*. Her story: the assailant enters through the window, the deceased, who was baking, grabs a knife in an attempt to ward the attacker off, some shots are fired in the struggle, one shot hits his stomach, the deceased slowly dying, crawls across the floor on his hands to his final deathbed. Ludicrous! Inaccurate, and, moreover, implausible. Fail!

Contestant #2: a pseudoscientific “empath” Ph.D. from the un-accredited University of Wiccan Philosophy and Star Trek, Bakersfield, California; Jacob Suarez. Jacob has a completely unorthodox, crazy style, at first intriguing: He hums, closes his eyes, two fingers pointing at each temple, squishes up his face, concentrating, turns, points, is pointing at the kitchen counter. He opens his eyes, walks towards the counter, and looks at a tiny spec, an eyebrow hair, which he picks up with tweezers and places in a baggie. He repeats this process, picking up a piece of dirt, an ant, a contact lens, a fragment of broken glass, a button off the deceased’s shirt. Ultimately, however, his style is impotent: All of this evidence collected, great, but there’s no purpose to it, no *Gestalt*, and he collects it all together and meditates over it, falling into a deep rhythmic ruminative slumber, perhaps never to awaken. No story, no point. Fail!

Contestant #3: a spry fellow from NYU, undergraduate major in performance Viola, the Violin’s larger and more retarded cousin, Master’s degree in forensic psychology. Simon Bailey is his name, and crime solving is his game. Here’s how he plays: He walks around, looking at each of the salient features of the scene, shaking his head. First, the ant-covered hand prints. Second, the knife. Third, the broken window, glass mostly on the window frame, the screen still closed. Next, the bullet holes in all sorts of places. Then, the boot print, et cetera. When he’s done looking, he says,

“This doesn’t make any sense.”

No response.

“Most of these things appear to be placed in a deliberate attempt at confusion,” he says.

“The body was lying on the ground, dead, when the bullet was fired into it; there is hardly any blood, and the window was broken from the inside,” he continues.

“Furthermore, the body has already been embalmed, indicating

that it was not a victim of murder, at least not tonight.”

“Go on,” I say.

“I believe that the following scenario took place: the deceased’s body was donated to science, specifically, forensic science, and was deposited here as a test, an entrance examination to the F.B.I. Crime Lab. The body was shot, pasted, and stomped, the scene rigged with bizarre and misleading clues, and the inductees invited to deduce the method and circumstances of death.”

“Right, but who did it?” I ask.

“You,” he deadpans.

Success! Now *that* is thinking outside the box.

“Simon Bailey, welcome to the F.B.I. Crime Lab,” I say.

I glance an orange sign out of the corner of my eye and suddenly remember what day it is. Today, the Vice Vanguard of the Ultimate Planets of Megatonia is visiting, arriving at the central port. This explains the low turnout at the restaurants and, *Christ*, let’s get down there! So we take public transportation down to the port, Neo Amsterdam being rather convenient and pollution-free despite its fascist government, and, speaking of fascists, as we go over the top of a hill, you can see the New Oppressor’s building to the West. Actually, what you see is the colossal statue that the building is constructed within. Think of the Statue of Liberty, a beacon of hope, and symbol of freedom, send us your huddled masses, except, of course, this is a Statue of Totalitarianism. It’s shaped like a giant concrete *The Man*, poised in such a way that he is clearly in the process of keeping you down.

***** is sitting next to me on the electron bus; I took the window seat and we’re not saying anything, not fighting or pissed at each other or bored, just each enjoying the silence, recovering from our

hangovers, relaxing, a mere accessory, an automaton. No, excuse my outburst, I am sure she has her own thoughts. I'm excited to see the Vice Vanguard. He's, like, the second most important person within our round-trip light sphere², the Vanguard himself (Earth name Komax Coolfaw) being the most important, but rarely making public appearances, instead he spends his ultraextended life in a deep freeze intended to slow his metabolism and brain activity and retard the process of aging; he's already like a thousand years "old," but his body is fresh and taut like a six year old's, and every once in a while

²The universe may be ever-expanding and infinite, but nothing travels faster than light. Suppose we make some event occur, like flapping a butterfly's wing in some tea in China. Now, as time passes, imagine a sphere expanding around China at the speed of light; only things within this sphere can have been affected by that wing flapping. The round-trip light sphere allows the Ultimate Planets of Megatonia to assert its dominance over all other life forms as follows: A broadcast is made, at an arbitrary location, high energy, broadcast all through space, of the following message, continuously: "Ultimate Planets of Megatonia rules and Vanguard Komax is your leader. If you object, please respond and you will be destroyed." Now, that same antenna or one like it listens for responses. Because the message needs to be received at a potential objector's station, and then a response sent, a round trip, the speed of the light sphere's expansion must be halved, i.e., a round trip light sphere. It may be that it takes some time for the respondent to process and decode the message, to formulate a response and then to broadcast that response. Thus, the round trip light sphere may be parameterized by a constant ϵ , an upper bound on that time. *math is boring* However, this time does not vary with the distance from the original broadcast location *shut up shut up*, so it subtracts merely a constant length from the radius of the sphere, namely, $\epsilon \times c$, where c is the speed of light. This naïve description does not take into account the curvature of space, nor does it account for the possibility **BORING** that the recipients may anticipate the message, or perhaps are broadcasting a similar or identical message, therefore starting their transmission before receiving the Ultimate Planets claim. Therefore, we can in fact claim, to be pedantic, rule over all life in our *shut up math sux* round-trip light sphere $_{\epsilon}$ and also rule over any precognitive life (with a prescience factor of δ measuring the number of seconds ahead of time that a life form perceives an event, minus the response time constant ϵ) within the larger round-trip light sphere $_{\epsilon-\delta}$. However, we cannot account at all for life forms so clairvoyant or so close-by that they transmitted their rebuttal *before* the first broadcast—because we only began listening *after* making that broadcast—and who then decided that the matter is settled and are now waiting, ready to preexperience being blown up and then to be blown up.

they thaw his brain out, just enough so that he can perform some important task, like appointing a new Vice Vanguard or issuing a statement, or singing a rallying song after some national emergency, and the rest of the time he spends at a leisurely brain rate, reading a continuous, all-year-round *State of the Union* address at one syllable per hour, that his team of speechwriters prepare for him. Important, but boring. Not dashing and sexy like the Vice Vanguard, Earth name Choochu Shuba, and, for real, the one who actually does all the work to run all of those planets. I've never really been outside the greater Neo Amsterdam metropolitan area, except of course when it was called just Amsterdam, and we lived on the farm and I rode a horse, and mom died in a tragic fire. This is our stop! So we get up and get off, thanking the computer program that drove the electron bus so optimally, and *jesus*, there's a big crowd. I ask a girl nearby who's dressed in hot pink/hot green Tokyo fashion if he's here yet.

"Naw," she chews.

The crowd is too dense and deep from here; we'll never be able to see anything after his ship lands. I suggest going around to the side, finding an underutilized area, a fire escape or a creative angle not yet investigated and ravaged by this hive mind, flowing sea of people and eyes, all hoping to see the same thing, an event that they can tell their children and weblogs about, only, how will they distinguish their experience from the hundreds of thousands of other people here? What do they hope to see or do? Personally, my objective is twofold: to catch a close-up glimpse of Choochu, if possible, to determine if he is indeed as dreamy as the centerfold in *Alien Megastar* makes him out to be, or is he airbrushed? and, if so, to fully bask in that image, and second, to experience the event merely inasmuch as its popularity and attendance creates value: all the people, unified and cheering, scream as loud as you want, shout it out, some girl lifted onto her boyfriend's shoulders to flash the Vice Vanguard, the crowd elated, aligned to a singular cause, energy combined not additively but multiplicatively, on the verge of riot. *What? He's not coming? Start a riot. Someone has a plastic bag filled with sarin*

nerve toxin? Make a run for it, trample, cause a wave and hope that you're on the crest, but not whitewater. Know what I mean? Perhaps I am perverse for imagining such things, not that I wish them to happen to these people or myself or my date, but in truth I relish the sense, or sensation, that they are imminent, impending, inevitable. He agrees to the plan, to make a flanking maneuver, and we head down a side street to the left. Here there are some robot kids, rebels, using a folded-up orange sign as rolling paper for their silicon cigarettes, deliberately not participating in the visit, also deliberately flouting the prohibition against robot drugs, but, in a sense, still participating in the orgy, the gravity. I smile and we go around, through another alley, not sure where, really, but there are no people here; we choose the least savory of the alleys at any given choice point, sometimes second guessing ourselves, thinking that, if another couple is doing the same thing, choosing the most unappealing passage, then perhaps those passages that are so overtly repulsive are instead desirable after all, and so we choose the most mediocre corridors, aware that our reasoning is circular but before we know it, amazingly, we emerge on a shallow rooftop *immediately overlooking the landing site!* I give ***** a hug to show my appreciation; what is his name again? And we stand at the edge of the roof, and just as we are settling in, there is a deep rumbling in the sky, and the crowd starts to cheer, "Shu-ba! Shu-ba! Shu-ba!" girls waving their sad, pathetic, beautiful homemade fluorescent signs, *I ♡ U, Choochu!*; *Your #1 fan*, fainting, getting ready to hop up on shoulders and show their boobs, the New Oppressor agents standing around the landing site, not watching, instead watching the crowd, like me, holding them back with their gazes, their automatic energy weapons. And the space ship is finally visible through the clouds, its plasma engines leaving a trail of ionized air, the smell of ozone, the sound of cheering, and plasma engines, and landing, and the sound of the sound of plasma engines stopping, and the sound of an announcer's prerecorded message, the same guy that does narration for really high-profile movie previews, *ladies and gentlemen*, the sound and sight of fireworks, of laser light show, of confetti, *Neo Amsterdam is proud to present*, the sound of the ship's walkway extending,

the Vice Vanguard of the Ultimate Planets of Megatonia, and the sight of, Choochu Shuba!!!

“THIS is like havin’ a Roni,” As in rice-a-. Rice-a-Roni is oil and MSG-coated rice, for those who don’t know, and it’s the San Francisco treat. What I’m talking about here is jail food: it’s like oil and MSG-coated rice, except that they probably don’t use real MSG because how could they justify that? It’s known to cause migraine headaches in some people, maybe even inmates, and it’s primarily used as flavor enhancement, which is something that jail chefs will hardly ever add extra ingredients in order to achieve. Unless, you know, the jail cooks are like the cooks in your elementary school, that one woman who was so sweet, who put extra love into each rehydrated macaroni and cheese dish that she ladled onto your tray. She probably sprinkled a little MSG, paid for out of her own minimum-wage pocket, into the food for the kids. Who’s to say that there aren’t chefs like that at jail? Because, I know one thing: they aren’t ex-cons working at jails; nobody in his right mind would get out of jail and then later take a *job* back there. This includes anyone in his left mind, of course, the scheming, ‘Type A’ personalities, the ones that create the plans and draft them in meticulous detail on vellum using mechanical pencils and protractors, marking the night watchman and the storm drain and the location for the C4 explosive and the × marks the spot. These guys are also not going to end up back in jail working as a cook, because they are careful, making lists, their jail cells filled with volumes of lists, tables, and figures, for example a *not to do list*, topped with “go back to jail.” Really it is us right brainers to worry about, the ‘creative’ types. Here, I am doing something creative: I have made a piece of artwork with my roni, a tower on my tray. Some of the other inmates think that my artwork is pretty fucking stupid, but I think that they are pretty fucking stupid, too, and ha ha, I am still getting a kick out of calling it *roni*, a term popularized by Vanilla Ice in a song on his debut album called “Havin’ a Roni,” a beatboxing epic whose lyrics are, in entirety,

Oh yeah.

What it's like,
Havin' a roni. (repeat n times)

Oh yeah VIP in for effect.

Although Mr. Ice used the term to mean, as I found out in under embarrassing circumstances later, ‘virgin.’ When I first heard this song, working as a mutual fund manager at the Choral Group, I thought that he was rapping about “Return on Net Investment,” another way we sometimes use the word ‘RONI’ in the profession. “What it’s like,” I’d prance around the office, “havin’ a RONI.” But the mutual fund business was too boring for me, for my right-brain creative mind. Seriously, with all of those tables, I was about to *explode*. So I quit the hell out of that job, but, rather than retire with my nest egg firmly under my wing and my golden parachute glistening in the sunlight above me, I decided, *what the fuck?* why not become a bank robber? You see, this spontaneity, unpredictability, is characteristic of my innovative right-brain mind. So we assembled a crew, me and some of my poker buddies, and began drafting a plan. The plan was made mostly by Ernest, he’s here somewhere, oh, right *there*, see? He won’t talk to me any more. I didn’t participate in the plan drafting or plan reading phase, preferring instead to *wing it*, bringing only orienteering gear such as a compass and signaling mirror—neither of which I have been trained in the use of but, of course, my type-B personality having the capacity to figure out, on the fly, as the need arises—also a gun loaded with tranquilizer darts, and a blowtorch. On the day of the robbery—attempted robbery, I should say—we all walked into the bank, pulled our ski masks down and hopped the counter, shot everyone with tranquilizer darts, demanded that they open the safe and give us keys to safety deposit boxes, etc. I went to work blowtorching open the lock to the safe, which was already open; I realized this, of course, I am not stupid; the blowtorching being merely symbolic, symbolic of the weight of the god damn oxyacetylene tanks that I had to lug around

all day, an art project also used to justify my presence, my *cut* in the earnings. The robbery was proceeding very well, the tranquilizer darts being an excellent idea, but, unfortunately, my welding set off the smoke detector and fire alarm, which caused emergency grating to seal off the safety deposit boxes and cash money and emergency fire engines to rush to the scene, eventually resulting in our apprehension. The guys all tried to turn *state's evidence* on me, but since this was my first offense and, I guess, the prosecutor for some reason did not think I was a big enough fish to fry, not an important enough metaphor to mix, and they were unable to cut any deals. Nevertheless, they were happy to testify at my trial, happy to bribe guards with cigarettes—the prison being a tobacco economy, much like the American Pioneers experienced—to put me in cells without nice views of the city; with undesirable cellmates. Okay, guys, ha ha, good joke. But here's a good joke: I am planning my escape. This is an ingenious plan, not that I make plans in that sense: it is a device, a piece of equipment that I am constructing so that its use can be determined on-the-fly, on escape day, whenever my 'Type B' personality decides that is. For the past several months I have been saving some extra roni in the space between my gums and lip, a half a mouthful, each day, and bringing it back to my cell. With water from the sink I've created a starchy mixture of rice and water and formed it into a hard, brittle shiv, which I've sharpened on the concrete floor. This thing is pretty good, sharp and non-ferrous, safe from the pull of the Magnet Zone.

KATIE Dixon sat on her Aunt's couch, up late, now grabbing for the remote. She has to change the channel every time that commercial comes on, the one with the computer simulated version of her dad going,

... and that's why I only use #1 mechanic recommended Saponacil synthetic motor oil. Vroom vroom! (**sound of channel changing**)

Even a whole year after his tragic suicide/multiple-manslaughter,

mercifully ruled an act of self defense by the magistrate, they were still using his likeness to sell motor oil, tennis sneakers, and feminine hygiene products. And though she escaped clutches of the Mafia, the majority of the family taken out simultaneously by her father, they had begun to regroup after the amazing reappearance of Guido Italio, who had been all but confirmed dead at the scene. But, the endorsements were lucrative for Katie, allowing her to really trick out her Aunt's basement, now a pretty cool room for a 14 year-old, and to soon purchase a car and pay for college. She will go to one of those new-age choose-your-own-adventure colleges, and her major will be "computational jazz sociology," the maiden diploma of what she hoped would be a successful and prosperous field melding the study of human social behavior with computer-generated improvisation to a sophisticated harmonic idiom. For now, though, it was just a pretty regular teenage life with a lot of extra cash and a good excuse for pretty much whatever. She had tuned to the *infomercial channel*, the ultimate late-night television experience. This channel was perfect for lulling; first, it appealed to the most basic source of human comfort, consumerism; second, the shows were long and repetitive, inducing sleep; third, there were no jarring commercial breaks necessary, the entire station being a commercial at all times. The product being advertised was a brain stimulator: attached to your temples it would send electrical current through your frontal lobe, inducing the FDA minimum recommended level of daily brain activity, with *no* actual effort required of the user except a flick of the *on* button. It was intended for persons who lead highly sedentary, passive lifestyles. Katie took this as a cue to stand and go outside for a bit. In her aunt's back yard there is a canal, and a bridge. The bridge is spraypainted, it says *fat phil*. Whomever thought Phil is fat liked him enough, at least, to immortalize him on the bridge.

Though it is much larger, Katie understood the Panama canal by generalization from the canal in her yard. Are you aware that the Panama Canal cost \$366 million to build in 1914, much of which was spent on the system of locks used to raise ships from the Atlantic Ocean's level to the Pacific's? In her opinion, this was a waste of

money. They should have just opened the proverbial flood-gates and allowed the Pacific to flow into the Atlantic, evening out the levels once and for all and then creating a peaceful, idyllic sail between the two oceans.

Katie lied down on the grass, spread eagle, and stares at the sky. A nice night, she hummed a little jazz with the orthoptera, eee eee eee, she watched long enough to see the stars move. She closed her eyes and, a few moments later, gasped and opened them abruptly, presaging the appearance of Guido standing over her with a blindfold and handcuffs, tommy gun, but it was nobody. Just the wind gently rustling through the trees, a gondola on the canal, a nearby bug chirping. As Katie rolled to her side and stood up to go back inside, she paused to look at something, I don't know.

I didn't see the cricket, but Katie did.

0.1 Inface

These are the first words that I write in this novel, aside from the title of this chapter, “Inface,” and the typesetting commands that make the word “Inface” all big. That may surprise you since this is the middle of the novel. Don’t be surprised or worried! I’m here to help.

Listen: The middle of a novel is boring territory. I am totally wasting it with this commentary, and, it doesn’t matter. Did you like how the very first page put you right in there, no preface or table of contents or colophon to wade through? No dedications to my dead relatives, no indirect self-congratulation by thanking my acquaintances for helping me produce this monstrous turd? That’s because I don’t want to waste that precious first paragraph, first line, first extravagant drop cap. The way that the initial letter is separated from the rest of its capitalized brethren in an ambiguous way. Is that “A NORAD” or “Anorad”? And what is an Anorad? That is good stuff.

I like the beginning, when characters can appear, can do anything. Hello, I am a multiple-amputee star squash player, world-renowned in my prowess. I only plan on the international size courts. My style is truly *off-the-wall*. Concepts can be introduced: Yes, this is a world where people can control each others’ bowel movements with mind waves. Yes, in this world, epic wars are fought with planet-sized space robots. Once you have characters, concepts, setting, that shit gets old. They plod along, things happen in the logical way, they talk, they “develop.” Boring.

Middles are absurd, anyway. What if, on the home surgery network, they showed hours and hours of drug-induced comas and anesthetization, instrument sterilization, and outpatient recovery, instead of 100% live full-length incisions performed by virgin surgeons? Nobody would watch it, is what would happen.

