

Cortez

Tim Van Hook



Arrival of Hernan Cortez by Diego Rivera in the Palacio Nacional, Detail
"It's just business."

Cortez
by Tim Van Hook

Part One

Chapter 1 Startup

Lem levered his fingertips under the metal disc on the back of his head and pried off the Cortez headset, the Bug, they called it. Working alone in the lab to improve the clarity of the images that the device captured from his mind, he reviewed the session. Shapes wavered on the screen like a TV channel that hadn't been paid for. He had visualized his daughter Annie, his Cortez-cofounder Peter, and the smile of his first-ever lover, Janie, but what played back instead he only vaguely recognized. Take a break.

Upstairs in Lem's cubicle, Peter slouched in the spare chair, his white jeans and zippered half-boots scissored straight out on the carpet. He dressed like a fastidious disco dancer. Slim and hairless forearms curved from his wrist to barely bigger upper arm. Behind him, the blaze of the simmering mid-morning sun bleached the parking lot and adjacent beige office building, shimmering under the pale blue North Carolina sky and filling the wide-blinded window.

"I don't know who they are, but I know they're watching me," Peter said.

Lem swiveled slightly in his plastic mesh office chair to face Peter. Frank claimed he got a great deal on the fit-up, the monoxide-gray fabric partitions, the sickroom-gray plastic desktops and suspended storage cubbies, the galvanized-gray chairs, from a portfolio company the investors had shut down, and thereby recycled their old losses into new equity. Lem pushed for Salvation Army furniture in a converted Victorian mansion, not this cheap industrial park generic, but went along with Frank, he's the boss. When Lem looked

away and listened to Peter Chu's flat-vowel Cal Tech articulation, an anxious precision, a hint of question in the final uplift, he forgot how Chinese he looked, but he was third generation SoCal, about as American as Lem, and equally out of place away down here in Dixie. "Well, I think you're overreacting. Have you actually seen anyone following you or anything?"

Peter fluffed his razor-cut bangs from off his eyes. He cared about his hair, shiny and soft as a blusher brush. "I have the evidence. We just need to be careful is all. This is game-changing technology. They have reason to suppress it." Lem brought Peter into the company to do the design of the sensor devices, called squids, superconducting quantum interference devices, about which Lem understood only enough to say the acronym. Using these sensors, the Cortez headset measured super-subtle magnetic fields in the brain, a process called magneto-encephalography, or MEG, and in this case, measured activity in the visual cortex. Lem wrote the software to process the huge array of numbers the headset produced, a recording of the real-time electrical activity of visual processing, both from what the eyes perceived, and the imagination.

"Sure, we want to keep it secret. Until the patents are filed and we launch, anyway," Lem said. Not many other people put up with Peter. In the lab he complained about microscopic dust particles seeping out of the air conditioning vents, and didn't hesitate to tell anybody he disagreed with how stupid they were. But he knew his stuff, and his quirks didn't bother Lem, much. Lem shivered, fastened the buttons of the cardigan he wore at the office, always freezing inside in the summertime.

"You need to have Frank sweep the office for bugs. He won't listen to me."

"Why won't I listen to you?" Frank Mansfield stood in the open entranceway to Lem's cube. Blue dress shirt, sleeves turned up over hairy forearms, tan slacks, flat-gut physique chiseled by the daily gym workout, hair already thinned to baby fuzz on top. A slight lisp made him sound like Sylvester the cat, but nobody laughed. "You guys shooting the shit or what?"

Peter didn't say anything, calibrated his shoeshine. Lem shrugged. "We're mostly good. Some noise in the red. Maybe we should demo grey-scale, drop the color for now."

"No!" Frank held his hands up, palms out. "They absolutely have to have color for the flesh tones. Skin color is a huge part of identification." The Cortez team anticipated that

their major initial customers would be intelligence agencies. Once enemy suspects had trained the headset sensor system to their individual profile by watching tens of thousands of faces for tens of hours (not that they had much choice while held in custody, drugged awake, eyelids clamped open, like *Clockwork Orange*), an interrogator would tell them to think of their associates (or, just as effectively, tell them not to think of their associates, since not thinking about what you're told not to think about is nearly impossible). The resultant activity in the visual cortex would then statistically correlate what the suspects imagined with all their previously recorded facial perceptions, and reconstruct images of the people the suspects brought to mind. Mind reading. Similar visualization techniques measured cortical blood flow with functional MRI scanners, but Cortez technology promised to be cheap, portable, and more accurate, the kind of device to deploy in an interview room or an enemy detention center or even on a remote battlefield.

"Well, right now people look kind of green," Lem said. "The gain is a lot higher in green anyway."

Frank poked a thick finger at Peter. "What's wrong with your sensor?"

Peter's chin settled into his collar. "I believe engineering is performing further testing."

"Engineering?" Frank's voice rose. "What are you? What exactly is your job?"

"I reran all the simulations and verified the design. The analysis is correct." Peter looked up at Frank, pushed his glasses up his nose. "In theory"

"Theory? We not selling theory! You need to get down into the lab and figure out what's wrong."

"I think I can remap the higher frequencies and shift the spectrum toward red," Lem said. "Faces will look better. Outdoors scenes will look a little burnt, but people are less sensitive to false color there anyway. I can bring up the blue a little to compensate."

"Well, get on it." Frank punched his fist into his palm and turned to leave. "Let's get this show on the road, boys."

After Frank left, Peter and Lem sat in silence. Peter straightened up in his chair, leaned forward, and hung his hands between his knees. "I'm going to quit. He hates me. I can't do this anymore."

Lem stared at his friend, but couldn't see his eyes, turned down, staring at the darker and lighter speckles in the industrial carpeting, a slab of grey noise. "Man, don't do that. It's just Frank, the way he is. He doesn't mean anything by it. Besides, how about all your stock? We're only halfway vested." Lem got five percent, finagled two for Peter, while Frank kept twenty, after first-round funding with Raptor Capital on the lead took two thirds of the company.

Peter shook his head slightly, the perturbation quickly damping down to stasis.

"Hey, it's not like we're chained below decks in the slave galley. It's just a job." Lem waved his hand across the extent of the cubicle. "Stick it out for a couple years. Maybe we'll do something really cool, make some money, maybe not. We can always do something else, get another gig. Why not give this a shot?" Peter's device physics skill set complemented Lem's own software expertise. Lem had lured Peter away from Unicom, where they had worked on technology similar to what they developed at Cortez, by promising him freedom from the committees, consensus, and process of a big company, and a chance to do something great. Lem wasn't sure Peter cared about the startup equity, but he seemed delighted, as much as he ever showed positive emotion, to escape Unicom team-building exercises and project reviews. At Cortez he did indeed design something extraordinary, a sensor mesh ten times the previous density and sensitivity, in a flexible circuit that fit the back of the head like a skullcap. A breakthrough, if they could get it to work consistently. So good an innovation that Unicom had sued Cortez for theft of trade secrets, employee poaching, breach of customer confidentiality, non-compete violations, anything they could throw in front of a judge. Wouldn't stick, though, Lem and Peter had started with a blank sheet. Mostly blank, anyway.

"No." Peter straightened and folded his arms across his chest. "He wants to get rid of me. He'll see, I cannot be insulted like this."

"Look, why don't you come down the lab with me? I don't think you've run the headset since my last update, have you? It's really cool, you can pretty much recognize people you think of."

"I can't do that. It's not safe."

"What? Of course it's safe. We wear it every day. You wore it."

"How do you know it's not generating thoughts inside your head?"

Lem sat up, gripped the armrests of his chair, grinned at Peter. "Because we built it! You know there's barely enough power to register the field. No way the sensor could affect anything inside the brain. Even if we did drive it with external imagery. Which we don't."

"You don't know that. The effect could be subconscious." Peter stood, looked at the aisle beyond the entry gap in the cloth-covered partition, and lowered his voice. "Do you have the headaches? Or the nausea? The visions?"

Lem pressed his fingertips into his eyes for a long moment, cool against the ache, the fuzzy sparkles purple-black around a drifting magenta blobby striation inverting the afterimage of the parked cars outside the office window, sectioned by the Venetian slats, where he had unfocused his gaze a moment before. No apparitions stalked his imagination, however. Not right now, anyway. "Well, yeah, but that's"

"See? They're using the device to control you. I have to get out of here before they find out what I know. You have no idea who Frank really works for. What he'd do."

"Peter?"

Peter walked quickly out of the cube, down the aisle, past his own cube, toward the stairway on the far side. Lem turned back to his screen and brought up the color profiles. The blind-band glare from the window behind him striped the glass surface, but he preferred to face the interior partition, rather than the outer corner toward the window, in the intended layout of the work surface design, where anybody walking down the aisle could see what was on his screen. Not that he spent much time on personal or private pursuits or idle pastimes, and not his paranoia, just one of those things. The playback of the sensor response curves undulated in the graphs like a wavering rainbow Sargasso Sea. No problem, he could transfer some luminosity into the reds, approximate flesh tones in the facial demos, rerun everything before lunch, keep everybody on track, Frank off his back, for today anyway.

Chapter 2 Home

Leaving the office late in the evening, Lem pulled out of the industrial park onto Hillsborough and wound the old Mondo coupe up to 45 in second gear, before backing off into third, fourth, and then fifth near the speed limit. The liquid night, cooler than the afternoon September sauna but still warm, thwacketed through the open window, licking dry the sweat at his neckline, rebounding around the back seat and whispering his side hair forward into his eyes. Felt good to get out and get moving, get home and wind down.

The car interior lit up like a three-cherry slot-machine, blue flash, white flash, red. Shit, a cop. Probably real, his visions never before altered the lighting on his surroundings. In the rear-view, Lem confirmed the tricolor strip-light grimace behind him. How'd a cop materialize on the deserted boulevard? Lem braked, put in the clutch, scrunched the gravel shoulder, killed the ignition. The cruiser's headlights solarized the dashboard, cut off blue-black above his waist in the seatback shadow. On the right, the off-season state fairgrounds spread fallow across the gulley beyond the chain-link. Lem once took his daughter to the traveling circus there, parked in that field, the outbound traffic jam took longer to clear than the whole three-ring length of the show, Annie asleep, cotton-candied on a backseat blanket.

"License and registration." The Cyclops flashlight tinker-belled across Lem's lap, the passenger seat, the side of his face, cross-flared in his corner eye. Black-leathered accessories, holster, flashlight loop, belt buckle, T-handle truncheon, pepper-spray canister, horizoned at his eyelevel, edge-lit white from the high-beams behind. Like acting out one of those Automation is Our Future educational films, robotic Lem servo'd the wallet from a raised rear pocket, flipped out the photo ID, extended an arm to pop the glove box, tweezed the papers, formed a flat hors d'oeuvres offering, and served the officer, with the efficient but jerky lurches of blind numerical control. He idled his hands like arcade claws while the patrolman went aft to consult his command compartment. Crickets.

"Had anything to drink tonight, Mr. Narkis?" A mannequin-tan hand proffered the papers above the window weather-strip crevice. Lem took the square wafer, cradled it.

"No, I was just getting off work, is all." Orange streetlights splotted empty parking lot stripes and tilt-up office bays back down behind them on Pylon Drive.

"Came out of there pretty fast."

"Well, I want to get home and everything. Was I speeding?"

"Just take her easy, okay."

Lem waited while the cop returned to his car and U-turned back toward town. Yeah, take it easy. Lem went up through the gears the way his father had taught him, plodding, fifth by forty, flurry of bug-whites in the headlights, a smeared insect cemetery on the windshield. Dark here on the route between Piedmont city and suburb, empty state property in red-clay scrub on the right, sparse self-storage, abandoned gas station, faltering farm house cowering far off the road on the left.

What's that? A white spot ahead zoomed into a long robed figure, hooded, bleached by the high-beams, walking or floating on the shoulder, flared up huge in the passenger window, then dark diminishing tail-lit red in the rearview. Lem exhaled, as the heart-rate rush eased from his throat, and rubbed one wet palm, then the other, on his pants leg. Nobody like that, what, monk, wizard, angel, would be out here at this hour, any hour. Since he started working long hours with the headset he saw this kind of thing more and more, visions, hallucinations, waking dreams, whatever you call appearances whose external existence you doubt. And the dull headache too, worse now at the end of the day. But nobody else complained, except Peter, about the visions or the headaches, so Lem wasn't about to jeopardize the product by raising potential health hazards. Frank would tell him to stop making excuses and get the damn thing into production, which, as Chairman and CEO of Cortez Inc., was Frank's job to tell him, and Lem's, as Chief Technical Officer, to do.

The side mirror flashed as Lem followed the slight curve, a car behind him, couldn't be the cop again, matching his speed, twenty car-lengths back. Lem took it up to sixty. The other car matched the pace. Back down to forty-five. The pursuit fell back, kept the distance. Was he being followed? Now he sounded like Peter, talking about being watched, being followed, surveillance, wiretaps. Perhaps investigators for the Unicom lawsuit poked around, competitors kept an open eye and ear, maybe somebody doing due diligence for the merger Frank wanted, perhaps the government contract brought along some oversight, but like Frank would say, it's just business. No one would follow Lem home. He slowed,

took the left on Harrison. The tail, a sedan, something long, its windows opaque in the mirror, reflected a fleeting red ripple of his brake lights, but otherwise sped straight along the main road.

The upslope pine needle carpet muffled the gravel underlay as Lem pulled up the driveway alongside Suzi's van. The house was dark, good, she'd be asleep. No moon, the overhead star-splatter lighter purple than the spiky silhouette tree-scape beyond the roof ridge. He eased his car door shut with a quiet clunk, creating, besides the crickets, the only sound on the sleeping street. Even the house next door dozed dark, cocktails couple must have passed out early, their son still out carousing. Otherwise, nice quiet place for a young family, older ranch house, big yard, elementary school a couple blocks away. Suzi hated it. Lem climbed the 'When are you ever going to finish this screened porch' steps onto the deck he had built weekends, before he quit Unicom and started Cortez, and his work week ramped up to eighty hours. Hard to justify puttering around the suburb, imitating the handy-mannery of every other honey-do husband, when he could be in the lab changing the world.

In the kitchen section of the great room, Lem flipped on the soffit light to strobe and settle in the stainless sink, opened a beer from the frig with the ear-of-corn-shaped bottle opener magnet'd on the enameled door-face, among the photos and kid scribbles and appointment notes, above the swirl of pastel plastic alphabet letters that spelled nothing he could decipher. Tailbone against the sink counter, he tipped up a long half-pint five-swallow pull, the perfect bitter cold throat-flush effervescent depth-charge, the alcohol or the anticipation of the alcohol washing the ache from around his eyes.

Lem lowered the bottle, and squelched a satisfied sigh when he half-eyed Suzi standing at the hallway arch, just inside the great-room, by the dining table. She reincarnated her grandmother, long hair loose, wire-rim glasses, floor length floral flannel nightgown cresting over the breast and hip curves that souvenir'd her pregnancy. Must be a generation skipping gene, not at all like her bird-bone mother, maybe more like her beer-gut father, his heart arrested on the ninth hole at age forty-five, in mid-guffaw at his own joke, story went. Only time Lem ever met him, he bummed a cigarette. Quit buying, he said. Lem remembered Suzi looking away, frowning, slip of girl, embarrassed by her back-

slapping salesman father. Falling in love or lust is blind, blind to the pending parental shape fated for the beloved. Suzi frowned again tonight. Most nights.

Lem belched but pressed his lips tight, so the burp spelunked, filled his mouth, tickled his nose. He swallowed, said “Hey.”

“You’re never home. What am I supposed to do?” Suzi crossed her arms beneath her breasts, tightening the fabric over her belly, which lifted the hem slightly off her bare feet.

“It’s just this phase, honey. We’re trying to get into production, a lot of testing, that’s all.”

“You spend more time with this Frank than you do with me. Why don’t you go and marry him?”

“Come on, he’s never in the lab. He does the finance stuff. Business plans.”

“Then why does he have all the money? That house.”

“You know. He’s done this before. He gave me this opportunity. Me and Peter. I told you, we got restricted options on the stock.”

“And what are those worth? You do all the work. They’re just using you.”

“No, yeah, I know it’s a lot of work, but I’m trying to do something good for us, to get ahead. You know, so we can have more time. With each other. To do our art.”

“You’re not doing it for me. It’s what you want. It’s all you. I thought I married a painter, someone who’d be home. With our family. You never even see your daughter.”

“I see her. That’s not fair!” Lem said. Suzi looked monstrous, puffy from sleep, twisted with resentment. He never hit her, maybe nudged her once, pushed his snow boots against her, when she blocked the front door to rant about his selfishness, unsafe to drive in the storm, but he had to get to work, couldn’t sit home all day, she said he assaulted her. Now he watched her face flash purple, eyelids swollen, lip split, speechless for once, no, he never did that, must be the headset effects again. He unclenched his fist.

“You’re shouting. You’ll wake her up.” She squinted, mouth miming, her voice tightened into a hoarse hiss.

“Look, you started it. I just want to have a beer and relax for a minute before I go to bed.” Lem slept in the spare bedroom, so he wouldn’t wake Suzi when he came in, nor she him when she got up early with Annie. So their marital relations shriveled to the seldom

nights he'd quietly lift the comforter, ease into their, her, bed, and spoon against her, sweaty with sleep, touch her, a dream lover, slip inside her somnolent moan.

"Yeah, and throw out your damn beer bottles. I'm sick of picking up after you."

"Sorry." He hated these late night arguments. The fluorescent light raw like an interrogation room, the conditioned air acrid as a mortuary.

Suzi turned back toward the hall, started away, then stopped. She said over her shoulder, "I made enchiladas. In the refrigerator. If you want some."

"Thanks." Lem watched her dissolve into the dim end of hallway. "Good night," he called, and killed his beer.

Chapter 3 Gallery

Suzi sipped her Chablis from the plastic stem glass and opened the pricelist binder on the reception desk of the Lux Gallery. The cover, in a hard-to-read faux-Sanskrit font, gold on the pebbly black, read *Alec Atman Inner Eye*. “Wow,” she said, “your friend is really successful.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Lem looked at the book over her bare shoulder and neck, a haze of golden hairs free at the nape below the swept-up bun, a sheen of sweat pale under the track-lights, she looked pretty good in the sleeveless paisley peasant dress. Either the air-conditioning didn’t work, or too many people and spotlights heated the old storefront hotter than the September evening outside the propped-open double doors, and Lem wished he wore something lighter than black jeans and a blue silk shirt.

Alec Atman, the artist formerly known as Alvin Dubochek when he and Lem were friends in art school, well, not exactly friends, students in art school are too competitive for that, tonight exhibited a dozen large paintings at Lux Gallery. Lem had left work early, picked up the babysitter, brought Suzi downtown to the opening, to do something together for once, something adult and artsy, to reconnect, to show he cared about her, cared about their mutual interests, and besides he knew the guy. But jeez, tens of thousands of dollars for one of these paintings. Back in Studio Painting, Lem had built polychrome twisted tetrahedral shaped canvases and won the Dean’s Scholarship, while Alvin (not yet Alec) retrieved a road-kill dog from the roadside shoulder, kept it wrapped in polyethylene sheeting in a secret location, photographed the progress of decomposition each day for the duration of the semester, and submitted the photographs to a blistering in-class critique. They drifted apart after Alec dropped out of school. Lem graduated and tried to program aesthetic algorithms to generate random art, but ended up in a computer career, while Alec moved through self-mutilation performance pieces, hallucinogenic tantric phornography, and guerilla subway advertisements, until he finally established his brand in Visionary Art.

“Does he really believe this stuff?” Suzi looked around the room. Behind clumps of feathered beaded blissed-out fans and not a few suits and stilettos, arrayed a dozen ornate paintings of life-size see-through naked human figures, calligraphed in rainbow electric

aura barbed-fire fields, inside and out, as if every nerve and artery and muscle fiber spun a tornado web of flaming magnetic flux to fill the frame. Lots of burning eyeballs too. Alec had stroked his brush-bristle on the G-spot of every techno druggie new-age neon-rave eco-enlightened Buddhist, and they lapped it up.

"I guess. He seems to have quite a following." After surveying the crowd, Lem located an emaciated short man in a buttercup-yellow collarless jacket and pantaloons, thin brown hair down to his waist, protected by a dozen acolytes or interlocutors in front of a painting that appeared to be a peacock-colored silly-string spiro-graph exploding into the lotus position. "Let's go say Hi." Lem drained his cup of warm Merlot and icebroke Suzi through the gesticulating floes filling the room. Some attendees swayed or heel-tapped to the deep techno-crunch satellite-bleep synth-reverb sound system with a soporific day-glo intensity obviously induced by something more potent than the weak wine and toothpick cheese.

"Alvin!" The cell of figures around Alec trembled at Lem's salutation, but maintained its barrier membrane, now out of equilibrium. Alec's incantation trailed off, he looked up at the interloper, eyes empty as the pale irises of a post-apocalyptic mutant, paused, put two together.

"William!" He never called Lem Lem. "William Narkis! I knew you would instanstiate. You appeared to me in Dreamtime." He spread his hands wide like Jesus showing off his stigmata. His inner circle parted enough to allow Lem admittance.

Lem stepped to the side and maneuvered Suzi in front of him, hand to the small of her back, fabric stuck to her sweaty skin. "This is Suzi, my wife."

"Yes, Suzi." Alec smiled beatifically. "Of course."

"And Allyson. Is she?" Alec's soul mate, been a few years since Lem treated the couple to dinner, back when she office-temped, Alec moonlit in a morgue doing medical illustration, and Lem felt munificent, newly minted as Senior Staff Software Engineer.

"Ah. No, we are traversing our separate paths to the deity for the time being." Alec turned to a green-sheathed sad-eyed spike-hair runway girl, head taller than he. "This is Holly."

"With an I," said Holli.

Lem nodded. Suzi stood planted solid as a hydrant. The conversations around them clacked like pebbled surf. "This all looks amazing, Alec."

"Yes, the One gives great gifts to all who seek," said Alec. "And you? How do you feel about giving your life to the service of the computer?"

"Well, I have another company," Lem said. "Remember Unicom? This is a huge leap. Our device can generate a low-res image of what people are thinking about. Faces. Some simple interiors. Landscapes."

"Really? You mean this computer can see the imagination?" Alec asked.

"Well, sort of," Lem said. "We don't exactly read your mind. We just measure the brain activity when a subject looks at a lot of different pictures, and then map the levels in each region into picture elements when the subject imagines something."

"You mean I could think about a painting, one I've never painted, and your machine could display it on a television for me?"

"Yeah. Or print it out. Within limits, nowhere near as detailed as these paintings. But we're working on that."

"I have to do that!" Alec almost levitated off the floor. "Holli! Can I do that tomorrow?"

Holli looked at the schedule. "Well, tomorrow you teach the darshana seminar. And you guide the unconscious drawing meditation in the evening."

"Actually, evenings would be better, when the lab isn't so busy." Why shouldn't Lem bring in an artist for once, instead of the usual defense contractors? He got into computers a decade ago to build a tool to realize the unmediated vision of the artist, a camera for the mind, not to create the latest military interrogation technique. Maybe Alec could give Cortez a different image, some cachet with the creative crowd.

"All right! Next Thursday evening then. Holli, put that down, and find out where I go." Alec held his hand out to Lem. "This is fantastic. The Unity sent you here so that I can realize the next level of the embodiment of consciousness. See? I told you great gifts would be given you."

Lem shook his hand, well, grasped as much of the bony bird-wing fingertips that Alec backhanded his way, before Alec turned to resume his exposition to a sharkskin-suited silver-maned patron or prospect or apostle. After Lem spelled out the Pylon Drive address

and other particulars to Holli, he and Suzi waded around the rest of the room, reading titles like “Journey of the Wounded Healer” and “Glimpsing the Empyrean” from the little cards on the wall beside the paintings, some bearing red sticky-dots of liberation, others, unadorned, doomed to another cycle of exhibition.

Once back around past the refreshments table, Lem pointed his chin toward the door, and Suzi nodded. They walked out into the steamy streetlight night, looped arms around each other’s waists despite the sticky heat, and hip-checked like dating teens. A cooler breath of breeze met them around the corner on the side street where Lem had parked the car.

“Thanks for taking me,” said Suzi. “That was pretty weird, though.”

“Yeah, but I really like the name, Inner Eye. N-R-I. Sounds like an acronym for the headset. Neural R-something Imaging.”

Suzi broke stride and slipped her arm from Lem’s waist. “Always work. It’s always about work with you. Even with this Alec you’re setting up some kind of business meeting. I thought you wanted to be with me for once.”

Lem unlocked her door, pulled it open. “I do, honey. I do.”

Chapter 4 Benefit

Three hundred competing conversations reverberated around the dim vaulted main hall of Techsperience!, the hands-on science and technology museum, which the Capitol Capital Consortium had rented for its annual benefit dinner and award ceremony. The individual voices merged into a washing-machine spin-cycle wobble that whacked Lem's ears like he was underwater. Or floating above, Lem stared down at the sloshing agitator subsuming bloated folds below the grey suds in the open-lidded cylindrical tank of this round room until the vision cleared. Some attendees circulated the space, others sat at their assigned settings at one of the scores of round white-draped tables, more people clotted in clumps in the capillaries in between.

"Where's our table?" said Suzi. She hardly knew whom to look for, and stood too short to see them anyway.

Lem scanned the last row and peripheral columns, figuring Frank wouldn't spring for something front and center of the stage. A middle table held Baker, a partner at Raptor, the Cortez investor, whom Lem knew hardly enough to interrupt, with head inclined in earnest conclave, as if bent over the traces of a plodding plow-horse that broke the prairie. A sepia dust cloud broiled behind a rusted combine tractor turning over slumping furrows as dry as yellow-bleached cornstarch, no, that was another vision, Lem acclimated, the headset aftereffects brought the roiling imagery always churning beneath the surface up to mind, it wasn't a problem. When his external visual field reformed, he saw Peter and his wife Mary sitting on the outer side of a table over in the last column, so he indicated "Over there" to Suzi and followed her in that direction. Lem wore a brown corduroy sport jacket, no tie, and Suzi had dressed up, a pumpkin-colored shift with cap sleeves, a garment which in the last few years had grown a bit snug midsection. At least this place provided air-conditioning of consequence, and the dress didn't cling.

"Now there's a familiar face! Hi Mary. Peter." Lem pulled back the chair next to Mary, where Suzi would want to sit, and sat on the next one over, with a better view of the podium. He took an already opened bottle of red wine from the centerpiece cluster, which comprised two water pitchers, four wine bottles, a yellow and white floral arrangement,

and a facsimile sextant, made of milled plywood and dowels and wooden brackets, painted red, probably intended to symbolize the vision in the Visionary Award. Suzi shook her head, so he half-filled his own wine glass, drank half of that, brought the level back up, and returned to bottle to its mates.

“So good to see you guys. I don’t know why we don’t get the kids together more often.” Mary could stand in for Olive Oil, round dark eyes, long nose, pipe-cleaner frame, but with a brown bob instead of Olive’s swept black bun.

“How is Tara? Is she sleeping through the night?” asked Suzi. Mary and Peter had a daughter a year or so younger than Lem and Suzi’s Annie.

Mary smiled. “We’re doing the family bed? We have the crib up against my side, with the drop side removed. So she can nurse on demand.”

“You must have a lot of stamina. She’s four now, four and a half, right?” Suzi smoothed her napkin on her lap.

Peter leaned forward, to explain and defend his wife. “It’s evolutionary biology. The hunter-gatherers breastfed their children until they could keep up with the tribe on their own. A necessary form of natural birth control, because you can’t carry two children at once. And they slept very close together. Not only for warmth and safety, but to form a secure attachment.”

“Ha. Securely attached all right.” Lem set down his empty glass and reached for the bottle. “And later on, wealthy families all slept in one big bed, with their servants around the edge, to keep them warm. With the cows and sheep and geese downstairs to heat the house.”

“Do you know most human infectious diseases jumped species because of animal domestication?” said Peter. And why was Peter here anyway, maybe Mary wanted the night out at the benefit more than Peter wanted to quit Cortez.

“Thank god the suburbs have a separate bedroom for our cow.” Lem turned from Suzi’s scowl toward a man and woman boarding the table, Ronald and must be his wife, a tiny ageless Asian woman. They all exchanged greetings and introductions, the wife being Ami or one of the name’s ten variant spellings. Ronald sat on the Cortez board, for no reason Lem could determine, other than that Frank had said that Ronald had opened some doors for him in the past, but somehow he’d never made any serious money, and Frank

owed him. The greetings and introductions restarted before they had finished, when Dave and his wife Janet joined the group, Dave Drewry being the Cortez VP of Sales and Marketing, another one of Frank's people. If the remaining pair of empty chairs awaited Frank, that meant that Greg, the engineering VP, and his wife Terri, had opted out of the affair.

"So Lem," said Ronald. "Do you follow the Ironsides?" His huge red and blue mandrill head leered at Lem, beady yellow eyes, huge canines, black hair swept back from the abrupt brow. Man, was the wine? Lem looked at his again empty glass, then back up at the regular Ronald, black hair swept back, beady brown eyes, veiny nose, toothy smile.

"I don't think Lem's ever even watched a game. Have you Lem?" Dave spoke from across the table, on the other side of Ami. "But Ronald, did you see that return from the fifteen? Bukowski was punching through those guys like a paper bag." Dave and Ronald replayed football. Lem poured more wine.

"Where is Frank? Isn't this his table?" Peter asked Lem over Suzi and Mary's continuing childrearing advice column.

Lem looked around. "Working the room, I guess. Hey, look, over there by Bill Lake." Frank stood with a group paying homage to the multi-billionaire venture capitalist, an early-stage investor in Unicom. Weird that Unicom filed suit to kill Cortez while Frank sought funding from Lake, a Unicom board member, but as Frank would say, It's just business.

A white-coated server set down salad plates and a basket of rolls. The green crepe-paper salad swam in diluted white glue, with translucent green-skinned sections of softened styrene, and a quarter red rubber ball whose seedy center if planted would grow into refrigerator-freezers, judging by the taste. When the breadbasket made it around to Lem, only two inert horse-chestnut-like rolls cowered with the crumbs and sesames at the bottom of the white linen liner, so he drank some more wine.

"Why so glum? You guys need to get out there and network!" Frank pulled back his chair. His wife Sarah sat next to him, her magenta Betty Boop hair-cut spit-curved onto her cheeks, dangly silver-jade chandelier-earrings and choker, red silver-satin cloque with a lot of freckled cleavage. The next waiter wave swept through to clear the salad and serve the entrée.

A young woman appeared behind Frank. "Frank. I just wanted to stop by and say Hi. I heard a rumor we may be working together again."

Lem converged his slightly double focus on this Peter Pan, yellow tassel hair center-parted straight to her shoulder, a pressed white dress shirt under a black silk men's, or boy's, tuxedo vest, a girl slight as a cornstalk, skin smooth as corn silk about a dimpled smirk. Another hallucination, but he'd never before seen a person he thought was his imagination put her hand on the shoulder of someone he believed to be real, as she did Frank's.

Frank craned his neck, huge grin. "Pat!" Then to the table, "Everybody, this is Pat. From Solaris. Used to work for me at Lustek." Everybody murmured an appropriate response, except Lem, whose mouth fish-lipped silently.

"Well, I didn't mean to interrupt. Nice to meet you all." Pat walked away, but Lem couldn't see past Sarah whether, in slacks or skirt, her hips swayed as slight as her shoulders. Conversations resumed.

"Oh, I need to go talk to Bourne." Frank pushed back his chair and wove away through the wait-staff and scattered standees toward the back of the hall. Lem probed at his dinner plate: a pale boiled-balsa ovoid doused in dilute lemon enamel, seven steam-sodden side fragments (bushy green, bumpy white, angular orange), an unmoving white mound of maggot-shaped rice, and a model-railroad-trees parsley garnish.

"So how much does this table cost?" Peter said.

"I don't know. Maybe ten thousand? Do you know, Sarah?" Lem asked.

"Ten thousand dollars? Jeez," Suzi said.

"Well, I certainly wouldn't know." Sarah inclined her head, smiled, long-lashed blue contacts sparkled.

"It's for charity. To get more technology into the schools." Dave paused a piece of the white object midair, impaled on his fork, fronting his shiny hamster cheeks. The benefit this year honored Jim Bourne, known for a string of successful public offerings and passable products whose time had since passed, with the Visionary Award. The event raised money for the Education Initiative, in which the Capitol Capital Consortium member companies wrote off the donations that paid for the dinner, gave the funds thereby raised to local schools, which spent the money to buy excess inventory from the self-same companies,

which took another write-off for the educational discount, and got all their money back, trailing clouds of good publicity and tax abatement.

"Well, I work in urban planning, and I can think of a lot more pressing needs for the inner city schools than more technology," said Mary. She planned to return to work when Tara and her scheduled sibling went off to school.

"Suzi, Frank tells me you do crafts," Sarah redirected.

"Ceramic artist," said Susi. "I'm doing low-fire earthenware until we can build another gas kiln." She looked at Lem, his building her a studio behind the house, how he sold her on settling for the suburbs, next up on the list. Lem drained his glass of wine.

"Oh, I'm an artist too. I do quilting, needlepoint, crochet," said Janet. "Are you an artist, Sarah?" Janet fleshed out a cornflower Prairie dress, which looked like she made herself.

"We feel we can do so much more for the arts with our philanthropy. I chair the publicity committee for the COCA endowment campaign?" Sarah meant the Center of Contemporary Art, downtown.

"Like Coca Colla-teral?" Nobody heard, or everybody ignored, Lem.

"What do you do, Ami?" asked Suzi.

"Ami works in our home," Ronald said. Ami smiled beneath a slight nod.

Servers supplied saucered cups of oily lukewarm coffee, and substituted dessert plates for the dinner plates. The homies in the kitchen had tagged the neighborhood around and on top of the sugar-spackled meconium-colored pumice-foam cake-block with red and green and black, some desert nation's tricolor flag perhaps, squiggles, but their graffiti remained unreadable. Lem tined off a corner of the iced cube between his teeth, crystalline and sweet enough to ache his fillings, so he rinsed down the cloying phlegm with half a glass of become-bitter wine before the confection congealed into plaque.

The overhead lights dimmed as a searing spotlight picked out the podium and obliterated the features of a standing suited figure. "Welcome everyone to the eighth annual benefit dinner of the Capitol Capital Consortium." The crowd's chatter ebbed below china, glass, and stainless clinks that percussed the rubber-tipped chair-leg bass, as the audience settled for the ceremonies.

Lem squeezed his eyelids hard and opened wide to try to discern the speaker inside a column of yellow-white fuzzy flame lighting up the stage and flickering like a teleporter stuck in mid-transit, but he couldn't clear the blur. Couldn't parse the guy's speech either. "Beef we can fishery ward sir money, weird light two percent shore fill dock many life calm plush far owner sieving." Or, as the people more centrally seated and less intoxicated heard it, "Before we begin the Visionary Award Ceremony, we are delighted to present a short film documenting the life and accomplishments of our honoree this evening."

The hall swept around Lem with warp-drive red-shifting streaks and the G-force flattened him like the stackable storage of his splayed-leg molded-seat chair. With all that wine he should have eaten more, though the single swallowed morsel of dessert worsened his swoon. He leaned into Suzi's shoulder. "I really don't feel well. I need to go."

She breath-alized him with a quick head-cocked exam, crumpled her napkin to soak in her cake plate, chirped back her chair, and levered her hand under his arm. "We have to leave. Sorry. The babysitter." Those around the table who heard or noticed, nodded and muttered indistinctions, while the tribute film amped its up-tempo Olympian horn-section to accompany blurring jerky servo assembly mechanisms from some former Bourne-founded factory.

They made it out to their car before Lem threw up, browning the width of the worn white line that bound their parking spot, leaning far out from the fender to spare his shoes. The blue-white lot-lights buzzed atop their tall struts, Suzi sat silent behind the wheel not counting the grey wiper-streaks that arced the windshield, while the idle engine wren-chirped its glazed alternator belt. Lem slumped into the passenger seat and rolled down the window, leaning like a dog to catch some night on his tongue.

"I know," he said. "Don't say it."

Chapter 5 Lab

The loading-dock doorbell buzzer antagonized the mostly empty back bay of the Cortez offices. Lem hurried across the polished concrete floor, past a couple piles of packing material and pallets, a brown metal storage cabinet, a swivel chair missing a wheel, toward the steel entry door alongside the ten-foot corrugated sheet-metal overhead door. The company needed little loading or unloading at the dock during its development phase, but the lease covered both office and light-industrial. Lem had told Alec to come around back and ring, with the front lobby closed and locked after business hours.

Two figures waited on the safety-diamond stair platform when Lem pulled open the door. The sodium-vapor parking lot lights orangesicled the only two cars in the lot, Lem's beater, and beside it, a dark late-model luxury sedan.

"Namaste, William. This is Dr. Drebin," Alec Atman pressed his hands together at his chin. The two visitors stepped inside the room.

"Please. Rick." Dr. Rick Drebin held out his hand, an older leonine man, weather-beaten, heavy, but with alive pale eyes.

Lem shook the offered hand, "Pleased to meet you," and looked at Alec. "But I wasn't expecting you to bring somebody else, we're still operating in stealth mode. So additional people"

"Oh, no." Alec beamed. "Dr. Drebin, Rick, is my close associate and dear friend. He runs VSI, the Visualization Sciences Institute? We've worked together for years. He's entirely trustworthy and discrete."

"And VSI? What does" Lem registered this Rick, open-collar blue dress shirt, conservative grey suit, expensive loafers, could be anything, business, government, medicine, even a lawyer. Unlike Alec, whose sequin-embroidered maroon Kurta shirt proclaimed self-styled esoteric or aesthete or fruitcake.

"We research transformative visual facilitation via psychoactive substances in therapeutic, creative, and other modalities."

"You mean like drugs?" asked Lem.

"Of course!" said Alec. "With Rick's guidance I have learned to depict unfathomed levels of being and becoming. Surely you saw that in Inner Visions last week." His gallery show. Alec smiled like Lem was a child who fumbled his Twinkle Star song. "So why don't we get started?"

Lem panned from Alec to whoever this Doctor Drebin was, widened his eyes, inclined his head a bit dog-like.

"I assure you, I'm a board certified medical doctor, and am only here because Alec is under my care." Drebin took a business card from his inner pocket and extended it between manicured index and middle fingers toward Lem. Embossed, gold letters, medical license number, University affiliation, office address and phone. Yeah, ten bucks at the Quick Print bought you a hundred of those. What the hell, he seemed legit. These avant-garde artists always dragged along an odd entourage, a pharmacologist on retainer.

Lem pocketed the card and turned to lead the pair toward the passage into the development lab, where he indexed the code on the lock-panel and then held the door open for the visitors. The lab hummed dark, lit by a dozen screens and scores of indicator lights on the front panels of bays and racks of electronic equipment, a red green yellow white Christmas star sky, and about as cold, for the comfort of the circuits. By the far wall stood two free-standing rooms, like tiny closets or outhouses, with perforated pressed-steel studs framing the outside, interior foil-covered panels reflecting the room lights, and dun metal doors, on which the engineers had hung restroom-like name plates, Humans, and Robots.

"So," said Lem, "we're using these shielding booths until we get the noise cancellation worked out. Otherwise the sensors pick up the flux from the lab. Can be a little claustrophobic. Hope that's okay."

"Certainly, I'm familiar with sensory deprivation chambers," Alec said.

"Okay. So now we'll do an abbreviated training session with our standard image sequence. Takes about an hour."

"Oh, there's no need for that. I brought my own data set. My catalogue of paintings. That's what I want to visualize."

"Boy, I don't know. We've never started with anything that complex. It might not work."

"I am confident." Alec turned toward Rick. "Send me on my way?" Rick took a small aluminum vial and a tiny caviar spoon from his side pocket and tapped a tittle of crystalline powder into the bowl. Alec bent, with his left index fingertip sealing one nostril, raised the spoon to the other, and swept up the substance with a sudden snort. He rubbed his nose.

"What are you" Lem paused with the headset in one hand, the other on the door-handle of the room labeled Robot, the one that had been working better that day.

"Completely within protocol. The visualization research?" Drebin said. "We haven't formulated the binder yet to produce the compound in pill form, hence the necessity for nasal inhalation."

Alec smiled. Lem shook his head, but stretched the headband over Alec's forehead and fitted the copper-clad demisphere to the back of his skull. A central ridge like a spine or stem ran down the vertical axis of the convex cap and terminated at the bottom in a square connector for the cable harness, and eight rib-like arcs extended horizontally from the center across the spherical surface to connect to the underlying sensor chips, like the veins of a leaf or the legs of an insect. Why the engineers called the headset the Bug. Alec sat in the straight-backed wooden chair inside the booth, facing a test-pattern screen, while Len plugged in the wiring and shut the door.

From a swivel chair at the workbench, Lem loaded Alec's data file, and started recording his brain activity in response to the images. Rick sat in the next chair.

"I take it your sensors are magnetic?"

"Yeah, we developed our own proprietary squids."

"How do you solve the inverse mapping problem?"

Lem looked away from the monitor at Rick, who slouched, hands interleaved about his paunch, eyelids half-masted, facing the two chambers. Guy knew his stuff. The inverse remained a big problem in this sort of brain imaging, because electrical activity in many different locations could cause the same pattern of magnetic measurement in the sensors. Kind of like hearing footfalls in a foggy night. You never knew exactly where a particular event originated. "Well, we don't," Lem said. "See, as long as our measurement of the response to the visual stimulus correlates with similar activity in internally generated imagery, we don't care exactly where it happened. It's purely statistical, not spatial."

Now Rick turned to look at Lem, overgrown grey eyebrows raised. "That's brilliant."

"Yeah, as they say, keep it as simple as possible."

"If what you say is true, this could be extremely useful in our work at VSI. We believe that our patients ameliorate the effects of previous trauma, and that clients like Alec experience enhanced, almost eidetic, imagination, but that is only self-reported, hardly verifiable or repeatable. But if your technology could let us see the actual images that the subjects are themselves seeing"

Lem noticed the training segment had completed, and jumped up to open the door. "You okay?"

Alec grinned like a Hare Krishna selling flowers, with the headband around his long hair holding the headset like a burnished begging bowl or battery terminal on the back of his head.

"Okay, I'm going to kill the display, so it will be dark in here, but it's better if you close your eyes. Try to hold an image in your mind as long as possible, so we can pick it up."

"Certainly. In Vipassana meditation that is called one-pointedness."

Lem returned to his station by Rick to start the capture and analysis. "So what's this drug? Some kind of hallucinogen?"

"Not exactly," said Rick. "We synthesize a methyl alkaloid with ferrocene under Polonovski conditions. A methoxydiethylamine. MXD, for short."

He lost Lem at synthesize, since Lem had nearly failed freshman chemistry and algebra, never made it as far as biology and physics, and ended up in art school. Rick continued. "Very interesting compound. The intense visual imagery of the opioids, but with increased arousal and a measure of elation. But no, not strictly hallucinogenic, more hypnagogic. A lucid dream."

"And this is legal?"

"Uncontrolled. For pharmaceutical research. Because MXD is a novel compound, it doesn't fall under the Controlled Substances Act."

"Holy shit." Lem stared at his screen. The image bobbled like bad broadcast reception, blurry and ghosting, but formed a distinctly identifiable human figure, arms outstretched, legs apart, flesh writhing blue-orange tendrils like a flame macramé. "I've never seen it generate anything like this." He got up and let Alec out of the booth.

Alec blinked in the brighter low lab light, trailing his cabled connectors, and rubbed his eyes, focusing on the playback on Lem's monitor. "Excellent. Not the fidelity I imagined, but quite faithful overall. You can make me a copy? And can you record several pictures at a time in sequence? I need to generate six more for my new series."

"Sure, just say 'Start' when you want to begin a new image, 'End' when you're done." Lem reinstalled Alec, and came back beside Rick to set up another capture session. "This drug," he asked Rick, "is it dangerous? I mean, are there any side effects? How long does it last?"

"Perfectly safe. Quickly metabolized. I wouldn't operate heavy machinery, of course. But you're back to baseline in a couple hours. A little residual anxiety, agitation, and lingering low mood, but any common tranquilizer will alleviate that."

"Can I try it?"

"I suppose you might sample it. Not the dosage Alec uses, of course, he's been my subject zero, as it were. Tolerance to MXD builds up rather quickly, unfortunately." Rick repeated the vial operation, tapping out a trace of clear powder this time so tiny that Lem saw only a sparkle on the spoon, but he mimicked Alec, and sucked the miniscule mote up his nose.

A huge unseen hand turned a knurled focus ring which sectioned the circumference of Lem's cranium, and a momentary thought, he thought of that woman-child Pat standing behind Frank at the benefit table, froze like vivid living ice. He still saw the worktable and monitor and wires and wall in front of him, but her face faced him too, not a fading peripheral phantom of imagination, which dissolves when you try to hang on to it like a fleeting fuzzy underwater apparition, but Pat herself, fair, floating hair scintillating in the Techsperience! canopy lights, crooked half-smile dimpling downy cheeks, narrow nose, wide-set hazel eyes, like a photograph projected on the back of his skull, or inside his eyelids.

"Wow."

"What do you see?" Rick leaned toward him, two thick fingers touched his wrist, yes, pulse and respiration elevated, capillaries contracted, cool, slight perspiration.

"Uh, a woman."

"Yes, at the onset, subjects typically visualize something with an emotional loading."

“No, I don’t...” Then Lem saw the head of the claw hammer strike the upper side of Suzi’s head, right above the ear, and as she recoiled from the blow, the blood welling up from the hair wet and matted black, filling her ear and running down her neck, as her image receded, shrinking into itself and into the fake Persian rug on their living room floor. He shook off the vision, tried to focus on the lab room, the equipment, around him. Never in his life had he hit Suzi, let alone with a hammer, he had never even thought about that before. Well, maybe he imagined pushing his wife a time or two, or slapping her, just to get her to shut up, but he had never done it. If anything like these images could be captured by the Cortez headset, he’d be, well, he didn’t know what he’d be. Rich and famous at least. Or in prison.

“Amazing. I had no idea.” Lem found he could pull himself back out into the lab, and see the progression of Alec’s session displayed on the screen, while his internal images remained etched in absolute clarity, but in the background like deep down in a Lauscaux cave. “Can I buy a small quantity of this MXD? I mean, for testing with the headset?”

“Oh, no, as a medical professional, I’m not able to supply you with an experimental drug.” Rick raised an eyebrow. “But I might be able to put you in touch with the chemist we use, a very small laboratory, more of a sideline for him. On a cash basis?”

“That’d be fantastic.”

“Of course, with the understanding that one of your units would be made available to us at VSI as soon as possible.”

“Sure, I’ll see if I can get you into the beta program. Or at least pre-production.”

The status panel updated on the screen, Alec had completed his run. Six more vaguely human images, looking like denizens of Dante’s seven levels of hell. Lem stood up to open the box. He had to get more of that MXD.