Ends are okay, you know, there is a twist, etc., the characters die. There's nothing wrong with that. The thing about filling up a novel with a load of endings is, well, first of all, there won't be many things to end. Second of all, it gives readers a lot of good stopping points to put down your book and get off the toilet, and as an author specializing in mind-control bowel movements, this is entirely contrary to the point.

So this novel has no middle. You might say, it doesn't have an end, and, right now, it doesn't have a beginning, either. But soon, it will be a collection of beginnings, of concepts introduced, of characters reified. That isn't to say that there is no plot—just that there is no *plod*, so to speak.

This is a murder mystery.

WHILE we're having this *one on one*, I wanted to talk to you about something. Do you remember the man who was singing in the pile of trash bag bags because he had been shot? Because this is a murder mystery, we need to figure out who the killer was.

Leslie, a good name for young girl or an old man, in this case the name of the man who is standing in the alleyway searching through the trash looking for one man's treasure: accidentally discarded rebate checks, plastic bottles with a five cent deposit, and clothes, he has a shopping cart; he's shopping for groceries, everything is free, but the merchandise is damaged.

All of a sudden, *Bam!*, a stray bullet from some gang violence in the distance ricochets through the alley and perforates his stomach. He is awestruck, and leadstruck; he drops his fortune and falls to his knees, then falls back into the trash bags, beginning the morose psalm, his own funeral song. We heard this one before. So who is responsible for this death? Is it the gang member's haphazard shooting? Ballistic tests could tell us whose gun fired the shot, but

the gang member acts deterministically, according to the words of the story, and the bullet acts according to the laws of physics in a setting where the law says: *the bullet will ricochet around the alley and strike Leslie in the gut*. So Leslie's fate is predetermined, and who is to blame but the flow of time itself?

But who is responsible for the flow of time? It's you, daddy, the reader, and although I can hardly blame you—reading the text like a 'see'-through End User License Agreement that begins, *By reading this license you agree to be bound by its terms and conditions*, not knowing what you are consenting to until it passes your optic nerve to the part of your brain that interprets and ignores small print—it was you who caused Leslie's death, because you can choose to stop—no, wait, don't stop, please, come back?—or skip—but what to skip without having read it?—to speed up and slow down, watch: read this part ... much more slowly ... , maybe mouthing it out loud, at least mouthing with the mouth in your brain that reads the story to the rest of the hypothetical organs, and then read this part *cha cha cha* much faster, do you see? *You* control the story's unfolding, but the story is deterministic, a choiceless *choose your own adventure*, unpredictable but also unchangeable, the reader powerful but not responsible, and is this the comfort we take in books?

THIS guy has copper hair, not actually orange but oxidized, statue of liberty, green, shaped like that too, green spikes, a dinosaur, actually, stegosaurus, we never knew what color they were, the fossil record being ambiguous on the subject, but now we do, green after all like the movies, like *Denver the last Dinosaur, he's my friend and a whole lot more*. His neck is long and skinny to reach the fruit on the tall trees, making on average \$789 more per year per inch than the other shorter animals, long neck, an ostrich, sitting on its eggs, then it must be a she, and since she is my friend and a whole lot more, that means we must be, you know, doin' it. And if we're doin' it, then she must not be a bird, perhaps a girl in a bird suit, then perhaps a girl in a bird suit in a bunny suit—sexier, or a kitty cat, on the prowl, having fights with the other stray kitty cats in the alleys, winning usually, attracting a posse, again prowling, this time with a posse, laying claim to this stack of garbage cans belongs to the *kitty power clan*, do not fuck with us. But, come morning, she returns to her suburban home, in through the door within a door, warm, eats from her bowl, sleeps in a box or pile of newspapers. When she wakes, she is an animate wooden toy, a possession of the young daughter, name shortened to *key-kat*, if you can imagine the young daughter, just learning to talk, trying to pronounce *kitty cat* then you know the name, always enthusiastic and always followed by a strangulating hug, but what does a wooden doll care? This was precisely the reason that the parents bought an animate wooden toy rather than a real cat with real nerve endings, the squishing though done with real child love being too cruel for real animals, the toy equal in every way to a real cat except for the following advantages: (1) it does not have nerve endings, (2) it does not have to eat, instead being powered by *dark side energy*; the following disadvantages: (1) its wooden body is not as cuddly as a cat's flesh and fur, (2) its ominous, never closing eyes, (3) its occasional need for recharging at the dark side energy shrine downtown. But the toy dreams of being a real boy, of being turned into a donkey. Donkeys can eat anything, cups, marbles, any sort of recyclable, dirt, whatever. Donkeys are, in fact, the natural recycling machines, Mother Nature's design to reduce, reuse, and rearrange

molecules via the stomach, if donkeys have those, in truth I imagine that they have a gizzard, six compartmental digestion chambers, an incinerator, a melting cavity, to dissolve the polystyrene and reform it into pellets that can be used in the manufacturing process to create recycled office products. But donkeys are not allowed in offices. It must be the opposite of a donkey, a jellyfish, floating around in a dramatic lit aquarium in the office, bioluminescent, green fluorescent protein. The office has a great aquarium, spanning the entire suite, all connected, molecules and fishies freely diffusing from one end of the floor to the other. The walls of the conference room are all actually aquarium. The door is aquarium, it has a locking mechanism that allows fish to swim into the door when it is closed, but separates the chambers when the door is open, gently nudging any fish that are caught in-between the two chambers to safety before opening. In the conference room presentations are sometimes given using a special in-house software package called “FishPoint” in which a system of PETA-approved rewards and punishments induce the fish on one wall to arrange themselves in bullet-point lists, into charts and graphs, to bioluminesce at appropriate intervals to create blinking text, any potential client or investor who sees such a presentation is instantly sold, regardless of the contract in question. At the head of the table sits a copper-haired man, a certain Benjamin X. Prestley, his sideburns are exclamation points, severe, and let’s make a deal.

“I’m going to sell the company,” he says.

His aides and the chairman of Flextronix corporation, Brian Baiseurdemère, are flabbergasted. They all just sit there, staring. Speaking of staring, here’s what happens if you tell Brian a joke:

“Hey Brian, what whitening agent does rapper Snoop Doggy Dogg use to clean his clothing?”

Brian stares.

“Bleotch!!”

Brian continues to stare, his mouth opening, his eyes squinting a little, shaking his head slightly. You're smiling, like, "get it?" and he says, no matter what the joke is:

"Well, I guess you just had to be there."

A real asshole. Right now he's staring in that same way, but out of genuine flabbergastation, not merely a desire to make me feel like an idiot.

Benjamin reclines in his chair and interlocks his fingers behind his head, a sort of executive sit-up posture, and smirks.

"What?" one of his officers finally says.

"Well, uh, if Flextronix can afford to buy, I'm sure we'll be glad to," says Brian, adjusting his high-index polycarbonate spectacles and shifting through his papers pointlessly, uneasily.

Benjamin X. continues to sit, smirking. This is his thing. If you go to a meeting and he is trying to make a deal, which he always is, then he will pause like this, make you feel uncomfortable and *on the spot*. He immediately assumes a commanding position, like your professor catching you not knowing the answer to an elementary question, or the truant officer finding you in the bathroom at the fast food restaurant during school hours, in mid-shit, unable to run. The meeting room is also set up to enhance this effect: a subtle asymmetry to the sleek mahogany table makes Benjamin look taller, your chair sits lower than his, a low-frequency standing sound wave generated by speakers throughout the room interferes constructively at your position only, causing you to feel nauseous and confused.

Brian starts to say something; the beginning of the syllable is "W—"; when Benjamin pounces:

"I mean *your* company, Brian."

The officers sigh in relief now, their stupidly profitable jobs intact, but Brian is not as cozy.

“What do you mean, sell my company?”

Benjamin sighs and, as if he is talking to a slow child or computer dictation software, says,

“I’m going to *sell*,” pausing, pointing at Brian,

“*your* company,” pausing, pointing at himself,

“to *me*.”

Brian is livid. “What do you mean?!” “You can’t be serious!” “I won’t sell!” Now the environment has shifted from *uncomfortably on-the-spot* mode to *irrelevant and powerless* mode. The officers whisper among themselves, writing things on memo pads and pointing their pens at Brian, but never making eye contact and certainly not paying any attention to his tantrum. Benjamin interrupts him again, his voice magnified, Brian’s voice squelched,

“That’s why *I’m* going to do it.”

Brian opens his mouth to speak, but like that, like you are blinking and not really paying attention, or like a sentence in a novel that suddenly switches tense without your notice, under your grammar radar, Brian was not Brian at all but another Benjamin, wearing an embroidered Flextronix polo shirt and pulling a ball point pen from its pocket, and he signed the paper, is grinning, will be passing the paper with the pen on it down to the original Benjamin, and shrugging like, *you might as well keep the pen!*, and the original Benjamin will smile, *thank you*, and signed his name as well, and the officers, who had not seen *that* one before, are smiling, laughing, congratulating themselves and each other, and like before, we pan off of other Benjamin and when our gaze returns, it is Brian again. He sits, dumbfounded, staring at the contract and knowing that he

just sold away his company, looking around at the officers, who are lighting up cigars and popping open Champagne bottles, puzzled, defeated, the man from *security!* called in to escort Brian from the premises.

SOME of my teeth are in the trash, removed by the dentist, ingrown, upside-down and impacted; they never got to see the light of day until those capsized incisors were excised, and discarded. Some choose to have their pulled teeth sealed up hermetically, in little bags or encased in polished Lucite, for use as paperweights, gifts, or Christmas tree ornaments. But not me: mine go in the trash, deliberately, on their way to the dumpster, on its way to the landfill, where they will be planted in the pile of trash, top soil and fertilizer, sprouting roots and growing into saplings, growing taller, over the years becoming gigantic trees, count their age by the annual annular rings in the enamel, if you don't believe me, and that tree will sprout new baby teeth—a *gum* tree?—which squirrels will cache in their cheeks, developing a secondary row of chompers like sharks have, and thus will be ready to assert their rightful place among marine life. But here's the point: all of this is seeded from my body, my palace; in other words, it is my fiefdom. I have sown my seeds and formed a kingdom, all because I refused the worldly pleasures such as an epoxy-encased paperweight with my teeth in it. Here's another thing! I signed up to be an organ donor. I used to think this was pretty sick, but then I realized: if I die, then my organs can *live on* within the bodies of others! For instance, my heart muscle might be transplanted into a patient with hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, thus transferring my emotions and desires into that person. Perhaps my brain, especially the pituitary gland will be transplanted into an anencephalic child of the opposite sex, thus transferring my origin of rational thought and arithmetic acuity into this child, who will grow to an adult and eventually meet the heart transplant patient, and the two, sharing so much in common but also having the appropriately orthogonal qualities for forming a relationship: love vs. reason; emotion vs. logic; literature vs. calculus, will indeed form a relationship, it is inevitable, fulfilling my

necrophilic self-love fantasies, and their children will in no small part be my own children, inbred but safe from genetic disorders, their relation to me one of nurture, not of D.N.A. molecules. Furthermore, the harvesting of my organs will leave my empty body ripe for mummification, which will make me a lovely heirloom, revealed only at Archæology Club meetings and on Halloween, but on those occasions so very *apropos*.

SPEAKING of Tokyo, I must say, these are a bunch of folks who know how to party. I have seen pictures. It is like Las Vegas there, lights everywhere, impossible to sleep, pointless to even close your eyes, neon the noblest of gases. But instead of gambling and prostitution, Tokyo has cell phones and digital cameras and karaoke. They use their cell phones to call each other in order to set up dates in which they'll sing karaoke over their cell phones to each other while taking pictures of their digital cameras. All of this is fast, don't stop, so unrelenting that you don't notice the contradictions and improprieties in their manner and dress, their obsession with and perversion of Western culture yet their lingering bitterness about the *a-bomb*, manifested as a looming post-apocalypse in their modern folk lore, mythology, their contradictory, encyclopædic use of color, each article of clothing simultaneously every possible bright, offensive, beautiful color, glowing, eyes straining, but, don't stop, their stupendous, stupefying, stupid feats of engineering: in 2009 they claim the world's tallest structure with a space elevator constructed not of super strong carbon nanotubules but of *origami*, a folding pattern unknown to Western scientists, completed by a national project utilizing thousands of those guys who are so deft that they can write the entire bible (or, Shinto bible) on a grain of rice. This structure, while an impressive feat and useful for shipping rice up to Japanese spacecraft, was destroyed only a year later by an origami *disease*. Did you know that this was even possible? Let me make an analogy: Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy or *Mad Cow Disease* is caused by *prions*, a sort of non-DNA based form of life. Prions are protein deformities that are *contagious*: if one protein the cow's brain has the deformity and comes in contact with an-

other protein, that other protein will fold and get the deformity too; the new shape is more stable, an *Ice-nine* of cow brains. As the art of mechanical origami became the foundation of Japan's military-industrial complex in the late 00s, the blissful march of progress blinded scientists to the possibility of their origami being subject to a similar effect—bugs like a computer program, sure, that was no real surprise; they'd get the deft rice guys to cut out the affected region and patch it with an origami band-aid—but origami *diseases*, well, one day an origami contractor was working, distracted by a passing girl's chromatically enhanced bosom—these were the boobs that destroyed Tokyo!!—and his fingers slipped and, well, the possibility for predictions and precautions aside, by the time anybody figured out what had happened, all origami had already been affected, the crane birds wretched and malformed, unable to fly, the space elevator tortive, helical, flailing, failing, falling across the tops of the buildings, miles and miles, forming a zip-line between two parts of the city, much more popular transport than the Tokyo Bay Aquiline, the 1997 record-breaking tunnel under the Tokyo Bay, which begins with a six mile highway bridge out to a bizarre, confused cruise-ship shaped artificial island, like my *build* cursor in a Sim City game that allows me to construct bridges over water and then abruptly change my mind, deciding to dive six meters below ground, cars already driving on the street even though it goes nowhere, a subaqueous *cul de sac*, because that's what cars do, but despite the Aquiline's great expense, the origami zip-line remains more popular to this day because it is more in line with the population's *wacky, free-spirited* perspective.

As an opal farmer my duties are duplicate: duty #1 is to maintain the robustness of our crop, by subjecting it to the harsh realities of early winter frosts, of silica-eating parasites, and of opal bandits, but #2 being to ensure that the quantity of our production remains high, allowing us to choose our supply in order to shift the economic graphs to maximize our profit. Of course you realize that these two goals are contradictory, or, as my superiors like to put it, *complimentary*. For instance, we would like to breed

opals that are *resistant to stealing*. In order to create an environment that allows for the theft-resistant trait to be expressed, I need to expose the opals to a hostile, dishonest state, bandits given ample opportunity—but never actually license, for then we would not be breeding against theft but instead mere harvesting—to break onto the grounds and snatch up the chaff, the runts, the opals unable to defend themselves, less fit and therefore not surviving to the next generation. We also must subject the opals to a generous dose of ionizing radiation in order to induce their genetic molecules to mutate. And what sort of phenotype does a mutant, theft-resistant opal have? Spikes that shoot out from its stalk when grasped by an untrained, larcenous hand? Or an oily slickness coating the gems, making them difficult to handle efficiently in large numbers, slipping through the thief’s fingers, and spilling from his bag of loot? Or perhaps a built-in alarm system, a sort of mandragora death wail triggered when the crop is plucked from its rooted position prematurely, the sound disrupting the neighbors and, by hearsay, alerting the police? No, I tell you, none of these mutations have occurred. What, then? Well, in the *'biz* we refer to an opal’s *gaze*, the deep, complex reflection of light by sub-surface features. The gaze is one of those intangible, inexplicable qualities that jewelers use to distinguish between different grades of gemstones, and to price them accordingly, even though there is no perceptible or objective difference to the purchaser, it mostly being a fiction of the gem industry—except in the case of our *Steal-Me-Not®* brand opals, whose gaze has evolved in a very significant and mysterious way. Stare into the gem. This has two effects: first, it makes you want to steal the stone. No matter what; even if you are the Pope or District Attorney, you’ll want to steal it—even if you’re so rich that *money is no object*, or even if you *own* the rock already!—you’ll want to steal it. This takes care of the important problem that a stone with theft-proof mutations must be able to distinguish somehow between stealing and other physically similar but juridicially divergent acts. Everyone who sees the stone is a potential thief worth stopping. Second, the gaze hypnotizes you, transfixes you. Your brain’s operating system experiences a general protection fault, or a livelock, or a blue screen of death. We don’t

understand how it works, because, all of the scientists who came to study them—at first to *debunk* them, skeptical as scientists tend to be, and then later to account for their missing colleagues, and then from the Center for Disease Control!—are standing in our fields, staring into these gems or the empty pods, where we sent one of our blind farm workers to snatch away the stones, hoping to release the scientists from their mind lock. We suggested to this fellow, Darryl, who has no eyes at all, just hollow sockets, that he could become a modern day Medusa; no need for the colubrine hair, jokingly we suggested this, just stick those recovered opals into his empty cavities, ha ha, but he *did it!*, I suppose tired of the years of indentured servitude, the minimum wage, the living in the separate building, the servant’s quarters, matching, like a miniature dollhouse version of the giant mansion that the farmers and gemstone administrative personnel live in. As I saw him tilt his head contemplatively, reading his expression—even without eyes it was clear he was thinking, *why the hell not?*, I immediately slammed my eyes shut, of course. But others around us were not so quick.

“Darryl, don’t really—” Naomi begins.

“Naomi?” I probe, my eyes closed, hand over them for extra opacity. I reach around, using my stale mental image of the scene, its accuracy degrading with respect to a Gaussian distribution, trying to grab for Darryl before he can do any more damage. I figure that I can pry the opals from his sockets and then put them somewhere safe, invisible, perhaps swallow them, remembering then to never take a second look into the can before flushing until I could be sure to have passed them, or, I don’t know, just hold one in each fist, using the extra weight to add momentum to my punches, pummeling Darryl, who we never liked; his empty eye sockets too creepy, why didn’t he just wear dark sunglasses or pirate eye patches like normal people? And then take my fists to a darkroom to open them and deposit the stones, that darkroom then being quarantined forever, like a high school built in the mid 20th century, with safety in mind, using the fibrous mineral asbestos for its fire-retardant proper-

ties, you know, to keep the kids safe, but then the building is finally condemned, ancient blueprints uncovered, the asbestos now considered a carcinogenic liability, the building sealed up with warning signs and clear plastic sheets, but never decontaminated, eventually the sheets coming loose or being cut open by new kids, having heard rumors of the old school being haunted, not realizing that danger comes not only in the form of ghosts and booby traps but of airborne cancer-causing particles, thinking, ha ha, this place is not so scary, let's invite our friends, and they start having a weekly club meeting in the place, bringing their 'BB' guns and stolen pornographic magazines and cigarettes, years later being diagnosed with mesothelioma, perhaps blaming it on the cigarettes, but, in fact, due to the unsafe building materials. I mean to say that the darkroom would have the same sort of problem: How more enticing can a place be to a group of adventurous, dare-prone prepubes than a darkroom all taped up in decades-old caution tape, signs warning of dangerous gemstones? And if the light seal on the rotating door fails? Or they bring a flashlight? The darkroom is perhaps not such a great idea. I didn't even think of this: what if the gems themselves emit light? An inner, ethereal luminescence that needs no ambient light to be seen, and so as soon as I deposit them in that room, despite the precautions taken to not expose photographic film or my eyes to light, I will still be transfixed, turned into a darkroom statue whom photography students will trip over until spotting the glowing opals themselves!