Chapter 6 Meeting

Gudrun stuck her head around the rounded plastic lip of the cubicle panel gap, although she was almost tall enough to look over the top, and mouthed “Excuse me?”

“Just a minute, honey.” Len held the phone away from his ear, thumb over the microphone slot, and unwedged his chin from his slouch into the ergo chair-back, cantilevered so his heels rested on the desktop bevel.

“You have the two o’clock with Dave? And a Ms. Steele is coming in to see you at four?” Gudrun org-charted as Frank’s executive assistant, but she administered all of Cortez Inc. and covered Human Resources as well, small as the company was.

“Right, thanks.” Lem watched Gudrun turn and stride away, not fat, but massive, like some Byrnhildr flying buttress, her Visigoth heritage or something, what would a woman like that, somebody his own size, maybe even stronger than him, be like in bed, those longship thighs and horned helmet breastplate. And who was this Steel person, an interviewee, Gudrun would get him a resume.

“I’m back.” Lem returned the phone to his ear.

“I’m telling you this guy came to the door asking questions about you,” Suzi’s voice said.

“What kind of guy? Did he have an ID?”

“He showed me some kind of badge. All kinds of questions, what you did, your friends, organizations you belong to.”

“It’s okay, probably some kind of background check, I’ll find out. I know we need to get a security clearance for one of the customers.”

“It’s okay? It certainly is not. Peggy called me and said he knocked on her door too.”

“Who’s Peggy?”

“Your neighbor? You spend so much time at work you don’t even know who your neighbors are. And Annie was right there. Now she’s very upset, why are the police after Daddy.”

“Don’t tell her that, tell her it’s Daddy’s work is all. Look, I have to go to a meeting. I’ll try to get home early tonight and tuck her in.”

"That'd be a change."

"Bye, hon."

Lem joined Dave and the consultants already at the table in the Pizarro conference room. Frank decided to name the meeting rooms after conquistadors, to set the right tone, but Lem conjured the painter Pissarro instead, the exquisite brushwork, a draughtsman, they said, who could have taught the stones to draw. The engineers called it Bizarro.

"Lem, so glad you could make it," said Dave. "This is Morgan and Bryn, the branding consultants I mentioned. Their firm, Psychometrics, has generously agreed to help us with the launch."

Neither the black-clad woman with the orange feather-cut or the black-clad man with the gelled spiky-cut stood up or offered their hands, and either of them might have answered to Morgan or to Bryn. Lem sat down.

"As I was saying, we completed an exhaustive trademark search, and target-sampled several dozen controls, when this candidate scored a seven-two on the Heatherington gradient, with a product identity that will go the distance for you." The Morgan-Bryn woman leaned toward a poster board propped on an easel in the corner of the room, and lifted up a grey overlay sheet to reveal, in yellow letters on a blue background, in an angular jutting Athenian font, the single large word "ELUCE".

"Wow." Dave sucked in his breath.

"What is that?" asked Lem.

The Morgan-Bryn man compressed his brow, and his little hair antennae quivered. "The name of the Cortez product, of course." The woman nodded solemnly.

Lem looked at Dave. "Gee, I don't know. I think we need something more, technical?"

"But Eluce is perfect, the association with light, literally to shine forth, and by metaphor, to shine out, become apparent, made manifest. Plus, it's the root of elucidate."

"I love it," said Dave. "You guys are incredible."

"But eluce. Sounds like loose. Or loser. Maybe a girl's name? What's that Beethoven thing that's always in the music box?" Lem said.

"Believe me," said the woman, "we registered extremely an positive emotional response for ELUCE. Off the scale. Engineers always have this problem. They think their

own left-brain analytic thinking represents the customer, while the customer responds entirely from the gut. Trust us, this is our core competency.”

“But our customers are technical people. Scientists.” said Lem. “I was thinking something like NRI, the letters? But you pronounce it Inner Eye? And we could make up a cool acronym, like Neural Retinal Imaging.” Unlikely that the engineers’ name for the device, the Bug, would sell very well.

The man and the woman looked at each other. “Acronyms confuse the audience. NRI invokes an unpleasant medical test for an injury or a disease. And an association with assault weapons and gun control. No, ELUCE shines with a clean clear light,” the man said.

“Okay, I think we’re done here,” Dave said. “Thanks for your input, Lem. We’ll stick your idea in the blender. Oh, and you need to get me that write-up on the functionality.”

“Yeah, right,” Lem said. Hiring consultants to think up product names, getting Lem to write up the product specs, what was Dave’s job anyway. And there’s his slobbery panting Saint Bernard wife Janet sitting next to him, metal needles clacking some crochet headband, hood, jibab, around her flapping wattle, no, the visions sure had strengthened after he tried MXD with Alec the other night.

“And the demo images? Can you enhance those a bit so they look like we’re really in production? Nice and sharp, clean, airbrush out the noisy stuff?” said Dave.

“Lem, see you a minute?” Frank leaned into the doorway.

“No problem, he’s finished,” Dave said.

Frank walked a few steps down the hall and turned back to Lem. “The woman from Solaris who’s coming in this afternoon, Pat Steele?”

Lem nodded. This was the Pat from the benefit dinner?

“Look, I can’t tell you the details, and you can’t say anything, but they’re very interested in us. They want an independent demonstration, one of their own people, of whether this thing does what we say. So you really need to win her over. Charm her. She needs to be absolutely convinced this works. Now, you don’t need to open up the kimono, and tell her everything. But do whatever it takes. Can you do that for me?”

“Sure.”

Frank laid a big hand on Lem’s shoulder, squeezed. “My man.”

"Oh, and Frank," said Lem, "are we being investigated or anything? Someone's been at my house asking questions."

"Oh, that. That's for the beta test at the agency. You'll need clearance to go in and install the unit. Just a formality. Unless you have something to hide?" Frank winked.

"Not me."

Frank hurried away down the hall. Lem walked back to the cubicle warrens, in one of which Peter sat typing two-fingered, with his glasses lenses reflecting tiny dual fish-eye copies of the white-on-blue symbol streams on his screen.

"Hey Peter, just a heads up. Frank said"

Peter held a finger to his lips, pushed up out of his chair, and double-timed to the stairwell and down, past the lab. Lem followed him at a slower pace, outside onto the tire-tread-lipped loading dock. The smoking dock, the smokers called it, but nobody stood then under the meager overhang cupping a cigarette. A pot-metal nimbus covered the fall afternoon, sultry but at least not pressure-cooking, with the sun concealed by cloud cover.

"We shouldn't talk in there," Peter said.

Lem leaned against the overhead door, hands in his pockets. "Anyway. Frank said they're doing background checks, for security clearance when we go into government sites. So those people you said you saw around, that's all it is. Okay?"

"So you say." Peter faced Lem like a cardboard cutout against the grey asphalt lot. He hadn't been shaving, a speckle of sparse black spots on his upper lip and chin, couldn't grow much of a beard. Hollows under his eyes, his nose sharper, his frame more angular, like he'd lost weight. And his pale blue pointy-collar tapered shirt wrinkled, sweat stained about the armpits, unlike him. "I have a constitutional right to privacy. Which I will defend. And I told you, you can't believe what Frank says. He's one of them."

"So what are you working on these days?" Lem tried a distraction. "You looked pretty engaged back in there. Anything interesting?"

"The next generation. You didn't believe me about the side effects, but I realized that the sensor field could be reversed in order to generate imagery in the visual cortex. My simulations only double the power draw, and the reversal completely eliminates the noise issues, by pulse modulating the transmit and receive modes. The subject should experience an amplification of his inner vision via the feedback loop."

Whenever Peter vectored the hardware in a new direction, Lem had no idea what he was talking about. At least he was working on something, and Lem could tell Frank that Peter had figured out the noise problem in the red frequencies, keep him off his back. "That sounds great. Let Greg know when we can put it into the next rev."

Lem turned and opened the service door with the punch code. "You coming?"

Peter didn't move. A faint dust devil stumbled around the corner of the building, cooler, maybe a late afternoon thunderstorm would break the humidity, and barely disturbed Peter's bangs, not as fluffy as usual, greasier. "We should go back in separately. I'll wait."

Len left him outside, alone. He might as well check in on the guys in the lab while he was downstairs, he usually left that to Greg, the engineering manager, because he Lem preferred to code and write specs by himself, or to run his ideas by Peter, who talked to engineering even less than Lem did. But Lem ought to make sure they left everything up and running in order to demo for this Pat woman. He'd have to tell Suzi he got tied up. Again.

Chapter 7 Demo

“That wasn’t so bad, was it?” Lem opened the door of the Bot booth (the crew must have pried off the R and the O) after an hour of training. Pat pushed out her lower lip, petulant, a child pardoned from her time-out, and shook her head, but then straightened up and smiled.

“Why don’t we take a break before we try a recording session?”

Pat said “Sure.” Lem stretched the headband and lifted the dome of the headset off the back of her head, she stood very still, eyes closed, head tilted up, barely to his shoulder. The headset strap flange caught on a strand of her hair. She flinched.

“Sorry,” said Lem. He freed the twist of hair and smoothed it down, her sudden skull tiny under his hand, a husked coconut, warm, a turquoise inlet with no surf, only the smooth stretch-marks traced by ripples flashing sun stripes and licking up the bubbles where the fine white sand dyed to tan around a half-buried gleaming horseshoe crab, where did that come from. Looping the loose cables, he rested the headset on the worktable and slid into a chair, side-handing to direct her toward the adjacent seat. The device glinted in the faint lab lights, brassy highlights elongated the finger-like spines curving into the center ridge line like an eroded mountain range, a metallic seashell, an alien hand.

“That thing looks like a big beetle,” Pat said.

“Yeah, the guys call it The Bug. It’s a good thing we’re not still running the prototype. That was nowhere near as sensitive. You had to shave the back of your head for that.” Lem pivoted away, his back toward her, and parted the neck-length hair from the top and sides of his head off the half-inch of new growth over the back bulge of his skull. “See, it’s just growing back.”

“Is that what that is? I thought it was some kind of new hair style.”

“What, like an inverse Mullet? Long in front and short in back?”

Pat laughed. “Like the opposite of a redneck.”

“Yep, that’s me,” Lem said. “So, want to see your data?” Sounded vaguely lecherous, walk her home, come inside to see the data.

“Okay.” Pat leaned forward from the edge of the seat, elbows on the padded armrests, chin circled by her nested fingers and propped underneath on her thumb-tips. Lem scrolled through the images, whose variation in color and brightness coded the level and frequency of electrical activity in Pat’s brain when she watched the training sequence, but which looked like nothing at all, diffuse blobby blurs, like those pictures of the cosmic background radiation from the edge of the universe, from the inflating dark-matter disorder that sucked together the dust and stars and nebulae, like the surface of a mud-puddle after a handful of pebbles perturbed the dappled overhead canopy reflection.

Pat frowned. “That doesn’t look like anything at all.”

“Right. But see, it’s the correlation we care about.” Lem brought up another column, the source images which corresponded to the captured data. “See, these two pictures of different faces are a point seven three, where one dot oh would be a perfect match. And the two data samples they generated are a point six eight. That means that we’re closely matching what your brain does for similar input.”

“I guess. Not really.”

Lem looked at Pat. Dressed not much more casual today than at the benefit, loose beige pleated slacks, a cream-colored high-necked silky blouse with embroidery around the collar and cuffs and across where her breasts hinted only the slightest swell, maybe she dressed like that to look less like a boy, or she always dressed like that, he looked down at his own worn khakis and chambray shirt, his habitual ratty cable-knit anti-air-conditioning cardigan, she was probably freezing. “Are you chilly? It’s always cold in here.”

“No I’m okay. Pretty hot-blooded I guess.” She sat back and pressed one palm to the lace above her heart, her head cocked, catching Lem from the corner of her eye, half hidden by a pale brow, her eyes barely now any color at all, maybe the gray blur of receding galaxies.

Green-gray eyes, was she like flirting? What was under that blouse, she wasn’t big enough to need a bra, an undershirt then, or a clingy camisole rather, something to hide the nipples below the flimsy fabric of her blouse. What it would take for Lem to ever have a woman like this, smart, funny, fair, slender, sexy. Good thing he wasn’t wearing the headset right now, imagining her breasts, that would certainly kill any chance of seeing them in the flesh. Lem refocused. “So you want to start recording? Usually training is at least ten hours,

but I don't want to keep you all night." Well, yes and no. "I mean, once we have a huge sample of subjects, we should see enough commonality to optimize the time. But for now, we could give it a shot with what we've got on you."

"Can I pee first?" Pat looked over at the two booths. "I mean in a real bathroom, not one of your outhouses."

Lem laughed with an out-breath.

"Man and Bot. So you guys think that women are bots?" Pat said.

Lem realized that the letters on the first booth now read Man, they pulled off the H U too. "I think the term is sexbot." Was that too much, no, Pat held her bright-eyed smile. "You know engineers, it's a joke. Humans and Robots. The Robot room works better for some reason. But sure, come on, I'll show you."

Lem led her out of the lab and down the hall toward the lobby, where the stairwell elevator core trapped the utility closets and restrooms, and waited, looking at the empty reception desk and the three visitor chairs, his dim double reflection on the glass façade backlit by the corridor light-cans. Awkward standing there, but he had to let her back in the lab, and the unaccompanied visitors policy, though who would know, and was she interested in him, you know, romantically. All those people standing beside him outside the front window, see-through people perforated by the parking lot stripes and bushy trees in the median strips with the orange overhead lights bouncing off the opposite office stucco slab, unrecognizable wraiths, ghosts of strangers, laughing at the shadow-play Lem on the inside, no. The Women's door opened.

"Okay, now I can sit in your penalty box for another hour," Pat said.

Lem got her hooked up again. "I'll have the intercom on, so I can tell you what to think about. Just close your eyes and concentrate. It's lightproof in there, but we can stop now and then to show you how you're doing on the monitor."

After the standard progression of simple shapes, circle square triangle red blue green, Lem told her to think of the face of someone she knew well. Something about the structure of the brain, faces came through the best, hardwired for a baby's first impression, eyes nose mouth. Lem's screen displayed a vague but distinctly male adult, as if seen through gauze or a vaseline'd lens, deep-set dark eyes, thick dark hair, large nose, weak

chin, thin lips. "Want to see?" With the brightness way down so as not to night-blind her, Lem enabled the display in the chamber.

"Oh my god. It's Brian!"

"Who's Brian?"

"My fiancé. You told me to think of someone close to me, so I thought" She trailed off, her voice clipped and metallic through the speaker.

Her fiancé, well, so much for the romantic fantasy, not that Lem wasn't a married man himself. "That's great. We're doing really well, if you can recognize somebody on the first try." They did a few more faces, some full figures, a favorite pet, an indoor location, a couple outside scenes, but Brian remained the clear winner, in fidelity and resolution. Lem released her from her confinement, more careful with her hair this time, and she kept her eyes open, on his, this time.

"You're really very good," said Lem, "for a first time."

"Well, I've always had a vivid imagination. That was interesting, to see it, I mean."

"I can send you a copy, after I clean it up a bit, if you want to show your people. It's getting kind of late for tonight." Pushing nine, Lem noticed, not late for him, but still.

"Perfect," Pat said. "Hey, do you eat dinner? We could grab something?"

Whatever it takes, Frank had told him. The session went as well as Lem could expect. Pat's images were convincing, although not as compelling as Lem would expect if they were enhanced by a dose of MXD. If he'd connected with Drebin's guy and bought some more of the drug, that might have nailed the demonstration, but the guy never called back, plus what could Lem tell Pat, hey, snort this experimental drug first. But dinner, why not.

Chapter 8 Dinner

"Can I park here?" Pat locked the wrapped-around-odometer import-compact at a yellow curb, with vacant spaces scarce off-campus on an in-session early autumn evening.

"I guess. It's pretty late." Lem waited for her on the sidewalk, yellow light and loud techno filling the warm night from the open windows of the vernacular wood-frame houses long since hacked into crowded student apartments. They drove their own cars, later to go their separate ways, Lem pleased to see her basic transportation, an old Allestra sedan, as unimpressive and pragmatic as his multi-hundred-thousand-mile Mondo. Cortez guys kidded him, Hey Lem, when we go public, are you going to buy a new car, and he said, no I'm going to buy my own road, my old car goes as fast as I want if it wasn't for all the traffic.

"Just a couple blocks up," Lem said when she joined him at the curb. Lots of kids out on the commercial strip across from the college, coffee-shops head-shops bookstores bars clothing-store sundries restaurants, one of which, the Ratskeller, every one of these towns has one of those, plywood booths, burgers fries quiche salad soup, seven brews on tap, dim enough to ignore how disused and dirty, waited for them. A driver honked. Pat'd pass for a student, chin and cheek like pale petals unfolding in the flaring headlight then fading to mercury blue and edge-lit orange from store-front signage in Lem's side-eye, though better dressed than coeds, her loose blouse limp, peaked by her sharp shoulder blades, in the humid heat radiating to starless purple sky from brick and glass building fronts. He pulled open the restaurant door for her, a curtain of cool air bearing beer and bodies and faint frying grease and old mop mold, should have picked a better place.

They took a side booth and pulled the laminate card menus from between the napkin dispenser and the faceted sugar silo, salt and pepper pawns, chrome dome creamer, and studied the selections with penitent bowed heads. The sound system's southern rock fought the clatter and babble, archipelago laughter from in back, third and goal on the big screen green beyond the seldom-served odd bottle shelves.

"So how'd you end up at Solaris?" Lem opened with the tried and safe workplace gambit.

“Oh, long story. English major, fiction, planned to be this century’s Virginia Woolf. Then to pay off the student loans I took a job tech-writing. I guess I had a knack for faint praise, so they promoted me to marketing.”

“That was with Frank at Lustek?”

“Right. Then after Frank left, I moved over to Solaris. How about you? Did you major in computer science?”

Lem laughed. “Oh no. Fine arts. Painting major. I had this crazy idea I could use computers to generate art.”

“Really? Then how did you learn programming?”

“Well, mostly self-taught. After I graduated art school, I had a job sweeping floors in a factory, all the while I was calling myself an artist, it was pretty depressing. So I took an ‘intro to computers’ course evenings at a local community college. Well, within the first week I completed all assignments for the term, and after that the instructor let me use his password on the mainframe. With the programs I wrote on my own, I was able to talk myself into a position at a small software company, and everything followed from there. I guess I was born with the right kind of brain, computers and programming seem obvious to me, much easier than making art.” Lem realized he was talking way too much. “Anyway, if I had been born a hundred years ago...”

Lem was interrupted by a waitperson, who said that he was Sean and pleased to serve them this evening and ready to take their order. Pat went with a bacon avocado cheeseburger fries, porter draft, not what Lem expected, but he stuck to the chicken Caesar and water, because all those hours in an office chair appeared to accrue about his waist of late.

Pat propped her menu card between the condiments. “I have to ask. Lem, is that a nickname?”

“Ha. Sort of. My given name is William, but when I was little I could only mangle the last syllable. I guess it stuck.”

“Not Stansilaw?”

“Who’s that?”

“The science fiction writer? Stanislaw Lem? He’s sort of our patron saint, at Solaris.”

“Right.” Lem ought to read more, look smart to this English major, fiction writer, too late now. “How about you? Is it Patricia?”

“No. You know how it is, families are weird. My stepfather used to call me Pet, his little pet. So I went from there. At least when I try to publish, Pat doesn’t get dismissed out of hand as a female.”

“And your boyfriend, Brian, what does he do?” Lem figured they deployed enough pawns to advance to the midgame. Whatever her real name.

“Brian? You might know him. He’s an engineering professor at triple-U. He does research in machine vision?” She nicknamed WU, Wilner University, over in the capitol.

“Podarski? Yeah, I’ve read the papers. Seems like a smart guy, though I don’t follow all the math. Never met him though.” Whoa, Brian Podarski was a big fish in Lem’s pond.

“Well, I’ll introduce you. You’re going to ViSCon?” The annual Vision Systems Conference, the big professional gathering for papers, tutorials, and an industry tradeshow.

“Sure. We have a poster session, but I don’t know if we’ll be showing on the floor.” Or whether Frank, who always went, would say they didn’t have the travel budget for Lem this year.

“Why? I thought your system looked pretty solid. Is there a problem?”

“No, it’s good. Maybe not as sharp as we hoped.”

“Is that because of the noise in the sensors? What are they called again?”

“Squids.” Why was she asking about the technical stuff, Frank said to be careful, defend that pawn. “You know, it’s funny, that’s an acronym. But when I started out, trying to make art with computers, I used to explain it by talking about actual squids, the sea creatures?” Better to knight over to an offset square on the board. “They have these pigment dots in their skin, and tiny muscles that expand or contract them. That’s how they do camouflage, stretching different color spots to match their environment. Now if humans had evolved from squids, to a much higher level of complexity, maybe we could generate pictures on our foreheads, to communicate with each other? See, there’s a fundamental mismatch, an asymmetry, people can hear sounds and make sounds, but we can only see shape and color, we can’t directly produce it. That’s why we have to mediate everything through language. If I know there’s a tree with ripe apples over the next hill, I can’t show it to you with an image on my skin, I have to use symbols. Or drawing and painting, which are

really inconvenient, because you need a marking instrument and a surface to mark. Now we have cameras, of course, but only for things that you can photograph. But how can I show you things in my imagination? So my idea was to build a prosthesis, to correct for our handicap, our inability to communicate directly with images. A camera pointed inside your head." God he was talking too much, she'll think he was crazy, he should ask her more questions, people like you more when you get them to talk about themselves.

"Wow. So you want to put us writers out of business?" Pat magic-wanded a catsupped fry to ward off the spell.

"No. Yeah, I guess. But I was making these shaped canvas paintings, where the Gestalt of the two-dimensional contours would vibrate against the closure of the three-dimensional object. Like, take a simple example, the fragmented outline of a sphere painted onto a tilted pyramid, so the viewer's experience would oscillate between circular and angular, like a Necker cube?"

"Uh, no, I can't see that at all."

"See, that's the problem with words. Just wait, when we have my machine, I'll be able to show you what I'm talking about."

"Got it." Pat picked up a corrugated pickle. "But your painting sounds so, I don't know, formal. Analytic?"

"No, that's just me, what I imagined, but I couldn't translate it very well into objects other people could see. But yeah, I guess that's how I ended up in programming, my logical and systematic brain. Other artists would do completely different things, that's the whole point."

"But how about all the words that don't point to pictures? All the concepts? Truth, justice, beauty, love? How can the headset show those?"

"Well, we're not going to replace language. When you think about it, language is such an amazing thing, it's not really out there in the world. I mean, there's an event in my head, mapped into sounds or marks on paper, or on a screen, which outside me don't look anything like my brain event, until it creates another event in your head, which we agree looks similar, the two events that is, to something out in the world we both see. But those abstract events, the concepts, don't exist in the outside world. Maybe if we had to show ideas in visual scenes, then a lot of our arguments, mistakes, wars, all that stuff, would be

less likely. I mean, you couldn't argue about justice or truth, you'd have to show me a particular person acting fairly or accurately. Or a particular person loving another particular person."

Pat swallowed a bite of cheeseburger, the dab of catsup in the corner of her upturned mouth her only lipstick, a gloss of grease on her lower lip, and met Lem's eyes, her own eyes dancing bright and steady. He hadn't touched his salad during his spiel, but now attended to and stabbed a gilled chicken slice, had he crossed a line, always happened when he got excited talking about his ideas.

"But how about mathematics? That's not just inside our heads. Aren't the laws of physics like a part of the universe?"

"Boy, I don't know." Lem never had, had never had, conversations like this with Suzi. "Some people think they are. The ideal forms, like in Plato? I could never understand the purely symbolic math stuff, I have to imagine a structure I can see. Like geometry."

"Oh, I'm no good at math either. Or any of that abstract analysis, textual criticism, all those deconstructivists. I have to be able to experience something to write about it, or see it when I read about it, otherwise it's just words."

"Exactly. See, the problem with modern painting is that paintings used to be how people experienced their world. Hunters and bison in the caves, gods in temple frescos, icons of the saints, battle panoramas. But photography made all that irrelevant. Now people think the only thing that's real is what's captured by a camera. Time frozen in a lens. Machine vision. And painting has become wallpaper. Or a mind-game status symbol. I want to restore the act of direct human perception."

Pat smirked. "Kind of ironic you're building a machine to promote more direct human perception."

Sean interrupted to inquire if they were still working on that, which they weren't, so he cleared and asked if they wanted anything else, which they didn't. Pat raised her mug and finished her beer, her long Modiglianian neck milky below the uplifted octagonal glass base glinting amber from the low-watt yellow-skinned sconce above their table.

"You were really good with the headset tonight." Lem brought the course of play back into the intersecting sweep of her bishops, the interleaved black-white diagonal, forks of force from each pawn, lawn-mower swaths crossing the rooks, a serpentine weaving

around the knights, where each square glowed with the summed focus of the attackers and defenders, a position in a game he played at the Cracked Cup coffee house back in college, with the big afro guy, Lamar maybe, he'd never seen the potential of a midgame so clearly illuminated, but Pat was talking, he dissolved back to the restaurant, her haloed oval face gold-leafed by the glowing fixture on the wall.

"I guess I've always had a vivid imagination. When I write, I just visit a place in my mind and describe what I see, what the people there say. I feel like a stenographer, or a court reporter, more than a fiction writer. So that's what I did in your machine, I just went there."

"That's so cool. So what kind of stuff do you write?"

"A few stories now and then. Not much any more, with my day job. Somehow I feel full-up with the business, the busy-ness, there's not much room for an inner life."

"Yeah, I haven't made anything in years, between the startup hours and the family obligations."

"You're married?" Pat splayed her fingers on the tabletop. "Any children?"

Whoops, time to get the queen out on the board. "Yes, a daughter, Annie, she's six. Great kid." Or maybe leave Suzi alone in the last row, while he castled to one side.

"I'd love to have children someday. Brian says he's not so sure." Pat's fingers traced gouged petroglyphs of diners and drinkers past, a lost language, illegible letters, carved initials revealing lighter layers or long-ago-stained or ball-pointed into the upper plywood plies.

"So you guys are getting married? You've set a date?"

"No, I don't know. Since we moved in together, well, since I moved into his place, he seems to have less time for me. I mean, he's busy too, but."

"I know how that goes. Suzi and I, Suzi, that's my wife, the longer we're together, the less we have in common."

"Is she in technology too?"

"Oh, no. Ceramics. We met in art school. We're trying to get a new studio set up. Since we moved out here, she's mostly been home with Annie."

"I can see myself doing that, staying home with kids. Maybe I can write a children's book or something."

Sean returned to lay the plastic bill tray on the edge of the table and thanked them very much. Lem leaned sideways to pull out his wallet, but Pat slid the shallow black boat over to her side and lay a credit card over the curling printouts.

“Let me get this, I can expense it. You’re the startup, I’m the big company. Might as well take advantage.”

Lem shrugged, settled back. “Sure, thanks.”

He walked her back to her car, no fewer people on the street now, but louder, loitering, lurching with their evening’s blood alcohol level, the air settling down for sleep, calm, cooler, crazy bug-blotch shadows smearing sidewalks under streetlights unadulterated by a moon, stretching longer strings between the red-white beads of sparser passing traffic, the endgame empty, played out of words to say. When Pat pulled out her car keys, they slipped from her hand and clinked beside her on the sidewalk, but before Lem could phrase a ‘Let me get’ and start to squat, she hinged from the hips, past horizontal, lock-kneed, palm flat out to pick them up, a jumpy toy-girl with the rubber bands that threaded through her joints released, how did women, dance or yoga or pelvic span, bend like that. She straightened and stepped into the street.

“See you around I guess. If you need anything, to write this up I mean, let me know. And I’ll send you a copy of your session.” Lem watched her unlock her car, pause in the open door, her head puppet-showed above the bowed stage of the roof thrust, backlit, unmirrored on the dusky metal arc, the painted-set tenements purple and yellow windowed behind her below a proscenium star-scatter smudged by city haze.

“Thanks. Hey, that was fun.”

Chapter 9 Sample

“Hello?”

Finally somebody answered the phone at this number. “Hi. This is Lem Narkis at Cortez. I think Doctor Rick Drebin said he’d contact you about us?”

“Yes. You were interested in research material?” The voice raspy, something fricative and foreign in the W, with a tongue tip toggling the R’s.

“Right.” If that’s what you want to call it. “How do we go about this?”

“You are familiar with the terms of the transaction?”

“Yes, Doctor Drebin told me about the, uh, informality.”

“A sample quantity is twelve hundred.”

Dollars? Lem didn’t carry that kind of cash, he’d have to run by the bank. “Okay.”

“Noon today. Seven Eighty Five Grove Street, number Three.”

“Great, I’ll be there,” Lem said to the silent preamble to the disconnect drone nobody yet bothered to rename button tone or keypad tone.

Grove Street ran east from the three and four story edge of downtown into an area that city zoners prosaically cross-hatched and urban planners cringed Mixed Use. A chain-linked-lot collision repair shop, a three story stucco apartment building with window bars, the flat façade of a wooden warehouse with its whitewash flaking in the noon burn, there’s 785, Lem parked beyond a beat-up box van, if he rolled his windows up he’d slow-cook the car-seats, down and somebody’d jimmy the ignition, left them open half an inch. Nobody dared the street. Late model dark sedan misplaced at the opposite curb, a reflected sun so bright that the windshield blinded the interior to him, could have been Drebin’s car, or the one that followed him the other night, or any of many he saw around him any more, who knows.

A V-groove-sided half-block-long single story, rightmost gray steel solid door, nibbled scabby russet at the sill, black on shimmer-plaid parallelogram 3 adhered off center, bent brass handle band and deadbolt squinty eye, peeling beige jamb, then the over-painted areolic button he pressed. No sound. He sweated through his short-sleeve shirt pits, brown and purple blotches in the yellow blue stripes stuck to his skin. The door

clicked and quivered, subducted an inch of shadow along its edge, and not the voice on the phone, more like an ogre with a cleft lip, said "Yes?"

"Lem Narkis, Cortez. I have an appointment at twelve?"

The door receded another foot, so Lem stepped sideways into the gloom of a dusty high-ceiling room, boxes barrels bins, a broken bicycle, one of those pump-handle pallet lifts with all the yellow crust scraped off its fangs, an open doorway on the far wall lens-flared like an afterimage of the streetscape. The doorman shut the door and kept behind him as Lem advanced across the space. A backward glance told Lem that his guardian stood about his own height, but massive, medicine-ball belly, T-shirt sleeves stretched tight by bowling-pin shoulders, shaved head, Rushmore chin, aviator shades, not reassuring. Was this some drug dealer enforcer, the muscle, no small laboratory assistant, not small at all, and silent. Lem walked into the light.

The next room looked like an end-semester high-school chemistry classroom whose overworked teacher suffered a psychotic episode and left the kids in charge, surfaces strewn with tubes, beakers, burners, bottles, shallow shiny pans, a brown-stained stainless-steel cylindrical centrifuge and two boxy bevel-edged chrome-bezel chambers. Between two heaped tabletops, a man in a wheelchair sat patient as a bullfrog, an amphibian's spindly limbs and bloated torso, a greenish skin tinge, yellowed eyes, perhaps a spring-loaded tongue curled behind lipless chinless cheeks in wait for a fly, but with a unfairytold slick comb-over and thick black-framed spectacles. So the big guy was his attendant or aide, he had stopped to block the doorway behind Lem.

"You have the amount?" Wheelchair guy, likely the chemist, croaked with an oddly resonant baritone, holding more lung capacity than he appeared, but with even less movement than an everyway-plegic.

Lem slid the bank's 'Would you like that in an envelop', maybe he shouldn't hand them his bank name, oh well, from his shirt pocket, and balked a step forward, because the chemist snapped his hand up, he could move after all, from the vinyl-squared chair arm and flicked Lem away. The attendant reached around from behind, and chop-sticked a broiled-pink ballpark-frank thumb and forefinger onto the offering, which Lem released into his custody. After the rustling insect clicks of twelve Franklin-edges threshed, and the crimple of paper creasing into a pants pocket, the same hand hovered again on Lem's right, palm

up, an orange plastic pill bottle, childproof top, no prescription label, caught between the life and heart creases in the calloused slab. Lem picked up the bottle, closed his fingers around it. The man in the wheelchair nodded.

“Pleasure doing business with you,” Lem said. The big guy stepped aside to follow him back to the front door and release him into the burning daylight, with only the bolt click to say ‘So long’. The black sedan still crouched across the street, windows white hot in the sun. Once back in his broiling car, the A/C convecting not cooling his hair back from his forehead, Lem press/twisted the ridged top off the vial. Barely enough powder, clear as ground diamonds, to cover the bottom, but if the same dose he took during Alec’s visit worked, enough for a hundred hits at least. He whirlpooled the container between his fingers, a smudgy grey nebula at the bottom beaming from a billion light years, orange-shifted by the expanding plastic bottom disc, constellating into Cancer the crab twisted back on its tail in timeless night, a toothy pink lobster claw straining against the tan rubber band, bent back to bite him, writhing above the tin pot of bubbling sweat, supernova hot inside the car. Lem replaced the cap and pulled into the street.

Back at his desk, sweat dried and skin chilled by the finned air outlet hushing overhead, Lem played back a voice message. “Hey, Lem. This is Laurent. Could you come down the lab when you have a chance? We can’t calibrate the new chips. They pass diagnostics, but everything looks like crap. Maybe they’re hosed, I don’t know. Thanks.” The samples of the sensor revision had arrived from the fab, Laurent and the other engineers retrofitted a headset with them, but wouldn’t you know, they didn’t work. Lem walked to the stairs and down.

He pushed into the men’s room in the first floor hallway, he’d for sure enlighten the new device with the aid of a little of this MXD. The wobbly slide bar clicked privately in the stall. Man, watch him drop the whole bottle into the toilet, he turned around to face the grey door, where a felt-tip marker had traced some humor he didn’t reread. Lem lacked a cool little spoon like Drebin’s, probably the powder’d dissolve on his skin, a fingernail too convex to cup it, not about to sniff it off the toilet seat, maybe his keys, oh of course, the miniature pocket knife spiral-looped on his keychain. He tipped the bottle sideways and picked up a smidgen on the blade point, cross-eyed communed it up above his lip, forgot to close the other nostril, no matter, an instant’s cool sinus burn, ah, the amoniac bathroom

booth blossomed into a beautiful jasmine abode and delighted Lem no end while he tucked away the responsible articles. Nice.

“Who’s running the headset?” Lem asked after he opened the lab door. Laurent and the technician Vikram swiveled their worktable chairs a quarter turn toward him.

Laurent, double E, curly carrot hair, zippered sweatshirt, outturned his thumb toward his cohort, the dark mop-topped, bespectacled, and madras-shirted Vikram. This tech was fine with electronics, but trying to debug a device that captures brain images from a guy who exhibits zero spatial-visual ability, that figures. Unfortunately, Cortez technology worked only as well as the operator’s imagination, meanwhile, management hired the R&D staff for skills other than the visionary.

“I do not know what the problem might be,” said Vikram. “I am certain that I concentrated correctly.”

“We tried everything. The chips must be bad,” Laurent said.

“Did you invert the Q wave?” Lem remembered Peter saying something about feedback oscillation. A lot easier if Peter would work down here with the crew instead of up in his simulations.

“Why would we do that?” Laurent disliked arbitrary software patches to the hardware, especially ones suggested by software people, even the CTO.

“I don’t know. I’m just thinking, now that the amplifiers switch directions, maybe the resonance needs to reverse too.”

“If you say so. Vikram can do that. Maybe we should rerun the whole training protocol?” asked Laurent.

“Nah, let me give it a shot. Flip the Q and load my dataset.” Lem picked up the copper cap from the table and strapped it around his head, trailed the cables into the booth, jacked in, and shut the door. The black closet soared smooth as an interstellar womb, a warm unbounded light-speed home, every electron inside him singing Hosanna, the drug’s sweet side effect, actually Lem could get to like this, maybe the visualization was the side effect. He told the guys on deck to record, and let himself drift, the other night, the dingy Ratskeller, the cave-wall sconce glowing like an illuminated parchment, a face straight from the Forms enthralled by his ideas, an ethereal vision.

"How's that?" Lem emerged from his capsule and pulled off his gear, blinking to readjust his eyes to the bright screen before which Laurent and Vikram hunched intently.

"Very very good," Vikram said, jumping an octave on the last word.

"In-fucking-credible," said Laurent. "Like we went Hi-Def all of a sudden."

From the monitor leapt Pat Steele, a moist sheen on the crescent lower lip of her knowing smirk, liquid yellow lamp-lens highlights about her gleaming gray-green eyes, a few strands of static lift about her near-white hair-part, almost imperceptible pores on the slope from golden-down jaw to pink-petal cheeks, Pat in the flesh. The revision had cleared the noise out of the reds, gained resolution clear across the spectrum, Peter was a genius, this MXD was a philosopher's stone.

"Who's the babe?" Laurent leered back at Lem.

"Oh, just this woman I know. But this is great. I have to go get Peter." Lem hurried out of the lab and back upstairs. Peter needed to see this, a success, how important he was, it would bring him back around, Cortez needed him. He wasn't in his cubical, Lem found him in the break-room, at the open refrigerator, snagging soft-drink six-packs by the choke-hold plastic rings and swinging them over onto the laminate tabletop behind him. Kerklunk. Kerklunk. Methodical, repetitive, like an assembly line robot, and thinner, like he hadn't been eating, his wrinkled satin shirt scare-crowded across his shoulders, worn way past the last dry cleaning.

"Where's the Clear? Where's the Clear?" Peter drank only the sugar-free caffeine-free flavor-free beverage in the mirror-finish can, Clear.

"Guess we're out," Lem said. Last time of the never that Frank visited the break-room and checked the frig, he told Lem, No way was he paying for decaffeinated beverages, his engineers needed all the all-night caffeine they could swallow, and that he Lem had better get rid of this crap right now, which Lem did. "Look, it doesn't matter. You have to come down to the lab with me and try out the new headset. Your latest design is amazing."

Peter straightened as the door gasket thumped closed, and looked up at the invisible camera concealed between the blades of the air-vent that claimed half of a suspended-ceiling tile. "Yes, I understand. This is a test. But I can control what they see. And they know that I know that they know."

"Okay, come on then," Lem said.

"You doubt me? I designed it, I can defeat it. You'll see." Peter's yogi-smile and droopy eyes emphasized his lack of grooming, unshaven uncombed unlaundered and unshowered, more a wandering begging-bowl mendicant version of Peter, but his arrogance served Lem's purposes better than his usual paranoia. They went downstairs.

"One more thing, come in here a minute." Lem pushed into the Men's Room, and Peter followed without protest. Lem leaned back against the entry door to hold it closed, they couldn't very well both go into a stall, and pulled out the bottle and pocketknife.

"Now you have to trust me, for the full effect, I need you to inhale a pinch of this crystal." Lem spoke with a confidence he lacked, what the hell, if Peter went along and saw how well it worked, he'd never walk away, no matter how much Frank berated or belittled him.

"Ah, the truth serum. I understand. I knew this would happen. Do you know that a yogi can swallow a thousand doses of LSD at one time with no effect? The highest levels of mind control are immune to these drugs." Peter stood still as a likely-suspect line-up while Lem stabbed a knife-point of powder.

"This is MXD. I forget what that stands for, I got it from a doctor. It's a medicine that really enhances visualization," Lem held the blade below Peter's nostril. "Now do one big snort."

Peter inhaled, his half smile, half-closed eyes, unchanged. "Yes, MXD, Mind Exposure Drug. No matter. They underestimate me."

They went to the lab, where Laurent and Vikram didn't say anything while Lem outfitted Peter, perfectly calm and compliant, the grace of a damned aristocrat before the hangman, no hood necessary, no last words, with the headset and settled him into the booth.

"Just give it a couple minutes, okay? Think of something you like." Lem shut the door and took a chair, told Laurent to initialize the capture. The screen lightened, flickered, undulated like a purplish dust-bunny lava-lamp, formless on the void. Shit, nothing, either the headset or the MXD or both didn't work, because how could Peter blank his mind and block out everything. "Can you boost the gain any more?" Lem asked Vikram.

"I have done that very operation," Vikram said. The three watched the screen, undulating like a TV tuner almost receiving an old broadcast station's signal, but never

quite converging, reddish gray smears and blobs. There, at last, what looked a human figure, front on, arms and legs spread-eagled, chin thrown back, head disproportionately large, belly rippling, dimpling raindrops on the murky water obscuring a child's figure, what the.

The booth door exploded like a tripped rat trap and swung the span of its hinges to bam against the jamb and rebound, but Peter had already leapt out and ripped the headset off his head to clatter with its cables coiling on the floor-tile, while he motion-blurred out the lab door and down the hall.

"What has happened to him?" Vikram said.

"That guy is bonkers," Laurent said. "And he broke the damn Bug."

Lem looked back at the diffuse dark static that filled the screen. "Did you load Peter's protocol?"

"Uh, I don't think so. You didn't tell me to." Laurent shrugged.

"Never mind. I'll rerun it later. Just save the session for me, okay? I have to go find him." Lem left the other two in the lab, and went out the back door onto the loading dock. The parking lot sweltered like an open pizza oven, no Peter, nobody, the last space against the back of the building where Peter parked his Vexra, the midnight blue sports coupe, always facing out, now empty. A semi diesel downshifted a long oboe moan up on Hillsborough, the air too thick to hear a bug or bird in the singed stunted median sweetgum trees. Lem went back inside and upstairs where he found no Peter either, no surprise.

Chapter 10 Pajamas

“Leaving early?”

Lem paused mid-step and pivoted back toward Frank’s cubicle. Gudrun’s station behind him opened dark and empty behind the waist-high counter-surface along the aisle, where Lem often leaned on his elbows to bullshit or trade paperwork with her with Frank out as usual, she’d gone home already. Everybody at Cortez worked in cubicles, fraternity-equality-maybe not liberty, except that Frank’s domain cornered two windows with about four times the carpet area of Lem’s cube, six times Gudrun’s, room for sofa side-chair coffee-table credenza, round maple-top pedestal conference table and four padded chairs, and an L-shaped live-edge wood-plank desk, no molded plastic clip-on work surface for the CEO. Who for the first time Lem remembered, sat in the side chair not talking on the phone or poking at his computer or in a meeting with Greg or Dave or with outsiders Lem did not recognize. Rather, Frank, blue sport-coat shouldered on the desk chair, tie pulled loose as a sloppy hangman, the cleft stubble on his chin foreshadowing the eve, appeared to be waiting, or less likely, looking out the window, or almost inconceivably, thinking.

“Uh. Yeah. I have to watch Annie this evening. Girl’s night out, I think,” Lem said.

“Don’t I pay you enough to get a babysitter? What, do you want a raise?” Frank snarled as if all in good fun.

“No, you know, some time with my kid.” Lem scuffed at the carpet with the toe of his sneaker. “You ever see your kids?” Frank had mentioned a couple, older, maybe even in college by now, with the first wife.

“Ah, no. That woman. Margo. Hell has no fury.” Frank’s hands made fists. “I tell you, stay married. Fuck around on the side if you have to, but stay married. It’s a lot cheaper.”

At least that detour endorsed Lem’s early departure. “So what are you working on?”

Frank turned to Lem, blinked, the indifferent ancient patience of a Galapagos tortoise, not as wrinkled. “Might be some changes around here.”

“What kind of changes?”

“Restructuring. Greg tells me the rev of the sensor chip jacked up the power and the area, so costs are going up sixty percent in production. You guys, you and Peter, had sure

better be right about this fix. With the current burn rate, we don't get to positive cash flow without another financing round, or some other kind of infusion. Which is why I'm juggling a couple irons in the fire. How'd it go with Pat?"

"Pat?" Shit, were they all in, Frank's face-up cards on the table showing nothing, with a half-working prototype in the hole, this Solaris deal a bail-out, a buy-out, the car keys tossed on the chip heap in the center? "Great. She did really well. Seemed to like it okay. We went to dinner after."

"Good, good." Frank turned toward the window, sounding like he inattentively approved of a side-tongue panting terrier, a child's kinked construction of colored paper and Scotch tape, or of nothing.

"How'd you know her, anyway? Pat."

"You know. Cute college kid works her way up the management chain. Smart, that girl." Frank circled a shoulder up toward his earlobe, all that tension trapped in the trapezoid. "But we closed up shop, at Lustek I mean. I got divorced. Ancient history."

Regular guys, shoulder-punching locker-room trash-talk guys, ask right off, so did you fuck her man, not Lem, a long pause. "So Frank, I know this artist. Very well known in Visionary Art, that's like the cutting-edge surreal stuff? I brought him in, he's really amazing on the headset. Maybe we could put out an article, photos, get some publicity?"

Frank snorted. "Artists don't have the money to buy this thing. Besides, how many of these vision artists are there anyway? Like two? You can't build a business on that."

"No, I know, I mean for the company image. Like we're forward-looking, you know, culture, the arts, social benefits. Not just rendition and interrogation."

"Run it by Dave. I don't want any bizarre porno shit going out." Frank's doubled-paned reflection, faint in the dusk, two of him an inch apart, one fainter, focused beyond its four eyes.

#

Annie slid sideways out of the breakfast nook booth, keeping her dinnerware perfectly horizontal and steady-cammed as she stood up and walked to the sink. "You have to clear your plate, Daddy."

"That's right, honey." Lem slouched in the spindle-back chair at the open side of the butcher-block table, a mottled orange glaze of mac'n'cheese and a few faint green bug-like broccoli florets decorating his pale blue plastic plate.

Annie raised on tippy-toes and set her setting down in the stainless steel sink with a minor clink, then stepped back, bent smoothly from the waist, knees locked, pony tail flopping forward over her shoulder, and with her palms flat on the floor, skimming the surface, smoothed the rag-braid throw rug in front of the cabinet. Pat's pale blouse spanned the ripples of her ribs and the ridges down her spine like snow-swept ice under the hot blue streetlight as she retrieved her fallen keys, a colorless partial part parting the hair over the knobby back of her skull, no copper Cortez cap this time, so the shock of blonde locks hid Annie's face, no, not his daughter, back in the kitchen, home. Since Lem started debugging Peter's latest headset fix, the new feedback capability sure cleaned up the noise, but the visions, images, no not hallucinations, increased in intensity and frequency and, 'This is not going to be a problem is it', Frank would say, reality. Or it started when he snorted the MXD, but boy despite the demons did that make the demos shine. Annie, Lem was sure this was Annie, straightened back up.

"Go and get your PJ's on, and I'll come help you brush your teeth," Lem said.

Annie checked the white-handed clock-face inset into the chrome-framed rear curb of the range. "It's only seven thirty two." She liked to read the exact time from the four tiny ticks between the thicker five-lines.

"I know, but it's a school night. Pick out a book and I'll read to you in bed." Lem had assembled Annie's supper late, because Suzi had hurried out to her dinner date as soon as he got home, early for him, why can't he ever be on time. Get Annie settled and he could relax, have a couple beers, actually watch a little TV for once.

Annie marched back into the kitchen from her bedroom, hands pliered onto her jean-skirt waistband, mirrored elbows making acute isosceli, lower lip out angular. "I don't have any PJ's."

"Okay." Lem sat up, pushed his chair back until a back leg caught in the grout channel and the other three legs squirmed on the quarry tile another inch around the radius of the stuck one's tip, stood. "Wear the ones you wore last night. Here, I'll help you find some." He opened the hollow-core door beyond the refrigerator into the utility room,

pulled the pressed-metal tulip on the string tied to the short beaded chain slinking out of the overhead socket and Rembrandt'd the laundry area. Annie began burrowing into the pied pile on the floor, miscegenation of darks and lights, Lem's jeans, Suzi's bra, one plaid knee sock, a flimsy frock.

"You should do the laundry," Annie said.

"Nah, Mommy doesn't like that. Daddy does it wrong." Lem extracted a rubber-treaded ducky footsie bottoms and a traffic-signs long-sleeved uppers. "How about these?"

"They don't match."

No point in arguing, after excavating several more strata, a ducky turtle-neck top emerged. With disdain, they're dirty, but it's Daddy, Annie undressed onto the widened fabric island, adding her outfit to the reef of clothes, and foot-hopped into the pajama pants, struggled for the sleeves she couldn't see from inside the contracted anemone neckline, moray'd out her hands, pulled down and up the hem and waistband, did not need any help.

She settled in with Wilsee the dog, Kookoo the Koala, a striped tiger and three other stuffies whose names Lem didn't remember, quilted daisy-chain comforter turned down across her chest, pillow and sham fluffed flat against the sunrise headboard.

"Arabel and Joasit ran through the dark woods," Lem began at the bookmark. "The branches grabbed at their arms. They could hear the heavy footfalls behind them. 'Run,' said Arabel." Annie liked the scary stuff. The flashlight beams behind him strobed the saplings as Lem lurched through the copse, half twisting his ankle off the cusp of a mulch-mounded rock, pinwheeling with the ragged bark of a thick trunk scoring his palm where he caught his fall. The crown of bare branches diffused the helicopter high-beam overhead, hid him, but they were close. Ahead through the trees a word-link fence sparked silver in the lights, woven wire letters with sharp serif points terminating the straight strokes, razor-edged, maybe electrified. The guard tower at the next chapter break swept its searchlight back along the barrier, but Lem couldn't read the metal mesh of words, the words that held him back from a leap off the cliff beyond language. "Arabel caught her friend's hand, and pulled him back from the edge. Pebbles and dirt fell without a sound. 'Whew, that was close,' Joasit said." Lem found himself reading a hard-bound large-print book in a soft bed by a warm lamp next to a serious child. He often drifted off in thought while he read to her, but never keelhailed like that, what if he stayed submerged.

"Okay, honey, that's the end of the chapter." Lem leaned over and kissed Annie on her perfect forehead, eyebrows faint as erased, not a single line traced by time.

"Good night, Daddy. I love you."

"Love you too, sweetie."

"Mommy leaves the little light in the bathroom on for me." Annie turned away, onto her side, arms folded at her chest, knees drawn up, curled no bigger than a pillow stuffed under the quilt. Lem darkened her room, left the door a finger from the jamb.

Line of thunderstorms from the southwest, burning barricade with bearded brown men, live audience overweight incest accusation and refutation, pouty policewoman frisks handcuffed hoodie on car hood, valuable awful Americana artwork assessed, long-lens big-eyed punk-feather dodo chicks in circle of sticks, Lem remembered, nothing to watch on TV anyway. The third beer diminished the relevance of boredom, and attenuated the channel-up reflex. He settled into how, no matter what, each day compressed into a half hour of news, well, six minutes of sports, four minutes of weather, twelve minutes of commercials, and eight minutes of news, unless an anomalous assassination or terrorism and consequent funeral or parade needed continuous coverage. The brown bottle, a tan interior froth-edge circumference now half-hidden by the paper label, triangulated its brothers on the coaster-equivalent celebrity lifestyle, Thinner Thighs!, now Olympic'd by dozens of damp raised rings drying flush but faintly bleached, magazine that Suzi had left on the end table.

"report of a personal injury accident on Route 4 south of Granville. Police and emergency personnel are on the scene. We now go live to our Channel 2 reporter, Jason Roach. Jason?" The crystal spider-web of the shattered windshield throbbed red from the fibrillating flashes of fire trucks and cruisers and ambulances saw-toothed surrounding the car where Lem slumped wedged between the wheel and crumpled door. A thick tree trunk prowed a fresh-creased bow-wave into the hood, misted with rising red-strobed steam or smoke, but the glade climbing beyond the drainage ditch that cradled the chassis intershadowed its reddened boughs into an impenetrable black matt only yards ahead. Damn he left the six-pack empties right alongside him. Lem watched scepter shadows sweep across the dashboard, then a tremor twitched the roof pillar, but the bent-back headrest pressed his neck too hard to turn and see. He lurched. A jangled shriek jerked the doorframe drip edge against the Jaws of Life.

“What did you pass out in here?”

Blue television, flower woven carpet, corded sofa cushion, the living room. That jagged noise was Suzi jimmying open the front door that sagged against the sill, wedged against the jamb, Lem meant to reset the hinges or plane the rail and stile real soon. Not sleep, not a dream, three of these visions in a couple hours, not so good. Lem clutched the worn wooden elbows bared beyond the upholstered welt and pushed himself up in the armchair. “No, I, uh. Dozed off I guess.”

Suzi crossed the carpet, turned off the television, and sat on the edge of the couch cushion. “I need to talk with you.”

Looked like trouble, she sat like Sunday school, back straight, knees together, hands folded in her lap, staring right at him. Lem met her eyes, then turned toward the fish-tank version of the foreshortened room reflected in the smoky TV screen. “Sure,” he said.

“I want a separation. I want you to move out.”

Lem looked at her, all the anger and sadness of an oncologist’s ten thousandth terminal diagnosis evident in her flat-line lips, her battle-zone eyes. “What?”

“You know this isn’t working. I need to move on with my life. You need to find another place to live.”

“Why do I have to do that? I live here. Plus it’s really a bad time for me. To deal with all this.”

“You’re having a bad time? That’s so typical. Bad time. You have no idea.”

“Look, we can work this out. I know I’ve neglected you. I can do better. We could go back into counseling or something.” Lem held his hands out, supplicant, suffer the children, surrender, something.

“Like the last one? Marcy Kaufman? You said she was a complete idiot.”

“No. I mean, she asked me if I wanted my wife to be more like a computer. Ridiculous.” Actually, that Kaufman was a complete idiot. But maybe somebody else. A guy.

“Fine. You’re right. You can go and think whatever you want. Do whatever you want. But not with me anymore. And not here.”

“I’m not going anywhere. This is my. Our home.” Why couldn’t they keep on like this, just let him get Cortez going, then things would be better, he didn’t have time to find an apartment, couldn’t afford an apartment, why couldn’t she let it go for tonight, go to bed.

"Look, either you move out, or I will. See how you like being a single parent. Annie needs to live here. Continuity is real important for children when their parents divorce. She has her school. Her friends."

Lem counted flowers in the carpet, twelve around the center circle, stems entwined into an endless braid. "Now you want a divorce?"

"I've talked to a lawyer about the separation agreement. There's child support and the division of property. I'm not asking for alimony. You'll want to get a lawyer too, probably."

"No, I." Lawyers Jesus, did she want mutually assured destruction, those guys billed by the escalation, the more back-biting bitchy bile they spawned the more money they made. "Is that what your friends tell you? On your girls' night out? They tell you to get a lawyer and divorce me? So you can be as miserable as they are? Christ." Lem forgot to maintain the robotic demeanor of a toll-free customer complaint representative with seventeen more calls waiting, outsourced and off-shored by twelve thousand miles of undersea copper cable, talking from where night was day, his name assumed, where no one could touch him.

"At least I have friends. Friends who care about me. You. You and your Frank. And your crazy Peter. What a weirdo. Maybe if you had some friends, you'd know how to care about people. But don't worry, now you can do exactly what you want. I won't be in your way anymore." Suzi stood up. "But you have to get out."

Lem traced the drywall seams in the ceiling, the gradual mud swells feathered over the taped joints slightly brighter toward the soft circle upcast from the tabletop lampshade, and the vaguely shadowed indents at the shrunk-spackle nail heads, a ceiling so smooth in diffuse daylight, and now at night a criss-cross corral penning double rows of daubs on a stubble of paint nap speckle and trampled splats of dry latex flakes dragged along from the can rim or the roller tray chevron skim. Kind of a mess, when he noticed.

"When?" Lem asked.

"Tomorrow. I guess tomorrow's okay. And I don't want that creepy Peter coming around here again. Ever." Suzi went to bed. Lem remembered to put his empty beer bottles out in the recycling bin behind the washing machine, gently, with the faintest empty quadruple clink.

Chapter 11 Conference

Morning clear and blue as a blown-glass cobalt bowl domed over the playground beyond the bowed wire fence as high as Annie's head when Lem leaned across to pry the handle and pop open the passenger door into the preschool drop-off bulb.

"Bye honey, love you," Lem said, while all-business Annie threaded short-sleeved August-golden arms through her Pertie the Purple Penguin backpack straps, scooted off the seat onto the curb and past the ankle-socked athletic sneakers and thick-calved calico skirt-hem of all Lem could see of the certainly smiling staff person. He pulled the door closed, the glass-down trapezoid framing Annie double-timing through the gate to mix with the scramble of multi-color-clad moppets on the macadam's indecipherable worn-out Nazca lines.

On the longer way to work around Route 54, Lem pulled off into a strip-mall parking lot, dry-clean, mani-pedi, hardware, beer wine liquor, café breakfast all day, mailbox rental copy quick, and parked at the eastern end of the storefront overhang steel-post colonnade. The three composition notebooks had slid farther back under his seat, caught on the floor-pan mounds and side rail slide springs, reluctant to leave, and he worked them out while bent near double with his forehead against the slick knurled wheel grip, his knees wide, as if contorting to scratch his lumbar spine up between his legs. He squared the books in a stack, round-corner mottled between-broadcast-channel frozen-noise covers, black tape-band binding, white lozenge blaze with a blue ball-point month/year he had inscribed above the third line. Every page full of his last year's idle hours nominally employed at Unicom, notes and diagrams and pseudo-code about a better way to decode visual datasets, a new direction nobody in management wanted to hear or would have believed if they had taken the time to take a meeting with him, and lists of names and phone numbers of other employees Lem speculated would be useful and could be convinced to join him in building such a system in a new venture. Now that he might be no longer living at home, and as the party accused in the Unicom lawsuit, these records needed to disappear from the spare bedroom closet shelf, beneath his old overalls and unworn sweater vests and shoeboxes of credit card and utility bills.

The mall walkway waited vacant with its polished concrete keeping its cool before the sun rounded noon and looked under the awning, who'd notice him here anyway. Lem got out of the car, a schoolboy with his homework in hand, walked to the second column's chain-locked trash receptacle. A shame to discard all this history, but he'd remember the important stuff, he'd already implemented the crucial ideas, or he could recreate them, or think up something else instead, and most of the recruitable names he'd recall. He could claim he wrote these notebooks on his own time, but lawyers said that every idea an employee generated during the course of employment belonged to the employer, no such off-the-clock, they buy your brain; or he could claim he wrote them at the onset of Cortez, after he left Unicom, if he hadn't adhered to the stricture that engineers keep careful invention diaries and date all the entries, too late now, redacting the record headers would only augment his guilt. Neighbors would notice a late summer bonfire in the backyard, what's he doing over there, and investigators had knocked on their doors at least once before, maybe they went through Lem's garbage too, there he sounded like Peter. The shredder at the copy store was too public, the one at work out of the question. No, best an anonymous commercial trashcan.

The rusted red wedge-shaped cover lacked its swinging door, and massive misuse depressed the left gable deep into its supporting disc, which bent up its turned edge to gap the aggregate pebble-finish silo rim and let flies freely probe the inner tin can. Lem imagined his books churning under boulder-sized bulldozer blades, shredded by the cleated treads, of no interest to a thousand mocking gulls, buried under landfill and sealed forever. Not the black-yellow glove-through fingers of some bottle-deposit bum rooting through the diapers and half burritos to pull the notes out for bed-roll reading under the bypass. Even better a trash-burning power plant, Fahrenheit two thousand to back-burn the toxic gas-off, did they have one, did the commercial waste hauler dump there, or off the cliff side of an abandoned logging road to save disposal fees. Lem fed the notebooks all three at once into the wopperjaw maw, turned away carefree casual from the triple thump safe sound as they slipped slightly apart before impact.

On the eastern apron he braked and waited for an approaching car to pass, but it slowed, blinkered no intention, turned into the first entrance/exit curb cut, a low late-model sedan, tinted windows, body panels dulled in between deep blue and darker brown,

alloy wheels, and parked in a midway space facing the neon-off liquor store. Well Lem couldn't sit here in the driveway all day, another coincidence, nobody got out of the car to dive for his notebooks in the garbage, he needed to meet Frank to go to the 10 o'clock lawyer conference, so he accelerated out onto the road and flipped down the visor against the morning sun flare as the road wove slightly southeast. The rearview lozenge shrank nobody opening the driver's door of the sedan as far back as he could see until the blank beige cinderblock strip-mall sidewall wiped the rear fender and then the parking lot from his view.

Done with that. But what if the headset could record the marks on all those pages stored somewhere in his brain, they never tried text or line art before, but now with the enhanced resolution and a dose of MXD, what if. That'd be rich, interrogated by an officer of the court, So Mister Narkis what do you see on page 27 of the notebook dated, betrayed by his memory, found guilty by reason of his own invention. He tried as an exercise to superimpose the blue ink on one of those pages over the two lane road apexing toward the slight rise ahead, and saw nothing, but they say everything you pay attention to gets stored in there somewhere, now he needed to forget what he wrote.

Now what Lem needed to do was to find an apartment, or to convince Suzi to forget the whole separation idea, without his staying home from work to cycle through her sobbing and screaming against his poorly enacted apologies and promises while the sun stood still until the tide of battle turned in the emotional equivalent of two to four months during one morning's kid-at-kindergarten time-span, the latter option leering worse than the first. Damn scrap metal truck, side panels busted and rusted as if they became the cargo they retained, thirty-two miles an hour single lane double yellow line late. Was that a headache, the back of his head behind his ears tightening like a jar-wrench, a hose-clamp, not the headrest pressing against and twisting off the safety cap that trapped his brains. An octagon of pressure points, like the fat fingers of the chemist's bodyguard, the big hands fused with no thumbs, Siamese paws, two sets of four opposed fingers parted by a thick pad of creased muscle connected to the tendon cable forearm, a boardwalk glass-box suspended claw of flesh to clasp a prize inside his skull, the multi-pronged mandible of some blind ruby-bellied beetle latched onto the back of his head to drain him dry, then squeeze the fingers flat as Durer's prayer or Alec's Namaste. Shit, Lem punched the brake,

the truck, bent-up brake-light bracket red above the shredded playgirl mud-flap, and the amber turn-signal ticking off sub-seconds, hung a wide right into its nesting wasteland side-street dead end ahead. Jesus, Do not operate motor vehicles while experiencing immersive imaginative visions, that hadn't happened while driving before, maybe because he was under more stress, when was he under less stress, with this migraine vise at the back of his skull. Concentrate. Lem put his hands ten and two and motored like the driver's license exam to the Hillsborough full-stop sign and the Pylon blinker-on turn off and the Cortez parking space.

Frank drove them downtown. The golden cursive inlay automotive logo in the walnut dashboard inset announced model MX600, not that Lem considered telling him What a coincidence, there's this drug called MXD. The Meridian six-liter coupe growled at its choke-chain throttled to ten over the limit, while Lem looked out the passenger window at nothing but the speculative office and industrial zone surrendering to tree-lined professional LLP Queen Anne conversions and then the see-your-stories-and-raise-you-two white-collar escalations with underground parking, while Frank talked.

"Now we're going to meet with an outside firm, understand? Solaris counsel doesn't want to commit to any privilege until they know how we stand regarding this Unicom thing, so you need to be on your toes today. Okay? Our guys tell me"

At the fifth or sixth red light, Lem looked through his own faint face reflected in the rolled-up, that is the Meridian powered-up, window, to the bright bent cross-street building grid bouncing off the adjacent driver's window, and through to a tiny older white-fringed woman panting pink-tongued at the glass from the lap of black-nosed bouffant bichon bent over the steering wheel, button eyes contracted and cataracted toward the signal when Frank punched the green. Double parked blinking brown delivery van smeared alongside like shit skid-marks on parked cars and stick-figure store-fronts streaking backwards, a circular city block spinning around shiny shoppers and wooden workers unsteady on their bleary-go-round. Lem sat stuck outside the window frame of the polychrome carousel cupola with idyllic landscape painted panels ringed by gilt-frame light bulbs oscillating too late to get on, left behind, while a karst cavern eroded under his palate and etched his throat and ate into his gut with too much sour thin saliva seeping up as if the emptiness felt too full to keep down, now nausea gnawing underneath the vision.

“Are you listening to me? I said, how are the patents coming along?”

Lem turned toward Frank, who drummed his thumbs on the crosspiece of the steering wheel, where the horn switch demanded more intent and the airbag waited to explode, impatient with the traffic or with Lem. “Oh. Good. We have a meeting to review the claims on Monday.”

“Well, get them filed. I’ve got to have some leverage against these fuckers, and the valuation looks a lot better if we”

The lanes split into their one-way vein heading into the heart of the city, and the artery of the opposing traffic moving much faster back toward the forking diminishing capillaries in the suburban periphery where Cortez incorporated. Lem never pursued any patents while at Unicom, the few-thousand dollar bonus to file and twice that on an eventual grant bribed him not enough for him to codify the company’s ownership of his ideas. Even though his name appeared as author, they kept the contents, if work is wage slavery, and property is theft, what would Marx call intellectual property, brain servitude? A guy ought to at least be allowed to use his own ideas in his own work, no matter who he worked for, or when. But different now, in this startup, which Lem owned, or at least partially vested an option to buy for pennies a tiny part of what presumably would be worth more at some point, because now he retained a piece of the patents he wrote. And joined the arms race, pay the lawyers to file the patents to counter the patent infringement lawsuit the enemy pays litigation lawyers to file with the patents it paid other lawyers to file, or to pay more lawyers to sweeten the terms of merger and acquisition agreements which convey the patents to the consummate company who pays its lawyers to use the patents to file suits or countersuits against another or the same enemy. Being how Lem landed in this prisoner of war boxcar transported to the concentration conference. Frank was still talking.

“Greg said you’re getting good results. Maybe I was a little too hard on Peter. He’s not mission critical at this juncture. Maybe you should cut him loose. Or try to get more out him.”

Peter hadn’t come in yet this morning before they left the office. Now didn’t seem to be an ideal time to discuss his recent state of mind with Frank. Lem said, “Yeah, maybe.”

“But you have to push hard,” Frank continued, “to see results. Tell these people you expect twice as much as they can deliver, in half the time. Then you get somewhere. I tell you, back when I ran Lustek”

What if making paintings, not that Lem had painted in a decade, became a patent application, instead of each mark making an object more unique, more exactly and only this one novel configuration of marks, a singularity, an unprecedented pattern of pigment, became ever more ambiguous and all-inclusive, a method or apparatus by which a visual perception is invoked in a viewer, muddling over the paint until the Cadmium yellow dies brown and the Viridian green clots gray, what is claimed is an organization of colors, the off-center saw-blade swath blurred into mist and the claw-corner rhomboid diffused into fog, what is claimed is a partition of a surface by a plurality of regions, commingled color killing the light, composite shape filling the frame, maybe that’s what suicided Rothko, the black void of expanding words eating outward along an indistinct necrotic edge, patenting all possible paintings in one expanding black blind spot.

“Why don’t they have any goddamn Visitor spaces down here?” Frank asked nobody.

Coiling down the third level underground square-slinky ramp with traction squeals cornering well over the posted 5MPH but streamlined well under the 6 Foot 4 Inch Clearance bumblebee barber-poles, Frank slotted the coupe two spaces from the EXIT stair and elevator shaft they buttoned up to the eighth floor offices of Lamb Fenster, which must have taken the whole floor since the doors shushed apart facing a book-marked birds-eye-maple defensive reception bulwark with twin ear-to-mouth-pieced painted guardettes. Told of their mission, the right one buzzed. They trailed gray-blue skirt-tight orbs pistoned by four-inch heels osculating the corridor of closed doors and bright through-to-curtain-wall doorways and open alcoves of briefs and file boxes and books across to a large glass-walled abode with an immense ovoid table and leather swivel chairs, where Lem replied Sure he’d have a coffee, black, and Frank looked at him like he’d have to stay here a month for every sip he swallowed when the attendant assistant guide woman left to go get it.

Two men entered the room, suit coat armor abandoned, but bearing shields of thick folders and elastic-strapped accordion files, wearing their striped silk breastplates, and exchanged the names and affiliations of the parties and sports+weather pleasantries without adhering in Lem’s long-term memory. The little skinny gray-groomed one

explained how informal and off-the-record and for purely informational purposes this conversation remained, and the sea-lion-sized one suggested that he and Lem repair to another room. Lem looked quizzically at Frank.

"It's alright. Attorney client privilege." Frank motioned with his hand at his waist to send him on his way. The larger lawyer led Lem to an office even more private and discrete than the upper story law office aquarium.

"Why don't you tell me a little about how you came up with the Cortez software," the large lawyer said after he and Lem settled into the tuck-and-rolled maroon leather chairs, the cross-button diamond lumps squeaking stiff beneath them, opposed across a low glass-topped table in a walnut-paneled windowless office.

"Well, Frank called me up and said he saw an opportunity to fund a low-cost visual sensor company, so I brought in Peter to do the hardware, and we brainstormed the design, mostly over at my house. Then Frank got us some office space, and we started building the prototype."

"And this was after you resigned from Unicom?"

"Completely. We both, Peter and I, quit before we started on anything new. But why are they suing us? I didn't take a single thing with me when I left. What kind of evidence do they have against us?"

"Well, sometimes these suits are intended to delay or frighten off a potential competitor, or to burden a small company with legal fees or a large settlement, even if the case never comes to trial, or if the claims have no basis in fact. In your case, the plaintiff is invoking the doctrine of inevitable disclosure. Because you were employed in a similar sort of development work at Unicom, their assertion is that you cannot avoid using information proprietary to or patented by Unicom in discharging your duties at Cortez."

"You're saying that even though I haven't done anything, they can sue us because they know what I'm going to do in the future? How can they know that? That's ridiculous."

"Yes, it may seem that way to the layman. But that's how the law works."

"And why am I named, I mean, me personally? I thought this would only be about the company, Cortez. Do I need to get my own lawyer?" When the process-server brought the papers to the house, and Suzi read her husband's full legal name in bold black all-caps above the label Defendant, cowering below Unicom Corporation, Plaintiff, on the left side

split by a column of curly-cues from Civil Action letters/numbers on the right, with United States District Court bannered up on top, she narrowed her eyes, and through clenched teeth growled with guttural lip-limbering exaggeration, Now. What. Have. You. Done.

“As an officer, you’re completely covered under the corporate liability umbrella. Unless of course you’ve committed a criminal act, moral turpitude, drug trafficking, that sort of thing.”

Oh man, for example purchasing experimental psychoactive substances from a low-rent low-life crippled cooker? “No, of course not,” Lem said.

“In that case, I have a proposition for you.” The lawyer leaned back in his chair, interwove his fingers to tauten the blue-sliver-black striped tie slung over his ripe belly, and measured Lem above the half-lensed glasses halfway down his nose. “Say that, hypothetically, I could negotiate unlimited usage of Unicom intellectual property, patents, trade secrets, whatever, related to Cortez product development. No admission of fault or liability, dismissal of the lawsuit with prejudice, a very straightforward low-cost license for any and all Unicom technology you might find relevant to your endeavors. Is that something that might be of interest you?”

Lem looked at the serpent holding out the apple of knowledge, back when that snake had bespoke shirts around thick arms cuff-linked at chubby palms, before he got himself cursed to crawl on his belly and eat dust all his days. Those Unicom idiots had zero interest in what he wanted to invent for them back when he worked there, and that now he came up with something new on his own, they thought he needed their obsolete technology? That he was incapable of thinking up a hundred better ideas? That he’d bend over backward to settle their lawsuit?

“I don’t use their stuff. I don’t need their stuff. I don’t want their stuff. And I sure as hell would never make a deal with those assholes to get their stuff.”

The lawyer tipped his head a fraction like a red-white bobber waiting bigger fish on a clear calm lake, and his lips creased upward the furrows falling from beside his narrow nostrils to his thick arroyo jowls and into his alluvial neck fan. “Good answer.”

They rejoined Frank and the other lawyer for the final round of aimless billable joviality, optimistic assessments, handshakes, and respective departures. Frank’s car had stayed cool subterranean, and they kept their own counsel until a third of the way from

downtown, motoring out into the blinding late-morning preheating protocol ramping up for the afternoon furnace, blasted beyond the tinted glass by the A/C MAX slider.

“So I take it that went well, with Hanratty?” Frank asked.

So that was his name, no matter. “Yeah, I guess.”

“You know, he’s a big gun, one of those thousand dollar an hour partners. What did he want?”

“Offered me a deal with Unicom. I figured it was some kind of test, you know, to see if we used any of their designs. So I said no thanks.”

“Good. Excellent. Hey, you and Suzi coming to the barbeque Saturday?” Frank’s annual Labor Day opportunity to show off his house and pool and Sarah’s latest trending caterer and couture loomed for his cronies and cohorts and oh-by-the-way Cortez employees.

“Sure,” said Lem, not at all sure what he and Suzi would do to or with each other by Saturday.

Chapter 12 Studio

Greg, the engineering VP, liked Lem to sit in on his staff meeting, during which Lem doodled on his notepad but failed to concentrate on what he otherwise would be working on, while Greg's direct reports took turns around the table to present their weekly progress as favorably as they could manage. They met in the Dildo conference room, what the guys called what Frank had named the DeLeon, where the grease inside an outer-pink and inner-brown ear-flapped dozen-count box of assorted donuts seeped through the dissolute cardboard and mauved its bottom and lower sides upon the faux-grain laminate tabletop.

"So, Martin, what kind of coverage are you getting on the test vectors?" asked Greg, tottered back on the rear chrome legs of the plastic stacking chair, his tiny simian ears straight out like landing flaps, accentuated by his short-sides haircut, near-black eyes too near the nose of a morose round face.

"I have the spreadsheet right here, let me" bird-like Martin pecked at his keyboard, his thick red hair stiff as a cockscomb, unwilling or unable to ad-lib or summarize when he could recite numbing columns of numbers and acronyms. Lem drew two diagonals across a square and filled each resultant triangle with a tangent circle, what if he keyed the search on the dominant geometric shape in each image, would edge detection offer enough linear continuity, Jesus, these guys discussed device yield for two days in every two-hour meeting, maybe if that depth-charge donut detonated he'd have the excuse to get up and go take a dump. How many people spent two-thirds of their waking lives in cubicles or conference rooms or burnt-coffee break-rooms slogging through tables of senseless symbols while their drudge coworkers droned mindless about minutia and their bosses barked in the background, all colored comatose by green-tinged fluorescents, sedated by the recirculated air-conditioned swish of ozone circuits and copy-toner cartridges and industrial carpet polymers and the residual backwash of their coworkers' farts and body odor and soap dispenser pink slime and a two-enchilada lunch special. Nobody wrote fiction about how most employed adults spent most of their time, white-collared by the corporation, head-counted in the office, why was that. Because nobody would read it, in denial of the life they lived, unwilling to compound their own despair, unless excitement and adventure

transfigured the story, big-tits affairs consummated in the broom closet, holiday parties celebrating drunken brawls, assaults and gunplay involving organized crime or secret agents or drug cartels, corporate conspiracy alien epidemic mind control, any fantasy about corporate life that let the readers escape the desolation of their life in the corporation. Well, Lem made a drug buy, Peter feared the conspiracy, legal action loomed, but not much sex so far, and this meeting mired in the slough of somebody's accelerated life cycle failure rate analysis. Plenty of people wrote and read about the torment of employment in the university, the dull knives of departmental revenge, dust motes of drifting academic ennui, intolerable colleagues' constipated conversations, is that because so many writers taught college for their day job, while far fewer, approaching zero, company minions inclined to write, or off-hour writers served a commercial servitude, even poet Stevens never wrote insurance nor Eliot borrowed from banking. Lem would dread to read his own life, he should call and small-talk Pat, she straddled both shores of the swamp of un/written and un/read writing-program/business boredom, entice her with his interest in literature over lunch.

Lem closed his eyes for a moment. Across the table, Pat leaned forward on her elbows, and her fingertips looped her hair behind her ears with a few pale strands escaping out like ear-locks, revealing huge ears, pointed, feral. Her pink, no purplish, lips mouthed soundless words, yellow teeth, canines sharp beyond the canted incisors, a gleam of spittle. No fur or whiskers, rounder cheeks, granny glasses, Suzi scowling, now what had Lem done. Brow domed, nose buttoned up, dainty, blue eyes wide, open oval mouthing NO, Annie told him not to. Woman wife girl turned away and stood up seen behind a man's bandaged hand, two fingers immensely mickey-moused in a white-wrapped splint, pressed splayed on the soundproof Plexiglas partition, the worn milky scratch-coat fogging the she-boy silhouette as she walked away. No.

"We have great gratitude that Mister Lem came to our lab to assist the successful bringing up." Vikram pulled Lem's attention back to the table.

"Yeah," said Laurent. "We fixed a bug in the amplifier control."

"That reminds me," Lem broke in, "with this rev, the sensor noise is so much better that we might be able to run the headset outside the booth. That'd be a huge milestone. You just have to rewrite the cancellation routines for the new characteristics."

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves here,” Greg said. “We’ll keep Lem’s idea in mind, but we have to stay on schedule with the component testing, okay?” The engineers nodded, or shifted weight, or turned over a pen to examine its obverse, sensing the possibility of an ending. “All right, that’s good for today. Thanks for sitting in, Lem.”

Everybody fled casually to their cubes or the lab or a restroom or lunch. Frank had way back explained to Greg his management philosophy regarding Lem’s role in Cortez, You know, a little bit of Lem goes a long way, where Greg learned to keep him. Back at his desk Lem found a voice message left in his absence.

“William, this is Doctor Drebin. I hope you didn’t tell anyone about our source of research material. It appears that the facility has been compromised. This is quite inconvenient for our work, as you might imagine. You ought to be advised that the parties involved may wish to speak with you.”

What’s this Drebin beating around the MXD, the lab, the chemist and his goon, did they get arrested, or ripped off? Did they blame Lem? Maybe he should have no further contact with Drebin, at least until this settles down. Maybe he should cancel the afternoon’s visit to Alec’s studio. But then that would seem suspicious, Lem had told no one anything, he should go ahead as if nothing happened. No reason to flush the MXD, just stash it somewhere discrete. Pop a panel of the lab’s raised floor while everybody’s off at lunch, a section near the front wall where no cables undertwined, no one could claim it was Lem’s. On the way downstairs to secrete the bottle under the floor, Lem detoured into the Men’s room to snort a tiny taste off his knifepoint, not to run the headset, but only to brighten the burden of a field trip with Dave, because Frank had said to run Alec by Dave. The drug turned the lab sweet quiet cool, vents and fans lullabying the humming power supplies behind the festive winking multicolor indicator lights, a silent night solstice shopping streetscape greeting card. Lem located the loop-handled six-inch suction cup, big and black as a chunk of Kraken tentacle, and levered the vacuum arm to fasten the disc onto the two-by-two laminate panel one down from the entry door, tilted up the near edge, and with his free hand squirreled the drug container down below safe against the steel supporting strut on the cold concrete.

Dave insisted on driving them to the east side, as at ease and oblivious in the leather eight-way adjustable driver’s seat of his towering land yacht as in his recliner in his den at

home. He educated Lem about the needed curriculum improvements in Dave's children's prep school, the inadequacies of the current administration's position on the far east, the merits of the cold cuts at the deli in Westover, and six or seven other topics Lem fended off with Uh huh, Guess so, and Don't know, while Lem watched the unselfconscious landscape of late industrial capitalism roll by outside the window.

Auto mall, luxury condos now leasing, urgent care surgical center, megastore parking lot, savings bank and trust, ragged ululating siren approaching the pain threshold, Dave slowed and steered toward the right, continued talking, strobing ambulance with red-gold lettering on white-chrome roared past straddling the center line. Riding supine under blotchy bird-shot ceiling tile alternating with cloudy cross-cut light panel, weep weep wobble on a wheel or an oarlock behind below his left ear, Stay with me now Mr Narkis, white jacket white shirt glossy badge swinging hunched as quick as Quasimodo, bloody belfry rung deaf with each press of crossed disposable purple palms on his chest. The crosscurrent of white-clad wraiths surrounded both sides of Charon's floe, rocking on a gentle ripple, leaving no wake, how many pale pallbearers, stainless slow-motion rowers, so cold here below nine-tenths of an iceberg frozen white as brine and Lem can't breathe. Wait.

"And here we are," Dave said. He steered onto the driveway apron of an off-yellow windowless warehouse building, stopped halfway over the sidewalk, beyond the galvanized rollup door, Loading Zone No Parking, and triple clunked the console Neutral Reverse Park. Lem shivered with a hidden adder's hiss of the open driver's door early afternoon annealing inflow. Well ahead, Dave pressed the buzzer by the electric blue building door, bold gold-lettered Semplar Sanctum. Inside, a low-ceilinged long hallway ignored triple pairs of closed opposing veneered doors, and via the terminal seventh, opened aside by their silent responder, a barefoot jeans open-shirted bearded young guy, into a full-court workroom, soaring to a wood-trussed cylindrical vault of age-stained decking, with suspended gymnasium-light half-spheres hanging every twenty feet along the crossbeams like illumed cocoons. Large canvases in various states of paint lined the periphery, with worktables and a lithographic press gridded in the middle. A dozen workers, young, of varied or indeterminate gender, attended to the artworks in progress.

"William. How fortunate you attained our Sanctum. And you must be the David he promised. You know, David was a great Semplar." Alec Atman, cerise dashiki, skull-tight skin, knife-point eyes, advanced to the center of the room, beaming, palms upturned, fingers slightly curled, as if gravitating them toward him.

"Wow," Dave said. "This is fantastic."

"Indeed. These are the new images I received with the aid of your Cortez computer. Come." Alec led them toward the paintings propped against the wall.

"Eluce. It's Eluce," Dave said.

"Ah, very perceptive. The blessed rest in the Elysium." Alec extended his hand toward the third painting. "Are you an adept?"

"Oh, no talent at all, except for marketing." Dave chuckled. "But this is great. Like an art factory. Your people do all these?"

A young man, ponytail and spattered coveralls, stepped aside from the painting, a female figure formed of fireworks and molten mercury, when Alec took the brush from his hand and applied a long silver stroke. "I paint each one myself." He returned brush to the assistant without looking at him, and softly Gregorian'd further admonishments, "Breathe with the flow of light. Breathe with the spirit of life."

"Amazing. We can take this to a whole new level. The new mind machine of the creative class. No, the genius machine. What would DaVinci do with Eluce. A whole new demographic." Dave bounced on his toes like a giddy trick-or-treater.

"That's what I've been telling you," said Lem. "Cortez is all about creativity."

"I know, I know, but Alec here is a real artist," Dave said.

"You have appeared here," Alec said, "to learn about your role in the Semplar Syzygy. Thousands will gather to celebrate the annual alignment of the eight levels of Love, and to dance for a cycle of Sun to the ethereal reverberations of the Astral Nots."

"This is some kind of concert?" asked Lem.

"An immersive sensory and spiritual journey," Alec said. "We generate a fecund womb of light and sound around the embryonic adherents in our arena."

"And these are real astronauts? Like the Apollo guys?" asked Dave.

"Apollo and Dionysius, centaurs and satyrs, Astral Nots synthesize the sound of restraint and abandon, reason and insanity, insight and intoxication. Their music is

exquisite, inspired, ineffable. Our aural visualizations, however, have remained mired in time, contrived and constrained by the media you see around you, paint and ink, paper and cloth, photographed and projected, they cannot arise in an eternal instant as the Spirit enters the self and the souls commune. This is why your computer is crucial, to project the visions which possess the artists as they perform. You see, language is prophecy, the spiritual medium must channel the visual medium."

"You're saying you want the band to wear our headset at this dance?" asked Lem. "Like a light show?"

"That's a great concept. We can record the whole thing and go global. Absolutely. Cortez is on board." Dave nodded so violently he jello'd his strawberry cheeks.

"Can there be any question that our paths are destined for synergy in the Semplar Syzygy?" Alec smiled, head tilted, arms open, an elementary teacher indicating a one-plus-one-is-two chalkboard tautology.

"Boy, I don't know." Lem, hands in pockets, weight on his heels, looked up at the shadowed trusses carrying the weight of the roof out to the plates, compressed, and tensed by the spread of the walls, the cross-tie chord triangulated against the coming collapse. "We've never run it outside the lab. Or even outside the booth. And doing the training runs on all these people. Huge datasets. I don't even know if we can move the servers to run in that kind of environment."

"Hey, come on. You can pull this off. Just tell the engineers it's a party, a night out clubbing. They'll love it. I can bring Frank and Greg around, no problem." Dave two-potatoed two thumbs up.

"Of course," said Alec. "When the One beckons us, nothing is impossible."

Lem shrugged. "I guess."

Chapter 13 Barbeque

A catenary arch of pink green blue balloons undulated above the side-yard gate on the packed pebble path off Frank's circular drive, indicating the entry to the afternoon party. Frank's wife Sarah preferred an outside route, rather than all the Cortez underlings and spouses let alone children traipsing through her marble-floored foyer and antique-lined hallway on through the sitting room out the French doors and into the rear grounds.

Annie held Lem's hand, walking with high deliberate steps to avoid getting any grit inside her yellow jelly sandals. Her mother Suzi followed a pace behind, shouldering the tote bag with Annie's towel, goggles, sunscreen, a peanut butter sandwich and carrot sticks in case Annie didn't like the food here, and a change of clothes for after she went in the pool, if she decided to. Lem and Suzi decided to be civil to each other and go to the barbeque as a family for their daughter's sake. "Is this the boss house, Daddy?" asked Annie.

"Yes, it is. Frank and Sarah's house. You remember them, when we came here at Christmastime?" Lem meant the holiday party, almost two years ago now, right after they got first-round funding and started the ramp up, with only Lem and Peter on board back then.

"No." Annie stopped to look up through the balloon semi-rainbow, tied-off ovoids filtering turquoise magenta cerulean almond-shapes against the bleached-blue beach-ball sky, then continued through the propped-wide redwood-plank gate. Across the thick fescue mat, umbrella'd wrought-iron tables with wicker café chairs phalanxed the pool-side patio, with a sideless six-pole tent covering the bar and buffet on the right, and Frank's new bocce ball court on the left. On the pavers behind the pool a clean-cut trio, bass, keyboard, soprano sax, played Misty for someone, not loud enough to bother anybody. The linen suits and summer dresses Lem didn't recognize clustered in the shade near the bar, Greg and the Cortez crew sidelined and teamed the court, Sarah and Greg's wife Terry, like stilt-legged pastel-frocked twin egrets, discussed the rose trees ringing the patio, and a woman with child sat back-on at one of the tables.

"Annie!" The child burst across the grass, and her mother stood and turned, Mary and Tara, Peter's family.

"Hi, Tara." Annie let go of Lem's hand, the girls eye-to-eyed, decided that they had remained friends since their last parting, and exchanged secrets or made plans below adult hearing range. Lem and Suzi joined Mary at the table.

"Where's Peter?" Lem hadn't seen him at work in a few days.

"Oh, he's still under the weather. I told him just rest up, we'll be fine on our own." Mary fiddled with the ribbon bow at the neckline of her red organza blouse. "Isn't this place lovely. And what a glorious day."

"Are you feeling all right, Mary?" Suzi asked. Mary arched her eyebrows and pushed up her lower lip to bottle up an answer. The girls warp-woofed between the table column/rows in an arm-swung forced march.

"I'm going to go get a beer. You guys want anything?" Lem stood back up.

"We'll go in a minute," said Suzi. Lem started toward the serving pavilion. "Don't drink too much, okay?"

Lem's head inclined to one side, straightened, as he walked. "It's just a beer," maybe not loud enough to hear. Under the canopy, Frank punctuated his point with a flat-palm chop in the air toward three other men holding mixed drinks, clear, amber, bloody, and barren hors d'oeuvres toothpicks and/or canapé napkins, so Lem didn't interrupt. The barkeep popped him a napkin-wrapped amber ale. Gudrun, statuesque in a teal sleeveless dress, maybe on the clock, clarified dish placement to two white-jacket catering staff. The chrome-covered entrée trays and salad bowls and breadstick vase arrangements concealed no hickory smoker or charcoal cooker or grill, but the Mansfield's had branded this event a barbeque nonetheless, probably poached salmon and miniature meatballs. Simmering summer seaweed compost cesspool grease-trap hollowed-out the hole in Lem's gut, with a teaspoon melon-balling the ache behind his eyes, maybe because the damn headset broke his brain, probably better once analgezed by a few beers.

When Lem turned back toward the tables, he saw Mary and Suzi leaning in, the latter's hand cupped over the former's fingers curled around the bentwood arm, in confidence, their girls in their own conference at another table, so he walked his beer over to look at the pool. Sterling cyan, bull-nose pink glazed edge, blinding sunlight reflections from the splash-dash boys playing Marco Polo, maybe Greg's kid. Lem's beer halfway warm already, he killed another third. Problem with the MXD supply secure below the lab floor,

on a Saturday he slept in and caught up around home with bills and bullshit, before coaxing the wife and kid to the barbecue, they don't have to stay long, other kids and fun for Annie, was that he now stood flat foot poolside without the little lift, the edge off, he'd grown to like from the drug.

"That Frank sure knows how to live." Dave, with Janet and their sulking offspring, bellied up to Lem's side. After brief mutterings with his mother, the son, mohawked, in black jeans and leather jacket despite the heat, retreated to scowl at his work-boots from a chair at the edge table umbrella shade. Must be the prep school problem.

"Oh, hey Dave," said Lem, and registered none of what Dave or Janet said until they excused to check out the buffet offerings, but thanks no he didn't need anything quite yet, not to mention another beer for which he didn't want to drag Dave and his worse half back over here. Hard to paint a swimming pool, not the plaster parge, but a picture on canvas, even Hockney looked better than he looked up close, the Impressionists predated this chlorine sheen, you'd think a little cobalt blue, titanium white, the caustics curving like calligraphic brushstrokes, bright strokes on a ground of aquamarine, shaded not by shadows but by the cleavages lensed between the concentrated sunbeams, but remained inert, dead pigment, never liquid light like this. A wave way too high to jump over, a striated wall topped by a falling cornice of whipped froth, flipped him over like a bug on his back when he dove beneath it, thrashed him like a flag, as if blue-green pincers crimped his shoulders and flip-snapped his legs in the underchurn, pounded the breath out of his chest like the hand-heels of a merman deathguard. When he broke the surface, his first desperate gulp of air sucked in some side-mouth brine, so he gagged and flailed to stay afloat enough to see the second, they always come in threes, sky-full wave collapsing over his head, dispatched down to kiss the sand, limbs whipped again by the backflow, a bladderwrack ragdoll bouncing on the abrading bottom, eyelids clinched against the ocean's ungloved speedwork, no breath left, about to open up and swallow the sea, no.

"Your hair grow back yet?" Ouch, something yanked abrupt a collar-length strand of hair attached above behind Lem's right ear, near the edge of where he had his head shaved for the first headset tests, a pain between pinch and poke, many-pronged like the smallpox thistle of pinprick needles which a stern nurse swabs and sticks at the end of a grade-school sleeve-rolled hallway line-up.

He swung around, fight or flight, neither, Pat, her face upturned, beaming, bright as the sun bearing down. Lem laughed. "Hey! That was hard."

"Sorry." Pat prolonged the first syllable, eyelashed him from under her blond brow, lips compressed to widen her cheeks like a defiant child caught crayoning the wall. "Your family here?"

"There's Annie. The bigger one." Lem pointed at the two girls fairy dancing, arms arced overhead, between the tables behind them. "Brian here too?"

"Oh, she's so cute. Uh, no, he's out on the coast. One of his consulting clients."

"Champagne?" A white-blouse black-miniskirt, sneakers, cyclist's faceted calves, sun-wrinkled server, head taller than Pat, one-handed a rimmed tray of narrow flutes, half-full of pale golden pink. They each took a glass, Lem replaced his with his empty beer bottle, drained the champagne, took another one if the woman didn't mind.

"Ohhhh." The bocce court bemoaned a near miss or an opponent's knockout.

"This is Suzi, my wife. And Mary, you remember Peter? That's her Tara with Annie," Lem said. "Pat Steele." Lem and Pat parted at the approach of the two women, with Nice to's and I've heard's and the almost end-of-fingers squeezes which replace handshakes or hugs or cheek brushes between women who don't know each other and don't care to.

"We're going to the buffet," said Suzi, calibrating Lem's stemware fluid level. "You'll keep an eye on the girls?" Lem nodded to the hips of Mary and Suzi, mismatched mantis strident and beetle wobble, snaking single-file out through the seating area.

"She seems very nice, your wife." Pat said what one says.

"Hey, don't run by the pool!" Lem called to Annie, bigger and older enough to tease an easy five steps ahead of Tara's giggling gambol, tag or chase or cooties across the terrazzo. He turned back to Pat, thin lavender cotton shirt, cream culottes above the knee, her hair tied back, tiny pink-tinged ears, the golden hoarfrost of faint hairs escaping the pony tail at her neck, a sheen of sweat there on the knob of her spine.

"Kids. I never" Lem said, but when he heard the two part sound, the high-pitched cymbal slam impact, then the low gulp-like slap of parted water swallowing and smacking its lips, kahh blump, he knew. A boy at the far end took his friends cupped-hand splash full in the face when he turned toward the sound, sputtered. Annie stopped, stared back at the water, freeze tag, one two three red light, mother may I, stiff, arms slack at her sides. Lem

held the champagne stem delicately between thumb and middle fingertip when his sandal soles broke the surface, but the glass left his hand, not much left anyway, as he tunneled straight down into the deep end. Hated to open his eyes underwater, especially swimming pool chemicals hated to, he opened his eyes. About a foot above the sloping aqua cement, ripples of light and shadow from the sun-tossed surface playing over her complacent face, eyes wide, two tiny air bubbles glinting like spit at the corner of her closed neutral lips, arms and legs floating free and loose as the kelp-frond dark tresses about her head, hovered Tara. With his hands hooked under her armpits, he swung his legs underneath into a squat, thrust his feet against the bottom, and like a SeaWorld trained orca launched the girl up through the surface, surged back, and bobbed with her at the edge of the pool. Pat, kneeling on the edge, overlapped his hands under the girl's arms and pulled her up, out, and sat her onto the deck.