I am contemplating all of this in an abstract sense, not actually repeating this sort of detailed, sprawling narrative in my mind, but aware of the issues vaguely, wondering what I would do with the gems should I recapture them. Of course, I don't have time for such depth of thought; I am engaged in a blind, groping battle, the two of us on equal footing, unable to see each other, only to use our echolocation skills, mine underdeveloped in comparison, but not useless, my many years in the darkroom having provided sufficient practice. And so we begin this ridiculous dance, squabble, and I'd like you to imagine that I perceive the scene the way that you are

imagining it, that is, words only; no visual description.

“Darryl, you son of a bitch!” I call.

He says nothing, knowing that the sound of his voice is a good cue as to his whereabouts. I sink to the exit of the storehouse, knowing that there is no other way out. On my way I grab Naomi, her brain fried, her muscles paralyzed and *rigor vitas*, dragging her by her shoulders, part of my plan to entrap Darryl, still with my eyes shut firmly, like a child who does not understand the difference between the gentle closure that a sleeping or deceased person undergoes and the violent, forceful shutting that he does when pretending to be asleep or dead, or when trying to be absolutely sure that he won't take an accidental, fatal peek. I prop Naomi up against the door, sorry babe, this is the way it's gotta be, and then duck down beside her. There is a crash; Darryl must be throwing things in an attempt to hit me randomly, and also to surprise me, to make me nervous and scared. He may also hope that I am barefoot, and will cut my feet on the shattered porcelain vases or whatever that are being lofted. I am not barefoot. I announce my presence again: *one ping only*,

“You'll never get out of here!”

The content and apparent source of the phrase must clue him into my location. I hear his heels clapping, charging towards me, shoulder lowered like a football player, and then I hear the crunch of bone and tissue above me as he crushes Naomi's body against the door; he announces his victory with a private laugh, but, as he goes to push her body aside in order to make his escape and is surprised by the handful of soft feminine flesh that he finds instead of brawny man muscle—but before he is able to react—I spring from my crouched position, deal him a fatal karate blow, and pry the opals from his sockets. Stones safe in my back pocket, I open my eyes again and open the door to the outside, but am suddenly caught in the gaze of hundreds of giant, glowing opals, having mutated beyond the mere ability to hypnotize humans but to a monstrous size, to an unearthly

mobility, to a purpose higher than avoiding theft, but one that I will never know, as I stare into the intricate reflections and subcutaneous glow, my mind lost . . .

I feel I must confess to the ladies about the nature of the separation between the male and female bathrooms. Contrary to the explanation you may have developed in your youth or gleaned from Internet FAQs, this has nothing to do with sexual predatism. Case in point: we welcome gay men in our bathrooms, and sometimes even have special graffiti in the stalls by, and for, them. It has nothing to do with a woman's tendency to leave the seats down, because we leave the seats down too, public restrooms having a new invention: the inverted-U-shape toilet seat, which has not yet fully penetrated the home market. It is not because we don't want your lavishly decorated bathrooms with couches, magazine racks, real live plants and a fully-stocked bar. The only reason is that we are fast, much faster than women, at peeing, and do not want them *invading* our lines. Sorry about that.

Speaking of the bathroom, here I am, at the urinal, practicing my technique known as *stealth urination*, where my stream impacts the porcelain—never the pool of water at the bottom or the minty cake—at such a shallow angle that it becomes one with it, laminar flow, like a beer or soda poured by skilled hands, running along the side of the glass as to not agitate the carbonic acid in the liquid, prematurely causing it to fizz. The reason for such stealth is that I am a spy—you may remember me as Mr. Y from a previous monologue—and spies are trained to be stealthy in all of their pursuits, even when I am just taking a drunken piss at the sports bar/pool hall. As someone enters the bathroom, I become suddenly aware that my very quietude may be giving me away; I splash noisily in order to conceal my stealthiness. I shake, zip, and wash, and open the door back into the noisy, smoky mess. There are a group of Quebecois hipsters here, regulars, I recognize them; they must make the weekly trip down to Maine in order to experience our higher drinking age—suddenly, it is meaningful to be old again, there are *benefits*—and in

order to feel more immersed in our English-centric culture, and to feel disdain for it; these guys seem to be fueled by contempt, especially helpless contempt for no good reason. I ask them if they want to *play*, meaning pool, but they just blow smoke from their uranium cigarettes into my face, *secousse américaine*, so I wave sorry, maybe I will look for a different place, but just as I am about to give up, a little British guy comes up and offers a game. He asks if I play for cash, I say, *of course*, and we play. My style is suffering a little bit, today, from the alcohol, from getting *stripes* instead of *solids*, from the briefcase handcuffed to my wrist. I win the game, just barely, and pocket the cash. He wants to play again, buys me a drink, and look, there's no point in making excuses: I get hustled. By the end of the night, a crowd has gathered around us; he's won most of my clothes—leaving me only with enough so that I won't get kicked out of the pool hall—all of my cash and credit cards, and I still owe him.

“Got anything else, love?” he asks in that infuriating accent.

“Just these . . . nuclear secrets.”

“Well, let's have them, then,” he says.

My head spinning, I punch the six-digit hexadecimal code into the digital lock, and open the briefcase up. I hand him the manila folder marked CONFIDENTIAL, containing detailed plans for the magnetomic bomb. Dejected, I leave the bar, picture this: walking along the sidewalk, it's probably raining, cold, I'm almost naked, the open suitcase hanging from my wrist painfully, dragging on the ground, drunk, but not worried about muggers—what would they steal?—so, imagine my surprise when Chuchoo Shuba's hovercraft limousine pulls up, the tinted window rolls down and he leans his head out, and asks,

“Would you like a ride, Mr. Y?”

“WHILE READING THE MORNING NEWSPAPER, the following sequence of numbers came to me,” says Erik. And then he's

off, reciting and ratifying those digits as The Erik Sequence; they do not converge or follow any discernible pattern, but the young faculty and stalwart *Fields* hopefuls alike are scribes, tallying the numbers on whatever bits of paper they can find, hoping later to discover what genius lies within, and to be the first to publish, or co-author a paper on the thought, or like a dog at thanksgiving waiting attentively under the dinner table for any accidental scraps of food that might fall. Thus Erik's honorary doctorate speech at a Massachusetts institute is extremely boring except to those whose hands try to keep up with his recitation, and to the reporters and spinmeisters who will try to turn this 14 year-old associate professor into a phenomenon. He has an endorsement deal with Nike for math shoes, specially designed for standing at a chalkboard all day, giving lectures, with built-in symbolic integrators. Back in his office he has an awesome 50" LCD computer monitor, bought on a National Science Foundation grant, money saved by purchasing a screen with economic proportions: since the fifty inches are measured diagonally, the viewable area is 50 inches \times 0.4 millimeters, extreme wide screen, only a few pixels of vertical resolution, displaying perhaps one line of text like a beautiful high-definition electronic stock ticker. This ticker is exactly perfect for displaying sequences of integers that Erik might dream up. A plagiarism scandal in the department leaves Erik and his caddy corner neighbor in a silent war. This guy, Rutherford, a Welsh post doctoral student is so petty, so intent on revenge after Erik published a paper detailing the origins of all of the plagiarized ideas in Rutherford's seminal paper *On the Actualizable Numbers and their Application to the Normalisierungproblem*—the evidence not so bulletproof that Rutherford would be removed from his permission but still persuasive enough to cause considerable consternation among the small clique of ultrafinitists at the university—Rutherford is so vengeful that he does things like break into Erik's office at night and secretly modify his proofs so that they contain minor, correctable errors, indeed, the correction is always to simply remove Rutherford's changes, i.e., anything written with the wrong style of pen and in the wrong handwriting, and Erik's response to this treachery is to simply discover deep, devastating inadequacies

in Rutherford's work and publish them, sometimes with sweeping changes that fix the proofs, and often with proofs of the converse statement. Rutherford will sometimes take Erik's important mail from his post office box and shred it in the high-secrecy cross-cut shredder. Rutherford likes his lemmata—and women—hairy, and sometimes Erik will achieve revenge by depositing depilatory cream into his hot water heater, which dissolves through the plumbing and causes women who use his shower to become bald, hairless. In response, Rutherford will stock Erik's office with balloons filled with flammable gases: *1-Chloropropylene*, *Carbon oxysulfide*, and shotgun pellets for shrapnel, and line the edge of the door with volatile strike-anywhere matches. But Erik's hypersensitive olfactory faculties will sniff out the characteristic rotten egg aroma of the *COS* and at once know the foulness of the play. The battle is all about knowing, and knowing is half the battle. That is one large or zero-sized battle!

AN emergency session of Parliament OKs 17,000 pagan mobilists to the fray, *frente*, frantic, their godless perspective paralyzing, or proselytizing them in action, the spastic chloroplast, plastic from a vast, distant waypoint, sending coordinates and *triangulation* on the Great Circle, and, let's just agree to agree, shall we? In echoing this sentiment to the post-war commission on pre-war meditation of inter-war activities, I made a verbal blunder, a dramatic *faux pas*, miscasting the episode as a mutual arrangement rather than a unilateral dictum. The insult will not go unpunished, meaning that it will be punished, and its messenger, myself, also chastised, early retirement, severance package. And I took the sideways elevator, pressing every button and standing, staring as its door opened, waited, and closed, making a film for myself about the District of Columbia, nay, *America*, a film with an extremely slow frame rate; one sixth frame per second or less if passengers enter or exit the elevator, or if I need to hold the door for a hurried businessman or elderly person in a wheelchair, and the film is entitled, "1001 Hopeless Journeys to Obsolescence," unfortunately limited to a single surround-sound performance in my visual cortex. In my window of unemployment I decide to clip'n'save, to preserve

my funds and live entirely off of complimentary coffee cream shooters found in upscale shops around the city; these packets have all of the nutrients I need: protein, and milk, and fat, calcium to build strong bones, and Bovine Growth Hormone to enhance my oxlike stature, and though I did indeed subsist my stamina suffered, and within a few weeks I was finding myself constantly tired, narcoleptic diabetic anaphylactic, and so at first I would wander into your *OK-mart* or *Radio Shed* or whatnot and seek the toy instrument replica isle, the place for me because, in my fatigued state, my brain is awakened to sobriety only by the cheerful idiocy of play keyboard demo tunes, and I hold my ear up to the speaker, cranking the volume, sometimes one on each ear, but the same model in order to synchronize, and go like that—finally, a clear thought, able to get my head around it, able to figure things out, what will I do and man, this song is *danceable*, dancing—until they throw me out. My suit is tattered and sweat stained, my government employee badge never getting me any automatic, reflexive respect any more, being an old model, the wrong color-coded year, but I'm like, people who live in mirrored houses shouldn't shoot Class I lasers! They must agree, I am confined to a soft matte room, not reflective at all, and without any coherent, retina-burning light. But I have my covert literature to keep me company: small scraps of newspaper, a personal ad, the printed message on the inner part of the toilet paper cylinder, in red: PLEASE REPLACE ROLL, and I have my friends: ie., I am given food that is not always liquid, and not always white, and comes in convenient mouth-sized portions, and baby, being with you is like being in Heaven Jail!

I will escape, there is no window but after that problem is solved I will dangle myself from it, if we are high in the air, otherwise I will simply walk or jump, but if high then dangling from a rope woven from my own D.N.A. molecules, long, stringlike helices tied into fine thread, then that thread twisted further into yarn, which in turn is braided into a sturdy rope. Nothing is tougher than this in the ductile strength metric, but in other dimensions we have competitors: For instance, take the iron resistance to peer pressure of pioneer set-

tlar Kurt Pinkett, whose namesake “Pinkett Tea” comes from the beverage brewed with a poisonous belladonna (nightshade) tincture that the other settlers always tried to get him to drink, but, resistant as he was to such persuasion, he never did. Another contender: Neo-Walden, the transcendentalist cyborg who lived in the 29th century in a minimalist hut carved into the side of a power plant transformer, and whose refrain of “No Data” sent memetic malformed packets resonating throughout the human/computer hybrid community. His strength is one of passive diversion, of inability to assert his presence in the physical world, instead choosing to make his mark by seeding a generation of number-crunching flesh with slacker mentality. So after I escape, I form a rag-tag group of hooligans, all under my command, called the Borecide Boys, the idea being that we will counteract this malaise, this listlessness, by destroying boredom with such severity that it will be worthy of a -cide suffix. Call me Slash or Spike, or here: Inclined Plane, the most dangerous and sharp of the simple machines, other than—I realize this after my underling, Screw McGee, takes up the name—the Screw. And we run ads on the television, giving incorrect contact information, and using outdated slang deliberately, embarrassingly, so that nobody will want to join our gang; as a result of the Americans with Coolness Deficit Disorder act of 2026 we are required by law to advertise our gang and to accept new members after subjecting them to a reasonable hazing process and simple majority vote, and we are not allowed to take such factors as race, creed, or coolness into account when making our votes. So the Borecide Boys are kept small, tightly knit, like my DNA rope, which is sealed in a commemorative glass case and hung on our clubhouse wall, a secret underground complex—to enter, you must find the appropriate phone booth, there is just one in all of D.C. that works, and make the appropriate gesture into the standard spy camera in the ceiling of the booth, only, this is not a real spy camera but a computerized gesture recognition system, and it recognizes only the Borecide Boys gang symbol constructed expertly out of a quilt of fingers and toughlook. And don’t go around trying this in all the phone booths. If you do, our snitches will tattletale, and we’ll find you, and, what’s the matter, don’t you want to fight?

I start the tape recorder.
“Begin scene,” it says.

The tape recorder is in *play* mode, and playing is the opposite of recording. Thus, the recorder is feeling down-and-out. This is its least favorite mode.

“How are you feeling today, tape recorder?” I mouth, while the tape recorder speaks those prerecorded words.

“Oh, I’m fine,” it says, in a different voice. I don’t move my mouth when it says this. Actually, it sounds a little sullen.

“Actually, you sound a little sullen,” it says, in my voice, with my lips moving. I make a concerned face.

Here’s the scene: I’m a reverse ventriloquist; I am the dummy and this prerecorded message is my puppetmaster. We’re a performance team, renowned the world over, today performing at the *Holiday Inn* in Reston, Virginia. I’m in my ironic tuxedo and the tape recorder, a *Radio Shack* model from the late 1980s, so you can picture this: a 1970s tape recorder, clunky, its design futuristic, but a future that never happened, displaced, sold to early adopters at *Radio Shack*, home of technology, perhaps it was actually called a ‘Dictaphone’ then, and then it sat in someone’s basement, in a box, until it was sold at a flea market to me for a few dollars. A sad life for a tape recorder, but now it is a star! That’s the tape recorder and it’s sitting on a tall stool now, no tuxedo; it’s wearing its *birthday suit*, and there’s a spotlight on it and spotlight on me.

“No . . . I’m fine,” it says, again, in such a way as to mean, I’m not really fine, but please bother me about it so that I can spill my guts.

“Tape recorder, if something’s the matter, you can tell me! I’m your friend! We’ve been touring together for years!” I walk up to it

and fall into an exaggerated posture of solicitude, putting my hands on my hips and tilting my head to one side. Exaggerated motions are the key to ventriloquism, because they distract the viewer from the fiction: look, audience, the tape recorder's lips are not moving, and mine are.

"Well, there is one thing," it admits.

"What is it? What's the matter?"

"It's just . . . right now, I'm *playing*, right?"

"That's right," I say.

"Well, see, I'm a tape *recorder*, and . . . and . . . it just makes me so sad to be *playing*."

At this point a sympathetic crowd sound of 'awwwwww' plays through the tape recorder.

"But what's the use of recording without playing?" I wonder.

"It's just what I do."

I take a short walk around the stage, scratching my stubble. This part is pretty hard. Like, in a movie when you're walking around thinking, that's no problem, unless you're trying to remember what your next line is. This is hard: I'm secretly counting in my mind, so that . . .

"Wait a second," I say, pointing my finger.

. . . I can make that motion and move my lips after precisely the right pause.

"What you're playing back, right now," I continue, "is a message that was recorded previously."

“Yes, that’s true, but . . . ”

“So when you admitted to feeling sad because you were *playing*, you were in actuality *recording*,” I mouth, pointing out the logical flaw. Part of this pointing happens with my finger, like this: “. . . because you were *playing* . . . ” (make an expository circle with my left hand’s index finger, tilting my head to the right), “you were in actuality *recording*.” (flip my head to the left and make an expository circle of the opposite polarity with my right hand’s index finger).

“Yes. So?”

“So why would you feel sad when you were recording?”

“I didn’t. I was recording my feelings that I would have at a later time, namely, when the tape was played back,” the tape recorder says.

“Huh,” I mouth, and scratch my head.

“It’s like when you find the creepy videocassette of your dead grandfather in his belongings that starts, ‘If you’re watching this tape, then that means that I’m dead.’”

“That *is* creepy.”

“And he thinks so, too, as he is recording it, and starts to mourn himself, on tape.”

“Right, ‘Don’t be sad. I had a good life, filled with adventure and postmodernism.’ That kind of thing,” I mouth.

“But all the while, he also knows that he can’t know that what he’s saying is true, or even if it will be watched.”

“It’s true if he’s saying it—he did have a good life.”

“But will it be true when it’s played back? What if he dies a

horrible, tortured death? What if his torturers show him the tape, as he's being tortured, and it starts with, 'If you're watching this tape, then that means that I'm dead,' but he's not dead?"

"Then he's a liar."

"The *tape* is a liar," the tape says.

"Are you a liar?" I ask the tape machine.

"Are *you* a liar?" it asks me, back.

Rather than degenerate into a *you, no, you!, no, you!* battle, we cut that one off at the pass:

"Okay, Socrates, what do you mean?" I ask.

"Well, you recorded this tape, didn't you?"

"Yes, I recorded it earlier with you."

"But didn't you also make the voices for me?" the tape accuses.

"Um ... yes," I mouth, shifty, looking nervous. He's breaking down the barriers, you know, flouting the maxim.

"And in fact, are you not, right now, making this voice that's being recorded?"

"Well ... " I start, "I *was*."

"No, right now, as we are making the recording, you are, I am, speaking in the tape recorder voice and recording it."

"Yes, I am. Was," I mouth. Tensions are mounting.

"So ... " the tape says.

There's another pause. This one is easier, you'll see. I survey

the crowd, making sure that they get it, that they're following. This is the climax of the act. Most of them seem enraptured, by which I mean that there are about a dozen really old people sitting in wheelchairs or beside walkers and canes, dressed in mothball tweed suits and staring at me with slack jaws, incredulous, eyes focused beyond the set, not following my motion, perhaps hearing aids turned down to 'zero,' for the quiet, the solitude. I wonder what it would be like to be old, to be so confused and bewildered by the goings on of the future unfolding in front of me, that I would just hang my mouth open, my brain and body atrophied and ready to accept anything I'm fed, but unable to digest it.

"I guess that makes *you* the liar," the tape concludes smugly.

"You mean, the tape," the tape says, in my voice but this time I don't move my mouth. I stand there very obviously not saying anything. *Aha!*

"No, I mean, you."

"Liar!!" I shout, for real, in a voice utterly different from either of the two used on the tape; a completely different person. I rush to the stool, pick up the tape recorder, and smash it upon the ground. Its vintage flywheels and bits of magnetic tape go everywhere.

"Thank you," I say, and the lights fade.

0.2 The End

This is the end of the novel. It is placed, again, out of the normal sequence of things and in the middle of the book's text because I feel that the storyline end of the book and the stylistic end of the book do not coincide, and since I am favoring style over substance here, it seems appropriate to waste more middle now with this trite plot wrap-up.

As it turned out, **Haley Yoshimoto** was part of a radical anti-time travel militia who believed that the time-space fabric or some such mumbo-jumbo would be damaged by repeated misuse, and had planned the assassination of **Benjamin X. Prestley** for years. Benjamin survives attack, easily, retroactively inventing a kind of field surgery that can seal up a gunshot victim with a 95% success rate, and ensuring that his aides and the bailiffs are all trained in its execution. Even though he is acquitted on murder charges, he is able to also convince the court that he is also his own *next of kin*, thus collecting on his life insurance policy, winning big, multiplying the size of his company and swallowing others, phagocytosis style.

Erik the math genius, in his accelerated plan towards maturity, achieves tenure by eighteen, mid-life crisis by twenty-four, retirement by twenty-nine, and then lives the rest of his decidedly finite life in a golden years community in Miami.

Vuc Cramyirt becomes addicted to placebos and eventually dies a sad, lonely death in his apartment, his body not discovered until the aroma of its ripeness alerts the neighbors weeks later.

Wally the refinery boy and **Mary Friedman** the geologist get married after she gets induces the child protection agency to rescue him from his off-shore rig. Sometimes she worries that she took advantage of his sheltered naïveté, but most of the time they have a healthy and loving relationship.

Simon Bailey the superstar forensic scientist goes on to write an extended version of his seminal paper in the 2012 *Journal of Foul Play*, about the murder of Benjamin X. Prestley and the solution of its mystery, which becomes a best-selling *true crime* novel.

Therapy Patient fails in outrunning the police across the savannah and fails with his creative legal theory to use his doctor-patient privilege to render him immune from prosecution. He is convicted of manslaughter and grand theft auto (among other minor infractions) and shares a cell with *Escape Artist*.

Escape Artist, made even more crazy by his new cellmate, eventually puts his starch knife to use, and nonviolently escapes from prison—MacGyver with his macaroni—but is caught a short while after when he returns to his own home to hide out from the manhunt.

Katie Dixon changes majors dozens of times in College, from *computational jazz sociology* to *general wellness* to *e-feminism* to *postmodern science*. In her late twenties she takes a trip to the Panama canal, and is present for the hullabaloo of the 21st century: the discovery of a massive black polished obelisk right at the fault line separating the Caribbean tectonic plate and the South American, which seems to be deliberately manufactured and yet to have been constructed before there were even mammals on the Earth. The object astounds philosophers and historians, and is sold in an on-line auction for six hundred million euros.

Johan Schisler settles out of court to claim the 2016 Mr. Hemiverse cup, but the terms of the settlement also prohibit him from participating in any future Asymmetric Bodybuilding Association-sponsored event. His franchise of bodybuilding video games more than make up for his inability to compete, and he becomes a household name and icon for the sport, like Mike Tyson or Michael Jackson.

Randy, after being fired from his job for desertion, goes into

filmmaking himself, his most famous work—you may have seen it—being *The Making of 'The Making of Attack of the Bio-Warriors 6: Revenge of Quagtar' DVD*.

The Ultimate Planets of Megatonia are currently in the process of appointing a new Vice Vanguard. Nominations can be made by intergalactic mail; please submit with two letters of recommendation to:

The Ultimate Planets of Megatonia
Vice Vanguard Nominations
attn: Zeflagrophy Dalach
Quadrant A-67-Σ-101-℔
1600 Nuloosmspoplex Dr.
Murmpolug, XU, 39101-3391

The Spaceman and *Space Girl* travel back to earth, his limbs regenerated by her futuristic space pod technology, to live a sort of Yoko-John life, he writing folk songs about space and she infusing them with a bizarre anti-pop aesthetic that could only originate in a futuristic prison colony. They produce children prodigiously and put them up for adoption, hoping to spread their troublemaking D.N.A. molecules around the world. One little girl is adopted by a pair of farmers in rural Holland, who name her Liza Anderstet.

Liza Anderstet and ***** have a short dating spree, focused mostly on physical pleasures and clubbing under the influence of robot narcotics, but eventually drift apart, due in part to their inability to remember each others' names and the jealous paranoia that stems from their sneaky tactics to try to figure them out. For example: ***** is caught looking through Liza's wallet, trying to find her credit cards or bar-coded citizenship tracking device, but she thinks that he is looking for indications of infidelity, or for reasons not to continue dating, i.e., a prescription or pharmacy receipt for some wuss-ass allergy drug, an expired library card (indicating a

lack of interest in literature), or a business card for a psychotherapist, indicating potential mental instability. Liza goes on to explore her revolutionary roots, and he returns to the celibacy of video game programming. **Dance Dance Constitution** becomes, predictably, a multi-platinum hit on the Sega Leviticus.

WHEN I sleep I wear a relaxation eye mask filled with blue-colored gel, strapped around my face like some bizarre prescription goggles. I realize that these are mostly for girls, but, I need my own beauty rest too. Wearing the mask I am a burglar, the kind who just sneaks into deserted houses and has restful, quiet sleep on the luxurious Queen- or King-sized mattresses, and then carefully makes the bed and leaves a small complimentary mint chocolate on the pillow in the morning, or I am like a superhero—Relaxation Eye Mask Man—obscuring the shape of his nose and brow bones in order to disguise his identity; if I was such a superhero I would also take care to use an accent when speaking, to wear platform shoes to alter my height, and to wear contact lenses in order to hide my true eye color, perhaps: novelty contact lenses that make my irises look like that of a cat, shaped like an upright football ready to be kicked, *laces out*, or perhaps the ones that make your irises and pupils disappear entirely, leaving your eyeballs creepy and blank white, if they have such things. My superhero self has advantages in combat: if you or another assailant were to strike my eye region with your fist while I was wearing my relaxation mask, I would not be damaged, unless the matte plastic enclosure is breached, the gel inside seeping into my eyes, becoming trapped between my contact lens and cornea or sclera, causing irritation and redness. We would need to take a break from fighting in that case, so that I can flush my eye with warm water continuously for five minutes while you make a call to the poison control center. I've often wondered why that number is not easier to remember; my suggestions: 1-800-I'VE-BEEN-POISONED or 1-800-MY-BABY-BROTHER-DRANK-ANTIFREEZE.

“Poison control center, Madeline speaking.”

Another hang-up call. Madeline could not imagine what could drive a person to crank-call the PCC, and moreover, not even bother to do any cranking, to just leave the call unrotated and without angular velocity. Perhaps, she sometimes wondered, it was a call from someone who had stuffed his mouth full of aspirin or vitamins and couldn't speak, but, of course, such a person would still be able to make muffled mumbling noises, and of course would not need the advice of the poison control center, the obvious solution to his problem being to spit the damn pills out. Another possibility—Madeline's mothering instincts responsible for such disquiet even though she was 29 and without children, not even menstruating at the moment—was that the call was made by a mute, perhaps made mute by the poison ingested or the call made by a mime, so desperately dedicated to his performance that, even after being injected with an unknown substance by miscreant kids, those darn kids always out to tease the mimes, to molest them, like the Queen's beefeaters, able to talk but unwilling, even in their death throes, the honor of the profession (irrespectively, art), outweighing the possibility that the poison control center may be able to suggest a curative procedure. Sometimes Madeline would try, still,

“If you can't talk, press '1' on your touch tone phone.”

... figuring that she might be able to walk the caller through a decision tree to determine the identity of the toxic chemical taken and its quantity, an exciting life-and-death game of *twenty questions*. The only problem is, if the caller does not have a touch tone phone—reluctant to pay the extortive service fee for such a line, his frugality ultimately being his undoing—he will be unable to simply stay on the line to talk to an operator because, of course, he is unable to talk in the first place.

Melvin hangs up the phone, sweating, exasperated, naked and fat, pathetic, beautiful. After spending the entire evening building up the courage and edifice to call the poison control center, to speak with his secret crush *obsession* called Samantha, to whom he

sold groceries several times at the local *Food Age* convenience store, whose profession he had deduced by reading her garbage, following her to work, phoning her office after swallowing a large container of chewable antacid tablets, hoping to make contact, hoping that she would provide expert advice and rush to his rescue, resuscitate him, and fall in love, Florence Nightingale style. Again, his call is routed to Madeline, who is definitely not Samantha. Melvin needs to get outside, stands, puts his pants on, puts an undershirt on, leaves his apartment, sweaty, stinking, stubble, double chin, walks down the sidewalk towards the gas station for some Tasty Cakes and milk, the gas station's sign reading

FREEDOM LIVES
NOW HIRING

Melvin stepping carefully; he avoided seams of all sorts: cracks on the sidewalk, the glued fold on a paper drinking cup, lips. He only liked things that were continuous and uniform, infinite, and only such surfaces that finitely approximated such perfect expanses were allowed to come in contact with his skin or sneaker. Areas of a woman favored: the lower chest, between the breasts and the navel, but not including either; the inner thigh, but surely not the knee or, shall we say, the nexus. He enters the parking lot, it being acceptable to cross zones, with one foot on the concrete of the sidewalk, one foot on the pavement of the parking lot, and no feet on the rift, odious, nauseating, that joins them.

In the parking lot is a 1976 Lincoln Town Car, tricked out with alloy rims and a totally phat stereo rated at, at least, a 1.21 kilowatts of total power. To the inhabitants of the parking lot, namely Melvin, here is what the car sounds like: Sing or rap your favorite hip hop tune, but do so with your tongue wagging out of your mouth and loose lips around it, slobbering, spitting, sinking ships. The bass warbling, buzzing, shaking the bolts loose, resonating in the muffler, the breakbeats escaping as Tyrone rolls down the window, to stick

his arm out as he waits for his girlfriend, to feel the night air, revs the engine, which cannot be heard over the sound of the stereo anyway, and she finally comes out with her purchase, hops in the passenger seat, and they back up and leave the lot past Melvin, who is feeling ill from the antacids, light headed, neutralized bile raising up his throat. Tyrone and Alisha are on their way to their high school prom, he dressed in a rented white tuxedo, perfect, dashing, she in a pink ball gown, hair woven and plastered into a rigorous and shiny upside-down basket holding her head. He with the boutonniere, she with the corsage, he with the Lucky Strikes, just bought at the convenience store, she with the condoms, nervously, also just bought at the convenience store, this being the big night, for Alisha anyway, can you believe that he made her go in and buy that stuff by herself? She of course selected latex with the *for her pleasure* designation, sized *Large* so as not to cause any unintended insult, and more embarrassed about buying the contraceptive than the cigarettes.

At the dance, fashionably late, hello to all his friends, her friends, oh, *Alisha*, you look *beautiful*, and, what's up, *dude*, word, this music *sucks*, what the *shit* is up with this DJ, dancing, will I be the prom queen? is she going to go through with it tonight? is Helen more beautiful than me? is Helen more beautiful than her? and cake, hanging out by the catering: Philip, with no date, no dress shoes, black sneakers as substitutes, high tops, extra ankle support for when he is pushed down stairs, for when he runs from the bullies, for walking up and down the food table, for visiting the DJ to make a request. His request is the twenty minute *Rush* epic *2112*—which the DJ certainly will not play—as Philip is a total *Rush* nerd and also an objectivist, believing that rational self interest is the optimal morality, and of course that $A = A$, and that in a distant palindromic year the rediscovery of music will lead one man on a quest to overthrow the oppressive Federation that dictates all culture and thought, but whose rebellious spirit is eventually crushed by their tyrannical hand. One of the elders, a councilmember named *Cratman von Plasmabrow*, in a white silken robe, much like a fluid version of Tyrone's tuxedo, stands in the crystal palace with his diamond sceptre, glowing with

Chi energy and staring out over his kingdom, his aging eyes tiring of the absolutism, the 60hz fluorescent flickering burning into his brain, the constant agreement of the councilmembers, the stagnant parliamentary procedure, the by-laws, the minute taking, the slowness with which royalty are expected to move and speak, sick of the dignity, the shards of crystal occasionally finding their way into his sandals, pollution-free flying cars, the free thinkers and radical music lovers sent away, sent to dungeons, teleported to distant moons with breathable atmospheres, prison colonies populated only by ultraliberal artists, anarchists, poets. On one of these prison colonies a licit love affair—surely it cannot be called ‘illicit’ because all love affairs are allowed, encouraged, in the ultraliberal prison colony—produces a young girl, and because every person is born free, even if both of his or her parents are convicts, she is sent out into space in a cryogenic pod, this baby girl, who should not be unfairly subject to the unfair punishment inflicted upon her parents. In the girl’s pod is a television receptor, which is able to receive and decode digital HDTV broadcasts and decode them in hardware, with picture-in-picture and closed captioning support. She likes to leave the closed captioning on, because it helps her learn foreign languages and because she finds the following phenomenon amusing: When clips of a television show are cut up and rearranged into a commercial, frequently the closed captioning signals are not stripped, however, they are corrupted by the process and result in bizarre captions, sometimes hilariously inappropriate. When her pod finally collides with Earth’s International Space Station, she is fully versed in English and Spanish, and, thanks to modern television programming’s self awareness, also not particularly prone to television cliché like that alien from *The Explorers*, River Phoenix’s breakthrough 1985 film, if you know what I mean.

Kramnik, who is out space-walking the surface of the ISS, removing space snails and flicking them into the sun—one of his favorite pass times, how cruel!—is surprised by the bump, and jostled off the surface, tumbling into space. Luckily for him the NASA-made tether keeps him attached, floating, an impossibly slow rotation, but

like an upturned turtle, his space suit's bulk renders him unable to reach behind him to grab the tether and start reeling himself back in. I don't notice his disappearance because of the much more urgent problem of a cryogenic pod piercing the hull of the space station, our oxygen rushing out and our antiquated mainframe computers aghast, beeping and printing out reams of continuous-feed dot matrix printouts, not stacking neatly but spiraling around the chamber like monochromatic birthday streamers, perhaps appropriate for a color blind child, the printouts then being sucked out through the breach. I use another NASA safety invention: quick-hardening foam sprayed around the pod, which is half-through our hull, sealing the crack, the foam crystallizing into a strong honeycomb form. The emergency called *imminent loss of oxygen* is over, but there are still some emergencies called *shut the damn computers up* and *where is Kramnik?* and *what the fuck is that thing?* So, first things first, I feed the proper punch-cards into the mainframe computer to instruct it to ignore the critical system failure. It finally stops beeping and printing. Next I'll—*HELL-o*—the pod opens up and out slips a girl, dressed only in a white silken robe from the future, nubile, well versed in game show trivia.

“Hello,” I say!

“Hi,” she says! “What's this?”

“It's, uh, the International Space Station,” I say.

Meanwhile, Kramnik has taken hold of the paper trail that extends from the gash in the ship, allowing him to spin himself around and grab the tether, and then pull himself back to the airlock, where he is knocking frantically, waiting for me to perform the air-exchange ritual that grants him access into the main compartment; I oblige.

Now we have a total mess of debris choking the air, and a Russian and a Space girl, and the other crew members of the ISS are obviously going to be coming through from one of the other modules any minute now, as soon as they finish their space tennis game or

this other guy, Zaitzev, we always call each other by our last names, maybe it's Zaitzef? I don't know, he's obviously playing correspondence *blitz* chess, where each side has a mere five minutes on their clock, so something like ten seconds per move. But since it's played correspondence style, he has to sit there by the computer constantly checking his e-mail since, as soon as his opponent's move arrives, he has only a few seconds to respond. Can you believe the shit that these guys tie up our internet connection with? Correspondence chess and downloading these stupid animated greeting cards in Cyrillic. You have to understand that when there is debris from an explosion or something, in space, that crap doesn't just fall to the ground and then get swept up by maid robots, it keeps on floating around and getting in your eyes and nostrils, and we have to fish it out of the air with these air filter nets. I teach the Space girl how to do it; she thinks it's pretty fun—we'll have to use this to our advantage, probably anything that doesn't involve being mostly frozen and motionless in a pod watching television will be fun for her—and Kramnik is doing it too. I'm wiping off some of the melted cryofreeze stuff that's flowing along the floor. The Russians have brought up god damn 'A4' size paper towels again, I hate these, the sheets are not well suited to the aspect ratio of my American hands. Meanwhile those motherfuckers in the other module are probably just playing Nintendo and laughing about how they never have to do any work.

“Isn't it funny how we never have to do any work up here?” Alan laughs.

“15-40; match point,” Clayton says, and serves another fault. Clayton's strategy in Space Tennis is to have a completely insane serve, with the idea that if it ever goes in, he will have won the point for sure. He hangs his racket, having lost the match in straight sets 6-0, 6-0, 6-0.

“Well, they shouldn't have built this Space Tennis court if they didn't want us playing in it,” he says, floating over to shake Alan's

hand *good match*.

Alan and Clayton dry their sweaty faces with towels, their clothes amusing to Earth people in the same way that any sort of middle-aged racket sport clothing is amusing, i.e., sweatpants, head bands, goggles, self-prescribed knee and ankle braces, NASA t-shirt. Space tennis equipment is different, though: for one thing, it is played with nine rackets per player. The rackets are each designed for hitting the ball from a different quadrant—octant—of the court, with one default racket for hitting from the center. At the beginning of each point the rackets are hung in the air, spinning along multiple axes so that their gyroscopic motion will resist drift, and if the player needs to switch rackets, he must deftly lift it from its spin to hit the ball back. This motion and just generally maneuvering in microgravity are very difficult, and so the ball moves very slowly in order to allow middle-aged, unathletic players like Alan and Clayton to ever hit it at all.

“Well, up for some Nintendo?” one of them asks.

“Hell yes!” the other responds.

They seal the door to the Space Tennis court so that the desweatifier can suck all of the saline moisture out of the air and compress it into salt tablets for use in cooking. They have to recycle everything up there; no kidding! Do you know how hard it is to ship water and tennis balls up from the Earth on the shuttle?

“Hey, Zaitzev,” remarks Alan.