Tara coughed, blinked, looked around, up into Pat's eyes, and said, "I fell in the pool." Pat put her arms around the child, pulled her into her lap, against her chest, rocked back, smoothed the wet hair from her forehead. Lem kicked upward, elbowed his palms onto the rounded coping, launched out of the water, and swung around to sit streaming on the hot wet travertine beside them, still submerged to the ankles, one sandal signaling from the bottom beside the jellyfish-invisible glass.

The bocce courted emptied, the buffet and bar cleared, the surge of people encircled, Mary running point. "What happened? Are you okay?" She bent and lifted Tara from Pat's arms, hugged her tight to her chest. Suzi wrapped Annie's clown-fish beach towel over both their shoulders and tucked it in between blouse now wine wet dark and bare drying child's thighs. Pat leaned back with her hands behind her to look up at the three, her saturated shirt-front now nearly transparent, she declined undergarments, the fabric soaked pink and tented on the twin nipple-tip smudges, dark orbs topping the demi-domed nudge of her breasts, then enfolded slack to the smooth fairing of her belly, hunched up off-white skirt-shorts wet-stained toward tan about the waistband and crotch and thighs, burning into Lem's eyes brighter than the pool glare.

"Jesus, Lem," Frank said. "I never saw you move so fast." Other people murmured lucky and wasn't that and never know and too careful and how did.

Greg cupped his hand over his eyes downcast at the poolside and waved his son over from the shallow end. "Kyle! Dive down there and get that sandal!"

"I think there's a glass down there too." Lem brought his legs around and stood, held a hand out on which Pat latched to pull herself up. Most people milled toward where Mary'd gone to sit with Tara in her lap and educate the child on how scared to have been, Annie sticking close to overhear, Suzi standing guard, arms crossed at her chest, everybody else, nothing to do there, turned back toward the pool, nothing to see, drifted back to bocce and bar, conversations overcoming the lull, then a laugh. The musicians never lost a riff. Dave and Janet's punk hadn't unslouched from his far chair, but smiled to himself at the she-could-have-drowned diversion.

"I'll get you a towel. Some dry clothes," Sarah said. She and Terry needed to reward the heroes.

"No need, I'll dry up in a minute here in the sun," Lem said. "Pat?"

"Thanks, I'm fine." Pat took a fold of her shirt tucked in at the waist in two hands and pulled it out taut, shook it a little, opaque now stretched away from her skin, the contours of her body only in Lem's memory. That vision under the ocean, that was a daytrip to the shore after high school, he stumbled out hands and knees onto the sand after the third wave, never told his buddies and their girlfriends that he almost drowned, and then this kid falling in the pool, coincidence, no image arose from the water, too rippled to see his reflection, like Pat's quick-dry cotton pulled out too tight to see anything at all.

"Wow," Pat said when they were left alone. "I didn't even see her. How did you do that?"

"No idea. I guess once you have kids, you're kind of on autopilot," Lem said. "I mean, I didn't even think, until you were pulling her out of the pool. Thanks for doing that."

"You kidding? Of course." Pat noticed the considerable absence of others on three sides of them, a wet sandal and a glass set at the edge of the pool, an empty sky. The easy-listening trio wandered around in Stardust, but haunted nobody's reverie. "Well, I'm going to go mingle."

"Yeah, I should check on Annie. So maybe I'll catch you later."

Pat held Lem's eyes for longer than 'So long', mouthed only the catch and hum of the consonants in 'Call me', walked away along the edge of the pool, hardly a sliver in the sun,

half lost behind a group with plates gathering to sit around the first table, then intermittent weaving between figures reforming the buffet line, then gone.

Mary needed to get Tara home, check on Peter, and soon after that, Suzi wanted to get going, the sun still simmering above the green crown of beech and maple at the back of the property, so Lem thanked Sarah and Frank and they went back to their van, walking single file beside cars parked on both sides of the curbless curving street. People here preferred the country lane look for their two acre treed lots, no sidewalks, narrow unmarked cul-de-sacs, craftsman Spanish-revival Tudor-wattle cottages blown up to eight thousand square feet, walled and gated against one another, as if all the feudal nobles fled to the suburbs and sent the serfs away.

Lem, still damp, spread Annie's beach towel on the driver's seat before he sat, and tossed his sopping wallet on the dashboard eyebrow above the instrumentation. "Money laundering, I guess," he said. Suzi didn't say anything. Annie climbed into her car seat and buckled her own harness.

Magnolia Lane curved into Juniper Drive, which turned at Chestnut Ave, limestone wall with wrought iron gate succeeded paving stone wall with wooden gate followed by clinker brick wall with steel fan gate. "Nice neighborhood," Lem said. Suzi stared straight ahead. Annie turned a page of her wild pony rescue book.

"Boy, that was pretty lucky. See honey," Lem craned his head toward the second seat, where Annie sat strapped in the middle, so she could see out the windshield between the front headrests, which seemed to help with her carsickness, "that's why you shouldn't run by the pool."

"I didn't fall in," Annie said.

"You were supposed to be watching them." Suzi violated her silence.

"Jeez, I was watching. How do think I jumped into get her?"

"I know what you were doing. I saw how you looked at her. At that stupid dinner I saw. I knew she'd be the one."

"Who?"

"That Pat Steele."

"What? She's just this woman I work with. I don't even work with her. I just know her from this other company."

"I want you out of the house. Now. Tonight. I'm not going to have you carrying on behind my back. Christ, right in front of my face."

"Come on, Suzi. Not now. Not in front of Annie."

"You think she doesn't know? You think you can hide this from her? Take me home and get out of my house."

"No! I don't want Daddy to go," Annie said.

"Shhh. It's okay honey. Mommy's here," said Suzi.

Lem drove without saying anything. He pulled the front visor down to cut off half the sky, though the sun was falling behind them, frosting the dusty back window in the rearview behind Annie's solemn twin tear tracks, the left high on her cheek, the right one building momentum on the down slope toward her jaw before it spent itself dry. Or maybe in the mirror, the other way around.

"I hope to hell you fall in love with somebody that doesn't love you," Suzi said, soft as a prayer. "Then you'll see."

Chapter 14 Hike

The blade of white light between the ochre/russet fiberglass damask drapes where the edges gapped because the metal hooks in the slide channel stuck alerted Lem that he woke way too early in the Jolly Roger Motor Court's room 114. Buying a bottle of gin and two bottles of tonic after a solitary burger-fries at the counter, filling the snap-top ice bucket from the thundering stainless hulk beside the coke machine behind the office after he checked in, and detuning the poor reception of worse television programming into a tolerable distraction by repeated drink rounds, proved misguided in the morning. He took a shower, left the armful of clothes he had stuffed into a wheely-bag before he left the house un-unpacked on the single stiff chair, picked up a coffee at a drive-through, and drove to work.

Cortez Inc waited reverent and empty on Sunday morning when Lem detoured on his way upstairs into the lab for a quick snort of MXD to hide his hangover from the excess of alcohol that hid his headache from the drug in the days before, hard to tell if the crystals forming a silver half moon in the angled bottle bottom meant more than half gone, and if so, did he dare contact the chemist for more. In his cubicle, he brought up the noise cancellation routines. If Greg wouldn't assign somebody to reconfigure the profiles, the task fell to Lem, in order for Alec's performers to wear the headsets at the, was it Synergy, concert. Unless the Cortez guys hauled the shielding booths over from the lab, and the musicians sat inside them on stage, which sounded ridiculous, although maybe consistent with some astral visionary deprivation meditation chamber music, who knew. The curve approximations Lem used last time made no sense, with the noise samples scattered all over the spectrum, and looking like, well, noise, he'd have to ask Nikhil on Monday what was going on, or maybe he was too tired today, or this was hopeless.

The distant hiss and vibration of the building's respiratory system, and the gray partitions and mottled carpet and speckled suspended ceiling blued through the midmorning window blinds, transformed his second home, or first, as much time as he spent here, or only, discounting the cheap motel, into a pained desperate mortuary silence, but after the casket's interred, wreaths wilted in the dumpster, mourners back at to their

ordinary undertakings, the vermillion pile vacuumed, dead empty. The window blind reflection on his screen re-unfocused on the underlying data display like that inside outside cube illusion, Lem could start to implement his image shape search idea, or rerun Peter's headset session from the other night and maybe find out what spooked him, but both endeavors appeared as pointless this morning as the noise compensation fix. So, what the hell, he called Pat, he was thinking of talking a walk if she, really, okay, the Hamilton County Park parking lot on route 4, say half an hour.

When Lem pulled into the lot, Pat already leaned against her trunk lid, hands in her cargo-shorts pockets, yellow ribbed tank top, hair pinned up off her neck, round sunglasses big as bush-baby eyes. They followed the wide graveled path through the sloping picnic grove of charcoal-grill potato-salad coleslaw weekend extended families, down to the shallows of the creek where the kids mucked and sailed stick boats past pint-sized rock-pile dams, across the plank bridge, and up the dirt path along the cut where the woods thickened. Pat strode effortless ahead, her scuffed hiking boots finding better purchase than Lem's worn sneakers. His breathing thickened as the grade increased, should have kept himself in better shape, he focused on the xylophone of her spine, the lurch of loose khaki as her hips twisted toward the next footfall, the shadowed hollow between the twin tendons behind her knee. The trees thinned at the top of the rise. The hustle and hiss of the over-stone spills eased as the creek caught up with the climb and chortled between its pebbles and pools.

"This was such a good idea, to get out," Pat said as Lem came up alongside her on the flat.

"Yeah, pretty up here." Lem exhaled the remark and inhaled slowly, hoping to sound as hardly winded as she.

"I'd probably sit home and read all day. That's what I usually do on the weekend when Brian's away."

"Hmm." A few more steps and Lem would recover the breath to talk. Or he'd sweat out the rest of last night's gin. Any lingering levity from the MXD fell down the hill behind him.

"It's so cool that you can make the time to go for a hike. So many people seem to do nothing but work anymore. When Brian's not working or traveling, he has some faculty

reception, or a dinner, which he never wants me to go to anyway. And then he's always too tired to go anywhere." They followed the meander of the stream, closer around a clump of trunks, then farther from the bank to skirt a tumble of boulders. Up ahead the rise of the next ridge broke gray-brown through the crown of the glade. Pat continued, "What's your family up to today? That Annie's a delight. You're so lucky to have her."

"Oh." Lem could talk again but couldn't. "Actually. I don't know how to say this. Suzi and I decided to separate. I moved out."

"What?" Pat stopped and turned toward him. "I'm so sorry. That must be just awful for you."

"Well, it's been a long time coming. Irreconcilable differences, I think they call it." Lem looked over across the creek, some kind of finch maybe, yellow, in the holly, or was it myrtle, shiny green.

"Wow. So where are you staying?"

"You not going to believe this either. Some dive motel. The Jolly Roger. Until I find an apartment somewhere." Lem found only his stretched reflection in her dark round lenses, but the corner her thin pink lips turned up slightly, but not a smirk, maybe sympathy. He gestured toward the path. "Let's walk."

The incline increased incrementally, and the stream splattered between rocks in hurried rivulets. A tumble of boulders bounded the much steeper climb up the ridge, but through a cleft, a small waterfall fell pulsating into a large pool, a few feet deep, sunlight through the trees spotting the sand and leaves on the bottom, and dappling the surrounding ring of jumbled rocks, water-worn light gray and fading to green-brown moss at the water line.

"It's hot," said Lem. "Let's go in." He pulled his polo shirt over his head, more pale and flabby around the waist and chest than he'd prefer to be cast in this scene, but committed nonetheless, and sat to untie his sneakers.

Pat laughed. "What, you didn't get wet enough when you jumped in the pool at Frank's house?"

"Come on, it'll be fun." Lem pulled off his socks and stuffed them in his shoes, stood, unbuttoned his shorts, and together with his briefs, on hop-foot stepped out of one leg, then the other. He climbed over a flat rock and stepped into the pool, tight-roping his arms to

catch his balance on the uneven bottom, water up to his knees, and turned back toward Pat. She watched unabashed, bent to undo her boots and socks, dropped her shorts, crossed her arms at her waist, and pulled the yellow top up and over her head. She dropped the shirt onto her shorts and shoes, and stood, arms slightly away from her sides, feet apart, the soft-edged linked blobs of light warbling over her shoulders as the breeze trembled the canopy, her breasts barely creased below at her ribs, the triune constellation of dark nipples and shadowed navel pointing to the pink creased triangle of her bikini cotton panties.

“That’s it?” said Lem.

“That’s all for now. My grandmother told me, a girl’s got to keep a few secrets.” She took Lem’s hand, had their skin touched before, her hair in the lab, his hair at the barbecue, the frantic unfelt handoff of the child, to steady her step up on the rock and then into the water, rising halfway up her thighs, not as cool as its uphill aquifer and not as warm as the afternoon early-autumn air, she trembled. Lem crouched and pushed off in a surface swoosh, arms sweeping to his sides, the pool too short and shallow to swim, more of an oversized bathtub than a swimming hole. He rolled onto his back and floated while Pat followed his lead, their intricate overlapping ripples releasing a musty fertile scent, the faint decay of bottom rot, dissolved minerals, invisible fish or frogs, new life about to sprout and flourish and fail, the dry hillside’s wet ripe orifice in the earth.

They lay on their backs, arms out, not touching, not talking, their ears submerged and sealed with the irregular warble of the in-fall and out-flow, the buoyant adjustments of their limbs, their heartbeats, the rasp of breath. An island chain mapped from Pat’s chin-up face, eyes closed, to breasts like breaking shoals then the round belly dimpled headland and pubic reef with farther flung subsurface coral knees while she arched her back and stroked below to keep her archipelago afloat, landmarks on which Lem took quick bearings before sighting overhead. He touched his toes down on the leafy muck to fake-float with his own pelvis well submerged, certain that the cold bath would shrivel his privates smaller than he’d want her to see, if that mattered, tiny as she was, but still, better not assessed by the eye of open sky. As the trees conspire for anyone who lies among them, their spires converged to trace a pivot point of blue, webbed by their woven branches like a rose window of yellow green, ultramarine, and wood-lead seams, or a spider’s web that spanned the round horizon thick with blue-green dewdrops, or the

hexagonal flickering fragmentation of an ocular migraine in which nothing can be discerned in the dazzle camouflage, with the polygonal shrapnel swirling into the vortex of a waterspout vacuuming Lem upward and out, no.

A slosh backwashed and revived Lem from his reverie when Pat rolled, touched bottom, and found her footing to step up on the stone surround and down onto dry ground. She bent up a knee, her back to Lem, and freed her underwear from one foot and the other, then at arms length folded and wrung out the pink twist with a splurge of droplets onto the dirt. The hollow below her hipbone squared the abrupt pale cheeks faintly rough and reddened at the creased arms of the shadow cross radiating from the concave diamond diadem gap bright with the forest light between her inner thighs, with a bowed gold-downed diffuse fleshy diamond echo crowning the base of her spine above the unsun'd compressed cleaved orbs. Her thighs much thicker, maybe why she climbed with such a strong easy stride, muscle mass, or firm fat, wider than her hips, maybe why she wore baggy shorts, loose skirts, to mask that one body part that betrays. Lem near-soundlessly swirled and swiveled onto his knees to gaze as Pat bent from the waist three-quarter-on, skin taut across her ribs, and snagged her clothes from the ground, flesh folding into three hillocks at the waistline chasm bisecting her belly and the cleft beneath gravity's apex of brown-knobbed breast, how would children change her body, she said she wanted children, ripen her torso like fruit follows flower, would she nurse, he had read that size mattered little to milk flow, anyway he needed no more suckling heirs. She stepped into the shorts, stuffed the wet panties in the side flap pocket, worked the tight top stuck to her damp skin down along her sides by pulling outward alternating around the hem, straightened the shoulder straps, then pulled the pins from her hair and shook the strands loose to resoak her back.

"That felt great," Pat said. She tied her shoes, attendant to the lace loops for as long as it took Lem to emerge and dress. Then their hand took the other's hand and swung in step back down the flat path, palms dry, bodies cool to the welcome heat rising from the vale, the underbrush refreshed, the undersides of silver leaves clarified, the toothy bark sharp, as their clothed nakedness dried. At the crest, where the trail narrowed for its switchback descent, Lem pulled her to a stop, turned toward her, braced his leading shoe-

sole a half-step downhill, bent and aligned his lips with hers, converged, her unglassed eyes greener than gray in the clearing, but she turned her cheek before contact.

"I can't kiss you, silly. I'm living with somebody." She freed her hand, stepped away, smiled wide, and marched broad-gaited down the hill, knocking pebbles loose to scumble after her for one or two steps until they gave up the chase. Lem followed. Once back in the middle of the parking lot, neutral to their opposing cars, they faced a yard apart, their shadows stretched longer than they stood tall, pointing back through the picnickers whence they came.

"So, you want to go get something to eat?" Lem said.

"No. I mean yes, but I can't. Brian's flying in, I have to pick him up," Pat said. Their shadows moved no closer together, to shake hands, or hug, or blow a kiss, but Pat lifted her hand at her side and fluttered her fingers in fare thee well, or a parting benediction. "See you." They took to their cars.

After a roadside salad bar dinner stop, he'd have more time to exercise now, eat sensibly, without the family obligations, shape up, was she attracted to this sad sack, that foiled stupid schoolboy stolen kiss, Lem drove around till dusk, work held no appeal, and then headed for the motel. A late model sedan, European by the oval ribbed grill, or Asian, they all bore those hungry mouths anymore, appeared in the mirror, disappeared behind a panel van, reappeared, keeping pace. He accelerated through the last of a yellow, lost him, but saw him again a block behind at the next red. He assured himself that this was only as crazy as usual until he bumped up the apron into the Jolly Roger, diagonal'd in front of his unit, and watched the driver's door of the pursuit car open dead center of the parking lot in his rearview, what the hell.

Lem swung out of his car and walked back toward the approaching other driver, shit, the Igor guy from the chemist. They stopped three feet apart beside Lem's rear bumper.

"What do you want?" Lem said. In the open air a better look at the guy looked no better than before, Neanderthal jaw, lumpy nose redirected left over overripe lips, the same mirror shades, and as articulate as in their last encounter. Then the cameraman went into slow-motion, Lem freeze-framed, the goon's weight shifted back on his right leg as his left boot-heel lifted, his left hand drifted upward while his right shoulder sank, and then the left

arm and leg descended as a squared-off knuckle pendulum swung beside his right side right into Lem's stomach, above the navel, below the bowtie of the ribcage, and to what felt like as deep as his spine. Lem didn't lose his salad, but his lungs emptied, and an orange-white ingot expanded to fill his gut from sphincter to throat with liquid nickel, spinning like tectonic geology as he doubled over the molten core.

The guy clamped Lem's upper arm in his grip and hobbled him around the front of the dark car to the passenger side, whose window whummed down at their approach. Already genuflected to the level of the occupant, Lem's bowed eyebrows blurred the as expected amphibian crippled cooker of MXD, buckled in without the wheelchair, probably kept one folded in the trunk.

"You must learn not to talk so much." The chemist's froggy-went-a-courting gray felt fedora nodded in time with his cement-mixer syllables.

"I. Uh." With no air in his chest and the fire in his belly, bent-over Lem unwillingly imitated the chemist's growl. "Didn't. Tell."

The window whinnied up while the big guy flicked Lem to the side like a spent cigarette. Lem leaned against a far fender, one hand Napoleon'd in his placket, until the car reversed into the street, ignored the horn of an on-comer, and accelerated beyond the dull see-through No and the neon orange Vacancy in the front office side wall window.

Until he could stand up to stumble out for ice, turn on the television, and mix and drink a suite of gin and tonics, Lem lay inert on the maid-service stiff and crinkly plaid bedspread and watched the light leak out of the popcorn ceiling. Then he propped up on the pillows and changed channels while the alcohol anesthetized enough of the ache to decide to get in shape with karate or kick boxing. Or the pistol range. Sucker punch, how Houdini died. And he the guy handcuffed and shackled in a chest locked in chains anchored at the bottom of a diving tank, not the shallow shadowed pool cupped at the base of the cliff, with her soft buoyish body white as a blind cave fish floating beside him, in an induced deep-space coma for the light-years passage to a twin-sun system where their own private planet bloomed and they'd name all the animals for nine hundred years until their children's children would record their begats in the book Pat wrote.

Three raps on the door, red 1:24 on the bolted-down clock radio, TV talk show guests laughing at their blow-dried late-night host, feet swung to the floor, palms pushed

up off the mattress, that hurt, why would those MXD guys come back. But through the spy-hole, a fun-house face, bulging gerbil eyes tapering away to munchkin legs, it was Pat.

"Are you okay? How did. What's" Lem undid the security chain, pulled aside the door to let Pat enter and turn to face him, baggy jeans, untucked muslin shirt, shoulder bag, hair askance, red eyes and raw around the nose.

"I'm sorry. I don't want to bother you. It's late. I just"

"No, please." Lem stuffed the zipper flap over the mound of clothes and put his suitcase on the floor in front of the buzzing ventilation wall unit, turned the chair toward her. "Here, sit down. Sorry it's such a mess."

She sat on the edge of the seat, he took the end of the bed, their knees a foot apart, their posture perfect. She looked at her hands, curled up comatose in her lap.

"I. I didn't mean anything. I told Brian we went for a walk. That you were separated. He went crazy. He's so jealous. We had this huge argument. Yelling and screaming. I didn't know where to go. I couldn't stay there. He's" Pat sniffled, lifted her hand to pinch her nose, raised her head.

"Of course. Anything you need. This isn't much." Lem glanced toward the bed, rumpled, two pillows punched against the dirt-gold padded headboard, yellow shaded feeble nightstand lamp, his empty glass and diminished bottles and half bucket of metallic melt, the drape-drawn window, the mumbling television flicker, the worn russet wall-to-wall, the snap-frame floral arrangement reproduction. He powered down the TV. "There's only the one bed. I"

"It's okay. I don't take up very much room." She tensed her cheeks enough to lift the corner of her lips for a heartbeat, then went slack.

"Sure. If it's all right with you, I'm really tired." Lem leaned forward to push up on his knees, winced, pressed his palms against his stomach, straightened slowly.

"Are you okay?" Pat asked.

"Yeah, fine. Something I ate must have hit me wrong." He straightened the pillows and pulled down the spread. While she went into the bathroom with her overnight bag to undress and wash and brush, he stripped to his underwear and got into bed, aligned so near the far edge so that he had to lift his outer elbow atop his ribs for a resting place. She slipped under the sheet on the other side, his eyelash filter allowing him her white

nightshirt, the laundered-limp cotton sheet slung between their shoulders and hips like a veil of cloud above the cool and darkling plain that kept them apart, still as the dead, awaiting occasional roadway headlight sweeps across the ceiling, soon asleep.

The muted rumble of the shower woke Lem lying on his side, upper knee up, arm flung across the now empty but still warm opposite side of the bed, could he have crowded her like that in sleep, sheez, second night separated and already he slept with another woman, sort of. He rolled onto his back to make room in the bed, in case, but the bathroom door uncatched and creaked inward, the vanity bulbs above the mirror gave up the ghosts of escaping vapor, and Pat trod across the floor to the outside door, black skirt, white blouse, blond hair slicked back and wetted to brunette.

“Got to run, I’ve got a meeting.” She unchained the clasp, quarter-turned the deadbolt tab, depressed the handle, and over her shoulder winked. “Call me.”

He pushed up on his elbows, sheet slipping from his chest, sharp stab in his abdomen, “Hey Pat,” but she was gone.

Chapter 15 Interview

"Morning Gudrun." Lem stopped at the admin's station, a few minutes late.

"Your nine o'clock interview is waiting in your office," she said, a melodic contralto that made Lem want to follow instructions, Caution Moving Sidewalk.

"Sure." Lem leaned his forearms on the counter that formed the outer wall of her cubicle and lowered his voice. "Hey, could you do me a huge favor? Find me an apartment, here on the west side, maybe toward campus, two-bedroom, furnished, something cheap, but, you know, not too seedy. Quiet."

Gudrun looked up from her screen, expressionless, except maybe her big ice-blue eyes less than the usual nine-tenths underwater. "Of course. I'll get you a list of options by noon."

"Thanks." Lem walked over to his cube. Gudrun was so great. Maybe she could take over his life. Whoa, the occupant of his spare chair was a chick. A young woman. Dark blue dress, compelling décolletage, heels, hose, who wore stockings this time of year, long brown hair loose, square jaw, pretty, the crew will peg the potentiometer when she works here, lonely engineers in love.

"Hi," Lem picked up the resume from his chair, sat, read the name, "Kathryn."

"Kathy, please." She smiled, leaned forward. "You're the founder, William?"

"Co-," said Lem. "And it's Lem." He scanned the usual degree, the requisite internships, memberships, the entry-level job, the associate engineer job, interests wow rock climbing, she's twenty-eight, looks younger. He asked the typical questions about her bullet points, she gave the expected answers. Lem hated posing those solve-this-on-the-board interview problems, and besides, the guys will vote her in unanimous at first sight. "So, what can I tell you about Cortez."

"Well." Kathy pressed her fingertips in a diamond shape above her lap. "Would I be working for you?"

"Oh, no. Greg. I think you see him next. I don't manage anyone." Except for Peter. Where was Peter, still out sick, with what? He needed to tell Gudrun to put him on medical leave, before Frank fired him. Or Peter went off on Frank. He said he'd defend himself,

talked about his guns. All black, boots to balaclava, tote bag of taped clips, steady as a wedding recession, grainy as security footage, clearing the corridor, ball-peen on aluminum soup-pan click-chink ejection of each ear-cup wham-crack cartridge, two three rounds through the sidewall of every cubicle, fiber blowout carpet-rip concrete ricochet, somebody whimpers, curled-up cowering under the work surface with cable-plug candy-wrapper pencil-stub, hoof kick in his ribs whip-snapped Lem's torso, spatter pattern. No, she was talking.

"the name Cortez? I thought he was a genocidal oppressor."

"Ha, Frank would, Frank's the CEO, he'd like that," Lem said. "Annihilate the competition. But no, it's a play on cortex, the outer layer of the brain, and like core technology. And the Keats poem, 'like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes / He stared at the Pacific – and all his men / Looked at each other with a wild surmise – / Silent, upon a peak in Darien.' Wild surmise, I love that."

"Oh. Kay." Kathy prolonged the syllables. "So, I don't know a lot about the Eluce. Can you tell me how the reconstruction works?"

Lem tensed, which hurt like a fist in his stomach, what it was, as it sunk in that Dave's ridiculous product name had stuck, and went into his customary high-level summary of Cortez technology without any meaningful details in case she was here only to gather information for some other company, or would wind up working for a competitor, you never knew. "So," he wrapped up, "how about you? Where do you see yourself in ten years?"

"I want to be like you. I want to start a company?" Kathy played the blink-first game, she was very good, eyes warm brown, liquid, serious. "So, how do I get to be as smart as you?"

Lem broke her gaze, laughed. "I don't know. Go to art school, I guess." He stood, didn't want to make her late for Greg, thanked her for coming in, she thanked him for taking the time, they shook hands, good grip, her palm warm and moist, more nervous than she let on, she trailed him to Greg's, the introductions, done.

Dave, beaming like a tent revival conversion, blocked Lem on the way back to his cubical. "Good. To. Go." He reached up and squeezed Lem's shoulder. "Frank and Greg are

on board. I told you. We set up Saturday morning, run the show overnight, tear down Sunday, should be back up and running here by Monday morning."

Lem blanked.

"The Simpler Synergy?" Dave said. "This is going to put the Cortez brand up in lights. I've already got Psychometrics working on the 'Elucination' campaign."

Right, Alec's dance concert, but that was not the right name, how could they possibly move all that equipment and get it working again in an uncontrolled environment, with the noise, and what the hell was elucination, let them try to sell the visions and headaches and nausea that side-effected Lem. Plus the stomachache.

"You're more than welcome to join us for the event of course. And I'll come get you around three, after I give the Hi-Q reporter an interview."

Dave slinkied one chunky foot to the other down the aisle, like a chubby Hans Brinker skating off to breach another dike. A voice message blinked on Lem's desk.

"Hi, Lem? This is Mary? I hate to bother you, I know you're really busy. But they're keeping Peter over for some more tests, in Grant Hospital? If there's any way you could stop by and see him, I know it would really mean a lot. Thanks. Hope you're doing okay. Bye."

Doing okay? Of course by now Mary had heard Suzi's version of the separation, spreading like contagion, with Lem the fecal vector. But Peter, when would Lem have time, he hated visiting hospitals, hospitals were like schools where they taught your body how to be wrong in the ways they wanted to treat, your prison cell until you signed the confession of dying disease debilitation death, and your body emulated the example of the other patients, the general population, people at their worst, at the indifference of the machines, devices strapped and stuck in and on careless and casual, the whole place a disinfected fluorescent buzzing killing machine, and the doctors and nurses and orderlies turned into machines by dissociating and disconnecting from dealing with people at their worst. All night lights and alarms and hourly probes, the wretched roommate retching to the always-on television confrontation show-down, bloating and baited food-surrogates that poisoned any organ not already sick, the curved channel cutting the ceiling tile to whisk around the meat-hook shroud and keep out or in nothing, that would be against medical advice Mister Narkis, the regimen we recommend, consider that next time you may swallow your tongue.

“Talk to you a minute?” Frank, grey-suited up for battle today, yellow tie, sat down in Lem’s spare chair, leaned forward with forearms on knees like an offensive lineman. “I’m going to be out of the office for a few days. Greg’s in charge, okay?”

“Sure,” Lem said. “Where you going?”

“We’re putting together the terms and conditions for the merger.” Frank protruded his lips as if an invisible index finger arose up to shush them. “But you have to keep this absolutely secret. We need to wrap up the agreement this week so they can report the combined results for the quarter.”

“Do we like, vote on this?”

“All taken care of. Remember about the Preferred voting rights? You guys are the Class B Common. So the Board handles this kind of thing.” Frank nodded with the flat smile that accompanies a negative biopsy report. “Oh, the other thing. I called in a favor from an editor at Hi-Q. They’re sending over a guy this afternoon to do a feature on us. Should help pump the stock after we announce the deal. So make us look good.”

“Yeah, Dave told me,” Lem said to Frank disappearing past the cube wall corner. Lem picked up his phone, a pinball flipped against these spinner people, ringing and flashing shluh-klung against this bumper then that and bouncing off the target and back, when what he needed to do was roll down the out lane and call Pat. “You have reached the voicemail of Pat Steele at Solaris Corporation. I am currently away from my desk,” but Lem chose not to leave a message after the tone.

“Excuse me, Lem, sir.” Nikhil diminished the doorway like a blue-oxford button-down beardless munchkin approaching the emerald city, gelled pompadour replacing pointed hat. “Greg told me that you might have the new noise corrections for the sensor?”

“Right.” Of course, now that Dave pushed the concert venue, Greg preempted somebody to prepare to run the headset outside the booth, after Lem let slide the project on Sunday, with the hike and its aftermath well worth the delay. Well mostly well worth, not the gut punch. “I’ll get something to you this afternoon.” After Nikhil hit the bricks Lem scrolled through the profiles, which fortunately made more sense today, shifted the knot vectors, applied the basis functions, and sent off the file.

“Quick interrupt?” Gudrun buttressed the desk-side, narrow-belted beige slacks flaring out about her pediment waist and pillar thighs at Lem’s slouched eye level. “Here’s

three possibilities. The first one might be the most relevant, since it's month-to-month. The other two have one year leases, though the second one offers a first-month-free."

Lem took the paper she held toward him and looked up at the noncombatant smile of a nightingale in the trenches, seen it all quiet on the home front, unstated, depend on Gudrun. "Thanks." He could run over there during lunch, a one month commitment sounded prudent for a somewhat single man, already checked out of the Gelid Ranger this morning because in case he needed a nicer place to entertain. He tried Pat again, nothing.

When Lem returned from the River Oaks Apartments, no river, no oaks, a vacant upstairs apartment which he secured, white walls, beige carpet, sitcom-set furniture, photo-grain cabinetry, patio door to foot-wide balcony with northeast view of parking lot to bushy berm to four-lane boulevard, Dave waved him into the conference room, where he and Greg sat across from must be the reporter.

After the introductions, Clint, his name turned out, or maybe Klimt, sideburns, Clark Kent glasses, linen sport coat sleeves pushed up over buttoned-up silk union shirt, stood and slung over his shoulder a web-strapped matt-black camera whose lens dwarfed its back. "I think I've got everything I need here. What we want now are some candid shots of the team, you know, the dynamics, the testosterone?"

Dave nodded, Greg rocked back on his chair, Lem dead-panned, Clint continued. "You've got a hoop on the side of the building? I saw coming in? Let's go down and play a little ball, get some action going, okay?"

"Sounds good," Greg said. He led the others downstairs and out into the afternoon, the side parking lot asphalt searing their shoe-soles like newly congealed lava, with Lem trailing behind like the playground kid left last in red rover come over. Greg picked up the basketball left baking against the building, dribbled out to what would be the three-point line if the white stripes weren't parking spaces, and fell away from a jump shot that caromed off the rim. The ball landed to the side of Dave, who batted it down with a straight-arm slap, and lurched to snatch the ball on the bounce like a roast turkey falling off its serving platter. He spread his feet and swung the ball back between his legs and up in the prehistoric foul-shot fashion. The rebound off the building wall petered out past motionless Lem and made its escape across the tar until Greg ran over and secured it.

"I'm not seeing anything here, guys," said Clint, holding his camera idle at chest height. "Come on. A little one-on-one?"

Greg dribbled in toward Dave, who raised his arms like a pretend airplane. Lem's legs carried the heat upward like a magma channel building pressure under a steaming cone of ash. Across the desert plain the wavering lakes waited, and Lem noticed that the visions behind his eyes appeared so often anymore he hardly noticed, like a mirage on the horizon, a reflection from the incident angle of the sun, a bellyache from when he drank brackish water from the bottom of a wadi, nearly a week without food, walking out under the stars after the crash landing and tripping over the scattered wrack and rubble on the flats, seeking shade during the midday furnace, when the buzzards gyred on the thermals until one orange-black beak banked into a glide and gained velocity straight toward.

The pass Greg side-armed to bypass Dave's feigned defensive grab bulleted through Lem's extended hands as his arms floated up in the syrupy air almost in time to clamp the ball between his palms, but only quick enough to feel the pebbly grain and slow the speed to less than a slam, to a thickening thump against his gut, a gentler inflated replay of yesterday's undercut. He dropped the ball, and sunk to clutch his hands over a bowl full of jelly.

"You okay?" Greg said. Lem straightened enough to turn away and hunch around the corner of the building holding a howl below his diaphragm near his snuffled breath and good sportsmanship, through the lobby air-conditioned 'Everything okay Mister Narkis' receptionist Julie, past the lab, and back to the ill-illumed storage bay where he could exhale alone leaning against the locker and review the play-by-play shame and pain.

Chapter 16 Visit

"I'm heading out, Gudrun." Lem passed her cubicle in the early afternoon without waiting for a reply. Unusual for him to dodge work at that hour, but he calculated that if he went to visit Peter in the hospital, then that excused him heading home, that is, to Suzi's house, to pack up the rest of his clothes and papers before Annie came home from her afternoon program and while Suzi might be elsewhere occupied. Plus Frank, out of the office, wouldn't snarl about his commitment to Cortez.

Down the ramp at the red-striped entry-bar arm Lem pushed the green button to tell the time-stamp machine to whirl out a ticket, did the information desk or nursing station upstairs validate it, or did he need to buy something from the hospital, an eighty dollar aspirin, a cafeteria open-face roast beef, to park free in the underground garage, the underworld, driving down the descending seven-level helix of hell, lost beneath surgical and pharmaceutical salvation's superstructure, did the morgue molder at the bottom, or did the dead rise up. Brain imaging usually hid, like the Id, deep down in the basement, with magnets the size of a one-man submarine, hardly the cap-sized Cortez Bug. The elevator resurrected him into a glass-walled lobby secured by a rent-a-guard armed against the terror of the entrants, so if he shot Lem, no shortage of life savers nearby, or would a bystander need to call for an ambulance to stretcher him out the automatic doors and siren him around the block to the Emergency Entrance in back. Unlike a school or factory or office or hotel, nobody checked him out or in, apparently no one who didn't have to enter here ever would, so Lem proceeded into the corridor without registration, identification, or authorization to visit Peter's room, admitting nothing.

The hall terminated in a large hub-like area penetrated by an octagonal nurses station in the center, with spokes of other hallways radiating replicated perspective doorways until, in the distance, another hub hovered, or maybe each hallway arm ended in a mirrored wall which reflected its hub of origin, but that meant Lem must have walked in through a looking glass. He bore left. Gurneys and crash carts and food service tray racks and cleaning stations with a red ninja-star or insect-mandible biohazard blazing their waste bins broke the repetition of buffed Marmoleum floor tiles and speckled suspended

ceiling panels and solid core doors with number plaques abutting their jambs, but not Peter's number. Every surface emitted enough fluorescence to eliminate all shadows, leaving only a grayer green tinge on the undersides of wheeled chassis and on the wattles of aging overweight nurses. The flexible rubber baseboard, ready for the caress of the overnight mop's trailing tresses, bent around the corner where the hallway forked and opened onto another variant of itself, the air no temperature, becalmed wax ammonia chlorine urine and ozone. In every double room twin minotaurs recovered or relapsed, casts and cables, gauze wrapped, sitting pillow-propped and gowned, sipping, spitting into pans, hooked up to monitor wires and transparent tubes, rolled over into blanket mounds, or vacant in between occupant morbidity. A kerchief'd crone hunched in the visiting vulture chair, cracking a bone, sucking out the marrow, greasy fat fingers, no, Lem had little reason to wear the headset lately, and had eased off the MXD, because, or despite, of that the visions increased, ran continuous like a TV left on in his living room brain, an all-afternoon bad alien-abduction B-movie. The flaring flying-saucer white light overhead, the bruising tetrahedral breathing mask below, and above the blue paper masks only the eyes of Doctor Drebin, Doctor Atman, Doctor Mansfield, Doctor Steele, with needles knives clamps restraints probes electrodes, headset strapped on the back of his head, peel aside the bloody scalp, then the bone saw, crowbar off the rear of his braincase unscrewed like the War of the Worlds hatch-cover before the cortical gray-green slime creature spilled out of the cranium like disturbed worms with wires coiled around his spread-eagled genitals and pinned-wide eyes.

"Can I help you?"

Lem transfixed in the indistinguishable passage. "Uh. Room 3413 I think."

"Oh, you're in the wrong wing. You want the Eastman wing. Go back out to the main corridor and turn left." The not unpretty young woman, her pink-striped smock signifying an absence of the indifference or hostility required of regular hospital personnel, smiled and pointed back the way Lem may or may not have come.

When he found 3413, Peter sat up in a plastic-upholstered armchair beside the cover-strewn bed device, wings and wheels down and tray table up for take-off, in front of the laminate cabinet with pink plastic water pitcher and tissue box, an IV lead taped and

needed into the back of his hand with the short tube red-capped off as if he needed nothing else. He had the semi-private to himself.

“Hey, man. How are you doing?” Lem screeched the metal chair over from the corner of the room and sat at the end of the bed, facing Peter. Double reversed mottled-teal hospital gowns, string ties trailing, bunched about his waist, bare hairless legs, knees wide apart, inward twisted ankles turned up slipper-sock foot-soles with grey smudged bottoms, fuzz of scraggly black hair shadowing his shriveled dried-apricot genitals, hairless forearms resting on the armrests, hands hanging like wet laundry from his wrists.

“Irradiated my brain. Hallucinated the motor cortex. Peripheral paralysis. Not Guillain-Barre. They lie.”

“Wow. So what are they going to do?” asked Lem. Peter shrank into the chair like a deflating swim float, but at the same time swelled to overflow the back and sides, plump pink tinged blotches of brown grey like a decomposing sausage-man whose face dissolved featureless under waterfalls of milky green soffit light filling and distending his drooling purple lower lip, but then again, what sort of distorted Lem did this blobby man Peter see without his glasses, eyes fuzzy and fish-like, the lid-folds fluffy and half-closed. Lem should have rerun Peter’s last session in the headset, maybe the images explained this, or indicated a worse prognosis.

“Needle in the spine. Inject the brainstem. You drugged me. The headset Bug. You told them.”

“No, you must have caught something, an infection. I’m sure there’s a good treatment. You’ll be okay.” Lem read the patient monitor readout on the wall above Peter’s head, error code, system off, alert, inert, green iridescent houseflies in a mason jar humming the monotone drone of Peter’s words, speaking for his collapsing lungs and bound vocal cords, was this contagious, Lem can’t stay or they’ll infect him into another room in this limbo and begin his own terminal treatment.

“You. Leave me alone.” Peter’s distal left fingers twitched upward, fell back, not quite paralyzed, in dismissal, dismal.

“Look, I squared everything at work. Take as much time as you need.” Lem anticipated his weight forward onto his feet.

“Leave me.”

Lem stood. "Yeah, well, I should get going anyway. But let me know if you need anything, okay?" Peter didn't look up as Lem left to navigate the labyrinth across and down and out.

No van in the driveway meant Suzi must be out, that was good, Lem pulled off on the side slope onto the pine needles, near a couple barren azaleas, the place already looked like somebody else's house. Bubbles and bare spots on the fascia paint, rust at the seams of the gutters he neglected to clean, chalky efflorescence on the brick skirting, and the green-treated deck boards blackening on their undersides where Lem never framed the promised porch. He sat in the car as the engine ticked, keys in his hand pointing vaguely dash-ward, and defocused his gaze at the busted out house windows where the black char ate through the top rail and scorched the casing and blistered the siding, every orifice surmounted by a burnt kohl crown, and the smashed torched sofa tossed onto the lawn, trailing its intestines, with shelves and tables and chairs strewn like kindling when the firemen doused the three-alarm. No, abandoned, sheets of knot-free splintery strand-board nailed over the windows, but half-torn off the kicked-in front door where juveniles and junkies crashed and trashed and tagged the walls with desperate pornografitti, beer cans, crack pipes, the brass fittings smashed out of the porcelain fixtures, the copper stripped out of the sheetrock, plaster punched and crumbled like marzipan sheet-cake icing. No, an eager wrought-iron knocker on the red-painted six-panel side-light entry door, ruffled white curtains still tied back at the dining window, home sweet.

A sheath of grocery bags stuffed on the shelf in the utility room had to serve for suitcases, because Lem disclaimed custody of the luggage in the attic. A dresser drawer per bag made three, two for the shirts off their hangers, three for the stationary and supplies in the desk, best leave the bills receipts tax-returns car-titles homeowners appliance-manuals until someone assigned responsibility, bags half full to not tear off the handle loops and spill out on the steps. With nostalgia only for what hadn't happened, Lem claimed no collections of signed baseballs or fluted sea shells or family photographs, ended up eight bags full, yes sir no sir, one standard weekly suburban supermarket shopping spree, 'May I help you to your car sir'. Dismembered body parts seeped through the seams of the rolled-up wrapping paper parcels, white stickered bone-in rump roast 4.3 pounds, and soaked

through the paper bag bottoms dissolved on the floor like wilted wet autumn leaves with the sawn-up pieces of Lem, or was that Suzi.

“Lem? Is that you?”

At Suzi’s voice, Lem hesitated affront the closet in the spare bedroom, with two pairs of bags of clothes angled out from the four glued strip-handles gathered in each hand. “I’m getting some of my stuff.”

She stood in the doorway, a plaid high-waisted peasant dress loose about her hips, barefoot. He put the bags down on the floor. “Just some clothes for now,” he said. “I got a furnished apartment. Temporarily. ” Tell her he wasn’t a loser stuck in some cheap motel. Or remain silent, anything he said could be used against him. But what if Pat went to find him at the Roger, he had never connected, ought to leave her a message. The closing motel door sucked in the morning glare from across the bed, the blazing white wedge bisecting the sheet covering the underwear he slept in that night shrank to a sliver then a slit then nothing in the rumpled gray, while the purple afterimage slash searched the empty room.

Suzi walked over to the guest bed, Lem’s bed, and swept her dress forward underneath her as she sat down, drew her legs up on the coverlet, she had changed the sheets and made the bed, underneath her, cross-legged, knees tenting the hem. “So I guess this is it, huh?” She folded her hands in her lap. “You need to come to the lawyer’s Friday at eleven so we can sign the Separation Agreement. If that’s okay.”

Lem nodded. “Where’s Annie?”

“Carpool. She carools from SunnyDay with Sharon and Betsy. Of course, you wouldn’t know that. With your work and everything.”

Lem nodded again, he did know about Annie’s SunnyDay afterschool program, because he wrote them a check once a month, but the carpool, no. He went and sat on the bed next to Suzi, the cross-tied grid of spring wires, a cheap trundle from the discount place, mentioned the extra weight. She untensed and leaned against him when he raised his arm around her shoulders, unclasped her hand and rested it on his thigh, he tightened his grip around her upper arm, pressed his chin onto her hair, his other arm downcast. Her citrus essence shampoo, the scent of unscented deodorant contesting fermented sweat, with the faint fertile female metallic tinge underneath, a trace of sour kaolin lurking in the lifelines of her palms and under her nails, the lunch remnant garlic and chocolate, her body

that conformed to his the way that favorite dungarees washed almost white fit again against him. Words like I don't know how, and We don't have to, and I'm so, and We could, escaped solitary confinement like preschool secrets. Lem bent his head sideways brushing her forehead and nose with his cheek and Suzi raised her chin eyes closed both reflexively re-enacting or replaying a long running revival of their dry lips almost grazing the preamble of opening wet and pliant like dewed petals sensing sunrise.

"No." Suzi pushed away, rocked free her legs from beneath her, found the floor with her feet, stood and stepped away. "What am I. What are you doing?"

"I just thought." Lem didn't think anything.

"Are you seeing her? That woman? Are you sleeping with her?"

"No, I."

"Never mind. Just finish taking your things."

The front door creaked, shuddered free of the sill, clangled open, and thudded against the stop. "Mommie! Mommie!" Rapid footfalls timpani'd to a crescendo at the doorway, stopped abrupt.

"Daddy!" said Annie. She bulletted across the room and in between his legs, against his chest, arms around his neck, his chin over her shoulder, his arms around her so far his elbows overlapped.

"Hi Annie." Lem straightened up and looked at her, her eyes like fireflies.

"Did you come home for dinner?" Annie turned to look at her mother. Suzi nodded while moving her head side to side, come what may, this and that, follow the music, or a rear-window car-shelf non-committal bobble.

"Sure, if Mommy wants me too." Lem widened his eyes and sideways'd his lips toward Suzi.

"I'll start dinner then," Suzi said.

"Come on, Daddy. I'll show you what I made in school." Annie took Lem's hand and led him back out to the living room, open over the kitchen island to where Suzi arrayed cutting board, cutlery, and vegetable matter beside the cook-top. On the sofa, Annie pulled from her backpack glossy papers rippled stiff by the contractions of dried poster paint.

"See? This is your new house," Annie said, holding by its two edges in front of her like a shield or a booking photo identification card, a painting with a lower swath of green

supporting a drippy brown rectangle with a drooping red triangle on top alongside a blotchy blue cloud or hole in the sky, and, running into the upper right corner, as big as a house, tumbling angular disjoint pencil-gashed ANNIE.

“Oh,” said Lem. “That’s really nice.”

“Where you’re living is very important to her,” Suzi said. “You should take her for an overnight visit. So she feels connected to you. Like it’s her home too.”

“Oh, can I Daddy? Is there a TV?” Annie shook the paper like a protest rally placard.

“I, uh. Well, I just moved in. It’s not.” Lem rented a two-bedroom for this eventuality, but more for eventually than immediately.

“Go pack your PJ’s and an outfit for tomorrow, honey. I’ll give Daddy some milk and cereal for your breakfast in the morning, and then he can drop you at school,” Suzi said.

“You guys can go after dinner.” Annie flew down the hall to her room, the painting freed to float upward, turning over, swooping low to the rug, a final lift of the leading edge, then flat, with only a few smeared fingerprints on the otherwise blank back side.

Chapter 17 Colloquium

Lem slipped into an aisle seat in the next-to-last row of faux-brass square-tube meeting-room chairs with plum-red padded seats and backs, arrayed facing a wooden dais by the far wall in concentric broken arcs deployed from centipede stacks on wheeled pushcarts parked along the wall, in the Fernwood ballroom of the Claymont Hotel. Did anybody hold balls, the dances, not the testicles, anymore, sure wedding receptions, confirmation/bar-bat mitzvah/(was there a Muslim puberty thing), holiday parties, and professional meetings: salesmen, pyramid marketing, motivational, investment, or in this case academic research, the Vision Sciences Colloquium. How did a colloquium differ from a symposium, more impressive than a seminar, that in turn more formal than a workshop, not a conference, that being bigger and overnight, this more an upscale panel, a half dozen experts and quasi-luminaries known by name to others in their field arrayed before and opining to a scattered audience. Six soft men enjoying a more interesting afternoon than the three-score attendees, with probably an honorarium for their trouble. At least the speakers had chairs instead of the embarrassment of stools, on which the round-shoulder slump-back pose billowed the tie over the gut, heels hooked on the rail, which spread the knees apart, with no harbor to dock the idle hands except to hang like buckshot birds between the legs. Chairs, but no table for water glasses and pitcher, the pretend reference papers, an elbow or fist rest. Flood lights disparaged the phrenology of one bald man, whittled deep the jowls of another, and whitened out the eyes of the three guys with glasses, one of whom Lem recognized as the indirect reason he attended, Brian Podarski, PhD. Not that Lem knew much about the Colloquium tag line, "Computational Hemodynamics in the Occipital Lobe", although he ought to, because blood flow in the posterior cortex correlated with visual precepts, the phenomenon Cortez measured electromagnetically, nor did this group of researchers know or care anything about Lem, an art student turned computer programmer turned entrepreneur rudely intruding on their domain. Frank Mansfield, Lem's boss, however, recipient of an invitation to this event, because conversant with venture capital funding and industry largesse, held huge appeal to these academics, who intended to retain their tenure, while moonlighting to gain grants,

board seats, consulting fees, and license the technology, which they had directed grad students to develop under taxpayer funding, to private companies which would make them, the academics, wealthy, but keep them untainted by tawdry and volatile business careers.

Earlier that morning Lem leaned upon Frank's assistant's countertop while she typed. "Hey Gudrun," he said, "Frank said I could have his invitation to the thing at the Claymont this afternoon. Since he's out and everything."

She reached over to slip an envelop out of a vertical steel desk file, and almost smiled when she offered it to Lem. "I'm sure he would have, had he known."

"Oh, and that apartment you found me worked out great," Lem said. "Just, you know, dealing with some family stuff."

Gudrun nodded. "Let me know if you want me to file your change of address or change of beneficiary."

"Thanks." Lem had not considered any of these changes. Or what changes Suzi's lawyer would offer for his consideration the next day. He drove cross-town to the Claymont. The Colloquium discoursed in deep argot by the time he snuck into a seat.

"you wouldn't see a sigma of more than one point three standard deviations" or something like that said the panelist second from the left, a curly brown almost pubic goatee lisping around the thick-lipped sibilants. Names of Greek letters and statistics terms invariably sedated Lem. Not that he eagerly anticipated Podarski's remarks either, rather he hoped that Pat's position at Solaris and her relationship with the esteemed speaker, were they engaged or even a couple anymore, might conspire to bring her here, since she hadn't responded to the message, or the second message, he finally left after hanging up on her recording a couple, well a half dozen, times, but he didn't see her anywhere. This stale over-miked sparsely-populated ballroom, what a waste of time when he could be working, but working on what, with Frank off somewhere closing on this unexplicated merger, priorities would change. Lem had worked for big companies before, where guys like him and Peter did not dream up a product and build it, instead an entire management chain had to piss on the hydrant first, the architectural review committee, the customer feature requirements survey, the manufacturability cost analysis, the return on net assets before interest and taxes, so the new owners were sure to hit the reset on the headset program. Plus he sucked at big company politics, managing up, overpromising his own proposals and

disparaging other people's projects in order to siphon away enough R&D budget so that when his program faltered and fell far short, nothing else survived in the pipeline, and headquarters had to keep funding Lem. Why strap on the headset again, and increase his intensity of hallucinations and headaches and god knows what happened to Peter, in order to tune the software to improve the performance of a product which the whims of new corporate masters will cancel or redirect or take away from him. As for the patent applications in the works, a merger with Solaris meant Lem's inventions became even less his own property than at Cortez, should he ever want to recycle them in some new venture, better to let his completion of the claims lag. Then what would he do these long afternoons, and mornings, and evenings, without the panicked startup push, Solaris employee number what, 12483, but maybe he'd finagle some new product development on which Pat could run the marketing, sitting across from him in the cafeteria, nearly empty now after their late lunch, golden moats floating in early-afternoon slabs of window-wall sunlight, not daring to reach across the tabletop to touch her tiny hand, airy and pale as a hummingbird momentarily come to perch, warm and weightless with a thousand heartbeats a second, too fine and fleeting to hold.

"capacitance of the Windkessel effect conflicts with wave propagation" said the panel guy on the right with more vehemence than his this-little-piggy cheeks vouched for. Everything depended on how much money Lem's options earned him in the merger, because he negotiated with Frank to give him full vest on change in control in his employment agreement in exchange for the non-compete. In other words, if Cortez got bought, he couldn't work for a competitor for three years, but he could sell all his stock right away. With the money he could do something different, get back in shape, start painting again, maybe go to grad school for the MFA, buy and fix up an old place in the country. Punch some north-facing skylights in the barn's post-and-beam standing-seam roof, he always wanted to work really big, a series of shaped canvases that transformed the painted plane into a walk-through chromatic aberration, no more computer crap. Walk up across the paddock to the wraparound-porch paint-peeling farmhouse for lunch with Pat, on a break from writing her children's book, he could illustrate it, she'd want to have children, a boy and a girl, kids can raise a pig for 4-H, the school bus stopping at the end of the eighth-mile gravel drive, cold sun touching denuded November tree tops, back kitchen

wood stove rough-plank trestle table, hot chocolate and chocolate chip cookies hot from the baking sheet leaving dark brown beauty marks on the green celadon-glazed plate, Hey he took two more than me! Now stop fighting children, Pat wiping her hands on the yellow-check apron pockets.

“break and then we’ll come back to discuss calcium ion concentration in the astrocytes, followed by our audience Q&A,” said the leftmost must be the moderator, the silver-back, a prideful white shock swept straight back to his collar. People rose sporadically, stretched, started conversations, advanced toward the podium, if they elected to commune with the speakers, or retreated to the exit doors and out into the concourse. Lem accompanied the outcasts.

Chrome coffee urns aligned like power-plant cooling towers, how could coffee smell so seductive in the morning but by mid-afternoon bitter and biting, bringing back up sour stomach acid, a plastic spatula burnt in beans forgotten on the stove, or was that his headset nausea, or the lingering gut-punch distress. The java dripped between spring-handle dispensations into sewer-grate plastic catch-basins on frayed white cloths skirting cheap folding tables. Upstream the two plated serving trays of silver-dollar-sized Danish, adhesive sweet cheese, cherry glue, blueberry paste, on perforated doily paper with translucent crescents where the grease bled through, a sweet morning manna food-group expired stiff and hinting wormy after noon. Beyond the shining trinity of regular, decaf, and teabag hot water dispensers stood twin clear cylinders, glinting ice shards with blurry lemon slices like dead tropical fish, flanked by stacks of clear plastic cold as opposed to white paper hot cups, and there was Pat filling a clear vessel at the chill font.

“Hey. I left you a message.” Lem broached the line and came up beside her.

“Oh, hi.” Pat turned, cup in hand, sipped, looked up from under her water-colored lashes, gleam of liquid on the indent of her thin upper lip. “Didn’t expect to see you here.” They stepped away from the tables, out of the queue.

“Yeah, Frank said it might be interesting, he gave me his ticket.” Likely story.

“So. You still sleeping at the Jelly Roller?” Pat grinned, her rosehip tongue tip flicked her wet lip.

“?” Lem stopped speechless at Pat certainly savvy to what she said. A joke, an innuendo. “Uh, no. I got an apartment. At River Oaks? It’s pretty nice. I mean, for the time

being. You should come over sometime. Apartment 216? I could cook you dinner. Any time. Like what are doing after this?" What was Lem doing, running on.

"Tonight?" Pat said. "Gee, I don't know. Brian's supposed to go out to dinner with the people on the panel. So I guess I'm on my own. But maybe we should"

"I know who you are!" Brian Podarski came up fast and stopped short at Lem's side. He was shorter than he looked in photographs or up on stage, beaky, dark, intense, and quivering as if steel landing-deck magnetic boots abruptly damped his forward momentum.

"Oh, hi. I liked your comment on the uh, time-course correction." Lem made conversation, sounded imbecilic if Brian hadn't mentioned that.

"Look, you just leave her alone. You hear me?" Brian began to raise his arm, not a fist, palm up flat as a warning or a shove or his Safety Patrol crossing guard school pose. Lem, never an athlete, a few grade school fistfights, art school aesthete turned desk-chair coder, and still sore about the other night's sucker punch, surprised himself. His right arm mongoosed up from his side, clamped Brian's wrist, hard, thumb meeting index finger in the notch above the opposite arm-bone end-knobs, and pushed Brian's forearm back toward his chest, unbalancing the smaller man enough to for him to fumble a half step backwards.

"Touch me and I'll break you in half." Lem clenched his jaw and hissed through his teeth. The other hand vise-gripped above the opposite kneecap, swung him overhead like a baton-twirler's ragdoll, dropped to one knee as he brought the small of the back straight down on the bone, spine snapped like a dry corncob, tossed the screaming carcass aside, rose to raise the massive ornate championship belt over his head for the ecstatic crowd, no. He released Brian's wrist. Brian dropped his arm, finished his fallback stumble, steadied himself.

"Stop!" Pat said, loud enough for the coffee line to perk up. "You're acting like children!" She turned and strode severely between the serving urn row and its supplicants, who parted for her mid-stream, then down the concourse past the potted ficus. Brian and Lem looked at each other.

"I didn't mean," Brian said.

"Yeah, sorry," Lem said.

"It's just that she's. Volatile. Emotionally unstable?" Doctor Podarski brought together bristly eyebrows, frowned, palms out at his sides, like a doctor without a ready diagnosis. "I know how to take care of her, keep her on track. See, I worry about her."

"Sure," Lem said. "It's okay. We're just friends. From work? That's all."

"Okay. But you'd do everybody a favor if you let it go. Consider yourself warned." Brian didn't wait for a counterproposal, he hurried back toward the ballroom and his place on the podium. Where had Pat gone, no reason for Lem to sit through the second half, guess he pissed off Podarski, so much for Lem's adjunct professor appointment at Triple-U, or the peer reviewed paper published in the Journal of Vision Sciences, right. Might as well pick up some groceries to cook dinner, some wine, in case Pat took him up on the offer.

After Lem reached the end of the risotto porcini recipe, how hard could it be, rice onions broth mushrooms cheese, he hadn't much cooked since college, he fluffed the mixed greens from the zip bag into a bowl to look like salad, broke up the baguette on a plate, the fully furnished apartment supplied generic stainless pans and white glass dinnerware. He set the table. Floral arrangement, candles, and silver tureen over the top but he hadn't those. Music on low volume. The chilled blanc he'd opened for the rice beckoned so he carried the bottle and a glass over to the glass-top coffee table on the beige wall-to-wall before the tan boxy sofa by the Navaho-white wall, with color apparently not furnished by River Oaks. A nice bachelor dinner anyway, another time-killer, gourmet chef, can he cook for one, frequenting the farmers markets for the freshest fennel and glistening apricots, the flat wooden trough-tables filled with drifts of ice chips for thigh-sized sleeping silver fish, bottomless brown eyes open wide, a lipless kiss, the crimson cuts of gills, serrated black razor tails, stacked like concentration-camp cordwood. The big golden bass with its smallmouth smile suspended a foot above the mud and rock beneath the dock, stripes of sun-slits screened between the boards, and swaths of refracted ripples, and the indecipherable curves of cuneiform scribbled pink and black along the scaly flank and fins, he hated to open his eyes underwater, the unbalanced spin-cycle throb of a distant ski-boat slicing the surface, where what was it had slipped from his hand and sank.

Two quick metallic thumps, then a third, queried the room, as if in some undersea cave a sledge bunged a steeping oak barrel, resounding Lem's pseudo-colonial entry-door,

which offered the world a cast brass knocker he had never heard strike before, that girl full of surprises he half expected.

"Hey, I didn't think you'd come." Lem swung wide the door certain without the peephole that Pat stood on the step, still wearing her colloquial white tuxedo blouse buttoned to the neck and violet voile skirt flared below her knees, loose hair tucked behind her ears.

"This is pretty nice." She entered the living area, crossed her arms. "Kind of like an anonymous safe house in a spy thriller where they don't let descriptions bog down the plot."

"Secret agent man, I am." Lem shut the front door, stepped alongside her, and voila'd his palm, elbow pivoting at his waist. "I'd show you around. But you can already see everything, there's the kitchen, the dining nook, two bedrooms and the bath. I got the extra bedroom for when Annie stays over. She already slept over, night before last. And this is the living room of course. Don't mind the awful prints on the wall, it's month-to-month, so I'm can't change the décor. You want to sit down? You want some wine? I have a white open, but I can open a red if you want. Or something else? Or if you're hungry, we can eat." Talking too much, give her a chance to breathe.

"Starved. I didn't get lunch. And the pastries at those things, jeez." Pat went around the island into the kitchen area. "Can I help?"

"No, sit, it's all ready. Here, I'll pour you some wine." Lem retrieved the third-full bottle and his empty glass from the coffee table, brought the serving dishes from the kitchen, another bottle of sauvignon. They ate and drank. Butter and cheese salvaged the risotto, congealed a bit beyond creamy to near spackle, but the wine sliced through, the greens and crusts roughed it up.

"This is pretty good. I'm impressed. Brian can't boil an egg." Pat put her fork down. "Hey, I'm sorry about this afternoon. Running away like that. He's just"

"No big deal," Lem said. "Thanks for coming over, though. This is really nice. My first company." Besides Annie, did your kid count, Lem noticed that Pat had finished eating. "Let's take the wine over to the couch."

"Let me clear, you did all the cooking." Pat stood to stack plates and bowls, her hair falling forward to frame her face, elfin, efficient. A gyroscopic course correction on the

wobble across to the sofa assayed Lem at a higher level than he should have drunk. The onions and garlic too, but they both ate those, that should be okay. Slouching with his head cradled by the back cushion, Lem from that recline counted with no numerals the times that Pat's head disappeared behind the island counter to place a plate in the dishwasher rack, then rise, her sharp shoulder blades flitting the fabric of her blouse like wrens fluttering in a puddle bath as she rinsed the subsequent ware in the sink.

"Just leave the pot to soak, okay." Lem said. Too high heat or seldom stirred encrusted some mix onto the bottom, did that reduce his security deposit, no matter, Pat did the dishes right at home, he preferred his castle not alone, the eighty hour weeks at work as much to escape Suzi's supervision as to make his fortune, when was the last time she browbeat him into the unbroken boredom and verbal battery of a family vacation. Shading his eyes with his hand from the late sun torching the hemlocks behind the lakefront cottage, lifting his head from the rolled towel on the suntan chaise he dragged out onto the dock, he can see Suzi bending and straightening in the kitchen, back turned, where's Annie, there in her two-piece on the thick-needled slope rising from the boulder-bracketed frontage, following Peter up into the tree-line. No oars in the bleached wooden row boat, six inches of dirty sun-warm water sloshing over his lower legs kneeling at the bow, trying to paddle toward shore with his hands alternating sides stroking the thick slick surface with no forward progress, thrashing, splashing, the boat side-slipping, he should jump in and swim, but then the boat, and Annie lost to sight in the underbrush with Peter's white shirt signaling between black tree-trunks.

"You sleeping?" The sofa leather creaked and raspberried like cinched saddle straps when Pat sat and pulled her knees up sideways poking toward him on the seat cushion.

"Just drifting I guess," Lem said. He pushed up and raised his right arm onto the ridge seam of the back cushion, and allowed gravity and friction to fight over its slide down onto her shoulder.

"What's this music? It's pretty cool," Pat said. She pressed off her hands to straighten up and slide her hip against his thigh, and the crook of his elbow nestled her neck like a notched pillow, with his arm levered out off her shoulder so that his fingertips feather-dusted her bare arm.

“They’re called the Astral Knots. I have this artist friend, Alec. He produces these like, psychedelic dance concerts.” The recording thrummed low in the background, the distant boom of a rapid ram battering Kong’s summons drum, pacing the undulating bass-line coming from the Close Encounters mother-ship, summoning an undersea sine-wave oscillation from a pod of electric whales, under ululating orbital sputnik chatter and a crunchy laser-beam ricochet, all singing a so-long supernova dirge. Lem found the synth somehow sound-tracked his visions, so he let it loop.

“Yeah, Dave told me about that. You’re doing the effects, right? Saturday night? He said he’d put me on the guest list.” Pat shifted her knees slightly apart, tautening the stretch of purple skirt. Deep purple the complement of her pale yellow hair opposite across the canonical color solid, with her grey-green irises vectored diametric to her rose-hinted cheek, the four light-points constellating a diamond in Lem’s eye.

“You heard about that?” Lem shifted his weight to rest his free hand on her thigh, the voile gently crinkled like crepe, of course Dave, these marketing people always interconnected. “Maybe I’ll see you there.”

He bent his head toward hers, she lifted her chin, their lips touched parched and tentative, like tumbleweed in the breeze touch-and-going along the scrabble, her open eyes too near to focus on his, he lifted lightly to moisten his lip and settle soft again against hers, parting like a slow-motion plosive plea, as her lashes veiled the light and her eyelids rolled closed. His thumb pressed a pearlescent button midway down her blouse against the slit his index finger found beneath, rolling the recalcitrant orb against the faintly raised stitched gap until it yielded and released, then the next with two finger widths of slack placket free, then the third and a hands-breadth open into which he slipped his hand, fingers slightly curled around the curve of her chest. The nub of nipple rubbed above along his ring finger until it came to rest between the heart and head lines, and the slight resistant swell of breast beneath it pressed against the heel of his palm.

Her lips opened into his and the moist inner-sides melted against one another’s glacial turning tremor and contraction. The pleats of her blouse coaxed the back of his hand as he withdrew from the surface of her skin enough for his parting index pad to first brush the puff of areola and then toggle its winked eye like an au revoir. Lem lowered his hand to seek and surf under the hem of her skirt and swoon along the smooth expanse of her out-

turned inner thigh, his navigation by touch as tenuous as the caress of tented semi-sheer against the tendons tensed on the back of his hand, until the arroyo narrowed into the warm wall of her other limb, a canyon smooth and cool as eon-worn quartz, and he prospected the edge of the cotton seam and stretched it over the back of his finger, quick over the nail and caught at the knuckle. Like a blind mapmaker deciphering a tactile chart of undiscovered territory, his fingertip climbed the crevice where leg creased belly and traced a rise of rough terrain over a pliant hillock abutting the vale, while her hand crept round the back of his head and her fingers spread to cup his skull like tendril spider legs weaving through the thicket of short hair there, and her tongue tip turned up to probe the wet of his inner upper lip against his teeth. At the depth he traced the hidden cleft where a seeping spring slicked his fingerprint drawn up weightless toward the secret source while the flesh that compressed the sides of his hand relaxed and widened as she tensed and rocked forward, humming a noteless song that pressed a harder kiss.

Pat pivoted away, pulling her knees up, covering her face with her hands, discarding Lem's left hand dead on his knee and casting his other arm lifeless behind her. A cutting breath caught the intake in her throat with the ragged moan of an ice-locked loon, her rounded shoulders rose up, held, then fell with a resigned unvoiced sigh.

"I'm sorry." Lem said. "What's the matter?"

Another less audible resonant in-breath, the shallow wave lifting her bent back like flotsam in a sheltered cove, a waning whisper, then she lowered and wrapped her hands to prop her chin. "No. I'm sorry. It's just that. I thought about Brian. How sweet he was. Now all we ever do is argue. How it all turns to resentment and pain. I hate it."

His hand hovered uncertain of its intent, then settled light as a brittle autumn leaf on her shoulder, the bones sharp as the bough from which it fell. "Yeah, I know." He knew nothing.

Pat sat up, swung her feet to the floor, rubbed her face with both palms, pushed back the errant hair from her forehead, and then covered Lem's hand with her own. She tensed her cheeks to pull up the corners of her mouth like a coerced say-cheese snapshot. "I have to go. Figure all this out somehow."

"Can't you." Lem slouched like a half-submerged shoal with his hand curved on his lap like a cockleshell she might snatch from the sand as souvenir.

“No, look. You’re pretty special. It’s just.” She stood and did up her buttons, adjusted her skirt, then bent from the waist, her fingers cupping each ear to hold back her hair or to hear the sea, and kissed Lem on the forehead. “See you.”

With the crump-clink of the front door, the 2:13:47 live concert recording of the Astral Naughts resonated into silence, paused to reset, and started over.

Chapter 18 Blank

The blue-gray cubicles alternated panel and gap as Lem walked down the aisle. Over the plastic-trimmed upper edges, the foreshortened cell grid, like a nuts-and-bolts compartment box, held desktops monitors keyboards phones office equipment files books folders chair-backs sporting a few hairy head tops and all the posters postcards photos mementos with which employees push-pinned their personal pens. Gudrun raised her hand at his approach and pointed a fist-finger gun towards Frank's corner cube. Her hair swept up in a braided bun, cheekbones bladed like a valkyrie with midnight sun skimming the horizon in her eyes, Lem read nothing but redirection in her expression, so he advanced to the doorway of Frank's domain.

Frank faced the window, leaning far back in his swivel chair, polished brogues crossed on the desk edge, left hand applying the phone to his ear, right hand rubbing the back of his neck when he listened, then waving straight over his head to punctuate his words like directing the rescue helicopter where to lower the basket, there's an idea, a gestural phone, show the other party what you mean, with the spittle option for those whose flecks of saliva fly with their fervor. Lem waited.

"Right." "Right." "Okay, delete fourteen and have them initial that." "You too." Frank hung up the phone and swung around toward Lem.

"They'll messenger over the final agreement around two, so I need you here to sign off on that." Frank's light-blue oxford cuffs turned up twice, still crisp from the cleaners, his old-school Windsor loosened a thumbs-breadth at the unbuttoned collar, his cheeks close-scraped flush crimson. Lem nodded.

"And Peter. Where's Peter? He needs to sign too."

"Oh, I thought you knew, he's been out sick."

"Well, can you get him in here? It's not critical, just looks better if all the principals sign."

"I don't know, he's been in the hospital. I'll find out."

"Do that. And then we'll do the general announcement for the all-hands at four. Before the beer bust." Frank returned to the window with his phone drawn and ready.

Lem retreated to his own station, so this Solaris merger went through, what did that mean for his options, find out from whatever he had to sign, before Frank told everybody at the weekly company-wide camaraderie where a few six-packs and dip chips sent the staff out under the legal limit to their weekend which most worked anyway, with bigger news at this beer blast than ever before, might be Frank's second attendance in company history, and now to deal with Peter, before Suzi's separation lawyer torture session, should he call Pat, did she mean she'd figure things out somehow with him, or without him. All these people and events in or out of time, an illusion of correlation let alone causation, no meaning, no plan, no plot, no purpose, his visions imaginations hallucinations like a stoved-in rowboat flooding the bottom of his mind with seeping dream scenes as disjoint as the splintered staves, he'd better bail, no bucket, cupped hands, cold, he can't keep up. Call the hospital and ask about Peter. No, they wouldn't tell him anything. Call Mary.

"Hello?"

"Hi Mary, Lem. Hey, is Peter still in the hospital? We need to"

"Oh, Lem, I'm so glad you called. Have you heard from him? They told me he walked out of the hospital, I don't know where he is, he didn't come home. They said he was agitated, but they had no authority to hold him if he wanted to leave, and the tests came back negative, they said he left against medical advice, I don't know if he's okay. The police say he can't be a missing person for seventy-two hours. You haven't seen him, have you? I don't know what to do."

"No, haven't seen him. I'm sure he's okay. You know Peter, always knows exactly what's best for everybody."

"But what if he's really. I don't know, not functional?"

"He'll be fine. Look, I'll let you know if he shows up. And let me know too, okay?"

"Of course. And Lem?"

"Yes?"

"This thing you guys built, this Bug? It can't hurt anybody, can it?"

"Of course not. It's just a measuring device. Hey, I'm sorry, I really have to run now."

"Okay, but can you go try and find him?"

"Sure. You take care." Lem hung up. Try to find Peter where, other than home and work, he never let on, the shooting range, the strip club, the park bench, the hair salon, the

odd fellows, could be anyplace. Lem had half an hour before setting off to subject himself to what hell scorned Suzi hath, might well rerun Peter's last capture session, maybe find a clue, or at least displace Lem's numerous other nerve-wrenching ruminations for thirty minutes.

The playback appeared black-red blobby with crinkly contours like dried-blood crinoline, then congealed into facial features, still dim, darker smudges of shadowed eyes and nostrils and lips on a lighter ovoid haloed by fanned-out floating hair, a delicate neck and shoulders, thin arms, the torso smoothly cylindrical except for tiny nipple and navel hints, a child, naked, lying asleep on a bed of dead leaves, a forest floor black-red beneath the paler pink-grey skin, wavering like a silent slip-sprocket film, weaving with rippled distortions like agitated water, because the child lay under shallow water on leaf-debris sediment, at the edge of a quiet pond, or in a stream's still pool, hands at her sides, slim hipped, only an indistinct niche at the crotch, a girl, then the surface stilled or the water settled and clarified, showed closed eyes, parted lips, a remnant of chubby toddler cheeks, the round nose-tip and faintly cleft chin from her mother's side. Annie. It was Annie. What was Annie doing in Peter's mind. Was Annie drowned in Peter's mind. At the bottom of a pond in Peter's mind. A pond in the woods. Where in the woods. Where in the woods was Peter's mind. Or was this Lem's mind. He killed the session, the image winked away, his screen his keyboard his desk his cubicle at Cortez, this all not in his mind. But now Peter's Annie remained in his mind.

Lem leaned back in his chair, pressed two fingertips into each eye-socket, hard, saw only the usual red black pink grey foggy fireflies that flew in spirals when he compressed his closed eyes. Annie must be at school, Suzi on her way to the lawyer's, Peter wandering his wilderness, Lem needed to leave.

Clock-wising north on the bypass to the suburban mall-strewn dealership chain-store stoplight office building in which his separation sought official status, Lem left the driving to his autopilot brain, while he wondered where Peter went and how he imagined Annie and why he ran from the lab and who he really was and what the hell was happening, but nobody wrote him an exposé. Visitor parking, there's their, Suzi's van, glass entry lobby, glass-covered black placard grooved for the hidden stems of bold white alphanumeric box-sets selected into clip-on names and numbers, Wilcox, that's the guy, 202, elevator ^

pushbutton lit orange-pink, fire door stairwell two at a time, hallway, door on the right bookmarked luaun mahogany veneer like an unfolded inferno, three blend-jointed Danish chairs with saggy slubbed olive-green padding, paired framed vintage Ringling Brothers posters, toothy tiger, black-lipped clown, no receptionist.

The inner door opened for a bald round man, shirtsleeves and suspenders, to lean out and bare tiny yellow-tinged teeth like a grin. "William Narkis? Please come in."

Lem entered the one-man show. Suzi sat legs crossed, wearing the navy pants suit she kept for graduations and funerals and church weddings, in one of the maroon leather armchairs facing the frigate-sized desk bulwarked by stacks of legal-sized file folders. She acknowledged Lem with a flash of her glasses reflecting the burnished late morning in the windowed wall beside her. Esquire Wilcox manned his high-backed swivel chair behind the desk and stabbed a stubby hand toward the remaining vacant seat. "Please."

Lem sat down. The top folder on the corner pile marred its stiff manila with big black block letters, upside-down to Lem, DIVORCE, perhaps a ten-stack of those. "Annie all right?" Lem whispered aside to Suzi.

"Of course. Why?" She inclined her head looking for a screw loose, something askew.

"So if we can get started," said Wilcox. "Susan here informs me that you decline your own counsel, so if that's the case we can review the separation agreement I've drawn up. Now, I see regarding the child, you wish joint custody, with the mother being the primary caregiver. In those situations"

The usual diplomas and certificates tessellated the wall behind Wilcox, who leaned back with his interleaved fingers satisfied about his belly, looking overhead for something more litigious than Suzi and Lem, but intermixed in the hangings Lem considered a smattering of matted photographs featuring a red-nosed white-faced tiny-porkpie ruffled-polka-dot clown, sitting at a child's hospital bedside, shaking hands with a square-jawed suit, accepting an award plaque, clowning around sullen smiling children, a publicity portfolio head-shot. "What's with the clown?" asked Lem.

"Oh, that's my charity work," Wilcox said. "I'm Torto The Clown. A little thing I do to cheer up sick and needy children. I think we all should give back when we've been so blessed, don't you agree?"

"Right," Lem said. Unbelievable. His wife's divorce lawyer is a clown.

"As I was saying, it's customary for the primary caregiver to retain occupancy of the family home until the offspring reach the age of majority, and then one party can buy out the other's equity, or both parties can divide the net proceeds from the sale of the residence."

"She can have the house," said Lem."

"?" Suzi stared at him.

"Excuse me?" said Wilcox.

"I'm giving her the house."

"Well, you can't legally gift her the property, you need to negotiate a mutually acceptable price."

"Okay. One dollar."

"Do you really mean that?" Suzi said.

"I can certainly incorporate that into the agreement." Wilcox made a notation. "Now, Susan is willing to waive her right to spousal support if you William agree to child support to be paid monthly in this amount." He slid a piece of paper to the edge of the desk, and Lem leaned forward to read the number, was this some organized crime bribe with hidden microphones, an anonymous silent auction, a blasphemy that dare not be spoken.

"Okay," Lem said.

"Annie will appreciate this." Suzi uncrossed her legs, pulled at the pleats of her slacks.

"All right then, those are the main points." Wilcox sat back. "Now regarding the other matter"

"I want half the stock options." Suzi stared straight ahead, hands holding the padded ends of the arms of her chair, like an astronaut's centrifuge.

"But Cortez is just a startup. I don't own anything yet. Options are for employees, to give them an incentive to work for a risky company. You can't have options if you don't work there." Lem checked Suzi, implacable, back to the lawyer, impartial.

"Assets acquired during the course of a marriage are community property, I'm afraid. Susan is entirely correct that she owns one half of William's stock options."

Lem considered his hands in his lap, one, and the other. "Well, I'll have to talk to Frank, to the CEO I mean. And to the lawyers. To see how this works. Legally, I mean."

“That’s about it then.” Wilcox slid two documents stapled into pale-blue fold-up paper covers, each with a blue-ink pen trembling along for the ride, to the edge of the desk, diverging on the way toward the former spouses. “So if you’ll each sign and date both copies in the blank above your printed name.”

On his skullcap forehead, black greasepaint outlined high white arches over each eye like a big round M whose middle leg ended in a bright red golf-ball-sized punctuation point above a stubby white-rimmed black hammock grin slung from ear-to-ear, or maybe the coal-tar nest of a fat red-bellied bird whose gull-wings soared above star-crossed piggy eyes, no, the attorney’s fleshy official smile, his plump hands stretched flat out. Suzi leaned forward to sign on the desktop, so Lem paged the document on his knee, and with third-grade cursive long ago decayed to spastic dribble William T Narkis scrawled and scrawled again.

“Don’t forget you’re taking Annie tomorrow.” Suzi finished signing and sat back. “At nine, so don’t be late.”

Traffic on the south-bound beltway flowed thick and fast, where did everyone drive in the middle of the day, not to or from a last meeting as a married man, though not yet single either, was that formality finalized once the papers were filed, plenty of pain without a fight over the meager marital assets, but half the Cortez options, or soon, Solaris shares, that hurt. Lem preplayed Frank’s dismissive “Told you so, stay married”. A car came up fast on the right, swerved in front of Lem, blinked its brake-lights, punched it past the panel van on the left, and then cut into the fast lane feet away from the wagon next ahead. Idiot. Wait, a dark blue Vexra, is that Peter’s car. Lem accelerated, squeezed between the wagon and the van, a dark-haired driver’s headrest could be Peter, in-state plates, but what was his license number. The Vexra cut right again, to pass a pickup in the left lane, threading traffic like a tail-light-seeking self-guided missile, but Lem’s fully-depreciated clunker, or his sense of self-preservation, couldn’t keep up, and if it was Peter disappeared beyond the cars and trucks ahead, he couldn’t be bringing a gun to the office, but at least Annie sheltered safe at school. Lem drove fully in the present far too fast, wishing to find in the office parking lot around the building back corner Peter’s preferred parking space, white-line bracketed bare macadam, untaken. Or would he park out front if bearing murderous intent.

When Lem turned off Hillsborough onto Pylon, the Cortez front facade pulsed red washed-out to pink by high noon on beige stucco from the flashing fire-truck, two police cruisers, and the paramedic bus jabbered along the front red No Parking Fire Lane curb. No SWAT or satellite-uplink dish-hatted Action News white van with microphone bimbo big-haired to cameraman, so not a workplace shooting. Lem joined the ragged receiving line of fellow employees watching the responders wheel a young woman on a gurney, dark hair, green dress, waist strap, down the walk toward the splayed ambulance doors, with Gudrun rear-guarding the evacuation. The woman fixed on the blank sky, as if willing herself a shield of invisibility, or tele-transport to a time before her present plight.

“What happened?” Lem asked Greg.

Greg stood, arms crossed, feet wide, leaning back enough to lower his chin, as if spectating a soccer match with his son stuck on the bench. “Kathryn, the woman who was interviewing? Had some kind of seizure. We brought her back in today for a second round. She said she really wanted to try the Bug. So couple of the guys went down to the lab with her. Boys will be boys. ”

“They let her run the headset? What happened?”

“I don’t know. Laurent and Vikram said she like fainted, her eyes rolled up, and she starting twitching or something. So they called 9-1-1. The cops are talking to them.”

“Jesus,” Lem said.

Dave came over. “I’m sure it’s not a problem. I mean, they say she’ll be okay. Probably just stress or dehydration. Nothing to do with Eluce. We should be fine to go ahead with the Synergy taping tomorrow night.”

Greg nodded. They all watched the parade of police and firemen and emergency medical technicians button up any residual excitement back inside the routine boredom, and ride off into the paperwork and radio static bounded by the dispatcher’s next summons. Cortez Incorporated withdrew to its air-conditioned lair. Lem poured a coffee to accompany the last half raisin bagel hiding in a break-room paper bag, and alone back in his cube chewed the glutinous crust to a paste. The warming plate under the coffeepot had distilled the morning brew to a black acid bitter enough to etch the dough off his teeth, but too biting for a second sip, so he set the Styrofoam cup on his desk. Gudrun will tidy up this Kathryn incident, maybe he should have her track down Peter too. Lem’s inner visions

made as much sense these days as what the outside told his eyes. He heard the siren blurp goodbye and pumper truck's diesel belch outside. The headlights and searchlights salvaged black-grey tree-trunks and black-green underbrush out of the night that swallowed the shore of the pond, but the throb of the red rooftop flashers contented itself with the sand and stubble running down to the still surface which sucked in any light, red or white. Below, the seeping black-pink glimmer flooded through the blue glass enough to see the cold dead water rising past the armrest and licking the dash, the door-handle floppy and ineffectual as if its door-seam were welded, he swung around thrashing backward like a colicky baby with his legs lifted to kick out the side window, or would the windshield break better, but that at a bad angle, damn soft soles of his sneakers bounced back, one hand on the wheel and one on the headrest for leverage, his head afloat at Annie's belted lap level, Daddy the water, a mineral musty odor of the decay to come, so silent down here a mere six feet under and up to the axles the mud.

"Show time Mister Narkis." Frank passed Lem's cubical entryway and over into his own estate, where a small city of paper stacks gridded the tabletop. From the far side he hefted the top story off one of the blocks and leaned across to lay it in front of where Lem took a seat.

"Should I read this?" Lem asked.

Frank looked at him from under his thick eyebrows like Lem offered to start a Bible study group. "The stuff you need to sign is in the section on top."

Lem turned over the top page. Roman numeral'd blocks of words had broken out of unabridged legal dictionaries in a great escape but shared no sense other than the shackles of their dead sentences. "Did you hear about the girl that fainted?"

"Yeah, no problem. That's not a material fact. We did all the disclosures right here." Frank knocked his curled clamped fingertips on the document stack three times as if testing for a knee-jerk reflex. "Besides, it's all been ratified and filed, Cortez is now a wholly-owned subsidiary of Solaris Corporation. Pending regulatory approval of course, but that's just a formality."

"And how about my options?" Lem found the blank line above his printed legal name on the third page. "Did those turn into Solaris shares?"

“New options. You’ll get a new option award in Solaris, after the Compensation Committee meets. The merger had to cancel the Common because the Preferred had first claim on the proceeds of any sale of assets, and given the kind of shit we were in, there wasn’t much valuation to work with.” Frank crossed his arms at his chest, the cords and muscles in his tan forearms bulging out the black hairs like wind direction vectors.

“But I owned half those options, I was half vested.”

“Look, you didn’t give me much to work with here. No revenue, no orders, no patents. Then the liability on the Unicom lawsuit. And the damn thing you built hardly even works. That’s what their evaluation said, anyway.”

“What? You mean Pat? That’s not true. She loved it.”

“I’m just telling you what they said. This is a great deal, considering. Raptor Capital gets made whole, so you haven’t pissed away your future with the venture community. You get to be a Principle Engineer at twice your salary with options on ten thousand shares in a very successful public company. You win, everybody wins.”

“But you and Ronald and the investors make all this money and I get nothing. You’re screwing me over here.”

“Now wait a minute. You think this is easy? Shopping this deal around? Spending three days in a hotel room with six lawyers haggling over four hundred pages of documents? I did the best I could in a bad situation. This place was out of money and going down fast. I saved your ass, no thanks to you, you could be a little more grateful. Christ.”

“What if I don’t want to sign this?”

“Makes no difference to me. I told you, it’s a done deal. You don’t want the job, you don’t want the options, fine, screw yourself. And you can tell that to Peter too, if he ever bothers to show up.”

Lem uncapped the pen, wrote his name and the date on the blank line, capped the pen, folded back over the leading pages, aligned the paper on the stack, and stood up. He said exactly the nothing there was to say to Frank, and returned to his cubicle. At least now Suzi got a whole half of nothing. The Solaris salary would more than cover child support and the apartment rent. If he could stand to work there. If he could stand the humiliation of showing up as just another loser employee, assigned to somebody else’s project, hey Mister Former CTO, what’s with that startup that failed because your product didn’t work, why

would Pat say that, maybe they said that just to lower the valuation, right, the kind of liars he wanted to work for, but then look at Frank, looking out for Frank, and Peter would never work at Solaris, if he came back in any shape to work anywhere, but would they carry him as an employee on medical leave, whatever was wrong with him, then what about his health insurance, Lem better ask Gudrun to find out.

They assigned him to workstation B14, toward the front, if a windowless cafeteria-sized room with double doors bifurcating each of the four walls defined a front, an empty chair facing a screen, people populating all the other stations, looked like Nikhil in the next row, was that Laurent behind him, hard to tell from the back, with their heads shaved and lumpy, and a golden scarab shell stuck smack on the back of everyone's skull, how'd they eliminate the headband, glue, sutures, their hands left begging in their laps, Lem sat, a grey stream on the screen like upside-down rain, were they all reading and writing and revising the same water-upfall of words in their minds, he couldn't keep up with the numerals and symbols he couldn't understand, like a worn-out floor-mat rusted-through floorboard at forty-five with the chert-jeweled asphalt flying by underneath so fast that the black white grain smeared to grey and when he reached out from behind his brain, the rough road, the paved code, ground down his eyes and the bloody vitreous humor glazed the highway to the horizon.

"Lem, everybody's in the break-room for the all-hands." Gudrun paused at the entry to his cube. He followed her to the doorway of the only room barely big enough to hold the headcount, both he and Gudrun tall enough to see over the assembled employee haircuts, Frank commandeering in front of the refrigerator at the far wall, mid-exposition, hands clasped behind his back, parade rest.

"an exciting opportunity for all of us to bring our technology to market with the resources and reputation of Solaris backing us up"

Gudrun smelled of sandalwood and sweet-and-sour orange shampoo and a hint of sweat, did she work out, the firm convex curve of muscle at her short blue sleeve, with skin slick and fair as mother-of-pearl, she stood still as the rest, all each chewing on the one many identical unique question, so what exactly does this mean for me, hey, stock options at Solaris better than their few if any at Cortez anyway, engineers and marketeers content

with or resigned to or oblivious of the machinations of their mutating corporate masters, but Gudrun gave nothing away about her opinion of Frank's monologue.

"working out the details of the integration, but in the interim you'll all continue to report to Greg and Dave"

And whomever Lem reported to, sounded like Frank had no plans to stick around. Lem might as well get out of here, for this afternoon anyway, get to bed early to pick up Annie on time and surprise Suzi, this a good chance to retrieve his MXD from under the lab floor with everybody raptured in the revelations upstairs, the drug might come in handy for diversion once the impact of this merger, no windfall wealth, no second act, sold off indefinitely as an indentured serf to his ex-wife, sank in, and potentially useful to tolerate or enhance the concert experience tomorrow night, plus who knows if he'll come back to work next Monday at Cortez. That is, Solaris.

The lab sat cold and somewhat stripped, the crew had already packed up most of the gear for the show, the two foil-bound booths left abandoned and bemused because the revised Bug ran fine without their additional shielding, or not, if induced seizures in novice users counted, well, no need for Lem to wear the headset ever again for Solaris, though his visions appeared unabated without it, in fact intensified, no mind, only a porthole open to the churning chop of images breaking over the prow of his brain, the endless dream stream bow-wave didn't bother him. He jacked the floor panel and found the little pill bottle waiting, hibernating in place, rest in peace, Cortez.

Chapter 19 Park

She straddled him, sitting on his belly, her knees against his ribs, and her hands cuffed his wrists at his shoulders, pressing down and denting the sheet into the mattress. He flexed his arms outward, trying to widen her hands to pull her closer down toward him, but her stiff straight-arm grip resisted, surprisingly strong for her slight frame, and tightened in the hollow between her shoulder and chest. Her straight blond hair swung forward at the side of her face, and shadowed her eyes grey and serious. When he bent his legs and rocked his hips, she tottered and giggled, he could easily launch her off of him and pitch her on her side, but he didn't. The drawn window curtains leaked enough late morning to whiten the dim wall along their edges and ricochet errant rays about the room to burnish her bare skin to tawny creamed coffee, with pale twin joined upturned triangles where the sun never saw her breasts, milk-white and hardly full enough for their untanned slopes to peak down in shallow pointed crescents. He sensed her, spread warm on the skin below his navel, his hips adhered to her thighs, but in the center slick, slipping when she shifted, while below he felt himself cold and exposed and aching alone. She eased her elbows and bent as he curled his neck and shoulders off the pillow to encircle one pink swell with his parted lips, and he toggled the tiny silver ring with his tongue tip, odd that he never noticed her nipple pierced, and like a knife dropped on a distant rock, the silver ball stuck through the top of his tongue faintly clicked and caught on her metal loop, odd he never remembered a stud in his tongue. She pushed up on her arms and straightened her legs out alongside his, as he lowered his shoulders and she settled into him, still clasping his wrists, so much shorter than he that her chin nestled in the notch above his collarbone, then pressed into his chest, breath tensed, as they shifted and slid and sought each other, and sighed when finally full and warm and home. No.

Lem's neglected coffee slouched beside him on the bench, a brown blot below the sippy-slot in the white clamp-on hard-hat top. He straightened up and took a sip, tepid and astringent, to scour the steely wool with which the vision had scrambled his gums and tongue, or was that a dream snared in a moment's doze, was Pat the succubus, his imagination never before so tactile, a trace of temperature and pressure ebbing in his

pants. The playground, the rubberized play structure, wide stippled steps on impact mats and fat-slatted handrails and winding-down intubated slides, specified by risk-averse adults for child's play safer than their own childhoods, sat plasti-green and cream-colored in the sun where motley children ran and climbed and sat in the sand with miniature yellow metal front-end loaders.

"Push me on the swing." Right at his knees, Annie, blue-jean shorts and Tiny Tyrano T-shirt, white-blond stray strands escaping from the elastic-tied hair spumes tight and high on her head, unblinking into Lem's lidded eyes.

"Sure, honey." Lem forgot to ask for Please, and followed Annie to the apex-connected steel-pipe twelve foot A's that kiddy-park planners neglected or knew not how to make safer than its traditional sagging straps on swinging chains.

"The bucket one or the big one?" Lem asked, the first A-bay hung with black rubber cut-outs bent and riveted like inverted hockey headgear with bidirectional holes for fat-creased toddler legs, stupid question, are you a baby Annie.