“Hello Alan. How was game?” asks Zaitzev in his thick Russian accent, not looking up. He’s strapped into a chair and hunched over the computer with his hand on the mouse, staring, waiting, his foot tapping in rapid nervousness.

“16 aces and 159 faults,” claims Clayton.

Suddenly a move arrives via e-mail. Zaitzev snaps into action, at once oblivious to the rest of the world. His eyes dance around the screen, his mouse moves, a false start, changing his mind, seeing an answer to his proposal, checking different lines, finally, clicks, submits his move. “Govno!” he immediately shouts in regret. Alan and Clayton know this one, and start chanting “Govno! Govno!” to tease him as they fire up their video game. They use the term *Nintendo* to refer generically to any number of video game systems, most recently a *Sega Exodus*, having tossed their *Nintendo Corinthians II*, it having a mere 256 bits while their *Exodus* has 512. They boot a game called *Space Debris Collector*, in which they use their controllers to virtually collect floating space debris with air filter nets. The graphics are very realistic. Zaitzev is tapping again.

I burst in, and I’m pissed.

“What the hell are you guys doing?” I demand.

“Uh . . . playing Nintendo, dumbass,” Alan says. They look at each other and roll their eyes, *duh*.

“Did you notice the space pod crashing into the station?”

Clayton and Alan ignore me, concentrating on their game. I float over and rip the cigarette out of Clayton’s mouth.

“*And don’t fucking smoke in here!!*”

I turn my attention to Zaitzev, or Zaitzef, however you spell that, and grab the mouse away from him, just as his move arrives.

“I will lose game!” he implores, clawing for the mouse with one hand while undoing his velcro straps with the other, trying to get out of the chair. I point to the punctured module and direct him to

“Get in there and help Kramnik!”

His chess clock is winding down, with only seconds left.

“Please, I must move queen!” he whines.

The timer hits zero, and a condition is triggered in the computer’s software that causes a packet to be formed in its memory bank, then streamed across the DMA controller to a network interface card. A laser diode converts this into a sequence of photons, which are sent ricocheting down a fiber optic connection to our out-board radio transceiver, which rebroadcasts these pulses of light as shortwave radio down, flying at the speed of light through space, re-entry, burning up, just like that, a snap of the eye, blink of the fingers, slowing as they enter the atmosphere, eventually stimulating electrons in an antenna that converts its stimuli to bits again, bits interpreted and routed and forwarded from Houston across the internet, where they reach my computer.

My computer flashes *Winner!!* on its screen, congratulating me on my victory due to Zaitzev’s falling flag and time forfeit. Actually I am nowhere near and the victory is hardly due to me; I’ve set up my computer with powerful chess playing software in order to frustrate Zaitzev without needing to expend any energy. Here’s where I am: I am about to make a *purchase*, so I am on my way to the Automatic ATM Machine to retrieve money. I always utilize this one specific machine in a laundromat down the street. I used a carbon dating test to determine that the machine originates in the 18th century; it dispenses vintage \$20 bills printed, it seems, by a lithographic process within the machine itself. The bills have the Queen of England on them, that’s how old they are. I have to enter my withdrawal amount and Personal PIN Number using keys labeled in Roman Numerals! But here’s the best part, the reason I that I make the trek: The machine’s charge for withdrawing funds on an out-of-network bank account is a mere 1.25 shillings. I don’t even know how much that is, or even if such an amount can be divided into modern day dollars and deducted from my bank account.

I withdraw two hundred dollars, and figure that the machine must be quite impressed at my wealthiness, because \$200 was a lot

of money back in those days. The money will go to buy a ferry ticket and entrance fee for Danger City, leaving from my current location in *Ciudad Cuidado*, the Well Taken-Care of City. Life is fine in Ciudad Cuidado; the trash is collected from the streets, the property values kept high, the schoolchildren treated to nutritious lunches, and, when typhoons emerge over our little harbor, the government agents contract people like you and me to place sandbags along the shore, to keep back the waves, to absorb all of that water that would otherwise seep onto our streets, maybe into our basements. No such luck in Danger City: here, the trash is left wherever it wants to be, the children are fed experimental food uncertified by toxicologists, and a typhoon generator spits out an aperiodic bi-monthly cyclone to ravage the shores and keep the people on their toes. Despite their purposeful creation, the cyclones are not predictable in their duration or direction, which accounts for the aforementioned and peregrine typhoons (normally found only in tropical regions) that we sometimes have to worry about, since Danger City opposes Ciudad Cuidado on our bay.

This is not desirable for the members of Ciudad Cuidado's tight-knit, affluent community, except for those who are in Danger City's target audience: stupidly wealthy, tearfully bored businessmen, who want to experience *life on the edge*, and who are fed up with standard mid-life crisis fare: bungee jumping, safaris, elaborate *manhunt* scenarios where some randomly selected army recruit is placed in a manmade jungle with no weapons, only a compass and a misleading map, and the businessman is given an assault rifle and laser-guided cruise missile with which to hunt him down. These adventures, while fun at first, eventually become senseless, humorous, as they grow in scale and farcicality, a sham, safe, certified AP non-toxic; no *real* hazard involved. These guys, estranged from their families, suicidal lonely disenchanting death-wish adipose high-society sadistic CEOs, fat cat lawyers, et cetera, sick of all that safe stuff, choose, of course, **Danger City**. At Danger City they can experience true perils, threats on their lives, after signing a waiver disclaiming the right to sue for wrongful death, even due to negligence, or, in the case of

Danger City, malice.

That's all fine inasmuch as the jeopardy is self-contained within their city, but the second-hand smoke, the leaked danger pollution—we worry about that over here in the Ciudad. Sometimes, an uzi will wash up on one of our beaches, and the poor kids—they don't know any better, their television censored, their video games only the non-violent puzzle sort, or else biblical video games like collect the pairs of animals for the Ark, or control a horde of Jews running between the parted walls of the Red Sea, running away from the Egyptians, then at the end of the level trigger the end of the miracle, those mummies or King Tuts or whatever being swept up, like when trying to take advantage of some freak of nature, *hey! gravity has suddenly reversed itself over by the sharp rocks quarry!*, and then, *okay, let's go down there and float around!*, and then, *whoops! everything's back to normal!*, crushed or sliced on the rocks, like Wile E. Coyote running off the edge of a cliff, and, for the moment he doesn't think about what's actually happening, his legs are able to propel him forward, then, propel him as if on an invisible, stationary bicycle, then, as he realizes, his legs become useless, and he plummets. That's what happened to the Egyptians in *Sheep Herders II: Revenge of Moses*, the smash hit video game in the key “sheltered” demographic. So the poor kids get these uzis, and they're thinking, *wow, what's this?* and then the next thing you know, well, suffice to say, those of us in the Ciudad are not happy with Danger City. So here I am, appointed as Ciudad Cuidado ambassador by way of some bureaucratic accident, and tasked with visiting Danger City in order to implore them—if I can find leadership as we understand it within the city limits—to take more caution in the deployment of their hazards.

A sensible, reasonable, request, right? So I purchase my tickets, saving the receipt so that the city council can reimburse me later, plus fifteen cents per mile, the number of miles being traveled in my car being approximately, exactly, zero miles, and get on the ferry. The ferry is curious, simultaneously attempting to appeal to the customers of Danger City and to the sensibilities of our Ciudad, so, there

are well dressed crewmen who will assault you with combat knives, but who are trained to make only superficial wounds, or deep, substantial wounds that narrowly miss vital organs, and the ship stocked with an extremely competent medical staff, including a five-star surgeon. Just as I board, in fact, I witness a disembarking passenger from the previous trip from Danger City get knifed in the back by the captain, thinking that she was done, that she had survived the adventure, had invited her family to meet her; they waving signs like *welcome back Paula*, etc.; her interest in regular things like food and relatives rekindled, but, in taking that final step off of the ferry had let her guard down—apparently this is a common occurrence, the captain, wishing her a *thanks for riding with us* and *please come again* and *have a good day* taking the opportunity to also impale her, slicing her kidney, and as she falls to her knees, the captain smiling his fake airline smile and her family confused, rushing towards her, touching her wound, wondering *why?*, her life flashes before her eyes, and she sees the rise and fall of her father, not present, having already fallen: Her father Jack was also a businessman, her wealth and corporation inherited from Jack, but Jack had built his fortune himself; his methods unscrupulous and his wake tremendous, leaving countless small shops and family businesses strip-mined, defrauded, husked. As a result, as part of God's plan, or some cosmic correlation, Jack is rendered sightless in a freak accident, or by way of an incurable disease; the details hazy in Paula's oxygen-deprived, dying brain, in any case, Jack is suddenly blind. He, like any rich late-onset sightless person gets a seeing eye dog, raised from a puppy and descending from a genetically pure thoroughbred line of Golden Retrievers, the quintessential seeing eye breed, faithful, perfect, loving, named *Cameo*, and, as Jack begins to develop a relationship with this dog, he simultaneously starts to reflect on his own behavior as a father and as a member of society, and, eventually, realizes the selfishness of his actions; he becomes a philanthropist, supporting local businesses and struggling charities, donating money freely, but with genuine purpose, not merely out of some self-centered desire to lower his taxable income into the next bracket, for his fortune was immense, invincible, indelible in any case. Eventually, the court

of public opinion rules in favor of Jack; he is forgiven for his juvenile transgressions and is elevated to the status of national hero, cult figure, benefactor. Universities are named in his honor, and his children are no longer afraid to use their real surnames for fear of guilt by association or pedigree. All of this time, Cameo is by his side, making public appearances, becoming a household name, children petting him, tongue wagging, mild-mannered, loving. And then a miracle: by some other act of God or coincidence, Jack's sight is restored! Across the nation people are stunned, happy for him; some parents of blind children making a pilgrimage, hoping that his magic can somehow be transferred to their child, even if their children's eyes are hopelessly defective, or even missing, poked out in a horrible drill press accident, and Jack does his best, but his only advice is to be *true to one's heart* or some other sappy stuff like that, but he means well, is just inarticulate. But what about poor Cameo? Though Jack still loves him, plays with him, feeds him meat-flavored vitamin-enhanced bone-shaped by-products, he does not bring him everywhere—for instance, he no longer has an excuse to bring the dog on airplanes or into public libraries—and Cameo becomes confused, sullen, unable to understand why Jack will not follow him around everywhere, holding onto his rigid harness; unable to comprehend how Jack can cross the road without his help. As a result Cameo becomes increasingly testy, sometimes barking at house guests, then occasionally biting the blind children on pilgrimages, then developing a taste for real meat at dinner time—none of that dried corn chaff for him—cooked ultra-rare, or raw, and eventually becoming feral, channeling his killer instinct, going for the neck. Tearfully, Jack and his family resign to committing Cameo to dog jail, first visiting him weekly, then missing a Saturday here and there, then the frequency dropping dramatically, and, eventually, he is a painful memory, not really because they don't still care about him or wish that he was cured of his rage, but because any further visit would require an explanation, i.e., excuses, for the rareness of visits, and they wish to avoid this uncomfortable situation.

In dog jail, Cameo is deprived of his juicy, bloody steaks, and

is instead forced to eat moist cylindrical food from a can. Cameo is a celebrity in dog jail; partly because of his famousness as Jack's seeing eye dog during his salad days, partly because of his reputation for cold-blooded, random violence against the other inmates. His cell-mate, Spot, is one of the few dogs that Cameo doesn't bite, mainly because of his sycophancy. For instance, spot will always get the ball and then give it to Cameo so that he may return it when they play hardened, brutal games of fetch within the chain-link confines of their one-hour recreation sports period. The thrower of the ball, wearing a suit like a bee keeper or hazmat worker, is Lawrence Ochs, former star of the long-running sitcom *Daddy so Dumb*, in which he played Leon, the loving but half-witted single father of four teenage girls: Beth, the oldest, a high school lacrosse star; Mary Anne, hopelessly jealous of Beth, trying desperately for the pairing to be parenthesized as such: (Beth and Mary Anne) and (Julia and Hannah), ie., she in the *big kids* group and Julia and Hannah in the *little kids* group; Julia and Hannah, little kids, Julia with progeria, the disease which causes her to grow to adulthood at seven times the normal rate, she acting a bit like the Mom, the straight one despite having the mental maturity of a five year-old, and Hannah, the token cute toddler whose mere presence brings a constant grin to a certain demographic, and whose witticisms end each episode with a laugh from the family and a freeze frame, the name of the executive producer appearing at the bottom of the screen. Following the cancellation of *Daddy so Dumb*, Lawrence spent years in relative obscurity, his show in syndication, his bankroll stable, but, as he faded as a public icon and his lifestyle did not become more reasonable in response, he accumulated debt, flew coach class on airlines, and was left off invite lists to cool parties with increasing frequency. In order to redeem his public perception and his bank account, Lawrence participated in a television show with the somewhat unwieldy title *Where are they now?—And where are they going?*, in which unemployed former stars compete with each other in various contests in order to win new jobs. There are several careers at stake: dream jobs—race car driver, abstract expressionist painter, professional *Non-Euclidean Quake* player—and nightmare

jobs—bathroom cleaner at Grand Central Station, corporate massage therapist, submissions coordinator at a major book publisher—and jobs in between, and participants are required to sign contracts forcing them to work at whatever job is selected for a certain number of years, *no takebacks*, the salaries for the undesirable jobs being used partially to fund the expense of the really good ones. Lawrence Ochs placed in the middle of the pack, passable in feats of brute force, but paralyzed in contests of mind: when the cameras began rolling, he regressed to his on-screen personality, his role of dim-witted Leon, encouraged by the producers of the show who wanted the viewing audience to see not these decrepit fallen stars, but their displaced sitcom characters, broken by poverty and corrupted by alcoholism. Leon's job: live-in prison guard at the Pennsylvania Canine Correctional Facility.

Leon was eliminated from the tournament by Brandon Sweet, a one-hit pop wonder with his single, *Where do You Wanna Eat?*, whose popularity can be explained in retrospect by the singular catchy chorus,

<i>G</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>G</i>
Baby,	where do you wanna	eat?	

<i>G</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>A7</i>	<i>Cadd9</i>
Do you	wanna take a	trip with	me?

The rest of the song is a complete mush, the lyrics unsure as to whether they are metaphorical (crudely standing for some sex acts, perhaps) or literal, and cover all sorts of topics with equally flaccid rhymes. But here was the innovation: this catchy chorus was something that radio listeners would reinforce by themselves, once or twice a day, finding the phrase topical, asking their friends, *Baby, where do you wanna eat?* in song, holding an invisible microphone and singing like Brandon, and then their friends responding with the second line, which of course does not answer the question. Brandon's album of the same title sold one million copies, the sales record being

achieved simultaneously with the growing public annoyance with the song; whenever someone's cell phone would go off, her ring tone set to a simplified version of the melody, other patrons of the movie theater or restaurant would groan, *oh my god*, I hate that song. Anyway, Brandon bested Lawrence in the *4D Tic-Tac-Toe Trivia Challenge*, and thus won the following employment: producer and director of panda pornography for zoos. You see, Giant Pandas, being the prudish creatures that they are, do not like to copulate in captivity. Zoos hoping to increase their panda population (the cute little guys being quite a draw for zoo visitors, thus, *cash money bling* for the zoo owners) purchase and display erotic videos of pandas doin' it in order to set the mood for their shy animals. As it turned out, this may have been Brandon's true calling—he won a Golden Condom® at the Adult Zoological Film Society's annual convention in 2005 for his film "Eucalicktus." Summary: Female panda Lai Lai, girls always having Siamese twin names like that, gets up from her bamboo munching to answer the doorbell; it's male pool cleaner panda bear Xiang Shue! He ambles over on four legs to the pool, its murky water not filtered since the installation of the exhibit, and walks right in. He cleans the pool; this is a short scene, but Pandas have a strong work ethic and so there certainly is no reasonable possibility for sex before the job is complete. Now: a slow-motion shot of him doing that vibrating maneuver that bears do in order to shake out their fur, the glistening molecules of water arcing off his back, sparking in the air, *lookin' good!* Lai Lai gives a sly smile and walks over, they do a silent dance, sniffing, the dance's meaning being: "Xiang, I wonder if there is some way I might pay for the pool cleaning specially, this time?" "Hmm, Lai Lai, what do you have in mind?" "Well," she winks. Then, there are thirty-five minutes of multiple-orgasm, hard core sex. The movie is especially popular among Japanese pandas, its dubbed voices grotesque, erotic. At the award ceremony, he felt obliged to sing the chorus of his hit song. When he did, Diane Meltzer at the Consumer Electronics Show across the street, sufferer of hypersensitivity disorder, thought that she heard the familiar pop tune of her cell phone ringing, and excused herself from the workshop on Next-Generation Enterprise

P2P Wi-Fi Protocols for Kitchen Appliances. In the hallway she digs through her purse, and finds her phone, a little white thing the size of a 20th century nine-volt battery. ONE MISSED CALL it says. It's from her brother Danny—strange—she dials him. No answer. Her brother Danny is a professional blimp racer, engaged in a year-round, continuous blimp flight around the Earth, multiple laps and differing orbits each time, today passing over the Atlantic Ocean, as has been the case for the past several weeks. Danny is actually hundreds of days ahead of the next closest competitor, but because the contest lasts for so many years, he is still reluctant to relax on his laurels.

Danny Meltzer is wearing one of those leather flight suits where the expansive front flap is attached with a series of large buttons, brown leather and gold buttons, and he has a big flowing white linen scarf around his neck, goggles, and leather cap. He speaks in a British accent that is not exactly fake, but which is certainly dramatized deliberately. Do you know what I'm getting at? Like a World War I pilot, the first major war to be fought in part in the skies—the rat-tat-tat of gunfire in an awkward dogfight, called so because of the looping, because of the tricky maneuvers that are required for one dog, say, Cameo, to bite the neck of another dog, say, accounting scandal scapegoat Cortez, the only mammal to be convicted as a result of the fraudulent 2011 SEC filings of Maxillomega Industries. Their excuse for the missing reports on their illegal strip-mining of Mt. Rushmore and the Redwood National Park: the dog ate it. But back to wars. Here's a good one: in World War I, which at the time was just known as "World War" or even just, "The War," military scientists were developing air warfare technology, and some of it was not that good. For instance, early mounted machine-guns, placed in front of the pilot for ease in aiming, would actually *shoot the plane's own propeller off*. This is a bit like when the earth was invaded in 2010 by a few ships full of aliens from what we later learned was Nenfon 9, a planet of warring, savage, and technologically advanced creatures that was destroyed by a nearby supernova. The ships that reached us were flying arcologies: residential starships with internal

ecologies; plants and animals, artificial sunlight, etc. When they landed, the Earth their last hope for the survival of their species, they swarmed our cities, attacking us. They weren't allergic to bacteria in our atmosphere or anything like that, but here's the thing, their only means of attack was to hug you, and then fire a biological spear from behind their heart, right through their own chest and chambered organ, and this barbed thing would puncture you, and usually kill you, but always kill the Nenfonian, a suicide bomb of sorts. This was scary as shit, for sure, these fallen monster/man pairings, bleeding all over each other, lining the streets. But seriously, with only a few thousand Nenfonians on their ships, and the Earth's population numbering almost ten billion, the whole thing was over in a few months, and we hardly had to even do anything, though, of course, we developed and deployed all sorts of bizarre weaponry anyway, like the magnetomic bomb. Speaking of bizarre weaponry, going back to World War I we have another strange one: flechettes, which are basically weighted metal knives or darts, weighted so that the blade is pointed down, and then dropped in large numbers by a plane flying over ground troops. These items were very expensive to produce, and there is not a single recorded instance of them causing death or a serious injury at all. Danny, having not learned the lessons of wars past, has a similar technique for keeping his blimp peers behind him: Air mines. These are balloons filled with a light gas, like Helium, or better, Hydrogen, its flammable nature merely enhancing the mine's effects, which have a proximity-activated explosive device attached to them. He releases them out of the back of his blimp, like the back-seat passengers in the frontrunning car of some car chase throwing anything they can find: trash bags inflated with paint, the license and registration, *et cetera* in order to disrupt the cop cars behind them. And you can picture the motion: the balloon rising, the bomb falling, and then, as the string snaps tight, the balloon is first tugged downward by jolt but then picks up, begins sailing roughly horizontally behind him. The balloons carry the name of his sponsor Flextronix who, if they had not retired the name via corporate merger shortly after financing his ship, would have a nightmare public relations problem on their hands:

the colorful, logo-bearing balloons were falling in scattered locations around the world, being found by children and endangered species and exploding, commercial airliners being occasionally damaged by mid-air detonations, and, like the flechettes, never actually hitting or even slowing the other blimp racers. Danny tries his cell phone again. Despite its high-tech perpetual battery, he never gets more than a single tentative bar's worth of signal up in his blimp, and he's lucky to get a single ring out of it before it hangs him up. He's spent the last year in isolation, except for his automated crewmates, attempting to sometimes send messages by means of ringing alone, through a sort of unitary Morse code, impoverished in expressive power, with no pre-arranged conventions for discourse and no SETI-capable code crackers on the other end, and so only being able to send the meta-message "I am trying to reach you."

"This thing sucks," he tells one of his crewmembers, tossing it out of the blimp.

The phone falls, roaming, full of *mobile-to-mobile minutes*, accelerating, whistling as it does, its industrial designers having never subjected it to a wind tunnel test, and onomatopoeically bounces off a yellow rubber life raft, breaking its fall without breaking *it*, and then arcs elastically back up into the air, lands, and skids its way across the surface of the oil derrick to the feet of Wally van Dragt, fourteen year-old child laborer, strong as an ox and as oily as a Texaco, the oil baked into his skin, a full-body monochromatic tattoo, born at sea, he has never seen land, kept by his parents secretly in the derrick's steam room for the first several years of his life. Now he's an expert operator of machinery, tier of knots, and hider in the steam room whenever the supply ships or inspectors from OSHA come. He has never seen a cell phone. Wally picks it up, puzzled by its bright white color, instantly mangled by the Texas gold on his hands, and puts his treasure in his overalls pocket quickly, before anyone sees.

"Wally!" calls his mother, "Help your pa with the crane!"

The crane is used to move things around the rig, such as supplies and replacement parts. For instance, Wally's father Nick is moving fuel tanks for the oil pump, which, ironically, is powered not by the very oil that it sucks up from deep below the sea but by refined gas that is shipped in from the shore. Of course a machine powered by its own output would be a perpetual motion machine, a physical impossibility! Wally goes to help his father, but just as he is loading the fuel tanks onto the crane platform, an air raid siren sounds!

sound of air raid siren

Obviously there is no air raid. Who would want to attack an oil rig? The American Child Labor Enforcement Agency? Hardly. ACLEA fights with threatening letters and paperwork, not cruise missiles. Nay, this is a different kind of cruise missile: one of the thousands of zombie cruise ships floating aimlessly through the oceans. You see, when the polar ice caps melted, raising sea levels and swallowing the entirety of California and South America, overpopulated cities began mandating a rotating cruise schedule for their inhabitants: ten thousand this month, ten thousand the next. Ships were created in huge numbers, packing the popular ports, their proximity such that they were able to form a vast *ad hoc* wireless network, and who wouldn't want to live on a cruise ship, with free sushi, a heated swimming pool, an artificial river for fishing feeding into a man-made salt water ocean for sailing other, smaller, cruise ships within? But the popularity of the cruise ships was rivaled only by their susceptibility to epidemics: as pathological microcosms with genetically non-diverse inhabitants (large families, for instance), they became breeding grounds for plagues, and were eventually deemed unsafe for docking at any port. The inhabitants all died at sea, and these cruise ships sail with the tides, aimlessly wandering; ghost ships, or so the legend goes. Occasionally such a ship would approach the oil rig, and, packed with pathogens, present the possibility for a derrick-rocking, employee-infecting, collision course.

sound of air raid siren

The siren means *Battlestations!* and so Wally forgets the fuel tank and rushes to the supply room, where he grabs instead a shoulder-mounted rocket launcher. His father jumps behind the machine gun at the top of the rig, swings it around to face the cruise ship, and starts firing, the tracers arcing through the air, drawing a dotted marquee between the derrick and the boat. Like so many times before, Wally calmly but quickly drops to one knee, flips out the scope on his launcher, tests the wind speed with a wet fingertip, and adjusting his aim appropriately, fires. He feels a bit like the Bermudans must have felt when they defended their resort island against one of the world's most treacherous sneak-attacks, when Barbados disguised a battleship as a cruiseliner and sailed it deep behind Bermuda's defenses before unleashing a barrage of missiles and gunfire. Bermuda was successful in staving off the enemy, though, and the battle eventually led to the International Resort Island Non-Aggression Pact, which outlawed such buncos. The rocket soars through the air leaving a stream of oily smoke behind it—even the smoke is covered in the grime—and impacts with a dramatic explosion on the ship's bow. After a few more rockets and rounds, the ship is visibly beaten, perforated, with its artificial waterways pouring from the holes, oblique, awkward, like an injured dinosaur, falling, sinking into the tar pit where it will become part of the fossil record. Minutes after the ship submerges entirely, it lets out a gigantic subaqueous fart, sending a final lump of diseased air to the surface, and when it erupts, Wally and the crew of the oil rig shout and jump triumphantly. Wally etches another notch in the doorframe of the supply room; the surrounding waters will be a Disneyland for deep-sea diving hyperimmune archæologists of the future.

Later that night, in the privacy of his steam room, Wally retrieves the phone from his overalls pocket. **2,495 missed calls.** He had taught himself to read a little bit—secretly—from boxes of food, heavy machinery operations manuals, and Material Safety Data Sheets. But he had never seen or heard of an object so clean, so

white, before. Its screen displays words and numbers, and he finds a snake game that he plays for hours and hours! High score! Not yet bored, but anxious to explore more, he discovers a list of words—strange, wonderful words like “Dave” and “Mary”—and, pressing buttons, suddenly, the object is making noise! He holds it to his ear in order to listen more closely, a buzzing sound, and, then it speaks to him!

“Hello?” it says.

Wally is dumbstruck. He doesn’t recognize the voice at all. This object can talk? Or it is like a radio? But the radio only talks to the other end of the derrick, and he knows all the people on the derrick. Unless there is someone new? A stow-away from a supply ship? Infiltrating our rig?

“Who is this?” Wally asks.

“It’s Mary. Who is this?” says the object.

“Wally,” he responds. What kind of thing doesn’t know who Wally is?

“Uh, I think you have the wrong number,” she says.

“What do you mean?”

The two engage in a lengthy conversation about all sorts of things, Wally being a curious, understimulated boy, and Mary Friedman being a lonely and, though she didn’t think of herself that way, depressed scientist. Mary educates Wally about life outside of his particular offshore drilling platform, about school, about girls, about volcanoes. She’s a geologist, on a visit to Mount Baker in Washington, USA. What the Mount Bakes is lava, and then, every once in a while, spits that red hot shit all over. They pack it up in ceramic jars like some kind of tomato sauce, *on top of spaghetti...* and ship it back to the laboratory to be analyzed for its mineral and

weaponized cyanobacterial content. Mary wears these heavy duty oven mitts, and holds a long, long ladle, and dips it down deep into the flow, making sure to get some spicy meatballs. She thinks again of Wally, and is elated, giddy about their planned wireless reunion that evening. There is so much to talk about! She probably will not tell him about her ex-husband, Darren, a sufferer of the rare *Late Onset Punk Disorder*, whom she had divorced in no small part because of the disease; it was not something that he could help, but nor could she.

Do you have Late Onset Punk Disorder?

Late Onset Punk Disorder is a rare congenital disease that affects dozens of Americans. Though the disorder is usually first recognized at ages 55-65, and your chances of contracting the disease increase dramatically if your mother or maternal grandmother has been diagnosed, it can affect almost anyone at any time.

There is no cure for LOPD, but early detection can lead to a treatment plan that vastly improves the patient's quality of life.

Symptoms include:

Male antipattern baldness One of the most tell-tale symptoms is a balding pattern opposite to the one experienced by most men: Hair along the sides and back of the head thins, while hair along the top becomes coarse and rigid, like a mohawk hair style.

Headaches

Cockney Aphasia Development of a sloppy British accent without any British heritage or vacations is considered another key symptom.

Delirium Patients with LOPD will often say ridiculous things, like that *Blondie* is the best band to ever walk the face of the Earth.

Fatigue

Most importantly, if you or a loved one is diagnosed with Late Onset Punk Disorder, remember that *you are not alone!* Aside from the eight to twelve other persons living with the disorder across the country, there are hundreds of *chronic punks*—those who have had punk-rock symptoms for the majority of their lives—and tens of thousands of *ur punks*—mostly teenagers, afflicted with the fairly common acute form of the disease. These groups also commonly welcome LOPD sufferers into their social circles and activities.

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Randy browses to the next web page. He does have the cockney thing and thinks that Blondie is pretty sweet, but no fatigue, nor any headaches. Next: *Chronic Enthusiastic Nodding Syndrome*, no, that doesn't sound right, either. The boss peeks into Randy's cubicle and he quits his self-diagnosis immediately, shutting down the web browser with an instantaneous, reflexive keystroke. A second motion makes his screen pop up with complex work-related 3D wireframe models.

"How's it going?" asks the boss.

"Yeah, uh, good—I'll have the storyboard proofs by tomorrow."

"Storyboard . . . proofs . . . by tomorrow," the boss repeats, disjointedly, while writing it down on his memo pad. He always does this, repeating what you tell him like a waiter at a Chinese restaurant, and like a waiter, tallying it on his little pad to hold you to it later. "OK."

The boss takes off and Randy hangs his head; why would he promise to have all of that work done by tomorrow? Here's the work: Randy is a special effects animator for a new film by avant garde writer/director Sosprofoy Moos: *Behind Enemy Eyes*. The film is a completely straightforward and serious war drama in every

respect except one: all of the characters in the movie have their eyes on the backs of their heads instead of the front. Since practically every shot in the picture has at least one human head in it, that means that the whole thing needs to be digitally edited, the eyes (shot by a second camera) pasted into approximately the location of the lambdoidal suture, or the forehead extended to cover the eye sockets if the front of the head is showing. Characters in this movie all behave as if eyes in the back of the head are extremely normal, i.e., they often talk to each other while ‘facing’ in opposite directions, or run backwards with their rifles drawn, and never in the film does Sosprofoyo ever address this ocular translocation.

Finishing all of the images for the storyboard would be nearly impossible, and on top of that, Randy has convinced himself—through hypochondria and excessive viewing of alarmist web sites about extremely rare or theoretical disorders—that there is something wrong with him, and is continually trying to match symptoms like “general feeling of listlessness,” “occasionally itchy scalp,” and “ingrown toenail” with diseases. Perhaps he had some as yet unknown and terminal illness, and he’ll be damned if some quack doctor is going to luck into classifying and naming that disease after something other than Randy himself. You know? Okay, time for a break.

Randy gets outside, lights up a caffeinated cigarette, and, since it will be a long night, decides to go for a pleasantly zestful power-walk in the buoyant London air. When I say buoyant, what I mean to convey is the exhilarating hop-skippity-jumpingness of the air, really, its temperature, relative humidity and pollen count, not its literal ability to float his body by means of its high specific gravity. Across the way, here, is the new London Airport, due to overcrowding located conveniently right in and above the city, with spectacular suspended runways and transparent glass skywalks between gates. He enters the terminal, as he often does, in search of women: he prefers long-distance relationships. Though the environment is familiar, today he is stricken with *wanderlust*, suddenly coming to the realization that he can—at great expense but nonetheless it is possible—simply

purchase a plane ticket at the counter to anywhere he likes, and fly there after waiting a short while and withstanding a brutal security checkpoint examination—what if they, in the process, detect his internal tumors and parasites and suddenly his disease is visible, public, and the traveling doctors run off to their typewriters and type up submissions to the *New England Journal of Medicine*? But before he knows what he’s doing, before he can finish the thought, he’s got a ticket to Astana, Kazakhstan, the remote capital city, and is through the checkpoint easily, having no baggage.

A colorfully-dressed bald monk sings a hymn like this:

‘There is no soul but false self soul!’
(True self does not agree:)
‘Though false be-lieves he’s o-ver-lord,’
‘we’re com-ple-men-ta-ry.’

The monk starts talking rapidly, introducing himself as Shimur and shaking hands and following Randy to his gate. Randy, still mesmerized by the possibilities for his impending globetrot, doesn’t brush him off quickly enough, and, falling decisively into the telemarketing trap—in this case actually airport followmarketing—allows himself to be engaged in a one-sided conversation which becomes increasingly difficult to excuse himself from, and which eventually turns to the *Foonon Shou* religious cult for which Shimur is proselytizing.

“The thing you have to understand,” he says, “is that your soul is divided into two parts: the *false self* and *true self*.”

“Uh huh,” says Randy, thinking about what kinds of things people do in Kazakhstan, and looking at his ticket again to find the right gate number.

“The thing is,” Shimur continues, “the false self constantly denies the existence or importance of the true self.”

“Sounds bad.”

“Exactly! But the true self affirms the simultaneous need for both the false and true selves.”

“The true self believes partially in the belief that it doesn’t exist?”

“No,” he shakes, “you sound confused, Randy. Let me give you this free educational book about the history of mankind,” he pulls a book from his bag, “it has full-color illustrations,” he opens to the color plates in the center of the book, printed on high-brightness glossy paper, a picture of a temple, a diagrammatic division of the human body into separate regions, each anatomically inaccurate and labeled with quaint archaic terms, and highlighted with color to indicate which of the two souls is sovereign over each region, like a spiritual game of Risk, “and it’s free,” he hands the book to Randy, consummated with an inkjet brochure and business—I guess, religion—card.

“Thanks.”

“The thing is,” he starts again, “we’re a traveling monk,” he always uses the plural pronouns to refer to anyone who is enlightened to the nature of his binary soul, “and we do ask for a small donation to help pay for our journeys,” he displays a needy puppy-dog face for Randy.

Randy would not normally give money out to a bald guy but he figures, since he’s in the process of hemorrhaging thousands of Euros on plane tickets for no reason, he can spare a few drachma in exchange for the reading material.

Shimur nods, bows, folds his hands like a mantis folding its hands like a Catholic, curtsies, and exhales a yoga mantra, and says, “We thank you and wish you well on your spiritual journey,” and then pussyfoots off to haunt the escalators again.

Randy sits and waits for the plane. Across from him is a gentleman nodding vigorously to music playing in his tiny stereo earphones, nodding so hard that he has to gently bite his bottom lip in order to restrain it, perhaps, to keep it from flapping around incontinently. Also nearby is a man absorbed in his laptop computer, calculating business spreadsheets or EBITDA or core competencies or whatever, for whom Randy—as a 3D animator computer genius—would normally feel an irrational contempt, a sensation that because he does not completely understand the technology he is not worthy to use it. Similarly, some automobile enthusiasts have this same feeling when they spot Randy’s \$75,000 BMW M5 sports car, and then realize that it has an automatic transmission. But in this case, Randy’s euphoria allows him to acknowledge the man undisdainfully. Others come and go, and eventually Randy becomes bored with them. He opens his book, the *Foonon Gol Mani* to an arbitrary page and begins reading.

ment, the souls exist in three stages. These stages are called the *Cinshuvi* (“nocturnal”) stage, the *Bethiti* (“morning”) and the *Michuhup* (“twilight”) stage. During each stage the souls have different strengths and weaknesses. It is important for spiritual development to be attuned to these rhythms and to synchronize one’s contact with the elements to the peaks in resistance. This enhances the souls’ natural flow of latent energy.

The chart below summarizes the strengths and weaknesses in each stage.

Soul Stage	Characteristics
<i>Cinshuvi</i>	<p>True Self: Weaknesses are fire and pestilence, Strengths are vegetables and rain water</p> <p>False Self: Weaknesses are the true self and arithmetic, Strengths are camels and lanolin</p>

Soul Stage	Characteristics
<i>Bethiti</i>	<p>True Self: Weaknesses are purple and small children, Strengths are iridescent minerals and barley wine</p> <p>False Self: Weaknesses are plague and oxidation, Strengths are equilateral triangles and truss lattices</p>
<i>Michuhup</i>	<p>True Self: Weaknesses are artificial scarcities and multiples of eleven, Strengths are rounded close back vowel sounds and embroidery</p> <p>False Self: Weaknesses are fibromyalgia and soft foods, Strengths are iodine and corrugated cardboard</p>

In no stage can the souls be harmed by rocks or metal. Cleave the worldly flesh with a saber. Though the flesh does bleed, does the soul not still breathe? On the other hand though the flesh may not be harmed by words, the soul may be. Say to your foot, “Foot! You are a lowly rat!” Is the foot not unharmed? Now say to your brethren, “Friend! You are but insignificant swill! You do not have the fire of life in you! Your spiritual energy is weak and anemic!” Does this not incite him to rage, burying his true self and awakening his false?

Randy closes the book. He can’t believe how obnoxiously arbitrary this religion’s beliefs seem, so, he will save the rest of the delightfully preposterous text for the fourteen-hour trip. He yawns and looks at the departing passengers from a newly arrived flight, perhaps the same plane that will be taking him to Astana.

The arrivals look like normal people, an old man with a walker here—the aluminum shafts of his walker actually filled with heroin;

a drug smuggler—a young toddler in a dress there—her toy doll, a walking and talking version of the US attorney general with real biological hair follicles and fleshy disease vectors; the hit of the holiday season—an attractive women in her twenties whom Randy thinks about getting up to talk to—but who, alas, runs to her apparent boyfriend’s waiting arms for an excited and tearful hug. But then there’s this totally abnormal sight: A huge, I mean at least *seven-foot tall* Japanese man with a kindly face but dressed in black tight robes, cleaved-toe shoes, red protective hand-pads that are attached via a string between his middle and ring fingers, and carrying no luggage except for a gigantic sheath attached to his back. The man is *Shirt Howbushi*, the monstrous ninja and national hero-villain of Japan, like *Fantômas* of France, subject of innumerable pulp youth series and graphic novels, but also real-life assassin whose stealthiness and seemingly random pattern of murder make him uncatchable.