"The big one." Annie stood back-on to the rain-stained yellow sling, hands up around the links, feet in the wide canyon worn by a consensus of dragging feet, like an immense sneaker-tipped ditch-digger disc touched down and carved a ten-foot arc beneath each swing, which lowered her feet to raise the seat high as the sharp lower tips of her shoulder blades. Lem bent and fitted the flat of his hands beneath her armpits against the wale of ribs half the width of his fingers, and lifted her light as a fallen fledgling up into place. The cool chain angled toward his chest as he two-stepped back, suspending Annie for a moment like a slingshot stone, released into an inverted flight, down and out, back and up.

"Lean back with your legs up, then lean forward and tuck your legs to pump," Lem said.

"I know that." Annie leaned forward outbound to push her face as far up as she could into the blue streaming sun, bending her arms back behind her, then straightened up on the round trip where the loose hairs forewashed and caressed her cheeks.

"No, the other way." Lem stood aside to align his left palm like a relay baton with the hand-off pause at the upper limit of the pendulum, and push.

"Higher. I want to go higher."

"Okay, but hold on tight."

Noble Duke of York. Push. Had ten thousand men. Push. Up the top of the hill. Push. Marched them down again. Push. Lem sang softly, spread fingers flexing against her tailbone, tracking her narrow waist up to the top of the arc, pressing down to power the descent, trailing off with a brush of rough denim belt-loop. The pushing machine ran an endless loop, pivoting at the hip, idle hand thumb-hooked in pants pocket, actuating arm up, down, up. Then an older buzz-cut boy mounted the swing next door, pushed back, and pumped hard, gaining height past Annie to prove the superiority of his age and gender, wobbling enough on the way up and down for Lem to wonder about the hazard of his out-flung feet, but he launched from the peak of his arc and landed squat with a spray of sand, stood for the nine point five card, his point made. Across the sand and the cement strip separating the scraggly lawn and the sidewalk and saplings at the curb and the street sat a dark low late model sedan, not the chemist's, different, one with those tiny dull half-pint hubcaps that marked an unmarked cop car, why didn't they spring for undistinguished alloy wheels, government low-bids, also the give-away inside-levered spotlight blobule on the roof column above the side mirror.

The driver and passenger doors opened in sync like they were levered together, and two crew-cuts in dun sport-coats single-buttoned over bench-press chests, with a generous enough cut around the shoulder seam to swing a sap or conceal a sidearm, emerged. The near one tenderly closed his door and waited for his twin to round the rear fender and come aflank where they put four eyes on Lem.

"Let's go get lunch." Lem stepped behind Annie, caught the chains on the backswing, and eased her forward to a near stop, dampening the last oscillation with her rounded back and the scimitar of the seat against his thighs.

"I want to swing more."

"We can go to Waffle-Lodge."

Annie jumped off the swing, arms over head her, and with two hops pogo'd around to face her dad. "Waffle!"

Lem scooped her up onto his hip, her arms around his neck, her sandals bumping the front and back of his legs while he double-timed toward the parking lot on the far side of the park.

“Too bouncy!” Annie laughed, with her head grazing Lem’s shoulder at each stride. He bent and opened the door of the old coupe with his free hand, peeled her off his hip, unrolled her into the seat, and pushed her leg away from the doorsill.

“Buckle up,” Lem said, as he swung the door, paused at the seal, pressed hard for the closing clink, and turned around to lean his butt against the rolled-up window. As the two men, walking deliberately but not fast, with the rolling gate of a cowpoke or boatswain or beat-cop, approached, one falling three steps behind for backup, they assumed separate identities, the near man shorter, stockier, a crooked fleshy nose, the farther one sharp-boned and creased about the eyes and mouth, but they shared the same indifferent empty eyes.

“William Narkis?” The first guy stopped out of arms-reach away, hands slightly elevated at his sides like a quarter-to-high-noon showdown.

“Maybe. Who wants to know?” Lem kept his hands flat and innocent against the hot skin of the car door.

“Agents Stafford and Tomes. Central Security Agency.” The nearer man, with slight of oft-repeated hand, flipped and flashed a laminated multicolored eagle-flag card-badge, from some government bureau or a mail-in cereal-box cut-out coupon. Which agency was that again, Treasury or Justice or Defense or Intelligence or Drugs or Something Seriously Secret.

“What’s the Central Security Agency?” Lem asked.

“Sort of an umbrella organization. Do you know the whereabouts of a Peter Zhangzhao Chu?” Stafford or Tomes, no telling, had mastered talking without moving his lips, as if he combined ventriloquist and dummy in one act.

“Why? What’s he done?” Strange to hear Peter’s middle name, his great grandfather’s name, a poet who fled the Wuchang Uprising Peter said, pronounced with a SH, same as how Peter said Chu, instead of with Peter’s soft J, bizarre what you think of when you’re facing two thugs or assassins or agents, maybe they wanted somebody else.

“We just need to ask him a few questions concerning an Issue of National Security.”

“What kind of issue? Is this about his work?”

“I’m afraid it’s a confidential investigation. But you can help him if you tell us where he is.”

“Uh, no, I haven’t seen him for a while. Look. I’m here with my kid, if you”

“Take my card. Give us a call if you learn anything that can help locate him. You’ll be doing your country a service.” Stafford or Tomes brushed the side pocket of his jacket and materialized a business card between his index and middle finger tips, which he held out to Lem, but it failed to identify which agent offered it, printed only black-on-white with the letters CSA above a toll-free phone number and a four-digit extension, maybe every suspect got their own hotline.

“Okay.” Lem slipped the card in his shirt pocket. “Hey, have you guys been following me around? The past week or so?”

The near guy looked over his shoulder, neck smooth and thick as tank turret, at the rear guy, whose impassive mute armor gave nothing away, and back to Lem. “No.” The two remained like outsized garden gnomes at the edge of the lot while Lem backed out of the space, turned onto the entry-exit apron, stopped by-the-book full-stop at the sign, and then ran through the gears out on the side street.

“Who were those men?” Sweat shone on Annie’s upper lip like dewdrops on an upturned tulip petal, reminding Lem to MAX the A/C into the interior oven, marginal refrigerant left in the old car.

“Just some guys from work,” Lem said. Work, the all-purpose explanation for adult mysteries that quenched child curiosity.

“I can ride in the front seat of your car, right Daddy?” Annie sat in the front bucket, eyes as high as the glove compartment handle.

“That’s right, sweetie. Because I don’t have airbags. It’s an old car.” Lem turned left at the light on Wade Ave, the four-lane commercial stop-light through-street, crowded with the errand and idle and entertainment traffic of all the work-week fathers occupying the offspring for the stay-home or double-shift mothers’ childless Saturday morning, separated, divorced, or struggling to hold the percentage of the former below fifty. Fourteen folding chairs, three empty, formed the Men’s Fellowship Circle in the knotty-pine-paneled foot-square vinyl-tiled basement of the Second Sacramonialist Church, with Associate Pastor Tim swallowing in such sympathy that a triangular stubble patch beside his predestined Adam’s apple that missed the morning shave flapped on his vulturous neck like molting pin feathers while a fat man with a pathetic pony tail gone grey and thin over the bald spot in

back interminably recounted his bafflement when his wife slept with the contractor and his bought-and-sold company stole his stock and his irritable bowel syndrome chained him twenty yards from a bathroom and his daughter despised him. The other attendees recrossed their legs or divined the dregs in the styrofoam coffee cups they cradled between their knees or sat back arms folded counting cross ties in the acoustic tile ceiling, until Reverend Tim thanked Len how he mistook the speaker's name for honesty and sharing and proposed a prayer huddle in closing which lurched everybody to their feet in the center of the circle with heads bowed and arms draped around one another's shoulders like a rugby ruck and the body odor of a ten-year-single man's laundromat interval and Philly cheese steak after-burn burps and the hot heavy yoke of two arms depressing his neck with the meaty mounds of two strangers' backs beneath his palms teamed to pull the plough of despair across the plain of despond until their cirrhosis or infarctions set them free.

"Mommy says we have an elevator."

Lem re-engaged conscious control of the car, lowered his hand to curl around the knurls of the steering wheel at his lap, and like any caregiver or investigator or psychoanalyst affirmed and reformulated Annie's hardly-heard remark in the form of question. "That's nice honey. Why do you have an elevator?"

"To push the button and go up and down."

"Right. Of course." Lem turned into the block-long parking strip, row in, row out, a grimace of thin teeth or opposed combs, shared by an assortment of franchisees. The Waffle-Lodge squatted on the lot like a snap-together model-railroad chalet, brown panels devoid of details, ill-fitting windows thick and dull as scratchy Lucite, scaled up enough for a full-sized menu, or maybe customers shrank into painted press-molded H.O.-scale figurines on entry. Lem and Annie obeyed the Seat Yourself placard impaled on the Frisbee-based chrome pole, and took a two-person window boothette with off-yellow L-curve laminated seats and a brown round-cornered tabletop all angle-bracketed off the half-wall for obstacle-free mop swaths. Ought to eat something, Lem ordered eggs, scrambled stiff in a mound like a seed-seeking goose-pecked cow-pie, beside a pool of pale puss or liposucted waste-product that had ignored his 'Hold the grits', four pointed toast shims suitable to wedge a metal lathe level and well greased to hammer home, some alchemy in the Cortez headset had transmuted food to offal, left a lingering nausea, the MXD uplift and wine glide

last night no aid, he never heard of an olfactory hallucination, tactile too, abandoned multisensory dross unsampled, stuck with oily coffee. But Annie loved hers.

“Wham they-at cough-fey foe yawl.”

At Lem’s side the aisle filled with a freeway exit guard-rail crash-barricade barrel or light-blue creased polyester stretched over Willendorf-arrayed ovoid belly breasts and thighs with spatter-grease graffiti bisected by a black flat-strip-secured order-pad side-holster tied in back. With the headset hallucinations, the long-standing adaptation of his auditory cortex to the local accent attenuated as the images intensified until he understood little the natives said, but he parsed the half black-full glass sphere throttled by an orange handle neckband threatening third degree caffeination in the waitress’s hand.

“Uh, no thanks. Just the check please.” Lem wicked a paper napkin-point in his water glass, and leaned across the table to swipe at the clown-face traces of red and white on the cheeks Annie knew to puff out, and to wet the sticky palms with which she weighed the air.

“Think ewe fair mush.” Three wrist-bangle bracelets announced four assorted rings binding dishwater-reddened fluid-retented digits slapping down the white-header green-lined slip blue-ballpointed with script obscure except for the triple-circled total. Lem left bills and change between his untouched Breakfast All Day and Annie’s sweetly smeared plate.

Too early to take her home, prematurely deported from the park by the CSA, he anticipated Suzi’s disparaging ‘Well back so soon’, so Lem scanned the storefronts for an air-conditioned time killer, no toy store, there, Bell’s Books, must have a children’s section, a chair for him to idle. “Come on, sweetie, let’s look for a book.”

With Annie parked cross-legged on the carpet before the bottom-shelf picture-packed sparse-text animals-as-people plentitude, she could read above grade, Lem pulled a coffee table tome from the Arts and Architecture shelves, Handmade Houses, as opposed to what, foot-made, more like one-of-kind built or at least designed by amateurs, and sat in the wooden library chair at the end of the bay, turning pages, waveform shake shingle roofs, onion domes, stained glass baths, debarked tree-trunk stairwell columns, mortared glass bottle-end walls, that kind of thing. What he should do, build a house by hand, an art house, like Kurt Schwitters, the Merz Haus, namesake of collaged newsprint scrap, decades of layered angled overhangs and Dada bric-a-brac, lost but for one grainy gray photograph

in an instant Allied bombsite, Lem's shaped canvas as painted plaster walls, span the stud ribs with bent lath, wide mud swaths swept off the hawk and floated with the two-foot trowel, fresco pigments pristine as the Sistine, a painting to live inside, a gallery that shows itself, unsalable, unassailable, life as art as life. From the foyer, the walls wind away and bulge back rippling up into the vault, with shading deeper near and lighter receding to render the surface flat, a painted planar rectilinear room illusion perceived inside a undulating sine wave space, now that would be.

Dark haired skinny short guy shiny charcoal chinos fast past Lem's feet he pulled quick in, was that Peter, pleats of wrinkled pink dress shirt cornering the Cook Books bay toward the Children's Section. Lem shut and put his glossy hardbound on the seat as he stood and strode after him, Annie safe where he left her immersed in a dinosaur adventure on the floor with no evidence of an interloper. Nah, couldn't have been Peter.

"Let's go, Annie. Mommy's waiting for us." Lem took her arm and lifted her from the discard pile she had accumulated, no matter, stores paid people to reshelve.

They parked out on the street at Suzi and Annie's because a full-size white pickup truck with a black lumber rack straddling its bed and chrome diamond-tread tool bins saddle-bagging its sides humped the driveway. Annie popped the belt and opened the door the inches she needed to squeeze out and scamper up the slope toward where Suzi stood under the pines. Lem trailed behind.

"Mommy! I had waffles and strawberries and whip cream!"

"Well, that's a Daddy thing." Suzi deflected Annie's impending waist-hug with a laying of hand on her forehead like healing the impure and possessed. "But we'll have a good dinner. Go on inside and wash your hands. They're all sticky."

"Who's up on the roof?" Lem watched a shower of leaves and needles and dust spill over the gutter and onto the front deck, driven by a blower-wielding big-bellied guy in work-boots and ball-cap standing halfway up to the ridge.

"Oh, that's Arnold. He's helping me fix up the house. I'm going to put it on the market," Suzi said.

"?" Lem looked from Suzi up at this Arnold, who waved the waist-high back-forth 'It's okay I'm just working here' sign silenced by the rabid throat-clearing rasp of the leaf

blower, and back down at Suzi. "You're going to sell the house? What about. You said Annie needed continuity."

"She'll be fine. Kids are really adaptable at this age, and a change of scene will help her with the transition. You know I've got to get out of these suburbs and be around people I can talk to, if I'm going to get serious about my art."

"Yeah, I guess." Where would she move, not out of state, he'd see Annie less, miss her, not the caretaking, more time to work, not that he had anything to work on. "Where are you moving?"

"You wouldn't remember Satya, from the Community Art Center. She has her brokers license now, so we're looking for loft space."

"Hmm," Lem said. The elevator, kids usually knew what they were talking about, did this town even have any old industrial buildings more than a couple stories.

"What are you going to do about Peter? I talked to Mary, she's really upset," Suzi said.

Mary, what did Suzi hear about the merger, and the options, the disappearance of the options, Mary wasn't that close to Janet or Terry, what did Dave or Greg know about Lem's situation, but everybody gossiped about everything especially about money, no way Lem could have to pay Suzi for something he lost, would she have a claim on a new option grant at Solaris, if they weren't married any more by the time he got it, no way he'd callous his fingers on some corporate keyboard for five years if she got half of any incentive he had to slave away in the code mine, or was separation enough to void her claim, or maybe his ownership accrued on the eventual vesting date not the grant, if he even went to work there that is. Peter, right, why find Peter for the feds, was that him in the Vexra on the highway yesterday, forever forget his images of Annie, clamp a demagnetizing coil on Lem's head and smear away that memory.

"There's not a lot I can do. I mean, I don't know where he is."

"Figures. Somebody else you abandon when you're done with using them." Suzi watched Arnold mount the ridge near the brick chimney and direct the blower blast at the back roof.

"So, I've got to get going." Lem checked the street, car still parked there.

"I suppose now you're off to your all night party?"

“No, it’s a demo, Dave’s doing a publicity taping for the product at this concert.” Suzi and Mary must have talked to somebody from Cortez if they knew about Alec’s event, fingers crossed on no news of the merger and its cancellation of the common stock, indefinitely deferred rage and pain felt fine to Lem. “So it’s more like I have to work.”

“Well, have fun.”

Chapter 20 Arena

Bloom Arena, like a square round-top button, depressed the center of the eighty acre parking lot quilted with a white-thread stitched lanes that pulled the multicolored car-top patches close to its grey-brown sides and left the outer fabric to fade blue-black in the dusk. A preamble to an earthquake rumbled from inside, subsonic, like an underground engine room vibration, the Semplar Syzygy had started at noon. Lem parked at the periphery, facing the wide arched band over the entryway with cast-concrete indented letters spelling its name, Alonzo Bloom Arena, long gone mayor who allowed some of his graft to accrue to his cronies who constructed this venue, a windfall for worthless land out on the outskirts, offering pilgrimage to rodeo, gun show, kennel club, traveling circus, exhibition basketball, rock concert, auto show, home and garden exposition, and a rental to anything transient and large but undersized for a stadium, such as Alec Atman's 24-hour extravaganza. The plastic pill bottle eyeballed in Lem's palm with barely enough powder left to levitate him for the event, done with the MXD after tonight, done with the Bug, done with Cortez, done with Suzi, a farewell celebration and then he'd, what, figure this all out somehow like Pat said, once these ever-present visions dissipated and let him think, but just in case, he left a trace at the bottom, for cancelled flight insurance. He capped and stashed the bottle under the rubber lip of the floor mat, swooned like the road rushing past as fast as the blood blooming behind his eyes when he bent over, then rose to the clarity of the windshielded evening banding the frisbee of the earth as if the horizon edge skimmed a hidden blue-white glow-light sea and threw a purple shadow on the stars, with Lem ordained in the perfect center exactly where and what he should be, on MXD.

The surf of sound lunged louder under the arch, past the rent-a-cops who outcast any containers into steel-rimmed cardboard barrels heaped with glass and plastic bottles and aluminum cans so that the attendees entered bare of any liquids but the internal three-quarters of their bodies and the ingested/inhaled/injected chemicals circulating therein, around the safety-glass booths that bounded the three-fingered smooth-tube turnstiles that groped the groin and smacked the butt of every passing human acclimated to or unconscious of their mechanical lechery, in one tray-mouthed window of which, the booth

that is, a toothy guardian eventually found 'Oh right look under William not Lem' Narkis on the Guest List and deferred the admission fee. His fellow travelers funneled toward a central double-door eye-hooked open to mock its three or four mates in chains on its sides, like a seven-foot square hangman's floor-hatch sprung on rainbow thunder, a throat constricted by a blink of rebirth after life, the condemned innocents converging but moving toward the light.

Past the narrow portal, the cavernous vault soared with gridded grey ribs barely distinguished by the backwash from the hanging searchlights that swept the crowd, the space dim and hot as a sperm whale gullet where ultrasound sensors amplified the huge beast's heartbeat whampuh whampuh whampuh dopplering louder lower and higher farther, underneath a wailing Theramin tremolo tortured by discordant shear pulses with a woozy raw undertow running minor scales. Dozens of sweeping spotlights up in the rigging, white red blue and green, some stuttering stroboscopically, sent manta-ray sun discs skimming over momentarily illumed bodies, a flash-frozen flesh glow, then abruptly abandoned dull and gray again. The kelp-bed of humanoids trembled in the sound waves, some swaying, some hopping, some swinging their slick day-glo seaweed hair, with desperate hand-strands reaching up for air. Some males and females wearing stretch sheaths as tight as skin, glowing ultragreen to infrapink, with metalflake glitter frackng the highlights, smooth as spray paint, no, unless those costumes came equipped with stick-on nipples and cracks and navels and hair brillos, that was paint, body-painted naked bodies. But with other adornments, glow-strip collars and cuffs, golden belly chains, ostrich-feathered headdresses, silver masquerade masks, a swung-trunk elephant head, curling goat horns, curtains of crystalline strands. And a few half-furred with pastel plush, a couple clad in shiny vinyl, too hot for that, too hot for Lem's black T-shirt and chinos. He shimmied, palms out parting backs and bellies like a snake through mangrove roots, into the melee, with the book-mold fusty-old face-powder scent of marijuana, and the sump-pump bite of incense, and butcher-shop wet sweat and seeping sex, and whale-fat acetone wilted-blossom anointments. Overhead, two bikini'd acrobats twisted in thick fabric skeins, crimson and green, winding up, upside down, swinging in slow circles, suddenly cascading down to the heads of the crowd. Up on the stage, visible through rhythmic flesh-framed overlapping slivers, Lem made out the musicians, the Astral Nots, with conical Mylar

wizard headgear, standing at consoles and keyboards and metal oddments and instruments, immobile and expressionless as if only alive in the sound-sea they created or channeled or merely hand-synched. Projection screens back-filled the wall behind them, with quivering false-color quick-cutting patterns too fuzzy and far away for Lem to identify.

Over on the side where the tiered permanent seats commenced their climb, leaning back, one elbow up on the half wall below the pipe-joint railing, surveying his domain, how many of these aging children were his patients or clients, stood Doctor Drebin, shining grey hair and silver smoking jacket mottled and pied by the moving colored lights, velvet collar and cuffs dark as his shadowed eyes. He couldn't recriminate about the compromised chemist, Lem as much the victim there anyhow, good to clear that up.

"Hey, Rick." Lem extended his hand. Drebin assessed him clinically, shook lightly, his leonine palm pads warm and dry.

"William. Quite the affair, eh?" Rick roared to make himself heard.

"Yeah. Hey, about that thing with the lab" Lem leaned toward his ear.

"Oh, no matter. We have a new source of supply. And we're testing a new compound. Very promising."

"That's good. But I have to tell you, about that beta unit, I" Whether or not Lem went to work at Solaris, he now had little ability or inclination to supply Drebin's research with a headset as promised, might as well wrap that up too.

"Yes, we are in conversation with your Mister Drewry to complete the arrangements." Rick poked his chin toward the screens behind the stage. "Very impressive up there, this Eluce. Interesting product name, too."

"Uh, thanks," Lem said. The Rick and Dave show, jeez, Drebin and Drewry, the drug dealer and the delusional, glad to miss that one. Maybe Rick'd get Dave high enough to bring him down to reality.

"By the way, as a previous trial participant, would you be interested in reporting back on a new compound?"

"Maybe, what is it?" The last of the MXD left Lem elevated and visually acute, but far from ecstatic and visionary, with the tolerance he'd accumulated, so he might as well make this a night.

“Very similar, this one is a polyethylamine, MXP for short. A little longer lasting and more intense, we believe.”

“Okay, sure.”

Drebin fiddled with a folded cellophane packet at his side, like extracting a dollar for a street musician’s open guitar case without revealing the whole bill wad, and then cupped his hand at his waist. “Blotter. We haven’t formulated a binder yet. Let it dissolve on your tongue.”

Lem took the tiny translucent wafer and communed. “Cool, thanks. I’m going to go check in with the crew.”

Rick nodded to bless his departure, and then called out a benediction into the buffeting sound storm. “Oh, by the way, William. Don’t take anything else with this, we haven’t yet assessed all the possible interactions.”

Swimming into the human wormhole, Lem caught sight of more of the screens behind the stage above and between the bobbling heads and shoulders. Counter-spinning spirals of red-green diamond checks, small-breasted odalisque with parrot, grainy newsreel goose-stepping regiments, a dancer’s flapping glittered tits, an Atman flaming chakra painting, a buttercup yellowing a child’s under-chin, a pan across the light-swept dancing audience, the Crab Nebula spewing stars, a musician close-up thin-lip soul-patch beak-nose sunglassed, lava-lamping enamel paint glooped on water, atoll test mushroom cloud, on and on, cross-dissolving at the rate of respiration, and overwhelming for once any images in Lem’s imagination. The sound levels near the source exceeded human hearing and transposed into the tactile, a migraine root-canal ear-ache from the upper frequencies, a pre-diarrhea pressure and knotting of the bowels from the bass, and flat-on-the-back heart attack chest compression in the midrange, with a burnt-hair caustic ozone wafting from the floodlights and the electronics.

Beside the speaker towers on both sides of the stage, dozens of black-garbed personnel stood and sat at mixing panels and plug boards and monitors and controls, running the lights, modulating the sound system, switching image streams on the screens among the movie stills, live shots of the crowd and the band, Alec’s graphic art, abstract synthetic imagery, and the Cortez headset capture from the performers, all intercut and dissolved and overlaid and chroma-keyed like every television broadcast in history got

sucked swirling into a unfolded three-way black hole. Up the four steps on stage-left sat a couple of the Cortez techs at their monitors and electronics arrayed atop a folding table, overseeing the processing of the signals from the Bugs strapped on the band-members, while Dave peered alongside the ear of the film-crew cameraman focusing on the performance, with a miniature side-angle stage scene showing blue and bright in his view-screen.

“Hey guys,” Lem shouted.

“Just a minute.” Dave glanced over the collar of his oblivious out-of-place blue-checked button-down shirt at the interruption without recognition. Up here in the sonic shadow of the two-story speaker banks the decibel level dropped from airport runway to power plant. “Give me a close up of the middle guy so we can pick up the reflections on the Eluce when he turns, okay?” The cameraman did not respond, one hand steady on the pan arm of the tripod, the other resting on the lens ring. Dave straightened up. “Oh, Lem. Isn’t this fantastic? You didn’t believe me that this would work, and now look. We should have clips in the feeds all over the world in time for the Monday morning news cycle.”

“Great,” Lem said. “Is Greg around?”

“No, he had to take off after the set up.” Dave grinned. “Hey, we missed you at the beer bust after the all hands. Congratulations on the merger. And this is excellent, we’ll all be rowing the same boat at Solaris, with new titles and new stock options. I’m Marketing Director, Greg’s Engineering Director, and with you as Principal Engineer, now we can all work together at the same level, you know, as peers. I’ve got the requirements for the follow-on products in the pipeline, so you can flesh out the specs and Greg can get rolling. We already talked about it.”

Dave’s bulbous face loomed like a Macy’s parade balloon, wavering a bit on invisible tethers as it bore down on tiny Lem trapped on the avenue by raucous crowds cheering and clapping on all sides and the marching band’s banshee bam-boom lock-stepping behind him. The onset interval for Drebin’s new drug became obvious as what Dave said lost any semblance of sense to Lem, not that he ever made sense, now Lem demoted below Dave’s level inflated between the skyscrapers, designing what Dave wanted with broken chalk on the wet pavement, dealt a homeless mattress of soggy stock certificates, did Frank tell Dave the details of Lem’s dismissal and divorce and drug use and defeat, now everybody knew

everything. A penny dropped in the funhouse slot and Laffing Dave sprung-wound into gales of ridicule, his shiny red paper-mache cheeks jouncing about his bucktooth maw.

“Have to go.” Lem spun around and galumphed the short stairs off the stage. Dave shook his head, Lem obviously inexplicable as always, and turned to further gadfly the camera crew. Down on the dance-floor Lem found himself inverted, the blood draining up into his head, a hot red heart-beat drum, upside-down like everybody else, who all hopped and jumped to right themselves, twisted to float free, stroked to swim up, but sank back and fastened their feet on the floor overhead. Like children pretending to walk on the ceiling, climb over the door header into the hall, slide down the slope of the stairwell, good thing Lem ate nothing beforehand or he’d see it again on the way out. Far below, the dark bowl of the vault, demarked by the color-coded landing lights, opened into an abysmal tunnel, where an immense face receded, safety line snapped, out of gravity’s grasp, eyes closed, a sleeper’s half smile, a flawless child’s face, how could Annie breathe way down there outside the dome that held all the air. Lem looked down or up into the people parting around a ochre-robed man, Alec, but a black bullet hole punctured the center of his flat gleaming forehead, why the women behind and beside him curved their hands around his head and about his hair and over his shoulders, smoothing the Alec-shaped void he filled, caressing his invisible aura, for life support. No, an open lidded gleaming eye, a third eye, bulging outward from the bone, bigger and black iris’d and unblinking, stillborn, static, empty. Yes, Lem noticed the flesh-tone blended edge where the prosthesis adhered, a party trick, a cosmetic stick-on cosmic eye, what a joker. There at Alec’s right hand stood a simple A-line white dress bare shoulders brushed by straight blond hair fair and slight long-necked and bright-eyed Pat.

“Pat. Hi. What are you” Lem stumbled over into Alec’s court.

“Oh, hey Lem! I was looking for you.” Pat smiled tiny tooth pearls, shadowed twin dimple hints, receding red-shifted light-speed, barely a smudge at the event horizon.

“Welcome to our Semplar Syzygy, William.” Alec beamed like he stood in the path of a particle accelerator that energized the water molecules in his eyes until the free electrons emitted streams of photons, but with his third orb only inert plastic. “A blessing that the One has used you to provide a path to the presence of this delightful Patni.”

“Patty?” Lem squeezed his eyes closed, then fixed onto her wan and waning face like the supersonic moon dead-still inside the scud of broken sunset-tinted dancing clouds around her.

Pat giggled. “He calls me Patni. He’s so funny.”

“Patni,” said Alec. “Mistress. Lady. Prajapatni, Protectress of Life and Procreation.”

Pat inclined her head toward the screens above the performers, then swiveled over to Lem. “We could go somewhere else and screw,” she sounded like.

Lem watched her mouth moving, gulping the viscous music that pulsed out the gills of her shimmering hair trailing a shower of golden roe, how could he, she. “Huh?”

“I mean on your headset. I said he’s good up there on the screen!”

“Oh, yeah, right.” Lem watched the projection blend a bloated corpse breaking the surface algae of a swamp pool, maggots emerging from cleaved meat, a vehicle’s black skeletal frame billowing orange flame, pale piles of open-trench tomb limbs, the keyboard player empty eye-socket close-up nose-bleed spitting teeth, tank treads chewing through a bathroom wall, a cauterized severed wrist, or was this all Lem. “No. It’s awful. I don’t understand.”

“Ah, awful, awesome, the sense of awe. The sublime.” Alec bathed in the stream from the screens, and the wandering spotlights sought him like burning moths drawn to darkness, his forehead cheekbones jaw iridescent rainbows but his two eyes as clear as the third glared dead.

“Not death. Not like that. It’s evil.” Lem’s neck jerked back and his eyes twitched from stage to crowd to ceiling to Pat to screen to floor to the next-door dancing girl’s out-flung elbow, searching for a perch, a safe place to rest his sight.

“There you see the three aspects, the Trimurti. I of course am the Creator. Look. See what I have brought into being.” Alec extended his arms at his sides to encompass the dancers, the light, the sound, the arena, the entire cosmos, then rested his arm on Pat’s shoulder, not much taller than she, even skinnier, the little people, Lem cannot capture them and win his wishes. “And as I told you, our Patni is the Preserver, she holds you here in this illusion. But you, William, you are the Destroyer. That is your fate. You must break the circle and bring the world down around you.” Alec’s free hand flicked quick toward

Lem, whipping an invisible burnished throwing knife, dealing the last face-card spade ace across the table to break the budding heart flush.

This pulsating chaos of stars born from dust in spiral arms, tiny blue-dwarf blisters burning Lem's eyes and red giants dull in his pulse pulling him down, spinning him around the scorching yellow corona, Alec not an oracle, nonsensical, a water-color wash of skin across his skull, his rictus sneer, the disjoint dangling saffron arm-bone pulling Pat near, death and the maiden, the siren singing Lem into the swell, into the swaying aquamarine bodies bobbing in waves of throbbing bass, the feedback breaking surf, the oscillator howl hiding the jagged shoals beneath, no closer, Lem torn to pieces, shattered, struggle up for air, get out of there. Lem pivoted into a tall bare-chested centaur, pushed him aside.

"Lem, where are you going?" Pat called out. She pulled away from under Alec's arm, but stopped after a step, when Lem merged into the shifting throng and was gone.

Left foot. Right. Weave. Arm out. Between. Turn. Space. Walk. Open. Doorway. Tile. Attendant. Turnstile. Echo. Guard. Slow. Push. Glass. Cool. Sky. Lights. Hum. Curb. Crosswalk. Cars. Pavement. Faster. Cars. Pocket. Keychain. Cars. Key. Blue. Door. Keyhole. Insert. Turn. Remove. Handle. Open. Sit. Wheel. Legs. Pedals. Key. Ignition. Door. Close. Quiet. Breathe. The parking lot quivered in the windshield, blue-white blurs on the receding array of hoods and trunks and roofs trembled like a school of fluorescent sardines beneath the surface of a still sea. Only a chemical, Lem had taken drugs before, his body processed chemicals, enzymes, liver function, a matter of time, chemicals in the brain alter perception, cognition, broken down, neutralized, after a few hours, that's all, come down, back to normal. Well, two drugs, with the MXD before, and then the months wearing the headset, all the same, never mind. The automatic over-learned motor reflex brain can drive the car, he'd sit back and watch, okay, no problem, not like driving drunk, not at all. He started the engine.

The low dark late-model sedan picked up the tail as soon as Lem, full stop look both ways accelerate gradually let the wheel slide between thumb and forefinger smoothly straighten out, pulled out of the parking lot, and followed him through two lucky green lights and up the freeway on-ramp. Like stepping a high-school slow-dance scared of the sweaty girl hand-clasp spine-hold, Lem four-squared between the pedal resisting his shoe-sole, the squiggly red tail-light trails doodling up ahead, the white needle hovering over the

mid-line between 6 and 7, the oblong rearview white flared squarish lights at the outer edges of the shadow-shape blocking the headlights farther behind refracted through double glass and disrupted by a hint of an interior silhouette, then repeat with the beat back to the pedal pressure, one, two, three, four, hither yon fro and to. Not the chemist, not the cops, not the spies, not Peter, not anyone, but someone followed, kept six car lengths back. Lem felt the tendons tighten in his ankle to press harder, his hands pitched about the wheel enough to yaw the fender a lane away from the twin red jitter ahead, the needle slumped over to touch the 8, but the backward mirror pulled the lights behind perfectly aligned by an invisible cable hooked to Lem's rear bumper and matching his moves.

When his car took the next exit, the tires squealed the terror of the turn until he braked back to forty, downshifted to third with a guttural engine surge, yanked hard right through the stop-sign at the underpass where a sweep of oncoming light whitened the yellow pendant penumbra from the bridge-edge poles, his ribs probed by the armrest and his arm indented on the sill, the mirror's image strewn in a lurching pan across the guard-railed brown ground-cover and grey bridge abutment, with an oncoming horn held down hard and long. Gaining speed on the unlit two-lane away from town with now three lights in the mirror, the third eye blinking red blue white, all-seeing, all-hearing the howl of the horrible synthesizers he ran from in the hall, wailing up and down, any sane sailor would sail far away from that song, toward the triplex screens up ahead, merged into one wide scene of instantaneous white insects vectoring and white lines contracting his car to a pinpoint and black poles and trees and posts radiating past a pin-pricked hangman's hood blue-black in the veiled execution high noon, scatter-shot star-holes moving too slow to smear.

The three-eyed pursuit grew larger and leaked into Lem's interior, licking the dashboard with its red-blue blood, the Destroyer behind him sucked up its thin sticky tongue, the speed needle stuck at 9 and the pedal stopped his foot, surround sound pulsated incessant high low Oh No Oh No, and the steering column shivered in hands. Then the cameraman burped or bobbled and the screen ahead bumped up at star-spots anointing a power-pole crucifix and back down to two more beacons pulsing where the white lines faded to a point, yes, the Creator and the Protector, the bright pillars of the portal pulling Lem through to a safe place to rest his eyes. See, the tri-color distant base of

the triangle, whose apex nemesis loomed larger behind, parted for his passage, two triple lights ahead to cancel out the burning mouth at his back when he slipped through and the trinity merged and neutralized, the pair ahead now spread almost as wide as the hood of his car. No, not a doorway at all, a low black V wall, a doubled barricade, a trick of the drug or the Bug, Lem saw the three-way jaws of light about to close and crush him, too late to brake, fence-post saw-teeth buzzing by on the right, so he under-overhanded the wheel hard left.

The tread caught the shoulder gravel and hail-stormed the wheel-wells like a chain-sawn harp, lost its grip, the left front wheel dunked into the drainage ditch, which slammed ka-blam a crosscut to the right rear shock as the hood rebounded, then the furrowed field rumble-stripped the seatback, the steering gear torn and the wheel floppy in Lem's hand, his jaw snapping like strapless electrocution. The tree trunks woke up abrupt and startled on the side to tear off a headlight with a body slam scream, careening the now-Cyclops car to part the yellow cat-tails like Pat's hair falling from her eyes as she leaned away, slowing in the soft soil at the edge of the star-mist farm-pond, hushed to a hiss as the engine died and the frame wallowed into the muck and the water slushed away from the prow and back to slap the rocker panels to a stop, with only the sirens and the flashers on the road above singing Lem to sleep.

End of Part One

Part Two

Chapter 21 Hospital

Goddamn punks next door. Lem stood on the front porch, looking through the crinkly haze of window screen. There they were, right down in front. One sitting on the dirt bike, work-boots wide, blue-jeans, wife-beater, red bandana tied around his greasy hair, blue-black blotches of tattoo on his outsized shoulder and forearm, long-ash cigarette hanging toward his stubble-shadow chin. His right hand twisted the throttle and released, over and over. Ahemmm. Skinny fenders way off the wheels, flat-black exhaust pipe sticking straight back, did he even have a muffler, his thighs gripping the base of the gas tank thorax, handlebar mandibles like some fat orange insect he dry humped. Ahemmm. The other guy, overalls, ball cap, beer can held out like a flea bomb, standing there staring down at the crankcase like he expected some kind of spiders to hatch out. Ahemmm. No.

Getting light already, Lem needed another two hours sleep or he'd fumble around with fuzz behind his eyeballs all day, pissed off at everything, and there's Suzi snoring again. Ahemmm. Why couldn't she turn over, he straightened out his arm to poke her, but bone below his elbow made contact cold, hard, round, smooth. Lem opened his eyes a crescent. A dull brush-nickel bedrail. The pleats of a pale green curtain, which filtered some of the light from a window and none of the snoring from the shadow lump in another bed. Ahemmm. Shit, the hospital. The concert, the car, the chase, the crash, nothing else. Must be morning. Lem looked up at the humming air vent, the speckley ceiling tile, the pebbly light panel, off, the beige metal bottom of the box of instrumentation above his head. He tensed and relaxed his legs and arms and stomach, nothing hurt, other than the headache that tightened a belt-clamp around the back of his head. Squeaky wheels and voice sounds and metal clatter carried latex bleach wax ferment around the end of the off-white wall that hid the doorway.

"How are we feeling this morning Mister Narkis?" A tiny dried-apple woman with a pale blue paper cap came around the corner and took his wrist between wizened but vise-like thumb and fingers.

Lem lifted his other hand, sharp probing pain on the back side, adhesive tape over an embedded needle, a clear tube vining upward. "What's this?"

"Just saline. Keep you hydrated." The nurse replaced his hand on the bed sheet.

"Hydrated," Lem said. "I really have to pee." He raised up on his elbows. The nurse bent to the bedside cabinet and retrieved an ovoid pink pucker-mouth vessel with an open tube protruding from one end. Not a place Lem preferred to stick his dick. "No, I'll get up."

"Let me unhook you then." The nurse reached over him to clip the line valve and pop the coupling on his I/V feed.

"This too?" Lem offered her the needled back of his hand.

"Doctor will check in on you in a few minutes. We'll ask about that then." She folded back the sheet. Lem swung his legs over the edge of the mattress, laundered-sheer green-white gown around his knees, rocked forward, found the floor, cold, stood, no pain, felt functional, but with a back door wide open daylight draft blowing up his bare butt. He bent his arm behind his back and clawed around for two flaps of fabric to pinch together, jeez, they undressed him, where were his clothes. She knew his name, guess they went through his wallet. What else did they know. He stepped as on sidewalk ice, one sole firm flat before the opposite heel came up, around the corner to the narrow entry alcove.

Lem shut the bathroom door, raised the seat, let the burning pressure escape to an empty ache. He looked in the mirror. His awful twin. Hollows below his cheekbones, he'd lost weight. Pale, with a purplish taint on the puffy thin skin over the eye sockets. Same stupid cheek mole and feathery brown beard fuzz. Hair stringy and bent up around the ears and crown like dried tractored cornstalks. He bent, levered the cold, splashed his face, smoothed his hair. His palm flat on the mirror, fingertips spread below his other eyes. Nobody ever actually saw themselves, only a reflection, a photograph, television. Ugly turned to stone if you did. That Greek boy gazing at the pond. Alec wearing that ridiculous third eye. Drebin's blotter. Corpses on the screen. Lem's poor car. How much trouble was he in. Only a foggy handprint left on the glass, a vapor cave painting, evaporating.

Back at his bed, breakfast sat on the pivot tray of the wheeled steel C-frame. Lem pushed the pillows against the headboard and squeeched the service over his lap, lifted the square maroon mini-tureen top. How did scrambled eggs produce that watery juice, maybe they mixed up powdered eggs and that's what oozed out, soaking two scouring-pad

sausage discs, salted grease and gristle. A conical foil-topped white container of pink yogurt paste, the kind that quivered when carved by a spoon, a little tan plastic plate with a bisected square of rigid umber toast, a pink squat coffee cup with a tan snap-in top, a translucent ribbed foil-rimmed orange-drink single-serve. The colors bleached out like a family album childhood snapshot, shifted toward red, the blues and greens gone gray, grainy and unfocused on the edges, like an image from the Cortez headset. His head hurt but he felt clear and calm, maybe his visions had subsided this morning, maybe Drebin's new drug somehow counteracted the previous one, or maybe this stinking breakfast, the stiff sheets, and the stale room suffocated him within another vision. Lem wet his lips with the coffee, room temperature, a weak hint of boiled thistle dyed brown, put it down, peeled the orange-aid top and tipped back with the curled foil flap wet on his nose, the astringent juice scoured his throat, then clenched a fist in his empty stomach. When the nurse returned he'd ask for a non-aspirin, though for weeks the only analgesic to treat the Bug and drug after-effects was alcohol, unlikely she'd bring him a bottle. A whiff of rubbing alcohol, or maybe Mercurochrome, did they still brown dab that. He pushed the tray aside, watched the tiny dull room fisheye in the far wall-mount turned-off television, warping a pinhead patient waiting in his bed.

White coat tall man strode around the corner and stood two steps from the side of the bed, considering a clipboard. Lem defocused on the laminated ID badge strung round the guy's neck over a narrow blue tie, his a feral pointed face, bristly black hair gelled into submission, red knuckles scrubbed like root vegetables. The doc looked up.

"So, Mister Narcos. Any idea what happened to you last night? Says here you were pretty non-responsive. Vitals are normal though. Nothing out of the ordinary on the blood work. No indication of trauma. Looks like the neurology resident came by. All right then. I guess we'll have to let you go. Anybody you can call? Apparently no response at the residence. You live alone? Any relatives?"

"No." Lem answered no particular question. So where was Suzi, she's better off not knowing anything anyway, he was okay, call a cab, or did they require somebody trustworthy to release him to. "Uh, Gudrun."

“Ha.” The doctor grinned. “Yes, I guess you did have a pretty good run. Before the crash anyway.” He clicked his pen and marked a notation, patient humor positive indication.

“No, I mean a woman from work. Gudrun. I could call her,” Lem said.

“Excellent. I’ll have someone take care of that. Oh, and there’ll be a detective coming by with a few particulars for you before you’re released.” The doctor put his pen in his breast pocket, sidearmed the chart, nodded toward Lem. “Good luck then, Mister Narcos.”

Lem watched his white hem wiped away by the wall corner, cut back to the semi-private diffuse-shadowed stasis, clatter and syllables seeping in from the hall. Shit, a detective, like from the police. The bedclothes rustled beyond the half-drawn semi-privacy curtain, a defeated elephant seal exhale groan, a blonk on the bedrail, the shush and thwack of shifted cablery. Two people, a different nurse, this one built like a butternut squash, and a heavy-set migrant-worker-height man, maybe an orderly, quick-stepped past the foot of Lem’s bed into the other patient bay. Inquiries and instructions conversed with moans and retches, vague shadows on the curtain indicated adjustments and realignments, casters squeaked and frame screws complained, metallic fetid septic fumes arose in the room, while Lem lay tolerant as a paper-walled rooming-house boarder way behind on his rent. The event ended and the attendants left.

The room’s gray beige had brightened to dull tan, must be mid-morning by now. Turns out when people die here they actually live on forever in hospital time, all eternity unfolds and nothing ever happens, clocks stop, the ventilation whistles, vague green light wanes, no one listens, no release, the peace that never passes. All those visions, those crashes, could they have prophesized last night’s automotive demise, not submerged but well into the water, not wrapped around but sideswiped by the trees, not a fenced precipice but a ditch furrow mud traversal, probably a crowd of wraiths around him at the scene, he may have rolled resuscitated on a gurney down a corridor. Those other dark low late model sedans following him, or the same one. But how about the white-robed apparition on the roadside, or was he still to come. At least Annie was nowhere around. Or Pat. But how could imagination form a premonition, they said time was an illusion of human perception, except for causality, time’s arrow, entropy, everything falls apart, whoever chased him caused the crash, not the headset, the visions coincidental. The twin

galaxies ahead accelerating away and shifting into red, the spiral behind looming blue, space winds up time in a place he can stay, but elongated, pencil necked, his feet so far away, his rubber-band body crushed into the mattress by infinite mass equals energy square rooted, where no light can escape the black hole at the back of his head, wound around like salt water taffy plasma at the collapsing edge of cosmic inflation.

“Mister Narkeez?” Beefy guy in a shiny brown suit stood at the foot the bed.
“Detective Reames.”

Lem pushed up against the headboard and out of, oh crap they’re back, his waking dream singularity. “Sorry, that’s me.”

“Have some citations here for you to sign.” Reames held out a clipboard with a sheave of multi-part multi-colored printed tickets restrained by a chrome clamp. “Failure to Stop at Stop Sign. Speeding Greater than Fifteen Over, says eighty-nine in a fifty-five. Reckless Driving. Failure to Obey the Signal of an Officer.”

Lem bent over the board propped on his knees, slid the capless ballpoint from under the clip, paroled by a blue coily wire molded onto its foot, pried loose the leaves, and found the first signature line.

“The court date is indicated on the back, if you want to contest.”

Lem signed his name with the familiar scrawl for Failure to Stop.

“Now, you’re not being charged with Fleeing and Evading at this time. You’ll be served with a summons if that were to change. That’d be a felony, so you’d undoubtedly want to retain an attorney in that case.”

Lem signed for Speeding.

“But your record’s clean. No points on your license prior to this incident. No evidence of alcohol or drugs on the blood test. So that all weighs in your favor.”

Lem signed for Reckless.

“But we found an unidentified material in a prescription bottle concealed in your vehicle. Doesn’t test as a Controlled Substance at this juncture, but the full tox screen is still pending. You mind telling me what that was?

Lem paused the pen above the line at the bottom of Failure to Obey. “Oh, that.” Detective Reames towered at the end of the bed, face as animated as a death mask, gaze as engaged as watching a startled cinch bug on curl up on arid dirt.

"It's, uh, some kind of herbal remedy I picked up. I get these headaches, nothing seems to work, so I thought, what the hell. Homeopathy, I think you call it," Lem said.

"Hmmm." Reames' lips appeared to turn up at one side and nearly smile or sneer or discount the story, but not enough to disturb his jowl's slack repose. "Got to be careful with that stuff. Not regulated, you know."