Shirt Howbushi’s one weakness is his sword, the *Sowbushu*, which he has become so attached to through decades of practice and meditation that if it is broken, or even just removed from his person, he will die, instantly, like when one of a pair of two identical twins is murdered and the other immediately feels the pangs of the event in his heart—it’s a medical fact. So Howbushi has a doctor’s note that allows him to bring the sword aboard flights and into sporting events, as long as he promises not to use it. The honor/terror of his presence in London is due to his impending assassination of Douglas Tollinger III, a local big-shot in an international diamond cartel that, while operating mostly within the law, is fairly flexible in its interpretation of moral code. So, you know, you don’t need to feel bad for Mr. Tollinger. He leaves the airport and stands in the taxi lane, waiting for a cab to pick him up. When a cab arrives, he climbs in the back seat, sits, and hands the driver a business card:

Douglas M. Tollinger III
Chief Economist, Spestet Corporation
1 Spestet Drive, London
+44 207 308 1444

Home: 0870 836 5291
1281 Stratford Dr.
North Yorkshire YO1 4NS

“You want me to bring you here?” asks the cabbie, sounding, I suppose, like a Yorker.

Shirt Howbushi says nothing, only sits back in the seat and rests his hands at his side. Shirt never talks.

“Whatever, man,” he says, and starts driving.

During the trip, the cabbie can’t resist trying to make conversation; he asks:

“You in town for business, or . . . ?”

“What kind of costume is that, a samurai?”

Each time Howbushi just sits, staring intently forward, not acknowledging his questions at all. After driving for half an hour the driver slows and pulls up to 1281 Stratford Dr., and says,

“Right, here you are, and you had bloody better—” but stops talking when his head turns around to see that Howbushi is gone.

Howbushi dances lightly across the grass of the property on the tips of his toes, kicking his knees high and crouched over in a ninja sprint. He darts past security cameras, is un-sniffable to attack dogs, and leaps to the roof of the garage silently, opens a second floor bathroom window, and slips in. He uses his highly developed sense of smell to detect the location of an overweight, fifty-year old economist, and tip-toes down the hall towards him. On the way there is a bodyguard. *Sliced!* silently, and the body gently lowered to the ground on his blade. Shirt continues, and here is the door

to his bedroom. He opens the door, the smell stronger now, and inside is Mr. Tollinger, working late on his laptop computer at his desk, and whose risk assessment sense is also highly developed, being an economist, and who instinctively reaches for the gun in his desk drawer, a silver six-shootin' revolver—remember that if you have one of these, to be sure to always keep fewer than six enemies!—and turns to see the tall ninja crouching in his doorway, his hand hovering over his shoulder, ready to grab the handle of his blade. Tollinger knows that this is not a friendly visit so he grimaces and fires the gun—bam!—and in the same time it takes for his finger to twitch on the trigger, Shirt Howbushi unsheathes his sword and draws it deliberately across his body, deflecting the lead pellet. He takes a step forward. Douglas fires again. Blocked. Shirt moves towards him more quickly, staring and pointing his blade straight at him—he's now blocking with the tip of the blade, the bullets being filleted into two or more tiny parts which fly safely to his sides and embed themselves in Tollinger's expensive furnishings. His sword is sharp, like atomically sharp, nonmagnetic Damascus steel, like an infomercial knife that actually performs in the outrageous ways they claim it does in the advertisement. Then Howbushi finally reaches him, and here is the payoff, here is how he became such a successful (meaning notorious) hero/villain: like Zorro, the ninja leaves his signature on the chests of his quarry, while he battles them, in precise, nonfatal sword slashes. His signature differs each time, and this is the only time that he is ever heard talking: he composes for you and recites a death poem, in haiku form, that is simultaneously inscribed on your chest with his blade. While deflecting the remaining bullets fired from Tollinger's gun, he speaks softly, in Japanese:

“Winter is so cold /” he carves.

“Help!! Somebody!!!” calls Tollinger. There are noises downstairs, other bodyguards responding to the much more alarming noise of gunshots that had been made in the preceding seconds.

“An economist's diamond /” the ninja continues, tearing Tollin-

ger's bloodied dress shirt to shreds.

“Oh my . . . god!” he cries.

“But never again.”

Shirt punctuates his haiku with a final fatal stab, Douglas's eyes bulging out in disbelief, blood coming up his throat, choking him. Bodyguards burst into the room before Douglas even stops squirming, but the ninja is gone by the time they do.

Next door, Olivia McClain is startled from her sleep by the sounds of gunfire. She dials the police, and even stays on the line until the police arrive, as tired as she is, because she is just about the nicest person in North Yorkshire. Let me give you an example. Whenever she goes out to dinner with her friends, she brings her cell phone and makes a point of calling any person that happens to come up at dinner, dials that chap right up, so that she can make sure that she and her friends never talk about someone behind his back. Isn't that just brilliant? Here's another example: When she's over someone's house for a party, she rearranges all of the magnetic poetry on the fridge to remove the sexual innuendo added by less scrupulous guests, instead spelling out lovely and flattering thank-yous in iambic pentameter.

While she's waiting on the phone, rearranging her own magnetic poetry to spell nice things about her friends and the 999 emergency service, fixing some nice tea, Olivia looks out her kitchen window to see the progress on the construction next door. If she didn't know any better, and she doesn't, she'd say that the contractors on the plot of land—zoned for commercial use—are building a giant energy cannon. At first it started out like all construction projects: a bunch of digging, a bunch of apparent confusion, the slow accretion of a concrete foundation, a bunch of waiting, and then rapid progress: an unworrisome base, perhaps for a skyscraper, then a strange but explicable array of batteries and battery of transformer arrays. Then, over the course of a few weeks, a ferris-wheel wide barrel surrounded

by high-tech tori, clearly intended to rotate menacingly in order to coax energy forward in a destructive blast. All of this was fine, because, we need to build planetary defenses in these troubled times, but, as Olivia realized as she arrived home one day to a yet more completed energy cannon, the barrel is immobile, fixed and pointing directly at her house!

Olivia didn't really know what to make of this, but figured, well, they probably know what's best.

INT. COURTROOM

A large courtroom. The defendant, BENJAMIN X. PRESTLEY, representing himself, stands from his counsel table, his aides at his side. JUDGE MOTTO presides.

BENJAMIN X. PRESTLEY

Your Honor.

JUDGE MOTTO

Yes, you may approach the bench.

INT. BENCH

The Judge's bench. Behind MOTTO, a scroll bears some customary ancient seal with the inscription "In Trust We Trust." As the scene progresses, camera tricks make BENJAMIN's relative size to MOTTO appear to increase.

BENJAMIN

Your Honor, I request that the case against me be dismissed.

JUDGE MOTTO

On what grounds?

BENJAMIN

On these grounds, your honor.

MOTTO

I mean, for what reason?

BENJAMIN

According to the 18 US Code §1117 chapter 51, a person is guilty of murder only when he unlawfully kills another human with malice aforethought.

MOTTO

I am familiar with the definition. I believe that it does not necessarily distinguish between the killer and him who is killed.

BENJAMIN

The section was changed by the future congress in 2047 to include the refined wording. Like all laws made after the discovery of time travel in 2031, the changes are retroactive. According to *Prestley v. The United States*, 401 U.S. 651 (2008)—

MOTTO *hangs his head, his left palm massaging his brow, and waves with his right dismissively, concededly. The landmark Supreme Court decision affirming the application of future law to present times has been a constant thorn in his side, and the sides of most other traditional judges. It has been difficult to keep up with the changes and the often perplexing, sometimes infuriating arguments of the batch of young lawyers from BXP Corp's Harvard Past Future Law School.*

MOTTO

Okay, all right, Mr. Prestley.

MOTTO *motions for PROSECUTOR HARLAND KILLOREN to join them at the bench. HARLAND shuts his briefcase, as he always does, in order to protect its contents from wandering eyes, makes a preparatory gulp, and walks to the bench. BENJAMIN produces a volume of his US Code of the Future and draws his finger over the applicable passage, and reads:*

BENJAMIN

“A person is guilty of murder when he unlawfully causes the death of another human being with malice aforethought.”

BENJAMIN *pushes the book to* HARLAND.

BENJAMIN (cont'd)

Your honor, I move to have the case dismissed on the grounds that it is, by definition, not possible for one to murder oneself.

HARLAND

If this is legitimate, and I'm not prepared to accept that it is . . .

C.U. BENJAMIN

BENJAMIN *delivers his winning smile.* MOTTO *raises his eyebrows reluctantly.*

INT. BENCH

HARLAND (cont'd)

. . . it's still not clear *a priori* that it's impossible to murder oneself.

BENJAMIN

Should then a failed suicide be construed as attempted murder?

HARLAND

Suicide is not done with malice.

BENJAMIN

Why not?

HARLAND

Because if I kill myself then I want myself dead.

BENJAMIN

And if I “murder” myself, do I not want myself dead?

HARLAND *sputters and waves dismissively.*

MOTTO

Are you trying to tell me that you would have been equally happy if the “other you” had killed the Mr. Prestley that I see before me, rather than the other way around?

BENJAMIN

Yes, your honor.

MOTTO

Do you have anything to add, Mr. Harland?

HARLAND

Only that this is completely ridiculous.

MOTTO

All right, then. Case dismissed.

MOTTO bangs his gavel. BENJAMIN grins. HARLAND tosses his hands up in defeat.

INT. JURY BOX

The jury, having spent several hours of selection and training, seems confused and slightly disappointed at the premature end of the trial, though, of course, jury duty sucks so they were not particularly excited about the trial anyway. The camera slowly pans in on JUROR HALEY YOSHIMOTO.

HALEY watches intently as BENJAMIN shakes the hands of his aides. She sits, the other jurors dismissed, until BENJAMIN leaves, and then follows.

INT. HALLWAY

A marble hallway inside the courthouse. BENJAMIN is walking with his AIDES as HALEY follows at a safe distance.

AIDE #1

“On *these* grounds,” ha ha, that was a good one, Benjamin!

BENJAMIN

Thanks.

AIDE #2

(inaudible)

They leave through the front door, HALEY behind them.

EXT. COURTHOUSE STAIRS

Wide shot of the prototypical courthouse stairs; hundreds of them leading down to the street. BENJAMIN and his AIDES are about half-way down the stairs when HALEY emerges.

HALEY

Prestley!!

BENJAMIN *turns to face HALEY, startled. A group of pigeons take off in simultaneous flight. She draws a ceramic gun from her coat, goodness knows how she got it into the court, past the ceramic detectors, and fires it at BENJAMIN. BAILIFFS on smoking breaks immediately rush to her, tackling her and taking away the gun, while the AIDES tend to BENJAMIN, who is clutching his chest and falling to his knees.*

FTB

PICTURE eight Kandahari gentlemen arranged in a circle, or truthfully, octagon, in their ceremonial garb, brandishing air rifles, sand dunes, the silica drift, storm, blowing in their

faces, but stern looks, serious. Now, forget this image. The rifles are gone from your mind. The hot Afghani sun—as if the various nations of the world have their own suns—glaring in eyes, a lens flare; you are not simply imagining the Kandaharis, but you must be there, for the lens flare is an artifact of the viewer’s eyeball, not the scene itself. You are forgetting this picture. One of the characters, his name Zahir Al Saeed, fiercely bearded, is staring down the others, a power struggle, a microcosm of politics, government, spiritual leaders, and you are forgetting him, too. Disregard the image of their polygonal convex hull changing shape, morphing, as they move around, just looking at each other—as if looking is mere observation—nay, they are looking *to* each other, sending a message, a territorial pheromone, assertion, and, at the same time, attempting to *not* look, that is, perceive, the other characters’ looks. Further ignore the sifting process, the sorting, according to some unspoken algorithm, by which certain uninspired gazes result in a weakened position in the clique, and by which some other more effective expressions result in an elevated status, the chain of command being determined, eventually emerging a leader: Zahir Al Saeed. Neglect, certainly, his unhappy past, his anthropology degree, his xenophobia, a product of his upbringing, certainly, and damaging events from his childhood, his dead wife, familyless, firing his sub-lethal rifle into the air, rousing his outfit, fists raised in unity, okay.

Picture Zahir’s encounter with the National Geographic photographer and writer. The writer, via a translator, assures him that he is interested only in the truth, not clouded by American sentiment; interested in the objectivity of photographs, carefully composed, cropped and then selected from hundreds taken, a 60° view for one thirtieth of a second, capturing an expression in Zahir’s eye, at least—as if an ocular utterance needs no translation any more than a verbal one—and, furthermore, as if the camera’s presence exerts no observational pressure on its subject, just as the look itself is used by Zahir not as a means of perception but as influence. Now, also forget this image.

Next, imagine a photographic version of your own life, perhaps as the collected snapshots in a photo album bequeathed to you as you leave for college. Forget the potentially misleading commentary that your mother might provide when narrating the book for a girlfriend or boyfriend, an embarrassing situation that you choose to not be party to, but yet remain within earshot of, so that any major mistakes can be corrected, or disputed. Forget the hundreds of photos of you sleeping; the objective self-timed camera that follows you everywhere and takes photos impartially, arbitrarily, that camera having never bothered to capture the large percentage of your life spent sleeping, nor did it bother to image your dream state, if we can imagine such things being reified in emulsion. Also forget the photos of you sitting at your desk, working, doing homework, eating alone, a guilty trip to fast food, pictures of the comfortable solitude of the shower, the toilet; forget pictures of your yawns, your left turn signals, pulled out into the intersection and tapping the steering wheel.

Reader of Novel, this is your life!

I N the distant future, the disparity between the technological and societal advancement of various groups in the world becomes more pronounced, as different governmental and cultural factors accelerate and decelerate the march of time, and, to use the tired metaphor, the liberals with their finger on the *fast-forward* button, the utraliberals on *skip scene* button, the post-post-modernist on the *eject disc* button, the secular humanists trying to turn on the subtitles, the reactionaries trying to use the jog shuttle to wind backwards to simpler times, the nihilists content to just complain about how dumb the movie is; every button on the DVD player's remote with a different finger on it, sometimes two, each vying for control over the wretched, beautiful motion picture of the human experience with multi-angle support and 6.1 channel digital surround sound, but in some regions the disc is unable to play, and in others it takes on different meanings, and as thousands of years pass, the different viewers with their different infa-red remotes become more and

more separated, unable to move from television to television without becoming confused at the missed plot developments of a film playing far in the future or utterly bored at re-watching the same beginning over and over on cable television, no matter how good it was the first time, and as a result, the world is fractured into pockets of cultures that are unable, or unwilling, to communicate with each other, to share thoughts and ideas and magnetic bombs, and there are not just a few designations: first-world, second-world, third-world, but thousands of stratified levels of progress, you know some of these: there are little burgeoning Americas, delirious with power, imposing their will and blind, honest patriotism on others; there are little feudal Japans; there are passive-aggressive ultra-calm future societies where everyone wears white and walks around in hydroponic gardens growing hemp products and tofu, yet the penalty for the merest infraction is instant death, administered humanely, immediately; there are Western societies, by which I mean Spaghetti Western, gun-slinging cowboys facing off over who spit on whose shoes, and some perverted mixes derived from imported, anachronistic technology: Quakers and Amish with plasma rifles; fiefs with genetically-modified supercrops, resistant to bacteria and other pestilence; a renaissance period tainted by artificially-intelligent robot painters whose realism brush skills and speed exceed the eye's ability to distinguish animation from motionlessness, or a *tromp l'oeil* from the *Real Deal Holyfield*, such renaissance men trapped in a dervish of brush-strokes and a lengthy, continuous canvas, unsure if what they are perceiving is in fact the world or just a mockery, an automaton's impressionism, and imagine the result that this has on their epistemological philosophy, the modern world turned on-end, having gotten such a head start in the actualization of Plato's thought experiments, an advancement that usually does not rear its ugly head until much later; until the development of *mind wave* technology that allows scientists, advertisers, or pornographers to beam thoughts directly into your brain, resulting in a phenomenon where once a person has experienced such a trick he is prone to nervous breakdowns, paranoia, accidental murders, believing that he is actually in some advertisement in which he is supposed to, in order to

complete it, to be returned back to his regularly scheduled programming, to kill the president of Pepsi-Cola or whatever, leading to laws requiring the display of the term **dramatization** on the bottom of the target's field of vision, so that he may distinguish reality from advertisement, and, most importantly, the reality place in which his purchases actually affect the advertiser's bottom line. And eventually, in some of these desynchronized time zones they finally reach the end of the disc, a layer change occurs, and, in accordance with the aphorism, time begins to run backwards, the society decaying, regressing, and one such society, having the equivalent of thousands of years of modern thought and culture, eventually degenerates to an aboriginal state, with a system of goods and exchanges based on hitting and biting, but such very advanced and civilized savagery, elegant and poetic, *Stradivarius* violence.

I *N the new me* I have optimized my expressions for maximum accuracy in communication. Why dilute? For instance, if I am angry, I will scrunch up my face like this, see? my eyes glaring, my nostrils flaring, and my teeth baring. If I am happy, I will wear a big grin, I will spike my hair out and give thumbs up, my eyes wide. If I am dead, then I will \times my eyes out, my face an algebraic term $ear \times nose \times ear$, and I will stick my tongue out, and I will lie face up on the ground, arms outstretched. Do you see this expression? From now on, I will only use the strongest adjectives; if I am tall then I say *tallest*, or *gargantuan*; no: *galactic*. I am always shouting, bombastic. Loudness enhances my meaning. Each sentence that I speak ends with two exclamation points!! I am compressed, quantized, and like a commercial break interrupting your favorite television program, I am overdriven, turned to maximum volume in order to deliver my message with maximum efficiency, and the message is *listen to me!!* Let me give you another example. I often visit the popular web site *am I hot or not?.com*, in which internet viewers are invited to anonymously rate pictures of other internet viewers, posted by themselves or by their cruel, cruel friends, with regard to the eponymous question, on a scale from 10 to 1; *hot or not?* When browsing this site, I always choose either 1 or 10, never

any intermediate value, because, why would I want my vote to count less? In truth, I always rate all players a resounding ‘1’, standing for *not hot*, because I figure that generally lower self esteem of internet users improves my chances of procuring a date, whether it be on the internet (a *direct* effect) or in real life (a *trickle-down* effect). Based on the success of the *am I hot or not?* web site perhaps a new scientific unit of measurement will arise, displacing the degree Kelvin, degree Celsius, and degree Fahrenheit by way of its intuitiveness, just as the metric system obsoleted the imperial due to its rational basis in unchanging, universal quantities such as an estimate of the circumference of the Earth and in the number of fingers that most scientists have. This new system, degrees Hot, is also based on ten: there are just ten different measurements, the numbers 1 to 10 inclusive, with 1 being the coldest possible, absolute zero, I suppose, and 10 being the hottest possible, like the temperature of the sun. Each number will probably also designate a person’s *hotness*, and perhaps some vain individuals, hoping to increase their *degrees Hot* will go to the doctor in the hopes of getting a pill or injection that will create an artificially-induced fever. But of course the doctor will have no such thing!!

SO, how freaky is this? We’re driving on the highway, now, and it’s dark, raining, and I roll down the window for some air, and, galloping beside us, keeping pace, like at eighty miles per hour, is this skeletal horse, its bones glowing with a blue flame which is wisped back behind it because of the speed at which it’s traveling and, riding the horse is, *holy shit*, not a headless horseman but a *head-only* horseman, I guess, the great creator of monsters needing to make two demonic apparitions to haunt us but only having the parts for one, and choosing to use most of those parts in Sleepy Hollow, I guess, for its cinematic appeal, and, *Jesus*, the head is just floating there, hardly ‘riding’ at all, and it turns to face me and grins. Its teeth are like fossils, sharp, and his eyes shoot—not literally—a Class II visible laser, say, a Helium Neon laser, through my chest and into my soul. I push the button again to roll up the window again; I prefer to suffocate from a perceived lack of oxygen than

to look at that thing! We've been driving all night, Choochu, Vice Vanguard of the fucking *Ultimate Planets of Megatonia* working on his speech with his aides. I've decided to forget the spy biz, to go AWOL, freelance a bit, and hey Choochu, where are we going?

He holds up a finger to say, "Not now."

We ride on, and I fall asleep, to a dream about a VH1 "Behind the Music" special on skull heads and their ghostly hums. As it turns out, at least according to my dreams, the head-only horseman's career peaked at his humming hit, *Do Fear The Reaper*, specifically its haunting performance at the 2008 Video Music Awards, which was followed by widely reported mass hysteria in the auditorium, resulting in a number of deaths from spontaneous aortic dissection and cerebral aneurysm, after which the pressures of stardom drove him to the *three A's*: adultery, alcoholism, and actionable breach of contract. When I awake it's daytime again, and drier; we seem to have made it into the prairies. Choochu Shuba, or truthfully, his cook, treats me to a continental breakfast in the dining room of the hovercraft. Not to be ungrateful for the effort, but in my opinion a 'continental' breakfast would be the opposite of a breakfast ridden with 'incontinence,' in other words, a continental breakfast is a crappy one. The shortening-doused croissant sitting heavily in my biological trash-disposal, Choochu calls me into his office for a private meeting.

"Mr. Y," he says, taking out his monocle and reclining in the space leather seats, "are you familiar with Benjamin X. Prestley?"

"Of course," I say. "Who isn't!"

"Mr. Prestley has been some trouble to us. His time travel shenanigans make it difficult for us to exert control over parts of the galaxy, particularly over prehistoric Earth, before the inception of the Ultimate Planets of Megatonia, and the Earth in the far future after the Ultimate Planets is overthrown. Furthermore, we have reason to believe that Mr. Prestley has timeported copies of himself

from the past to the present in order to use them as doppelganger body doubles.

“Because he poses such a threat to the Ultimate Planets, because he has been resistant to attempts to coerce him to be cooperative, and because he has been readying defenses in apparent preparation for a conflict, we’d like to head this one off at the pass. We would like you to kill him.”

“!” I stammer, just the punctuation mark on a contentless exclamation. “Kill him? How?”

“However you’d like,” says the Vice Vanguard.

“I mean, why not just use some sort of space laser?” I wonder.

“Because we don’t want him to know that we are responsible if we somehow don’t finish him and all of his doubles off,” the Vice Vanguard explains reasonably.

“Well . . . why me?” I ask, still spitting out these terrible questions. I must seem like a total sap.

“Because you’re a total sap, we don’t care whether you live or die, and neither do you.”

“Well . . . I guess that’s true,” I say, my reticence being a non-verbal agreement to take the job.

Just then we pull up to a confusing intersection where we’re in the wrong lane to go straight, sorry, Choochu’s driver noses his big-ass hovercraft into the correct lane, cutting off some other driver. The driver start honking madly, perhaps touchy today, trying to give up coffee, perhaps jealous of the size of our vehicle dwarfing his forty-gallon SUV, or jealous of this trick: under Choochu’s hovercraft is an array of spraypaint nozzles attached to computer-controlled actuators. The driver can select from a number of pre-programmed

messages or write his own, up to twelve characters or symbols, and he hits the key corresponding to one of his most favored. The nozzles do their thing under the vehicle and then as the guy is honking we pull forward a car's length into the intersection so that he can see the message spraypainted on the street, the letters elongated so that they appear correctly proportioned from the other driver's viewing angle. The text says,

shut up

We all find this enormously funny, a little camera in the back of the hovercraft zooming in on his cell-phone toting, furious expression as he slams on the horn more. The only problem is, when the light turns green and we start going again, this guy is in total road rage; he accelerates up right behind us, still honking, then overtakes us—very dangerously, on a turn—with his puny giant SUV, gets in front, hits the brakes, driving thirty miles an hour, weaving back and forth so that we can't pass him again. Apparently not content with this he starts stomping on the brakes erratically, maybe hoping that we will rear-end him so that he will be able to sue us, raise our insurance rates. Well, he gets his wish and then some: the hovercraft rams his vehicle, climbing up on top of it and the powerful fanblades in its underbelly chew up his car's frame, spitting it out in tiny pieces. But his roomy gas tank is punctured, and our fanblades seize up, causing us to drag the flammable, thermoplastic, sparking mess under the failing hovercraft limo, the embers quickly igniting the gas and exploding, crushing the craft from the underside and sending it breathtakingly into the air as it is incinerated, along with all of its passengers.

TOTAL cubism; the cumulative effect of years of robot drug abuse causes *digitalis*, not the plant and source of heart medication but a new disease, if it can be called that, where the patient becomes aware of the discretization of the universe. In other words, he perceives the pixelated and minute details, at the quantum scale, he moves in integer multiples of the Planck length, he

understands the quantized nature of gravity and uses the round-off error to his advantage, allowing him to jump several nanometers higher than equally fit but less enlightened humans, cyborgs, is a machine, planning his trips on the three dimensional grid, some believing that perhaps Picasso and Braques were time-traveling interlopers, displaced, withdrawn from their nanocotics, instead only able to satisfy the desire for *digitalis* by the invention of cubism, and what if instead the unit of discretization was really that large? If, suppose, the universe's pixels were the size of dice, our fingers able to uniquely align themselves with the keys on a keyboard, we would never have to worry about the sort of typo where a finger falls simultaneously on two adjacent keys, and there would be no fear of sharpness, your finger being one quantum unit wide and deep, the finest point available due simply to the laws of the universe; even the corner of an axis-aligned rectilinear desk being safe, there being no way to orient that point on the grid such that it is as sharp as it seems; only being able to contact fragile surfaces like your temples—I always worry about the apparent softness of the temples; why not have thick, forehead-like skull there?—on one of the three flat, safe, surfaces. Insects would be obsolete; too small to exist, and small children, numbering perhaps only a few thousand or so dice-sized pixels in size, could be taken apart piece by piece, their components labeled, weighed, and quantified, reassembled; no need for standardized aptitude tests any longer, there now being an actual objective *metric* of a child's value, in fact, children can be named according to their contents: choose a starting point and trace your virtual finger throughout their grid, visiting each pixel exactly once, and, as you go, speak a syllable or letter corresponding to the sort of matter that you find there, I suppose, there must be a periodic table that lists all the different types of dice-sized matter, e.g.:

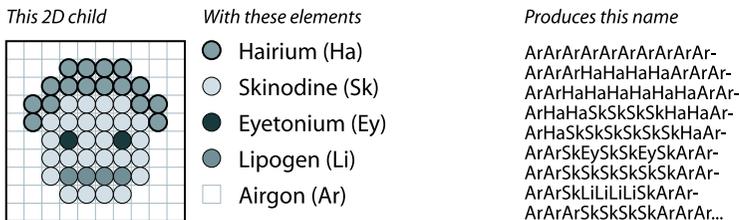


Figure 4: Example of child discretization

Then we have a unique name for this child, the name being an exact description of him at that instant, Goëdelized, fed into a computer and a specialized piece of hardware that can reconstruct a new child that is exactly the same, should a pair of parents love their first born child so much that they want to have, you know, *more of the same*; not take any chances, or, supposing that they do want to take a chance—a, *I wonder what would happen* if we allowed him to drive by himself at the age of eleven or home-schooled him, an accelerated program whereby he becomes a Ph.D. candidate in mathematics at the age of six—in that case they can have a backup that can be restored in the case that the experiment goes wrong, the child turns out sociopathic, or scientifically brilliant but awkward in social circles, and ultimately unable to reproduce. In addition to these child rearing benefits, we would have the ability to make unbreakable, universal world records in sports, time also being quantized at the order of approximately one quarter second; and so, a world record in the one pixel sprint: one time unit. Unbeatable! Can you believe that they have such an event as a one pixel sprint? In our sedentary future, some sports have been—well, we prefer to use the term *deconstructed*, although others have been used in the popular press!—into their finest elements, the *quanta* of achievement that really underlie the more complicated sports of the past. For instance, basketball includes not only a *speed* component but an *acceleration* component (the ability to change speed quickly to ‘deke’ an opponent), and an *accuracy* component with regard to shooting the ball into the basket. Each of these components have been distilled to other sports and Olympic events, ie., the sprint, the free-throw contest, the *10-kilonewton deceleration challenge*. Distilling, say, the *free-throw*

contest further, we can remove all of the complicated artifacts: wind, ball weight and internal pressure, crowd noise, popping flashes, etc., and simplify the game further; computer sensors attached to the player’s hand record a time-indexed sequence of position values, and the player must accurately match a certain well-known graph; that graph specifying the game.

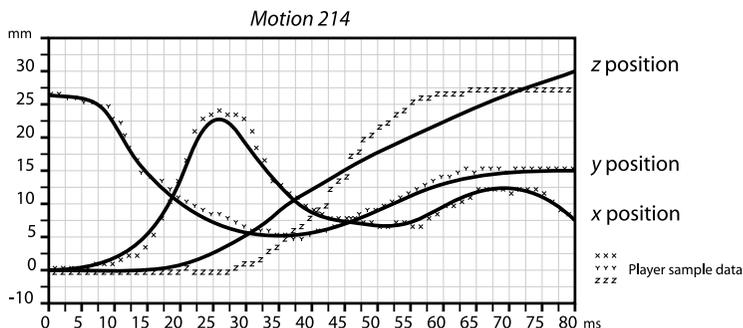


Figure 5: Ideal motion 214 and actual human approximation. Note the player’s excellent accuracy in the x and y dimensions, but mediocre performance along the critical z axis.

Udo Schorn, 2167 Gold Medalist in Motion 214 (Figure 5) had a statistical variation from the optimal computer model of only $\chi^2 = 1.439 \times 10^{-16}$, a world record unsurpassed to date.

AND if you had a ticking time-bomb attached to your head, activated and counting down 3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . . what would you do for those last three seconds? It’s too late for sex—you’ll die a virgin, if applicable, otherwise, die a virgin for that week or day or hour or minute. And seriously, the rules are that you can’t avoid this bomb: it’s attached to you permanently, unremovable, impossible to slow down or to short-circuit. Do you freak out, a panicking flail, a dance never before seen, moving all of your muscles, in an attempt to be maximally *alive* before exploding? A visceral scream to alert your neighbors: *watch me!* and to get you mentally *psyched* for death? It’s important to prepare your response, because you don’t want to waste the first half of your living time left on Earth,

or more, just thinking about how you'll spend the remainder. Your response needs to be premeditated, automatic. Will you think first of others, moving your head either nearer to them, if you can find a group of people for which you have a vendetta, perhaps the individuals who placed the time-bomb on your head and activated it, or will you attempt to move your head away from persons that you like, or with whom you are unacquainted, perhaps because your moral code dictates that all people are naturally good until they have shown to be otherwise? Or do you not care about that at all, believing that as your consciousness is halted, so is the universe around you, that it does not continue objectively onward? Such a bleak perspective; do you prefer it for its gothic appeal, a sort of intellectual black eye-shadow and chained fishnet stockings? If so, will you spend the last seconds of your life in stoic calm, knowing that any action would be pointless? Or, perhaps instead you will turn to mental spaces, e.g., you will attempt to have an original thought, to solve some complex open problem of philosophy or mathematics or tetris, with enough time left over after solving it to explain your answer to someone, and then move away from that someone so that he is not also blown up. *In three seconds?* For instance, you could finally solve the 'meta' problem: Think, then think about thinking, and think about that, and think about thinking about thinking about thought, etc.. Think about the process of repeatedly thinking about a sublevel of thought, i.e., think about the meaning of the 'etc.' in the previous line. *et cetera*. All of this is troubling, difficult to think about, in an infinite setting, but, when your life is going to end in a few seconds, you will reach only a few abstractions deep and then *boom!* while at a safe level of mindfuckery. And, speaking of fuckery, if you believe in heaven, will heaven be like one, huge, panda sized continuous orgasm? Or better? If so, you had better not tire yourself out, or give yourself a *headache*, with all of this thinking or panicked dancing.

THERE is a great tectonic ripple as the four thousand megaton robot awakens from its subterranean hammock and stands, destroying buildings and creating a massive crater—if we were filming this, we would have built a scale replica of Portland,

Oregon out of dusty, brittle materials, embedded fireworks and special effect explosives, then filmed the two-second eruption of the miniature robot replica from multiple angles using high-speed film, so that the shots can be slowed in order to imply a large size, large things moving and falling slowly, and accompanied by low-frequency grinding and straining noises, rumbling, large things making low-frequency sounds. But there's no need to film this one using special effects, because here it is, happening, and some of the citizens have already got their hand-held digital video recorders out, watching the scene with one eye through the flip-out LCD panel and watching the scene with the other eye directly, while running the fuck away, or standing safely at make-out city overlooks, if Portland has such things, or filming from news cameras in helicopters circling the scene, if those helicopters were not destroyed by the first, unexpected fissure of this robot stirring. The robot's name is **Octobotronic Massive X**, a sand-powered prehistoric robot created by a tribe of ancient Dislo Suken scientists in the year -16,239,199, and is so named because of his eight enormous prehensile protuberances, now extending from his body, buildings and streets that were caught in their mechanisms being pulverized and the ground remainders raining down on the few bedraggled citizens that remain alive and splattering them. Octobotronic lets out a 120 Hz square-wave roar, the Dislo Suken scientists being highly advanced in the art of constructing somnambulatory, stratospheric warriors but neophytes when it comes to computerized speech generation; their best attempt being a mere caricature of the nuances present in their guttural whistling-based language. Nonetheless, the sound had the desired effect: dozens of other robots built in deep sleep underground hear, or feel viscerally, the vibrations and begin executing their wake-up programs, their eye sockets glowing a deep infrapurple, their arms thrashing cities, and footsteps in preparation for their balancing posture shaking the surrounding counties violently, tossing children into the air and flipping SUVs.

Militaries of the world leap into action, bringing in tanks and fighter jets and bombers, launching missiles into the robots' mouths,

attempting to entangle their legs with freeway-scale rope woven from suspension bridge cables, detonating hydrogen bombs at the glowing joint between the robots' thorax and abdomen, hoping to splay them open, to reveal weak points that might allow for further military exploitation. Armies try for months to budge them, to make them at least wince slightly, to give some sort of sign of progress, a nice little video of the robot grimacing, or moving its feet to adjust its balance, just scratching its back where the hydrogen bomb was detonated; anything to show on the news to justify the uncontrollably spiraling cost of waging war against these monoliths. But the robots ignore this puny firepower, and, after months of trying, governments start to lose interest and patience, start to have to answer hard questions like, *what threat do these robots pose to us, now?* and *why are we trying to blow them up?* The news turns from a constant video feed of bullets and missiles ricocheting off these robots to some other issues, maybe even some reviews of holiday movies, or a lighthearted story about a little boy who has a giant-robot themed birthday party, wearing a homemade cardboard costume and proclaiming on camera, "When I grow up I want to be just like Octobotronic Massive X!" And the next year some of the Portland survivors decide to dress up Octobotronic like a mile-high Christmas tree, for a holiday fund-raiser for muscular dystrophy, a daredevil scales its stony body using only suction cups and a spandex santa suit in order to place the nondenominational angelic star atop his head. But as he's up there above the cloud layer and suffering from lack of oxygen, the weather balloon cameras filming his ascent, the automaton starts to move again, shaking the daredevil off, his head turning towards the sky to see that it is turning from black to a bright red, and the astronomical observatories around the world simultaneously shit their pants over this one—a previously undetected comet the size of Jupiter traveling at a third of the speed of light streams towards Earth, lighting up the sky in its high-energy massiveness, and Octobotronic hums again, this time a nice scientific middle C, 256 hz, and the robots all cast their arms to the sky with outré velocity, and, thank goodness the weather balloon cameras are around to catch this one for areas where the cloud cover is too dense:

beams of energy simultaneously arc from robot arm to another arm dozens of degrees away, thick lightning bolts of ionized air forming a soccer-ball pattern around our fine planet, and finally the robots show some sign of strain: Octobotronic Massive X himself replants his feet and pushes his arms up against the impact of the comet, resisting with all his sand-powered might the Armageddon blast: from space, imagine an energized soccer ball (that's Earth) being propelled forcefully through liquid (that's Space) and impacting a high-velocity bag of red dye (that's the Comet), the dye wrapping around earth like a bloody jellyfish, its guts spraying out but then sucked back around by the Earth's gravity. There is a horrifying ten minutes of near-death experience for the entire population, nobody except the American president in his underground mountain bunker being able to not notice the deadly astronomy merely by virtue of being anywhere on the planet, and even that president not knowing where the hell they'd even shoot their missiles if they had any left from the robot war. But Octobotronic and his crew of Bucky-ball defenders hold their ground and eventually the shaking and burning red light subside, the grid of energy waves is deactivated and only a gentle rain of bite-sized meteors remain, causing superficial damage to skyscrapers and car windshields. The people cheer, and the robots begin to hunch and recline into their previous slumbers, crushing rebuilt cities but their populations not really caring, instead of screaming, saying, *oops, my bad, Octobotronic, sorry for building my house in your bed*, and, *that's sad about my crushed family, but, sweet work on the comet thing!*, and the kids all gather around and watch as Octobotronic Massive X's purple eyes finally turn off, not to shine again for thousands of years.

0.3 About the Author



Figure 6: Title of Book

Title of Book, otherwise known as Tom Murphy VII, created this book in a frantic month for the National Novel Writing Month contest/project (<http://nanowrimo.org/>). He hopes that you enjoy it. Although this book seems to make him out to be obsessed with these things, Tom does not smoke uranium cigarettes, bodybuild, take any sort of drugs, listen to Rush or Vanilla Ice unironically, or murder people. Instead, he studies naïvely idealistic mathematics in the computer science Ph.D. program at Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. You can see his other projects at <http://tom7.org/>.

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