Lem returned to his task, signed Failure to Obey.

"And, your vehicle has been towed to by a private company to their lot under contract to the county. You'll need to bring them cash or certified check for the towing and storage fees in order to recover it."

Lem held out the clipboard, and at the same time as via prisoner exchange he took from Reames' outstretched paw a business card.

"Information you need is there on the card." With remarkable dexterity for his meaty paws, Reames separated the yellow customer copies from the rest of the pages with a whisper zipper along the perforation. "Of course, with the vehicle totaled like that, most people don't bother to pay to retrieve it. Depending on your insurance situation."

Totaled the car, no surprise, he insured only for liability, at now double the premium with all the points against his license, as if he had any money to buy another car, after Suzi filed for separation and Solaris sank. Lem laid the tow-trucking card on the bedside stand, along with his violations, evading and fleeing for the time being their unread demand for whatever the fourfold fines totaled at some due-by deadline. Reames began to leave.

"I have to ask," Lem said, "why did they start following me? I thought it was some sort of road rage thing, maybe I cut in front of somebody without meaning to, and some kind of crazy guy was chasing me. Why I tried to get away." A reasonable explanation, if not an excuse, not that it mattered, the detective did not touch a pencil point to his tongue and write anything on a film-noir flip-open pocket notepad.

He turned back and once-overed Lem. "I couldn't speak to that. Not being on the scene. We do increase patrols around the Arena after those events. Usually a number of operators leaving under the influence. My advice, next time you see lights and a siren, pull over."

"Okay, thanks." Lem lay back on the pillows after the brown suit-pleat flapped around the corner to the corridor. Somebody would come to set him free at some point, the

white-cabled call-button hung at the bedside like a single-function remote control or the self-destruct option, but too soon to summon anyone and risk premature annoyance.

The clear I/V tube clung to his hand, and a nurse injected a syringe into the stub-end of the Y fitting hovering above Lem's head. A chill venom seeped up his arm and spread across his chest, tingled his loins on down to his toes, how had he not known before he was exactly where he belonged. Another attendant eased the tetrahedral oxygen mask over Lem's mouth and nose, his nostrils cored metallic and cool, dry as a Death Valley dawn. They pulled down the covers, slipped the sleeves off his arms and with a tummy tickle swept the gossamer gown away, but once exposed he felt radiant and warm. Over the curve of the translucent breathing dome he saw his erection angled out over his belly, pulsing pink-eyed and vaguely anchored but without other sensation, did this happen to people in the hospital, he had read about the hangings. The purple gloves and pale blue scrubs and caps and paper masks on both sides of the bed busied themselves with scalpels and clamps and sponges and forceps, but Lem lying back couldn't see the progress of the procedure on his torso, the oxygen mask blocked his view, he felt only a welling comfort, and although they chanted with muttered whispers in time to the metronome bleeping from the heart-rate respiration monitor, he couldn't make out any words. Once the necrosis was excised, the dark matter made whiter than snow, the secret sin washed away in the blood, he'd be fine. No.

"Ready to get out of here?" A different nurse set a brown paper bag, like a supermarket shopping bag embarrassed to advertise its own name, on the bed, this nurse as round and rosy as the apple that the first nurse shrunk from when she shriveled in the sun. "There's your clothes. Let's take that off your hand." She pliered Lem's palm, peeled off the tape, pulled out the needle, ouch, and adhered a bandage over the red-eyed purpled blotch, before Lem understood the unbloodied sheet and gown over his unsutured chest, and remembered to watch her. So the visions had returned immersive, or maybe he dozed off in an ordinary dream, assuming a distinction between the two.

"You can dress in the bathroom. And there's your paper work, you sign the first three pages. Someone will be up shortly to take you down in a wheelchair." Once Lem had served his sentence, the facility spit him out as expeditiously as the nurse finished him off.

"I don't need a wheelchair. I can walk myself out." Lem sat up and pulled the covers off his legs, skinny, faint hair, flabby chicken-skin yellowed in the cool air.

"Hospital policy. You have to be taken down in a chair." She emplaced her closing edict and retracted.

Lem pulled the gown from his shoulders, balled it up onto the pillows, and upended the bag of belongings onto the bed. They wheeled him in and stripped off all his clothes in front of everyone, but then told him to redress behind closed doors, somehow the unconscious or incapable merit no respect, but once aware they cast him out into shame, from what, some other sedated slump behind the curtain, or some minimum wage wheelchair worker who'd seen much worse. Lem pulled up his pants, the T-shirt over his head smelled of his own sour perspiration and the concert's sandalwood incense and some taco sauce he must have once spilled and Suzi's preferred perfume-free detergent. Soon a basement laundry room at River Oaks, or the desperate spin-cycle sojourn in the strip-mall laundromat, slamming in the quarter-filled eye sockets to buy more timeless boredom. The tall Black guy contemplated probably all his clothes twisting behind the dryer's bulging porthole, one hand clutching closed a diamond-striped blanket around his cantaloupe shoulders honest Injun. He turned to slim fair long-haired Lem unloading his wet wash into the wire cart, and wrapped his free arm around Lem's shoulder, his sinews like steel when he squeezed, said 'How about a little kiss', but Lem spun away, the blanket abrading his elbow, an overripe musky tobacco smell, 'No man, I don't'.

"You go to lobby?" A wheel chair whimpered around the corner, handles manned by the gnarled mahogany hands of a short mustached man, dark green uniform supply.

"Uh, yep." Lem stood up from the bed and sat in the chair, sneakers sticking out past the chrome-fold landing flaps, paperwork prayer-booked in his lap, pivoted out into the familiar corridor he hadn't seen before, visiting-hour recalcitrant kids in tow, scurrying shift-change staff, gurney crash-cart cabinet jetsam of the daily shipwrecks, colors scrubbed from every surface leaving behind only a thin gray antiseptic slime, a sulphurous saccharine sanitation concealing something worse. Subliminal doorway snippets of case histories, pneumonia, kidney stones, overdose, dementia, melanoma, rolled past on both sides as far as the Fire Exit push handle double-button elevator central core, turned away toward the glass-framed cottage lane painting print on the opposite empty wall, rolled

backward over the double-bump stainless steel threshold gap, a black crevasse clear down to hell, the opposed tan panels black scuffed and scarred silver at bed bumper height slid sideways and squeezed the hallway into a gasket slit, then the lurch and descending moan.

“Been working here long?” Lem asked. The metal cube sucked the question into its perforated panels and denied Lem any company, or motion, or perception other than the hiss and hum of steel-sided solitary confinement, until the 2 button lit up, guess Lem over-nighted under observation on the third floor, Peter had stayed on the third floor, all the Cortez crazies on the third floor, then dimmed and passed its gleam to the circle of L, who lorded it over dark B1 and darker B2.

“Yes, not so long,” the singsong voice above behind Lem’s head answered. A terminal jolt pretended to end their alleged but imperceptible downward progress. The doors stretched apart a lobby vista, windows beyond walking figures, Lem wheeled left into the waiting area, a U-loop of puce-upholstered chairs with magazine tables at its turns and a back-to-back seating spine splitting the center, so that anyone sitting needed to pull in their feet for those who traversed the circuit.

Lem pushed against the vinyl-wrinkle arms and stood, unsteady, light headed, at the same moment that from the third seat of the U leg Gudrun stepped toward him, blue-white cross-mesh athletic shoes, tan endless legs, the abrupt cut of the calf, the blunt curve of the thigh, those flimsy short nylon shorts with the notch cut up toward the hollow of the hip, a red stretch top, maybe a binding sports bra or Lem had never before noticed hardly more breast than chest muscle, the shaded blend of shoulder into bicep, her hair slick pulled straight back like a swimmers cap, ice blue eyes earnest and pale lips severe.

“Hey. Sorry to pull you away from” Lem said, what was she, out running, stadium stairs, the hundred meter hurdles, something that transformed her into entirely somebody other than Ms Office Efficiency.

“How are you? What happened?” Gudrun checked his eyes for signs of trouble.

“Fine. I’m fine. Just wracked up my car is all.” Lem smiled all Nascar-nonchalant.

“Let’s get you out of here.” She clamped her arm across his back, around his ribs, and walked his papers over to the Administration counter, confirmed his insurance coverage, accepted his copies, and steered him toward the automatic doors. Lem acquiesced to her support, his feet felt half-floating off the floor, like a confused concussed soccer player

helped off the field in the strong-arm grip of a concerned backfield colleague. Her car, a teal Abraxas, Lem forgot she drove a sports car, waited at the ten-minute curb. Leather seat fit him like a firm warm glove, the white windshield sun flare lowered his eyelids, and the relief of his release relaxed him toward sleep while Gudrun buckled up and backed out.

“So it’s River Oaks, over on Edwards Mill?” Lem said.

“I know,” said Gudrun.

“Right.” Lem lowered his eyes, moron, of course she had found him the apartment. At his side her long fingers, short unpolished or maybe clear-coat nails, no rings, no bracelets, snickered the console shift baster from reverse to first, her bare thigh bulged on the bucket cushion edge, rising round to release the clutch, silken up to the curved crease at her belly hidden just inside the white-piped hem of her shorts. Don’t stare, Lem squinted up toward the road again, office buildings bleached near to noon.

“I’ll let them know at Solaris you’re taking some time for medical reasons. But when you feel up to it you’ll need to come in and start the transition process.”

“Okay. Maybe a couple days.”

“The health plan won’t switch over for several weeks, so you’re still okay with the Wellspring coverage from Cortez you gave the hospital.”

“Good.” The pile of forms filled in with something, nobody asked him, they must have found the insurance ID card in his wallet, negotiated rate, deductible and co-pay, how much was an overnight room, probably admitted from the ER, must have been an ambulance, from way out beyond the arena somewhere, adds up to a lot of money, what if he blew off the job at Solaris, when did his coverage end, people declared bankruptcy over healthcare debts, did that cancel his child support.

“Do you want to swing by Medway and pick up a rental? We have a corporate Silver Card.”

Forever standing in the stretch-strap serpentine waiting line, uncushioned concrete pile-driving heels into spine up the back of the headache, only compact available at the moment Sir is a white subcompact Grio sedan, piece of shit, did decline or waive mean he wanted or didn’t want something, purchase the whole tank costs more or less than forgetting to fill up, was that a smudge or a dent above the wheel well to mark on the cartoon car, Lem’s fumbled rental agreement unfolded driving over Severe Tire Damage

piranha teeth Entrance Only, no. "Yeah, maybe tomorrow. Right now I need to get some sleep."

Backed-up traffic on the Edwards Mill Boulevard stoplight sequence timed to turn green when the next intersection answered acceleration with yellow to stop dead red, wait, and repeat, whence went everybody midday Sunday, home from church, a three-cheese sausage scramble in the corner booth, over the crosswalk and through the mall to grandmother's condo we go, out of the hospital on his own recognizance in his crusty concert clothes and no shower.

"Should we stop and pick up some groceries? There's a Torrey Market up ahead."

"No, I'm okay for now," Lem said. The left front crazy-wheel of the shopping cart newborn-baby wailed as it epilepted down the vanishing-point aisle of shining choices tiered higher than his head, double stuffed, zero fat, gluten free, all natural, low sodium, vitamin enriched, the chorus of consumptables throat-singing deep-down Gregorian overtones Bite me Eat me Suck me Chew me. Cleanup on Aisle Nine. Chose the best looking line but then the expired crumpled coupons and the missing barcode call for a price check and the card won't swipe and the broken egg and put those on a separate order with the exact change in nickels and pennies from the lint gum lipstick depths of the swagman tucker bag eternity, while Gudrun checked out Lem's cornucopia of unhealthy food choices and alcoholic beverage excess, no.

Gudrun signaled into the River Oaks curb-cut, stopped halfway down the row of intermittently occupied parking spaces, cross-palmed neutral, up-clicked the brake button-arm.

"Thanks so much. On your Sunday morning and everything. I don't know" Lem didn't know, why or how, what happened next, only that he needed a couple drinks, a dark quiet room, a pillow over his head, a hundred year's dreamless oblivion.

"You sure you're okay? I could walk you in."

"No, really, I'm fine." Lem got out of the car and crossed the drive to the open stairs up to the second level apartments. Gudrun idled, tracked him along the elevated walkway until the door of his unit closed behind him.

Small mercy Lem had left the blinds drawn down and the air-conditioning cranked high. No mixer but the gin chilled on the frig door shelf, he poured half a juice glass, drank

half of that. The cold double-shot rotor-rooted his throat and landed like molten lead in his oakum gut, which sent a burning blast-wave rushing up his chest and neck and cheeks, and wiped away the ache behind his eyes as it haloed a smoke-ring out the top of his head. Ah. Another swallow, two, softened the rigid cartilage in ankle knee hip spine and loosened Ezekiel's dry bones enough to sway and slump against the countertop bezel, but opened a valley in his stomach aching empty as a skeletal ribcage, something to eat. The leftovers Pat wrapped after the dinner four days ago, or was that four years ago, did she want to see him, or was she seeing Alec now, the salad gone to black green mush, the passage of time like an alimentary track turned what's once fresh into shit, though not as fast, the baguette bites as hard as broken geodes jagged brown outside and grey quartz voids within, but the risotto, Lem lifted the fitted glass dome dappled with underside dew drops from the baking dish flange, smelled all right. He spooned the cheese-glued buttery fungi gunk, not bad, cut the grease with sips of gin, with the midday blaze sneaking in around the edges of the blinds and blooming the dim room like a candlelit romantic rendezvous dungeon, until he finished the dish and killed the bottle and stripped down into the unmade bed and slept.

Chapter 22 Strip

Lem had not prepared a presentation. Somehow he assumed the airfare and the limo and the room, actually a detached garden bungalow, what the hotel called a casita, with living room kitchen bedroom bath and its own privacy-fenced hot-tub patio, at The Boulders resort, allowed him to sit silent and half-asleep through the two-day seminar subdivided daily by three group meals in a private dining room, morning and afternoon coffee tea fruit pastry breaks, and a cocktail party reception the first evening and a winery tour tasting the second. The moderator finished his brief introduction of Lem's name and title and affiliation. Twenty or so attendees sat at folding tables arranged in a U-shape in the low-ceiled second floor meeting room, slouching, sideways, or leaning forward, waiting. The previous presenter, head of some game company, had remained in his chair, sitting up square, eyes straight, hands folded on the table, and monologued in a raspy breathless monotone for forty-five minutes about the evolution of his company's rendering engine and its requirements for the future, no way Lem could sustain that kind of maniacal self-absorption, probably why that guy drove a new Ferrari and Lem a beat-up old Mondo. A shiny whiteboard spanned the wall at the jaws of the U, maybe Lem should stand in front and sketch some ideas, he brought no bullet-pointed charts and graphs to project, no ideas either. The stack of technical manuals on the table in front of him had pink and yellow sticky tabs feathering their pages, but what good were the bookmarked entries, he couldn't hold them up to the audience like toddler story-time and read the passages aloud. The spine of the topmost book, hardbound, cheddar-colored, bold black entitled MCL Data Book, what was that. Lem's eyebrows implored across the void of the U to where Greg and Dave sat, he tried to say 'Can you' or 'One of you', but Greg focused down at the enlogo'd mechanical pencil and complimentary cloth-bound note pad in front of him, Dave shrugged and vaguely uncurled his cloven pigs-foot toward Lem, mouthed 'No you go ahead'. After all, Lem was their company's Principal Engineer. Other animal people shifted against the enlarging silence, the moo cows contemplated what incapacitated their next speaker, the sheep-headed one bleated. Lem could talk about curve fitting, how he interpolated the sample points, but he had merely copied the basis matrix from a conference paper, he

couldn't derive the coefficients, couldn't even explain what they meant, and when the divisor went to zero and the approximation spiked to infinity, he just threw away the offending part of the data, how could he draw that on the board. Had to do something, say something, with everyone waiting and watching him. He stood up. The air was cooler, because he was naked, with an about-to-burst bladder backing up the usual futile waking tumescence. Oh.

The bed sheets wadded sweat-wet beneath him and Lem lay naked and chilled, but the light had changed, no longer a rectangular white corona around the eclipsing window shade, rather a softer blue-grey haze, had he slept past the north star and straight on to morning. No, the red seven-segment radio clock squared off 7:42, the dimming must be the dusk. When had he last dreamt anything other than fear, failure, shame. Including this waking anxiety dream, this evening after he had lost his company and crashed his car and drove away his family and what friends had he anyway and even the tremor of a possibility with Pat. He lurched gone limp to the bathroom and let the showerhead stream up to steam while he peed.

When he raised the blind behind the sofa, the headlights on the boulevard smeared past like fireflies, while their accompanying tires whined like failing light's mosquito feeding foray. Lem twisted the T-knob on the table lamp socket and blinked at the generic beige room and the blind-mute convex TV mirror and the castaway kitchen island, can't sit here all night, with nothing to drink. He had driven past a commercial strip across the road a ways up, certainly within walking distance, must be a package store open 'til ten, maybe even eleven.

Up the springy ivy mound between staked sapling sycamores separating the parking lot and the sidewalk on which no one ever walked, squelching on the prickly sprinkler-soaked Bermuda grass verge, Lem long-strided into the four lane, headlights oncoming a block away, diamond-dust glitter splattering the black tarmac, and up onto the scrubby snagging ice plant median strip to wait for the opposite traffic. Beer bottle, newspaper page, tight-wound diaper, potato chip bag, floated on the spiny green froth, with plastic paper bits and cigarette butts sinking under the spongy surface. The shadows went to sleep with the sunset while road trees buildings bled out to purplish gray, the by-contrast sky stabbed white-washed blue between the flattened fading tilt-up facades, and the sweeping

low-beams dry-etched scratch-board sudden texture on the tree-trunk bark, power-pole spiked splinters, curb-section seam juts, pacing the passing lights' intermittent rippled twins in the window wall of the after-hours office building beyond.

Lem leapt the far gutter onto the broom-smooth concrete walk, with the parking-strip planting on the commercial side of the street squeezed down to sparse dead weeds in the expansion joint edge crack, and turned toward the bright roadside signs mocking the sun's pink orange memory above the purple brown horizon. |Meecham Motors||New and Used||Sales Service Rental| blood-red block letters on white that blurred when driving by but loomed ahead forever on foot beyond the row of whitewash One Owner Low Mileage Cream Puff inner windshield assertions meeting bent echoes of the selfsame sign creased and curved on the car hoods and roofs. Fat black bumper-car bumper, simian-forehead fenders, oblong headlights of an eight-year old or so silver gray Nougat coupe, not a bad automobile, good gas mileage, Lem needed a car, easy financing no money down low monthly payment bad credit no problem. Free transportation until they came to repossess it, not very hard to find living right across the street, tow-truck potbelly big-beard bald guy name of Rooster or his ilk. The glassed-in showroom, its captive cars like aquarium furniture sunk inside the blue bubbled UV film, gave way to the Service Entrance driveway chain-link side-lot two-thirds full of sleepover customers, drive-train disabilities, bottomed-out struts, recall warrantee work.

Right beside the Meecham driveway, long white building stretching back from the road, flat roof steel siding, parking spaces on the far the side, unilluminated black italic block letters painted above the shuttered windows |A J Custom Cabinetry|, looked too big to be a showroom alone, maybe a warehouse, garage doors punctuating the lateral expanse, there, the ICBM cylinder-cone fat-ducted through the sidewall, the dust collection system, must be the woodworking shop. Fabricating the three-dimensional stretchers for his shaped canvas paintings, cutting the compound-angle shiplap joints, back in the art school woodshop, Lem loved the joiner, planer, compound sliding miter-saw, band-saw, ten-inch table-saw, the sweet clean softwood spruce sawdust, but figured he'd never afford a space of his own, let alone the stationary tools, one reason he sold himself to software, thinking someday. Then Suzi's ceramics studio came first when they started out in the city, until Annie and then the move to the suburbs, where Lem procrastinated another construction

project plus full-size fuel-fired kiln for Suzi in favor of Cortez. A decade gone where he postponed what he wanted for what Suzi wanted, which ended up less than or entirely not at all what she wanted, and he gained a wife he lost and child he loved but never particularly wanted, when what he wanted was, to work, and not to be alone, and now with his options worthless at Solaris, left with nothing but starting over at the bottom of the hill with the same damn boulder, if there was a hill, or a boulder, and not merely this passing traffic flat cement path going nowhere near where he wanted.

A shift of the air fluttered Lem's hair off his forehead, burnt toffee scent of engine exhaust, dentist's amalgam irrigation sprinkler smell, baked bitter talcum cooling cement, best time of day in Dixie with sundown dying into the dark. Sidewalk depressed the parking lot entry to [Golden Gun and Pawn] metal mesh against the window, shadow box of small appliance guitar Nubian maiden gilt mirror saxophone, too dark to see the watches jewelry handguns under glass and long guns beyond. Lem had never fired a gun, he'd held one once, one of Peter's, did Peter buy it in a pawn shop, back when they hashed out the headset plans for Cortez he brought over a leather snap-latch box big as a child's pretend-grownup briefcase, grey molded foam negation of a nickel-chrome black-handled revolver, unloaded, Lem hefted the weapon, heavy. Right in Lem's living room, Annie at preschool, Suzi out shopping, she'd kill him if she knew Peter had a gun in the house, Lem transubstantiated into the incarnate extension of that perfect machine, as if his hand grew out of the grip, metal made flesh, the glory of lethal omnipotence encompassing everything in his sights, what his fingers had evolved to trigger, his eyes had evolved to aim, and he swore never to indulge in the pleasure of so much power, and christ, that was without the bullets. Where was Peter and his convenient conspiracy, leaving Lem to wallow alone in his own incompetence while he marched left right step crack one two left right.

White-painted window-dressed lattice with ample tops, elastic slacks, and tented dresses hung from hangers behind beheaded baby-bumped womanikins fronting [Adelle's Maternity Fashion]'s unbulging white-lined parking profiles all barren at this hour. Pregnancy merited its own retail distribution channel, maybe even its own manufacturing chain, as did Big and Tall, but nothing special for Emaciated, or for Midgets, did they shop in Children's, and how about Amputees, or those Flipper people from the toxic drug exposure, but Annie was perfect, Lem taller than typical but flabby as average, although pleating the

waist band by two more belt holes of late, and Suzi gone from waif to rotund with the retained burden of child bearing. The baby they never named would be what, almost two by now, was that the beginning of the end, when Lem ignited the booster stage on a full-immersion double-shift startup schedule, and Suzi paged him from the lobby, she never came to the Cortez offices ever, so they could walk across the rain-wet parking lot, and sit on the low wall bounding the soggy drainage swale, where she told him that she miscarried. And Lem loved Annie more than life, but behind his wraparound hug and Suzi's sniffley cheek on his chest 'I'm so sorry honey', what he felt was relief, the clank of the anchor chain slipping free of the capstan and the whip-end last link xylophoning through the hawsehole, pitting his desperate obsession to make this company succeed versus neonatal sleep deprivation while backfilling housekeeping and childcare during Suzi's convalescence, with only a remnant of sentiment lingering in him toward her other than obligation and conflict avoidance. However, he suspected beneath his arms around her and behind his comfort and caring words, she saw through, she knew.

As if those teeny pigeon wings on his ankles and on the Prussian helmet could give him flight, the naked golden boy toy on the [Chrysalis Florist] storefront, wasn't chrysalis like an encased former flower-eating caterpillar, waved an oversized three-blossom bouquet, was he Mercury or Hermes, or both, if Lem lost much more weight he'd look more like a young Adonis, then all those Greek-love Senators and Philosophers hitting on him, with no little wings to fly away, and no bouquet. Sure flowers were pretty, pretty as a three-page purple prose paragraph flowering in Virginia Woolf, wasn't that who Pat aspired, but like printed paper pages, already cut dead, and wilted brown in three days, the glass vase water gone slimy green, or instead, send a live potted plant for the pleasure of killing it slowly. Lem never wired anyone any flowers. How about the handicap principle, sexual selection by the exhibition of fitness in excess enough to waste, the male peacock's tall tail tale, maybe Lem should spring to send Pat a dozen white roses every day, from an anonymous admirer, clearly his wit and intelligence alone weren't working. She didn't seem like the swooning romantic type, but who knew, at least he ascertained the other night that tomboy or not she was entirely female, though that interlude did make her bolt like a colt, what did she want. Seemed like women slept with the bad boys, the brutes, the lotharios, whose seed promised male progeny endowed with an inheritance seductive unto

the next generation to keep their code alive, while women married the nice guys who'd stick around and raise their offspring, cuckold or not, and who supplied sufficient resources to do so, which after Suzi and Cortez Lem had none, not even a car, and was he a nice guy either. Look at Pat with Alec at the concert, a messianic cult-leader wannabe, probably already a psychopath back in art school, like Hitler was, with all those half-naked chicks fawning and fanning him like a harem of concubines, and Lem so stoned he never even asked Pat if she was now sleeping with Alec. Or why she told Solaris that the headset didn't work and dumped Lem into this despond, well, contributed to his decline anyway, if indeed she did.

On past [Paws Pet Supply], then from animal claws to [Cindy's Nail Salon], after the abrasive clay, Suzi had hardly enough nails to cut and polish, and hands as tough as a woodcutter, plus throwing on the wheel and hand-building deployed her fingertips as tools, long nails would long since snap. Pat's hands felt office soft, nails short but shiny, maybe at most a clear polish, at least no makeup. Lem saw no point in the painted ladies, paint belonged on panels and canvas, not a powdery pretense of youth at a distance, as another fitness fertility fetish he'd read about, like the hourglass shape narrow waist indicating unpregnancy, and fashion preying on nails and hair as proof of protein intake, spike heels plumping the calf muscle to promise prolonged forage and migration, big boobs to feed the babies, fat stores in the big ass to outlast the famine. So did his lack of attraction to the cultural indicators of female fertility make Lem less fit, or less male.

Bit of iron-curtain Eastern Europe up next, no illuminated sign, a squat brown blockage set back from the road, no windows, handicap ramp entrance pushed in under a flat-roof portico like a slaughterhouse cattle chute, a couple flagless poles poking out of neglected plantings, beat-up blue barrel-top mailbox, crumble-rimmed cast-pebble trash bin, gun-metal letters glued along the parapet, [C UNTY MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES], ha, no O. Maybe they've got Peter, or they should. But Lem wasn't paranoid, maybe a little depressed, who wouldn't be, but not schizophrenic, because the visions weren't hallucinations, confused with reality, or dreams authentic only while asleep, or delusions like Peter's persecution, they were only Lem's overactivated imagination. The visions would clear up now that he stopped using the headset and stopped doing the drugs, see, they already had, this entire half-mile stroll free of any imagery except his observations,

associations, ruminations, memories, all perfectly normal. Unless he was actually still sitting on the sofa and the whole walk was a vision, or the whole weekend, Cortez, he never married, art school, the story of his life, of everyone's life, mass hysteria was okay, seeing and believing same as everybody else, only when one person saw what no one else saw, that was mental illness, or art, or prophecy. But even John on Patmos with all the wheels in wheels and ten-horned beasts knew he was imprisoned on the island, exiled like Lem out on Edward Mills Boulevard.

Naturally, because County Mental Health failed to avail anyone solace or sanity, its next-door neighbor awaited with the reliable remedy, |EZ Liquors| |Beer Wine| on the blinking yellow-lettered sign, no prohibition against selling alcohol within a hundred yards of a nuthouse. Across the asphalt strand the tide-line of tan cigarette filters, a few white, and package scraps and bottle caps met the dead lichen on the low curb seawall, sheened gray-green by the interior ceiling light-tubes segmented between the advertising posters plastered on the inside of the windows, hard to read the brand-names backlit, and the threshold step rouged a bit by the red neon OPEN. Lem thunked in the aluminum push-bar to open the plate-glass door and sound a flat-line chime to alert the stockroom of his presence, but two guys at the ready staffed the front counter and suspicioned his entry. Olive skin, purple lips, eyes close for discomfort lurking under jutting dark brows, the brothers or cousins in the family liquor business returned to their tiny TV soccer game. The overheads hummed and failed to reveal much of the yellow skip-trowel sidewall, rusty water stains bleeding below the ruptured acoustic tile, behind crumpled cartons on mostly empty erector-set industrial shelves. Past the aisle of dusty wine bottles standing sentry in cut-down cardboard boxes with the cross-cards removed, waist-high on stacks of their uncut kin, and past the wooden racks of better bottles in repose with their labels exposed, to the coolers that covered the back and near wall, stretching tall-boy singles and six-pack cans or bottles and hand-hold suitcase cases on their wire shelves abutting fingerprint fog doors, Lem found the unrefrigerated shelf of sodas and mixers and the tonic he wanted, and turned back, they kept the hard stuff up front behind the counter. Unlikely to find a fresh lime in a package store, but he ought to eat something, from the plastic poke-hole sacks hooked on end-bent rods, not pork rinds or slim jims or jalapeno chips, there, a ring-top squat can of mixed nuts, protein, nuts are nutritious. The more burly but equally surly

proprietor answered Lem's selection of his preferred gin by slipping the specified bottle into the single-sized prophylactic paper bag, and poking the item prices on the blackened square red buttons of his adding machine, their concave tops long-fondled clean of both grime and most of their white number and symbol signs. A silo-dispenser of popular cigarette pack stacks, with customer request frequency ranked by inverse height, unless recently refilled, included Lem's former brand, Darien Lo-Tar, he quit at Suzi's adamant pregnant insistence, can't smoke around a baby, bummed for a while at work, until the nightly nicotine withdrawal worse in the morning excruciating on the weekend, and her disgusted 'You've been smoking again haven't you', gave in and up the smokes for good. But now, what the hell, self-medicating as the mental health professionals euphemized, might improve his mood, he added a pack and matches please to his purchase.

Outside about as dark as it gets in the metroplex, a lighter blue smear lingered on down the diminishing boulevard, but under streetlights and store signs and security spots no star dots, sky more like a dirty purple indoor stadium dome with no suspended scoreboard man-in-the-moon. Lem clamped the bottle bag between elbow and rib, and for old times, slammed the pack on the heel of his palm, twice, hard, tamping the tobacco, then caught the side tongue cellophane and stripped the four sides to flutter away flimsy as a molted clear exoskeleton descending to join the curbside debris, next pried the foil folds and tore the edge against the overtop label tape, leaving attached the three-sided shiny spout to later re-lap over the opening, finally tapped the two-thirds closed top gently on at the index finger first knuckle until five white filter tips protruded unequal as organ pipes to pry out the winner, sliding straight and smooth with paper friction reticence. The sweet ripe loam smell evoked an autumn haymow from the paper cylinder dry-stuck to his spit lips, his thumbnail levered the matchbook cover off another twenty redheads, the rightmost torn like a sudden milk-tooth root release, its furry tail trapped between index and middle finger-pads, facing in with his thumb-side kicking the phosphorus against the flint strip, the crisp book turned aside but not closed before striking, the two-handed cup habit, breeze or no, like a floating wick in a creased orange bowl, Lem bent to almost touch the tip and draw in the fleeting flame, then backhand flip the ember match away extinguished in mid-flight. In-breath whispred through parted lips, a tiny puff errant, a punch in the throat, contracted jaws and gut to swallow the cough, a pause, exhaled a slow

spume white in the storefront sheen, and Lem turned back the way he came. With the bag cradled like a football carry, his free hand swung slightly, in step with the opposite foot, until it occasioned the cigarette back up to his lips for a two-strides inhale. Like slipping into well-worn jeans and broken-in boots for an afternoon working over a promising painting he had almost forgotten back in a warm light-filled barn he never knew, his stomach relaxed into a satisfied emptiness, his eyes filtered out the night-vision noise, his thoughts cohered and clarified like a proof by construction. Look, this was not so bad, he was alive, smart, young, male, white, healthy, he could make something happen, he'd done it before, escaped his parent's prison wearing nothing but self-loathing and made it in art school, taught himself computer programming with nothing but gumption, built a company out of nothing by force of will, he could do it again. Of course, there he was walking, the only person destitute enough to be walking, down this deserted strip carrying a bottle of booze and a pack of cigarettes and nothing else to show for his thirty-one years in the wilderness.

Water glass half-and-half gin and tonic, at least the apartment's ice maker worked, bare foot-heels smudging the glass-top coffee table, remote control advancing channels, Lem slouched back against the couch cushion and munched a mouthful of mixed nuts into a salty and pleasantly smooth paste. Like how the clever barkeep's bowl of pretzel party mix keeps the patrons thirsty for another drink and then hungry for another handful, rinse and repeat, Lem cycled through snack and sip while he circled through the evening's offerings, nothing on TV. He seldom drank in bars, why pay the three or four times premium plus tip for an uncomfortable perch on an under-padded stool, an overhead major league game of no interest whose commentary he couldn't hear over the jukebox'd chatterboxes shouting to make themselves heard, and a chance to fail to flirt with the kind of chick who would want to meet the kind of guy who tried to pick up chicks like her in bars, or was it worse to drink at home alone, was this his home. In his glass, the ice crescents diminished with successive re-pours, waned toward new-moon room temperature, not worth replenishing with cold quarter rounds from the far-away tray. The television surrendered part way into another one of those science-fiction cop shows where everything looks conveniently, for the sets and effects budget, like the present, with a few futuristic vacuum-formed panels tacked on, except in this future they have androids, which conveniently look exactly like

people, but who because they're machines act like awkward amateurs, wooden, and probably as inexpensive as inexpressive. Method acting: assume the persona of someone with no past and no personality. In this episode, a renegade robot rampages as the psychopathic, well, who'd expect empathy in artificial intelligence, serial killer leader of a messianic cult of degenerate androids and misguided humans, which our heroes, the misbegotten detective hunk former drunk, the toned martial-artsy big-hair girl, the garrulous grey-browed boss, the disheveled on-the-spectrum scientist, and their loyal good-android sidekicks, battle to the expected deaths, of the bad guys that is, after all the car chases, explosions, near-fatal, for the heroes, hand-to-hand combat, and saturation-bombing commercial breaks. With perfect proportion, the relevance of the inanity of the program and the insipidity of its sponsors, the almost invisible level of liquid in the aquamarine liquor bottle discernable only by the different index of refraction of the dim kitchen island distorted through the glass, the angle of Lem's repose and eyelash-fringed eyelid hinge probably still exhausted from the all-night hourly well-checks he didn't remember in the hospital, declined in unison.

Lem couldn't move his arms or legs, his body stretched out near horizontal, strapped down or sedated, but with his head propped up enough to see the bulletproof broad chest and bulky arms of Fremfeld, the rebel commandant, who stared unblinking expressionless into Lem's eyes. They wanted to know the whereabouts of Peter Chu, he's not in any danger, just need to clarify a couple questions about encrypted emotions in his dataset, do your country a service, but Lem had no idea where Peter was. At Fremfeld's signal, his twin henchmen, one shorter and stockier, the other sharp-nosed and wrinkled, amazing how lifelike these androids looked, advanced to Lem's side. Don't think about Annie Don't think about Annie. One pair of cold hands yanked Lem's head forward, another stretched the strap of the Bug around his forehead, careless of a strand of hair caught and nearly ripped out, and centered the device on the back of his skull. Don't think about Annie, they'll threaten his family, harm, kill his family to find out what they want. But Lem couldn't suppress the image of the pine-needled driveway, the steps to the deck of the porch he never finished, the autumn-red front door, the body-armored thugs kicking in that portal, Annie sitting upright sudden in her bed, awoken by the splintered crash, the slash of

bathroom light through her inch-open doorway bisecting the pink daisy-chain comforter and cutting across an orange-yellow ducky on her blue pajama sleeve.

"Who's there?" Lem startled, and struggled against the sofa's flytrap contractions, when the front door jambed against its hinges and humid dark street air exchanged the stale room.

"I brought you some groceries." The screen-lit bare legs of a figure bearing burdens swung from each hand crossed the carpet. Gudrun? Did Lem give her a key, or leave the door unlocked, would she crowbar the strike plate, what time was it. Half-lit by the white light bouncing out of the open refrigerator door, the intruder bent and lifted items from paper bags, turned to put them on the shelves, yes, straight nose strong jaw profile it was Gudrun, bent again, white-highlighted butch hair brushed back behind the ear, shut the door and slung something softer, a bread-loaf, beside the toaster. She folded flat the bags, secured them in an upper cupboard, came around the end of the island and powered off the television on her way toward the sofa. To greet the approaching ghost, her arms eroded and torso flattened by the diffuse streetlight seeping in the left-open blind, Lem formed questions in his mind that his tongue and lips tingled too thick to sound out, and fabricated motor programs that his muscles preferred not to execute.

"Let's get you to bed. You've got that big interview at Solaris tomorrow." Gudrun bent and hooked one arm behind his knees, pushed the other below his arm in between his back and the cushion, straightened her legs and lifted him clean to her waist, man she was strong. Six steps, sideways through the bedroom door like a thresholded bride, three steps more, Lem's head lolling gently like he had dozed off with knees and shoulders propped between the seats of a rowboat cut adrift at dusk on calm pond, the creak of an oarlock or the box springs as her knee indented the edge of the mattress and she eased him onto the keel of the bed. The pillowcase cool on his neck, and cooler the tickle on his chest, pressure then pull then the placket spread slack, she unbuttoned his shirt, was that okay, his shoulder lifted from the sheet when she pulled the sleeve off his arm, flopped flat, the shirt scratching his back snapped underneath like a tablecloth trick, Lem left lying unperturbed in place with the cloth whisked off the other arm. Two fingers in his waistband then the button unholed and the zipper growled down, two hands at his sides and his hips lifted enough to wiggle his pants and underwear off the hooks of his hipbones and butt, sinking

back, then feet lifted by the tug on his cuffs and the fabric tubes slid down and scraped over his knees and off, his pants gone too, naked, stripped by strangers and sort-of-a stranger two nights in a row, half-conscious, feet turned out apart, a chill sheen of moisture about his inner thighs and unacclimated groin. The top sheet tautened and yielded sideways from underneath his legs and feet, unfurled, and resettled like a parachuted shroud, modest, safe across his waist.

She stood beside the bed, a darker shape against the dark drawn shade where was it moonrise or only parking lot glow outlined the window frame, and angled elbows out at her sides, then up like a time-lapsed unfolding hatchling in its midnight nest, with a flutter of flimsy eggshell cast aside to the forest floor, her blouse, why would she undress, she stooped in a half squat at the side of Lem's eye, raising up one knee then the other between her hands above the horizon of the bed, slid off her shorts, what was this. The corner of the sheet peeled back as her hip hollowed the mattress, Lem drawn toward her like curved gravity, her knees swung up, her arm slipped around his neck, and her other hand, firm on his shoulder, turned him on his side, dead weight, paperweight, her fingers spanned his spine, pulled him toward her, his wrist fell on the flex between her rib and hip, Lem the lost lamb found far from the fold and borne home to rest. Her chest pressed firm and flat to his, no cushioning bolster of breast, the curve of her thighs met his, matched two to two, she pushed her head far enough in the pillow to press his slack mouth with her lips, wetted, parted, peppermint. Lem sank like heavy-syrup fruit, preserved and sealed, was this all right, should he rouse himself and raise an objection, ask for an explanation, but now he felt himself aroused, hardening against her belly, and her hard against his belly, had he at last embraced his ideal self, found his perfect reflection in the mirror, the two of him erect against each other, identical twins feeling what self felt other felt self felt.

Her arm slid from under his neck as she lowered him over supine, and pushed herself down along his side, leaving a remote chain of island kisses, damp from an undersea desert, barely surfacing on his chest and rib and near his navel and the ridge of his hip, as she swept the sheet away with her legs and left behind a blanket of tingling still air, to where she rolled over his knees and plied her hands beneath the small of his back, fingers aligned with the notches in his spine, pressing upward, and lowered her head upon him. Lem closed his eyes tight against the searing overhead operating-room light, they called

this twilight sleep, an anesthetic where he'd remain awake and aware and feel pressure, but no pain, did they ever explain the procedure, what was wrong, or out of place, below his waist. Wet and warm, pulling, suction, pushing, slippage, then a sharp tinge, sliding farther, his lower abdomen aching empty, what were they, drawing out his intestines, no, stripping the veins down the inside of his thighs, opening the marrow of his shinbones, or, inserting electrodes in the nerves, bright blue streaks from groin to feet, his toes froze in the wash of winter surf. The clamps around his spine immobilized his hips, good, don't want to twitch and have them slip or miss, the plunging smooth and slick, slicing, severing, pumping, purging, building pressure, all his ligaments loosened around the center of the excision, as if his entire body were drawn through a single point, but his hand moved, no straps, not restrained, or its motion didn't matter, his arm up off the operating table, lighter than the fluid filling the diving bell, buoyant, as if bound down for hours and involuntarily levitating on release, so what sort of instrument cleansed him, eviscerated him, he reached out and felt the back of the bellows, mechanical lung, evacuation pump, a hard ribbed half sphere, like the shell of a steel scarab, a metallic horseshoe crab, not the headset, not the Bug, his palm fell away brushing the bristly wiring stiff behind the flexible motor mount. He tensed, clenched, more than he could take, please, is the operation almost over, like a chunk of steak between the teeth, pressing, denting, aligning the incisors, until the surface fiber tears, muscle, mushroom, meat, resistant flesh cleaves all at once, smooth, slicing straight through, or like a body-weight barbell pressed against the chest, arms pinned, fingers wrapped, wrists twisted back, heaving, straining, the burning muscle tear, the tendon torment, the joints almost asunder, then a quiver, a slight shift, now a lurch up abrupt, gaining momentum, breaking through, gliding clean up and away, spent. Done, the armature released, the mechanism disengaged, the procedure purified, the process sublimated, and clear as summer snow, they let Lem sleep.

Chapter 23 Clinic

“Gudrun?” Lem snow-angel’d his arms under the sheet, the bed empty, as he expected, when did she leave, under his eyelids the light lashed around the window-shade, blazing like a laser torch cutting a rectangle through a steel-walled vault, must be late morning, Monday, of course she’d have gone to work. He ran his cotton-swab tongue between his coconut-husk lips and beached-seashell teeth, too much booze and why on earth smoke cigarettes again, right, Gudrun brought him groceries, and then took him to bed, or somebody did, it felt like a guy, or Gudrun was really a guy, not that Lem knew what a guy felt like, not like the surgery, or sex, or whatever that was, that must have been a dream, or a vision, but a real vision, was that she or he person wearing a headset, a medical machine, a metal monster. He must have passed out on the couch, and she carried him to bed, undressed him, and then what. Nothing felt funny, he reached down, encircled himself, soft, not sore, or sticky, or crusty, or anything at all, hard to say if anything had happened, not at all hard. Rolling onto his side, hooking the seam of the mattress with his hand to angle himself across, he peered over the edge, where were his clothes, there, on the chair, his pants folded on the seat, shirt draped over the back, see, he never did that, he always dropped them on the floor. His other arm levered underneath, his feet fell off the edge, he sat up, Jesus, their bone-saw had sectioned the back of his skull and their egg beater had churned his grey matter into throbbing meringue, who said the brain felt no pain. He stood, the room swayed a like the subway on a bad track tight turn.

Nothing on the counter in the kitchen, a glass in the sink, nothing in the refrigerator except a tonic bottle with an inch left in the bottom, so where were the groceries. At least the last of the tonic went down bitter biting sweet cold and scrubbed the lichen granite teeth. Nothing in the cupboards, a quarter bottle of gin, see, Lem would never put that there, and on the upper shelf two folded brown market bags, makes no sense, or were those there when he moved in. Naked crossing the living room rug, coffee table clean, couch cushions aligned, the shade half up but who would look in at or care anything about some hung over mixed up man in his midday daze, the front door was locked, in fact dead-bolted,

how could she bolt it from the outside, unless she had a key, maybe from the management company, the Central Security Agency pulled tricks like that, what had happened here. Anywhere. Last night after the crash, in the hospital, no, not last night, two nights ago. What had they done to him. What had he done. Identity theft, what had who done where and when.

The hot shower resurrected his body, reconstituted his skin, wait was that destroying evidence, of what, but left his mind no less muddled. Drebin had said that the MXP was a new compound they were testing, more intense, longer lasting, maybe all this was like flashbacks or aftereffects of the drug, that's all. Those pictures of death on the screens at the concert inside his eyes. His body in bed with Gudrun or some other guy. Not on the dining table, not in the end-table drawer, now where did he put the hospital forms and traffic tickets, those would prove what happened, part of what happened, where was his car anyway. Peter claimed the headset changed his brain, maybe that's what they wanted, to implant false memories, maybe that's what they did to Lem. He needed to talk to somebody. Figure this out. Somebody he could trust. Who wasn't part of whatever this was. Somebody anonymous. Right down the street, County Mental Health Services, he could walk over right now, no one would know.

Burning out here, and bright, walking slow as a see-through nematode writhing on the clean-sheet operating table under a white-hot surgical light bent wide as the sky, but over in the other direction, he didn't notice last night, or it wasn't there last night, a 24-hour convenience store [FASTOP] detour to buy a single-serve non-aspirin packet, fructose caffeine can of Koala Kola, too hot for coffee, cheap plastic sunglasses, fat turquoise frames, looked stupid, what a nutcase wears, but beats the glare. Silly-putty-face fat man made change, judged not Lem that he be not judged worth less than a carry-out cash-register career, shared the common isolation of the castaway and crazy.

The unmoving sidewalk inched backward as Lem lumbered forward, his progress much slower than the night before, like a dream of panicked pursuit plodding in place with no hope of escape, or else yester-eve's stroll was the dream, and/or the hot sun blurred the buildings ahead into a wavering mirage on an ever-distant horizon. Offices, cars, stores, as anonymous this morning as billboard movie sets, Lem walked in flatland, a painting on the plane whose third dimension projected an illusion of depth as seen on edge from a bugs-

eye view. Snapshots cast aside like a deck of playing cards bent near double between thumb and fingers until the fingertips eased up enough that the whole stack sprang free and flew all over the floor, that 'Have you ever played fifty-two pickup' prank, all face cards, white robe on the roadside, pill bottle, air-conditioned cubicle, girl in pajamas, late model sedan, small unsunned breasts, bottle of gin, notebook trashcan, Chinese eyes, a basketball, and so and so and so on. When the scattered images lose their sequence, with no suits or spots or numerals by which to reorder or re-rank them, then does a gut punch beat a blue Vexra, does a lawsuit trump a Caesar salad. Pry off the top of the skull and squash the ear on the white-enamel feed-tray and slide the exposed gray cortex into the spinning stainless-steel deli slicer, then shuffle the stack of remembered events seven times and deal solitaire. Who would want to read a random book like that, who could stand to lead an incoherent life like that, the Surrealists' Exquisite Cadaver, the parlor gamers' Consequences. Not amnesia, as many memories as anyone, not delusion, anybody involved agreed on each event, but a slide show without a story or a setting, this that the other, unordered, not even one damn thing after another, like the Semplar Syzygy projection screens, without an MXP explanation of the absence of causality, coherence, coincidence, or a sense of self itself.

A discard of cars in the County Mental parking lot, how many Mentally Handicapped spaces, did the driver's license vision test determine if an applicant saw what the sane consensus agreed to see, and what would the disabled symbol be, a white-on-blue cartoon of the Munch Scream man, hey, new business idea Munch Ice Cream Man white truck jingle bells to butterfly-net and straight-jacket the elusive crazies in who run up for a fudgesicle, toss them into the reefer in the back, through that heavy round-cornered little hatch with the oversized chrome hinges and clamping handle lever, and here's Lem walking right into the boobey hatch under his own volition, have to be crazy to go in there. Low dark late model sedan parked in the first row, a coincidence, not the chemist, or the CSA, or the cops, unless they were serving Lem a felony warrant like the detective said, Fleeing and Evading, did it have to be both, like if you fled but didn't try to get away, or if you stayed around but dodged and ducked them, that was okay, but what if they found something in the blood test, how could they know he was here.

Plate-glass Pull entry doors, another clamping lever handle, inside buffed brown-speckled tile floor, inch-worm-green walls, red framed In Case Of Fear Break Glass terrarium stuffed full of coiled flat constrictor snakeskin with a sleeping brass lamprey-head, perspective ceiling grid with alternating jaundice diffusion panels, on the left the scuffed ochre laminate counter embrasure defending the damsel of distress, Lem advanced slowly returning to Shiloh Christian High School with no idea why he'd been sent to the office, smoking in the stairwell, threw a book in class, tardy, dress code violation. He stood innocent before the first crotch-high notch in the long curtain wall, this was all a mistake.

"How may I help you?" Woman with wavy purplish perm, pointy cats-eye glasses, fleshy powdered face with dangly jowl dewlaps where the nose-side crease joined the frown tributary eroding the chin, how did Lem's mother know to move down here and get hired as a receptionist at the mental clinic across the street from his apartment in order to document for the record that he'd always been no good, told him so too, bitch hadn't aged a bit in ten years. This woman presumed she could help him even before she asked, a mere matter of How.

"I, uh, I don't know. I think I need to talk to somebody. My life is like, falling apart. I don't know what's real anymore."

"Name?"

"Lem. Uh, William. Narkis."

"Fill this out and have a seat in the waiting area, Mister Knox. Someone will be with you shortly." The gatekeeper held out a form restrained to a clipboard. Lem took a blunt miniature-golf scoring pencil from a card box on the counter. See, she helped him already, told him to use an alias, Knox, to keep him safe from unforeseen consequences and unidentified pursuers and his parents.

The waiting room circumferenced pastel pink stackable fiberglass bucket chairs, like severed whale tongue trophies displayed on spindly chrome stands, seats worn through to whitish fibrous strands on the lips and in the concave buttock contact zone. Luckily, the left wall offered three unoccupied chairs in sequence, so Lem could avoid a seat adjacent to the woman with cheeks sucked into her missing denture maw who hand-over-handed over-and-over one long matt-lock of yellow-white hair, the gray-stubble ski-hat man with flannel shirt spread one-unbuttoned to reveal a kite of hairy creased abdomen who hum-sang God

Bless America, the hunched over giraffe-limbed blond girl with arms and legs contorted double-crossed who bobbed and sobbed softly, the break-out Adam's apple guy so skinny his eyeballs almost hung from springs who sat flagpole straight and machinegun chewed gum or his tongue, or one of the other half dozen denizen zombies whose appearance assured Lem, hey, you're not so bad off after all.

LAST FIRST MI M/F AGE DOB SSN STREET CITY ST ZIP Lem filled in the address of an apartment he once visited invited by people he barely knew to a St Patrick's Day green-beer Irish whiskey pass-out party he left after fifteen minutes. EMPLOYER unemployed INSURANCE none. Down double columns of every conceivable ailment and treatment and pre-existing condition he ran two vertical lines through all the NO check boxes. SMOKER no ALCOHOL some DRUG USAGE no. Tiny pencil cramped up dysgraphic with its recessive graphite nubbin sheathed by facet-wood strands to where each stroke scored against Lem's intent. HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR PROBLEM. Uh, with difficulty? I'm clicking five hundred channels of programming without a TV guide? I built a device that demagnetized the directory index block in my brain? I'm locked inside a secret experimental CSA hallucinogenic sensory saturation chamber? A five-year-old girl blew away the dried dandelion of my mind? Keep it simple stupid. Lem wrote, Anxiety.

Black-rimmed white moon wall clock with thin red second-hand hopping each hash-mark and falling slightly back unsure whether to take the time, apparently the tall-skinny short-fat minute-hour comedy duo arms moved not at all, as stationary and disconnected as everybody else in the room who watched the unchanging face, actually only Lem watched, time stopped long ago for the others, who looked at nothing nowhere, not up at the second hand satire. A cool-front of leaking-antifreeze conditioned air with an evaporative-cooler pond-scum taint advanced evidence of unwashed unwiped unbrushed impersonal hygiene, too long in here to hold his breath, like pushing to pee more quickly in a biker-bar broken-door bathroom at last call, mouth breathing, this place can drive you nuts. Lem had read that if he wanted to be seen right away in an Emergency Room, complain of chest pain, what should he say here, probably that he's been thinking about harming himself or others, however, that might get him locked up on suicide threat watch, bad idea. What was the idea.

The stiff coveralls didn't fit, and in the worn-out cloth slippers, how many other fungal feet wore those before, his bare ankles grew as cold as the steel shackles that rubbed on the shin-bone end-bumps when he shifted his feet, and the chain slung over to the brass padlock on a rusted ring sticking out of the raw concrete floor clanked like a tangled wind-chime. The snap-on cuffs on his wrists hurt too, like that Durer drawing, praying hands, they clamped Lem's wrists together with nothing to do but pray to nothing he believed in for an end to endless waiting on this wooden bench, when would they give him his goddamn phone call. What if nobody answers the one call he gets to make, or if he calls collect and they decline the charge, did that count, or what if the party on the line had already sentenced him to a life without pardon and eternal damnation to follow, so he can't call his parents, and Suzi, well, Suzi's not able to come to the phone. The thatched black plastic stock fit warm in his fingers, but the exposed chrome spine of the frame cut cold across his palm, while the curve of the trigger against his index pad felt neither warm nor cold, only heavy as the keystone holding up a cut-stone cathedral vault, eager to slip and bury him. The impact knocked off her glasses, blue eyes wide, she couldn't see without her glasses, knocked her flat back on the faux-Persian carpet flowers, endowed her with a new third eye, a lidless dime-sized pupil in her forehead dead center, maybe she could see out of that one, but considering the amount of blood and bone bits and brain matter on the floor and the sofa behind her, blew the back of her skull clean off, like blasting off a Bug of bone, so she couldn't see anything anyway. At least she finally shut the fuck up.

"Knox?" A young woman in brown slacks and yellow top who appeared to be on loan from a sleep deprivation study of the inconsolably aggrieved, loon-called Lem's alleged name. He lurched up like a bell-conditioned dog and held out his clipboard, trying to turn in a ten-year late loony-bin take-home test she wanted nothing to do with.

"You'll be talking to an Assessment Specialist, Mister Timmerman." The woman had already turned down the hallway, spraying Lem's fate over her shoulder like spittle in a gale. She paused at the third doorway down, its rippled milky upper pane lit by what lay distorted beyond, rapped twice on the varnish-amber'd stile, turned the knob, and like sowing bad seed cast the door halfway open. Lem entered the office, blinds drawn at the windows, a wood-frame chair with sackcloth-upholstered seat and backrest, then a wide battleship desk, defending the reason no one rose to answer a knock and open the door. An

immense man filled the swivel chair behind the desk like those rippled bulbous limestone deposits that mound around a mineral-rich hot spring, skin the same cream-colored crumbly porous travertine, a sitting stalagmite of a man, who made the clerk at Fatsop look like fitness fanatic.

“Please, have a seat Mister Knox.” Timmerman’s voice whispered high and sibilant, an inner-tube air leak, an underwater scuba mask, a stranger waiting in a van with candy at the schoolyard.

Lem stepped to the chair, bent his knees, looked behind him at the seat as if it had teeth, sat slowly with the clipboard clutched between his hands, should he put it where on the desk, pen pencil set, tear-off calendar, stapler, green in-out box stack, single polygonal felted leg propping a plated picture frame, back of a, judging by the tiny splined setting knobs, clock, or stand up again and pass the form across. Timmerman’s conical head nestled into his neck and steady sleepy eyes peekaboo’d from under marshmallow folds like a female mantis measuring a mate.

“So, should I like tell you about my childhood, my parents and stuff?” Lem examined a framed poster on the wall above the man’s head, a race car, one of the flattened tubular ones with the engine sticking up behind the helmeted driver and no fenders but an airfoil on the tail, so like Formula One, blurring the track underneath and smearing the fan grandstand behind, did this guy race in a previous incarnation, or just enjoy spectating, Sasquatch fetishing a size five stiletto.

“Do you have a problem with your childhood?” Like those kids’ cartoons where they scrimp on animation by only updating the lip cell layer, the Timmerman pink-painted face froze on the reverse of its black inked outline and only the center purplish pucker overlay compressed and pulsated.

“No, I mean, not any more. Since I got out of the house. My parents were really strict, more than strict, like crazy fundamentalists, no drinking, no dancing, no card playing. We didn’t even have a TV ‘til I was in high school. And all that spare the rod crap. Actually, I don’t remember much of anything before I started getting in trouble in sixth grade.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“Just the usual stuff, shoplifting, vandalism, cutting class. I started smoking. Getting high. Like everybody else.”

“Were you ever arrested?”

“No, no, nothing like that. After I went away to college and found something I cared about, that I was really good at, and people appreciated me, I had a lot more important things to do.”

“Perhaps we should focus more on your present issues in the limited time we have.”

“Well, my wife is divorcing me, she got the house, and my company just got bought, so I lost my job, and then I totaled my car. And I think I may have slept with a guy. I mean, I’m like, straight and everything. So I don’t know what’s going on any more.”

“How about drug and alcohol use?”

Better to say nothing about Drebin’s compounds, besides those weren’t really drugs, they weren’t illegal. “Sure, I drink, yeah.”

“How much do you drink in a day?”

“I don’t know. A six pack. Or a bottle of wine. Half a bottle of gin.”

“Every day?”

“It’s just to help me relax. With all the other stuff going on, I mean. You know, take the edge off in the evening. So I can sleep.”

“I think you may be an alcoholic. The events you’re experiencing now are sometimes called ‘hitting the bottom’. When you realize you’ve lost everything that matters to you because you can no longer control your drinking. The sexual encounter you can’t recall in any specific detail? That’s called a ‘blackout’.”

“No, it’s not like that at all. I think it’s the stress. Or anxiety? I feel out of control, like I don’t know who I am anymore.”

“Yes, denial is extremely typical. But clearly, with the amount of alcohol you’re consuming, your wife has given up on you, your employer has fired you, and you’ve crashed your vehicle driving under the influence. So you need to take an honest look at your addiction, that’s the first step.”

“No, the police didn’t. I wasn’t drunk.” This guy wasn’t going to believe anything besides the booze unless Lem gave him another explanation. “Look, I know this sounds crazy, but I developed this technology that captures images of what you visualize. Like a headset, that you wear? I thought this headset could enhance artistic creativity, but now the military wants to use it for interrogation. Anyway, we dramatically improved the

resolution by adding feedback, reversing the sensor field to amplify the image. And I think this messed up my visual cortex somehow, now everything is a disconnected image, but really vivid, so I can't tell what happened or what I imagined. That's what the problem is."

Timmerman's fleshy eye-folds narrowed further, his rosy lips formed a lower-case O, like a navel dent in the broad belly of his cheeks. "Hmmm. An alcohol-related psychosis or hallucinosis would be extremely rare in a person of this age and condition. Unless brought on by a pathologic intoxication, which does not present here. Rare. But possible." Timmerman stopped muttering to himself and looked at Lem. "You haven't abruptly stopped consuming alcohol within the past several days?"

"No, I told you, it's only at night. To relax. But these visions, I don't think they're hallucinations, see, it's like my memory and my imagination have merged, and I lost track of the story of my life, the order of events, what caused something else, so it's all like the same? Like an endless storm of images."

"Yes, well, I understand, Mister Knox. Let's try to use the time we have left to help you address these issues." Timmerman shifted a huge tapering arm, hey, he could move, and swung a dainty hand over to the top of his desk with surprising grace, to retrieve a day-planner-type notebook. "We'll want to get you into Group right away. There's an opening weeknights at six thirty right here at the Clinic. You'll start tonight, and they can set you up with a sponsor."

"A group? Boy, I don't know. You mean like a bunch of guys sitting around telling their stories? I don't see how that's going to help. I was kind of hoping to talk to like, a psychiatrist, or maybe, since it's a visual perception thing, a psychologist? Somebody who could understand what's happening in my brain and help me sort it out."

"Yes, of course. But trust me, joining a group is the best course for you. The recovery rates are quite impressive. And it's actually very simple, people sometimes make it sound much more complicated than it is. You simply accept the fact of your addiction, and your reliance on a 'higher power'. However you envision that, of course. And then you acknowledge your mistakes and make amends to all the people whom you have harmed with your addiction. Those are the main points."

This was pointless. Go sit on a folding chair in a stifling room every night for the rest of his life listening to rheumy toothless ex-drunks brag about how badass they used to be,

jeez, a higher power, right back in Shiloh Christian Bible Class, need the power to get higher more likely. "Isn't there somebody else I can talk to?"

"No, once you've been seen by an Assessment Specialist, you need to follow the prescribed course of treatment, within the resource constraints of a Public Welfare Agency, subject to state and local statute. Of course, you're free to seek alternatives in private practice if you wish."

Yeah, as if that alternative was free. "But see, if I could just explain"

"I'm afraid that's all the time we have. Six Thirty this evening. The lobby will be closed, but come round the side entrance and you'll see a sign indicating the meeting room."

Back out in the lobby, Lem lay the clipboard on the counter, but his, it turned out, seventh grade Latin teacher with the cleft lisp that made the hic haec hoc declension sound so ludicrous that his imitation of her earned him a detention, was talking on the phone, not in Latin, and ignored the completed form whose misinformation apparently mattered to no one. Outside he slipped on his gag glasses against the welding torch parking lot, and EZ Liquor next door advertised far better therapy for his undiagnosed ailment, but he was no alcoholic, walk away, who did this Timmerman think he was, Lem belonged in no group like that, fuck him anyway.

Chapter 24 Market

Up ahead at the next intersection, twin pipe-poles propped overhead a white slab that almost revealed Torrey Market in the smog haze humidity that defocused the late morning, disappeared the power lines, and diffused the green now yellow, wait, red traffic signal into an instrument-landing runway light. The store where Gudrun suggested stopping for groceries after the hospital, or where she bought him some groceries later that night, was that last night, if she had brought him any when she came over, if that was Gudrun, or anyone, but Lem found nothing in the apartment this morning, and he should eat healthy now, that he quit drinking. Yep, tilted off the edge of the sidewalk, one wheel breaching the parking space tire-stop stone-loaf, a chrome-cage shopping cart, rusty around the wire welds, mop hairs twined around the wheel hubs, store-branded red toddler leg flap upright, a skeleton stripped clean of anything edible an eighth mile from its den. No way was Lem old or demented or wearing an overcoat and galoshes in this heat enough to shuffle behind a shopping cart of any wares the six blocks back to his apartment, besides, one black-sheep bag-full that he could switch hands when his shoulder ached should be plenty of food to start, as long as he forewent anything frozen in this outdoor oven.

The entry door awoke on his approach and shuddered open, piston hissing, hinges whinging, as a startled cold-air ghost gazelle bounded around him to melt into its herd on the savannah outside. Lem needed a visual airlock, an impression compression chamber, in which a blank beige expanse incrementally coalesced into stacked squares of color, then letters and numbers, then endless horizontal chrome-edged price-tagged rows of products, so that his eyes could adjust gradually to the boggling berserk cornucopia that spilled supermarket surfeit. The commonplace SPECIAL quantity-for-price poster atop the towering rampart of polychrome packages at the thrust of every aisle, the tiered bastion islands of ziggurat rainbow produce in the clearing, the battlements of celebrity magazines and candy selections gauntleting the check-out starting gates, all at once struck Lem's eyes like a fusillade of burning arrows. He blinked, pried a tisket-tasket basket from its nest, and advanced through the speeding cross-traffic of luge-launching yoga-moms building

momentum behind their high-mounded sleds with their child-coxswains sucking fruit chews, eighty-count disposable diapers and gallon whole milk jugs secured below in the steerage. What did Lem want here, and why did the wide cacophony of every conceivable edible entity smell like nothing at all, other than faint squeegee cleaner and freezer-case ozone and metallic ticker ink, did they filter the food odor from all the pop-art imitation packaging, like Annie's toy kitchen plastic cheese and peas and burger bun, 'Here's your dinner daddy', smells like pretend.

Down the dry goods, four brand-names of forty shapes of pasta, twenty varieties of dried legumes, instant slow brown white tame wild short long grain rice, Lem made rice with mushrooms and cheese for Pat, not bad even leftover cold. How did Lem misunderstand, she took off her clothes, most of her clothes, at the creek, turned her firm squared cheeks, then sitting on the couch she kissed him, widened smooth thighs and tensed against his hand, but ran away when he touched her, did he push too fast, wanted all the way right away, that perfect immersion, that oceanic ontogenesis, over in simple minutes, but more than lust. He wanted the cliché completion of himself, muse, soul mate, true friend, boon companion, alter-twin, remember that altered meant neutered, the tomboy, the titless slimmed-hip desideratum, self-object, mirror image, body double, was that why he dreamt of the Gudrun-guy, man was he messed up, he should leave Pat alone. Plus she lived with, was almost engaged to, this man Brian, whom Lem nearly knocked down, and now he led her into Alec's aura, and the psychedelics, and his sick-sex sycophants, was that why she trashed Cortez with Solaris, no that happened before. But maybe that clinic idiot, Timmerman, was right, and Lem had harmed people, had hurt Pat, she never did call him back.

Into the ethnic ghetto, Mexican habanera salsa, Indian dahl curry, Thai rice noodles, apparently Italians are fully assimilated, Dutch dispatched to chocolate, Germans exiled to sausage, Swedes meat-balled, French fried, but here's moo shu sauce, Lem never saw Peter eat Chinese, some heritage allergy or aversion. Peter if seen to eat preferred burgers plain and fries, or more often only his elixir Clear. He and Lem had lounged on the Unicom common-area couch and discussed what was known and not known in their philosophies, Peter attempted to explain the nine dimensions of string theory to Lem without the math, Lem tried to convey how found objects like Duchamp's urinal could be fine art, Peter

claimed in a thousand years people would look back on how clever we were to burn all the fossils fuels and prevent the coming ice age, Lem convinced him to ditch the steady job and start what was to become Cortez. And now where was Peter, after Lem dosed him with MXP and the headset revealed whatever that was about Annie, maybe sprung a trapdoor to a dungeon underneath, after trapping him in the uncertainty principle of probabilities he couldn't predict, under Frank's incessant harassment he couldn't stand, and he ran, even Mary knew not where, the police would have said if jail or hospital or dead, gone to ground, underground, got his gun, god knows. What kind of friend would coax him out of the simplified cell where he confined himself sane, stress-test him with strangers, electroshock his brain with the drug and the Bug, right, a friend like Lem, fallen from the foredeck and frantically thrashing for a piece flotsam from his former life to keep himself afloat, without a thought of diving down to find Peter.

Around the corner, a century of breakfast cereals, corn rice wheat oat puffs flakes checks discs raisin nut marshmallow fruity cinnamon chocolate honey, there's Choc-a-Bits, Annie loves those. Suzi sent Lem to the store with her list, twenty laps around before he found where everything hid, four times as much food as he'd ever buy by himself, 'Daddy I want Choc-a-Bits', why not, then unloading at home, Suzi unloaded 'She can't have those, what were you thinking.' An unspoken 'Maybe kids like crap cereal', or that Lem gave in keep Annie happy, because he had other things to think about, and he cared more about being seen to be a good father, 'Oh look at that man grocery shopping with his darling daughter, how patient and attentive he is', than dealing with discipline and tantrums and life lessons, when he'd rather be at work. Distant as his father, home at five-fifteen, the paper, prayer parentheses around the same seven suppers recycled every week, meat and potatoes, our daily bread, the Bible chapter, and Lem knew not satan's sugared cereals, prayed for cool blue jeans and desert boots, gave no thanks for good leather-soled shoes and cuffed wool dress-code pants, suffer the children to wear what they want, to eat as they please. He loved little kids, his Annie, in small servings, sculpt her a dinosaur diorama while she pounds out a play-doh pancake, play the push-button game with her balanced on his outstretched knees, 'Whoops that's the trapdoor button', but the boredom of reading those cloying puffy-tale golden books, the urgency of coercive feeding and washing and brushing and dressing on schedule for school, the deep sleep snap to a nightmare howl or sudden

onset bedside vomit, how did Suzi do that all the time. Lem owed Annie more than an occasional paternal performance home on leave from his more interesting mission, now not even home, how would he entertain her through the hours in an empty apartment, he hadn't even called her.

Out into the fresh food periphery, ice floes, sprinkler hose, leafy greens, tuber roots, floret heads, waxy orbs, unidentified pest-insecticide, or certified organic who can tell for twice the price. Suzi wanted to go strict vegetarian, Annie adhered to an exclusive off-white cuisine, allowing yellow toward cheese and red if pizza/spaghetti, Lem ate what he found in the frig at night or drove-through in the afternoon, but Suzi's mostly plants included enough buttered bagel and parmesan pasta to pack on the post-pregnancy pounds. That primeval evening Suzi surprised him in the school painting studio, 'Hey, do you work all the time', so slight and fresh he assumed her to be a visiting high school freshman, not a college peer, and they went from there out for coffee, and back to his flat. So proud to serve her a late supper, the split pea stew he made on Sunday with the ten-cent limp celery soft-spot onion supermarket discards and ate all week, not as a vegetarian, but as the art student's diet plan drawing down his summer savings because his parents declined to subsidize his sinful lifestyle, and Suzi said 'You eat this every night?' So how could he blame her, if easy-come software and the foreplay of fortune had seduced him away from when they stayed awake until their first dawn together so enraptured talking art that they forgot to have sex, and when they did, it felt as predestined as darkness on the face of the deep, or complain that after three years of long-distance calls and passing-through liaisons she wanted to marry or move on, and he knew enough to say, I do, not want to be alone, and on what grounds after they made a home and made a new life in Annie, could he find fault with her for finding his alienated affection and his focus elsewhere intolerable any more.

Why were there like twenty varieties of apple, green red yellow round pointy-tailed tart sour sweet soft crispy crunchy, and only one banana, two grapefruit, three oranges, not counting the midgets, and a couple each of the stone fruits. The entire second semester at art school Alec ate only fruit, claimed that the ascetic augmented the aesthetic, a process of spiritual purification, and Lem made him a daily joke about fruit bats or fruit cakes or frugivore monkey seed dispersal. But Alec persevered with painting, yeah all that Age of Aquarius but at least art, while Lem tried to cash in on computers for of all things military

intelligence, which probably broke his brain and left him bankrupt to boot, who's to say Alec's not onto something in the syzygy synergy cosmic consciousness crap, at least he shows and sells. Lem abandoned his art, maybe he mocked Alec out of jealousy, or an engineer's bourgeoisie belief in nothing beyond bits and business, Alec anyway tried to use the headset for art while Lem never bothered, ended up as what he once despised, a literal-minded mercantile philistine who looked down on Alec the artist from his own empty despair.

How did they ever clean the long blade strung around the six-spoked wheels concealed inside, did they clean, the blood-dusted band-saw that cuts through flesh and bone behind the Butcher section glass-front chunks of dead muscle, fish fowl and formerly hoofed, fallen on the warm side of the spectrum, white yellow orange pink red brown, slapped flaccid on tray-top scales and rolled up in plain brown paper parcels, incognito pieces of anonymous animals. Frank and Ronald and the Raptor Venture partner Baker allowed Lem along to dinner when they sealed the Cortez first-round deal, at Bentley's, white cloth and crystal, well beyond Lem's pay-grade, and though the company was paying, an early return on investment, Lem went with some kind of pumpkin ravioli sage nutmeg Mornay, which was awful, but the only entrée he understood, other than the last word. Frank sawed through, stabbed, and chewed a 20oz slab of rare steak whatever au poivre meant, not poverty by the price, befitting the alpha-male carnivore. Those hirsute hydraulic forearms pumping testosterone, true, paid the price of early male-pattern baldness, but imagine owning the buff bulk to swagger through the world, and how big was his dick. Frank found the funding, incorporated the company, outfitted the office, brought Lem on board, and after two years, Lem never got the product into production, never filed the patents Frank wanted, barely even got the headset working, and now he blamed Frank for the failure, was that fair.

No candlestick maker but now the Bakery, or the shelves of plastic-wrapped loaves and bags of buns baked elsewhere, the thick pink Thiebaud sample special-order birthday cakes, the glass-door display case of quarter-pound cookies and sundry seeded bagels and diverse donuts, the waxed paper serving squares to keep fingers off the goods the servers served themselves, or for the dainty, the blood-orange blunt-tooth spring tongs tainted with glaze flakes and sesame. Greg brought donuts to all the engineering meetings on his

own dime, powdered chocolate jelly cake cruller assorted dozen, the ritual management motivational tradition for startup employees working double time for a half-dollar unhealthy donut and free soda-pop. Why should Lem disparage Greg for lack of imagination when he staffed and scheduled and supplied and mostly kept product development on track, or would have, if Lem had held up his half with a system that fully functioned and a less dysfunctional cofounder than Peter, plus Greg never got pissed off about the screw-ups or the slippage. Any why resent him for bagging that lanky catwalk wife Terry, but what was with that, Frank Lem could see, the muscles and the money and the brute charisma, but how did melon-head beady-eyed pocket-protector Greg attract a woman like that, charity fashion luncheons with Sarah Frank's wife, Suzi wouldn't, couldn't, go near them. And Lem could have made friends with Greg, helped him weekends work on his restored bright-red post-war Terranger, one of those that looks like folded cardboard with the headlights squeezed between the front fender bends, or stood beside him on the sideline and cursed the ref at his son's soccer game, was the boy named Karl, or done whatever it was guys did who didn't want to work all weekend alone.

Three quarters around the grand tour, approaching the span of stained black-belt flatworms feeding the scanners and swipers at the registers that guarded the stacks of charcoal brickette and canine kibble and garden mulch bags blocking the windows, why bother buying in bulk, pieces of plants and chunks of carrion, to boil or broil or fry, when here's the Deli section, ready to eat. Turkey and Swiss on wheat, that's a non-alcoholic recommended daily allowance, he left his plastic basket useless on the floor before the sandwich selection. Dave blathered on about the world's best corned beef sandwich back in his hometown, a thin-sliced slab the size of his fist, slathered with mustard on sour caraway rye, all he talked about wherever he and Lem had lunch, but why fly out there and bring one back and stuff it whole down his goddamn throat 'til he choked to death. Dave loved his life and his Mohawk delinquent kid and his dowdy needlepoint spouse and his quarter-acre colonial revival house as much as he loved his corned beef sandwich, what was so wrong with that. With his contribution to Cortez more smiley sports-talk sociability than sales or marketing, or were those different, he Dale Carnegied his positive thoughts to his full potential, plump and happy, was that worse than Lem's solitary jobless detox deli selection among the Monday morning market-basket mothers.

Lem ate half the turkey sandwich standing in the Express Checkout proof that shoppers can't perceive more than Fifteen Items, perhaps Items are Ideas, all cartons or cans but instances of one canonical carton or can, all fruits and vegetables mere shadows of one ideal Fecundity, so multiplicity doesn't count, but Lem paid the barcode for both halves plus the bottle of water. If he ate lunch inside the store, then slept hidden atop a triple pallet tier in the stockroom until the food digested, evacuated in the employee restroom, and walked out without paying, was that shoplifting. He finished the second half while knight-stepping diagonally across the parked car hedgerows, pulled the water bottle from his back pocket to flush the mayonnaise sheen, and took to the sidewalk, redundant plastic packaging in each hand awaiting a waste trash garbage recycle donation.

An oncoming car, a teal Abraxas, slowed and came to a stop at the curb, in the right traffic lane, with no shoulder or parking along the Boulevard, provoking annoyed braking and merging and acceleration around it. The passenger window powered down and the driver leaned across the seat as Lem came alongside.

"You're not answering your phone!"

Lem bent toward the window, a blond-haired chiseled-cheek young woman, holy shit, it was Gudrun, he should have recognized her car, what was she doing here again, was it again, what did she think he thought about last night. "Uh, no. I went to get a sandwich." He upturned the glinting plastic wedge pack at his side as if it explained everything. "Hey, did you come over last night?"

"No." A car honked behind Gudrun, swerved into the left lane, glared past.

"Oh. I had this weird dream I guess. Sorry." For asking, for having the dream, for not knowing it was a dream, for not answering the phone, for blocking traffic, maybe Lem should apologize for everything, and make amends to Gudrun along with everybody else.

"Come on and get it. They're expecting you."

Lem opened the door and the warm leather bucket and cold dashboard blast fit him into the seat like memory metal while Gudrun punched the coupe up to forty-five. "Who's expecting me?"

"Solaris. Barry Tarkoff, the CTO. Your orientation interview."

Who the fuck was Barry Tarkoff, last week Lem was a CTO, back when there was a Cortez, so what was he now, a thrall summoned to an inquisition at Solaris it sounded like.

“Oh.” Lem turned the empty sandwich container over in his hand, couldn’t ditch it on Gudrun’s floor mat, some clever person envisioned how to cut a square-slice sandwich on its diagonal and stack the two triangles inside an extruded clear gable roof with the snap-in attic floor turned up to display the otherwise hidden innards to a passing appetite. Clever.

Chapter 25 Headquarters

“Have a seat Mister Narkis and I’ll let Mister Tarkoff know you’re here.” The appropriately pretty executive assistant in the suitably revealing red dress and requisite upswept blond chignon picked up the phone and curled her fingers like hydro-planing out of a car window in order to depress the intercom button while protecting her long purple fingernail. The black leather seat straps of the knock-off Breuer chair squeaked when Lem sat and leaned back. He’d never before been inside Solaris Global World Headquarters, redundant, but the full company name was Solaris Global Corporation, they could have added Planetary to make sure, he’d driven past often enough, you couldn’t miss the cluster of blue-glass office buildings from the beltway. In this antechamber, wheat straw fabric on the walls, oversized exotic flame-grained wood door, was that bubinga, the company certainly threw money at the décor, too bad none landed on Lem, no obvious wall clock, how long would he have to wait, the woman busied herself with the almost nothing on her X-legged desk, more of a table actually, no front panel, her bare knees slightly parted, dress hem high and taut across her thighs, a concave T-stem tunnel summoned Lem up into its shadow, so he looked out the window.

The side of the adjacent building filled about a third of his view, a grid of bronze-channeled glass panels, but the bluish anti-UV tint and the reflected distortion of the building from which he distracted made it impossible to see inside. The corners of three more structures in the complex, turned increasingly toward Lem because their diagonal axes pointed toward the center of a circle of seven buildings, all square, identical, with seven stories, completed his vista, with enclosed glass walkways connecting the third and fifth floors of the third and fourth visible buildings, with replicants likely connecting all the other buildings, considering the four more of the same which Lem had seen fronting the parking lot. This needed a diagram. Actually, there was a diagram, the Solaris white-on-blue logo labeling the cover of the annual report on the glass-top table beside him. A circle, actually a seven sided polygon, was that a heptagon, ringed with seven equally spaced squares, looking more like diamonds because they were rotated so their opposite corners pointed in and out, like a star, so a quasi-stellated heptagon, or like the stylized rectangular

flame tips of a corona with no sun in its center, Solaris, get it. Outside, in the voided middle of the full-size version sunk a small round artificial lake, with paths radiating to the buildings and grass and trees and benches for employee respite, or for something greener to look down upon than a blue hole, from up their seven stories. Seven times seven shall ye forgive them, Sunday school taught Lem. Seven points on the badge the detective flashed in the hospital.

The seven in-turned points on the logo looked a lot like the mouth of a hagfish on some British-accented public broadcasting nature boredom that Lem once drank into oblivion, not a fish at all, nor an eel either, although slime-eel was another name for the hagfish, because it didn't have a backbone or a jaw, had sort of a skull, more like a cartilage nerve case, two light-sensitive spots but no actual eyes, a fossil relic they said, one that burrows in the muddy bottom like a two-foot-long worm. These hagfish hinge their teeth outward and puncture the side of dead or disabled or otherwise indisposed, such caught in a trawler's drag net, fish and then retract their teeth and eat their way inside, while they tie themselves in a knot behind their head and press said knot against the flank of the victim to gain leverage when they chew off a chunk. They also can slip their knotted self from head to tail in order to squeeze off the gallons of slime they produce to clog the gills of any predator that attempts eat them. Devour the vulnerable from the inside out, while all tied up in knots and protected from threats by its own slime, the perfect corporate logo. Why didn't Lem think of the square teeth aligned along the radius of the circular mouth as a way to mount the semiconductor chips on the Cortez head-cap, a much better distribution than the rectangular grid they used, round mouth clamped on the back of his skull, cable harness knotted around his brow, sharp silicon teeth poking in and pulling back, digging deeper into his brain.

"Lem?" said a little Emerald City man made smaller by the size of the door he opened, not green-clad however, pale blue dress shirt and khakis, the thin brown hair that looks greasier the longer it gets, an amateur mustache, Groucho glasses. By the time Lem shut the door behind him, slowing into the quality klunk, the apparent Tarkoff leaned back behind his curved cross-legged desk with his fingers intertwined behind his head, not minding at all the manner by which his immense corner office and sleek Teutonic furniture

shrank him into a child with that rare aging disease isolated in a solitary Montessori preschool.

“Please, have a seat.” Tarkoff contemplated the cove of his ceiling cornice. Lem took the nearer of a matched pair of Barcelona chairs, chrome X-legs again, must be a theme, angled somewhat toward each other, so that he and Tarkoff faced slightly askew like passing ships.

Tarkoff continued. “As Chief Technical Officer for Solaris, I’m responsible for the overall strategy of how we develop and deploy the fundamental algorithms and architectures underlying our product line. In that regard, I head up the System Process Teams that liaison with Engineering, Manufacturing, and Marketing. The question is, where in that structure do you fit.” Tarkoff lowered his hands on to his desk and righted his chair’s recline as if bracing for an answer.

“Well, Mister Tarkoff, I guess” Lem looked at the almost nothing on the desktop, maybe nobody here kept anything on their desk, another theme.

“Barry, please call me Barry.” Barry picked up a matt black writing implement and held it horizontally between his resting fists like a goal post, or a hurdle.

Lem crossed his left leg over right, which turned him a little more sideways. “Okay, Barry. I developed the architecture of the Cortez headset and wrote the prototype software, so I guess I’d see myself doing something along those lines.”

Barry began to flip the pen between two fingers like a majorette’s baton building to the toss. “Now, I have to tell you that Solaris prefers to take a team approach. Mission critical for an enterprise of this magnitude. They tell me you like to work on your own. I take it you’ve heard the slogan, There’s no I in Team?”

Yeah, but there’s a Me, and an Eat Me, like what is this, word scramble. “Sure. I mean, it was just me and Peter. Peter Chu, when we started out. Then as people came on board, we worked with them to bring up the first units. But I guess I think the creative vision of one person has to drive an effort, otherwise you get bogged down in consensus building. Especially in a startup.”

The pen, although maybe a mechanical pencil, began to tap out a diagram of Barry’s sentence structure. “I see here you have a fine arts background. Painting. So is that your personal creative vision? Here at Solaris we need people with a passion for the product. I’m

wondering now if technology is maybe your day job. Not your passion.” He stopped tapping.

“No. I mean I’m still interested in art.” No pictures or posters on the wall behind Tarkoff, no backs of stand-up family and friends frames on the desk, only the two window walls forming the prow of the corner office, plotting a course exactly in the middle of the four buildings visible across the circle and out into the piss-brown haze of afternoon pine barren undulation. “But I think art and technology are like two parts of the same thing. And it’s a mistake to separate them. I actually got into technology to try to build connections with art.”

“Yes, Corporate had to clamp a lid on that Cortez dance promotion of yours. Unfortunately the video appears to have been distributed informally, so we’ll have to distance the Eluce brand and downplay the acquisition.” The pen pointed toward Lem, its tip dousing a bit up and down. “Wall Street won’t look favorably on how the customer base could potentially associate Solaris with a costume party drug scene.”

So Dave’s movie killed the Eluce name, what a shame. “I understand.”

“All right then, let’s get a feel for how you think on your feet. A few brain exercises we like to run people through, okay?”

“Like what?” Len uncrossed his legs, pressed his hands on the tucked fake leather, ready.

“For example, how would you estimate the volume of water in the all the earth’s oceans?” Barry abandoned his pen, crossed his arms at his chest, leaned back.

“The what? The ocean? I guess I’d look it up.”

“Say you couldn’t look it up. Like right here, right now. How would you come up with an estimate?” Barry leaned forward and imitated a smile with tiny sharp teeth too big for his face.

“Then I’d ask somebody who knew how to figure it out.” The limp brown hair, magnified tiny eyes, an opossum, that’s what Tarkoff looked like, didn’t they eat their way inside dead animals.

“Wouldn’t you start by calculating the surface area of a sphere?” Barry joined thumbs and fingers into a big zero.

Lem pressed his hands on his knees. "Why would I know the formula for that? If I needed it, I'd go get a geometry book."

"You don't know the formula for the sphere?" Barry held out both palms horizontal as if holding a big beach ball. "You mean to say you're an image processing software architect and you don't know the formula for the sphere?"

"Look, this is ridiculous. I'm not going to solve some stupid math problem for your amusement." Lem stood up.

"Oh, come on now, Lem. That's hardly an appropriate attitude." Barry's hands turned outward like directing traffic to slow down.

"Look, you bought Cortez. You bought me. You either want me or you don't." Lem turned toward the door.

"But that's exactly what we're exploring here, the qualities we need to see in a Solaris employee." Barry poked one index finger into the other palm causing the fingers to flop over.

"Well, you won't see me, that's for sure." Lem had once abandoned reading a fat book about some man with no qualities, because the hero was like some rich aristocrat who didn't need to do anything but wander around and ruminate all day anyway. He left Barry's door open behind him on the way out, let the red woman get up and close it.

Out of the elevator, he walked across the lobby past the central seven-sided security station with the closed-circuit rent-a-cop monitors, and peeled the self-stick visitor label from his shirtfront with a satisfying rasping sound. Why sign himself out, he never planned to come back, let them search the building for him after hours. Pat must have an office in one of these buildings, should he try to see her, and what, tell her he just walked out on her CTO, but that otherwise his future shone so blind he had to wear these dorky turquoise dark glasses. No, he half folded the badge on its own backside to neutralize the adhesion and dropped it into the door-side trash cylinder, pushed his way on out.

At the far edge of the parking lot, the office-compound entrance street promised no metro bus-stop signs, no idling taxi queue, no light-rail station or subway entrance of course, southern sprawl cities neither supported nor subducted commuter train tracks, no way he'd call Gudrun to ask for a rejected return ride, call-me-Barry Tarkoff couldn't dismiss somebody who walked away, he'd walk. The access road paralleled the six-lane

beltline between the latter's intermittent overpasses, and bent inward to the first traffic light on the cross-over streets like a coastal cliff highway turning inland at the creek canyons to bridge a narrower gorge and then switchback again out to the sea, which may have added an extra half mile to the next exit mileage numbers that Lem read on the pylon signs alongside the highway. After what he calculated to be four and a half miles, his anger had sure shown them nothing but hot, tired, thirsty, and no way he'd make it all the way back to River Oaks Apartments. No doubt the decade since he'd last hitchhiked had aged him out of college-cute and into psycho killer or rape bait crime trends. He sat down on a low concrete block wall that restrained a vacant dirt-weed lot, Available, hoping to grow up someday into a big box retailer or a self-storage facility, from leaking its dream all over the sidewalk. Not that he had any reason to go back to his empty apartment, but he had to be somewhere. When a vaguely-known acquaintance wants to wrap up an expiring encounter, they look at the time and say 'Well I have to be somewhere', but that's probably not a philosophical assertion, because when are you nowhere, when you're dead and only your corpse is still somewhere, like Lem's newborn baby sister who never made it home from the hospital, and they said 'she's in heaven with Jesus', because she was so perfect that Jesus took her to his bosom, their word for boobs made no sense for the Son, but then where did that leave Lem, nowhere.

With the dirty sun low in the sky, the traffic on the bypass thickened into streams of molten mercury globules, merging and viscous for the rush hour slowdown, the same density in each direction, because the suburban clock ran both counter and wise for the homeward commute. Not many cars on this segment of access road, not much to access, the grey corduroy dented steel shed-roof metal fabricator and/or scrap yard on Lem's left, the row of headless semi trailers kneeling like T-rex on their spindly forelegs at the rear of the next parcel on the right, then the beige barbican guarding the bulky keep of the janitorial supply warehouse behind it. A brake-dust breeze cooled the sweat on Lem's neck and smog-checked the leaves of weed trees interweaving the chain-link fence that kept them off the freeway, reminding the pending evening to turn down the temperature. The curb at his feet read a brown wad of tuck-folded newspaper, some deluded paper boy once sampled this vacant lot from his bicycle basket and returned on Saturday to ask for a subscription. A crushed beverage can, killed crossing the street, cupped white sky in its scour-rimmed

round bottom flange. Sneakers spread apart, leaning forward, his fair thin forearms cantilevered off the bones above his knees so that his hands hung loose, with the ancillary outer fingers curled slightly upward, but the thumbs and forefingers in a double U pointing straight down.

Chapter 26 Tavern

The freeway smeared from white into red as the horizon sky yellowed up into darkening blue without going into green, Lem knew that light colors added up because of how he faked it with paint, yellow plus blue summed to white, still looked weird. He stood, his butt hurt like an embedded concrete block, his thighs ached from the unaccustomed mileage, now what. Signage up-road had come alive, an orange smudge sequence lengthening into six likely letters he couldn't read above an orange underline blur. He headed toward the blinking beacon.

Abreast the warehouse he distinguished the initial O, then five more contorted neon tubes aglow, their back-strokes painted black, which timed his footfalls and lit up along the row, Z, Z, I, E', S, held claim to its full name for two paces, the second Z and E-apostrophe uncertain and stuttering about their status, now he could read Tavern, always on, underneath, then Ozzie's off again, restart at the O. A bar, he could get something to drink in a bar, maybe they had a grill too, probably a punk-floor piss-trough men's room in back of a low-rent low-life last chance out here in the post-industrial zone, somebody's second home.

Parking spaces on the side, with more out back if you had something to hide, no dark low late model sedan, more the ilk of a late-payment primer-fender duct-taped-taillight minivan. Red-psoriasis cross-bucked plank door pushed inward, Lem Must Be 21 To Enter, between what once were flanking windows in the perma-stone front facade now black-painted strand-board panels edge-screwed onto the frames. The cool warmth of low orange-yellow sidewall globes, dark hardboard paneling behind a half dozen mismatched tables and chairs on the right, way back a pool table bright shamrock slice under a chain-slung coffin-shaped lamp, dead staccato crack of the break when one T-shirt elbow snap-contracts and another Hawaiian-shirt Oscar-statue-stands his waiting cue on the far side. Long scarred ogee-edge red-black bar along the left wall, chrome-tube pillbox-top stools, the carmine vinyl split dry and drooling blobs of cotton-wool stuffing, gray whisker guy hunched at the far end, beefy bare-armed bartender midway lock-elbow leaning into his newspaper, bright beer-brand signs shining on the mirror shelf bottle line-up behind, all

overseen by the wide screen ballgame hung on the back wall beside the red-exit storage-room bathroom musk-shadow hallway. Outlaw country music not loud electric twanged and straight-up snared the gravel whine who'd Always been crazy kept me from going insane, Waylon maybe. The distant dead-fish scent of misdirected piss, the creosoted crumbling-mortar spilled beer smell, the wet dog bar rags, the dried-sweat-band fingernail-grease smokers breath, all swung like an incense censer to swirl around Lem's entrance and signify acceptance of the sinner, the penitent, the pilgrim, all welcome into the dim sanctuary, to commune and consume the sacramental liquors beers and wines and seek solace from the devil's dominion outside. Gin mill, scowled Lem's father.

Claiming the third stool down, Lem lay a limp twenty on the lip of the scarified top perpendicular to the glass-rail channel, in order to initiate the bill's ritual incremental conversion into lesser denominations and dead-head coins as the rounds progressed, with the tacit agreement that no patron messes with a another's bar change, until the last remnant accrues to the bartender's tip, at closing time or incapacitation or guess it's time to go. The massive barkeep, short-cropped hair, miniature ears, rotated his head a time-zone or two on his hydrant neck toward Lem, with his tender's apron bunching below the breastplate square where the tie tightened above his medicine-ball belly.

"Gin and tonic," said Lem. The barman took a tall glass and a grey rag, twisted the two twice together, tilted the house brand with the silver anteater nose until a clear tube stretched the tip and glass wide apart then snapped together, applied the push-button hose-head froth fill, finger-tweezed a green wedge from the precuts and impaled it on the rim, slid a logo'd blotter circle underneath the order, flitted Lem's bill to the single-keyed cash drawer below the bottle shelves, upended and snapped back the spring-loaded segregation clips, landed the change back in its place, and returned to contemplate his newspaper, all within one refrain of the background song and one well-considered but unsuccessful two-cushion combination click-clack off the six ball in the back.

The first drink, sweet bitter sour quinine lime concealing the glycol gin, or maybe too watered down to taste, tonged a saw-dust-stored ice block off the wooden wagon bed smooth and self-lubed down the basement chute of Lem's summer throat to thunk frozen-lake-sawn and melt in his cold-cellar gut. As efficient as the first time, the bartender instant-replayed the preparation of the second serving, which Lem then sipped more

slowly, no, the alcohol was industrial, he felt the annealing oven realign the iron band behind his eyes. Did anyone ever paint the remnant end-of-empire American tavern interior, the worn-out welcome outstanding-warrant women-trouble warmth of Nashville blues and pay-check booze and a stool to sit on 'til nobody cared. Not the dark recess around the red-orange glow of grinning flop-brim black hats and long-stemmed white pipes slumped florid with spaniel and violin in the Dutch Golden Age, not the scrumbly washed-out bent-wood top-hat black-velvet wasp-waist barmaid café French impressions, and not the black-and-white beat bebop Cedar Tavern whose New York School expressionists abstracted Pollack's polychrome puke, maybe Lem could make a name as the post-romantic unrealistic painter of last resort and lost cause and last call. Nah, he was never that kind of painter, his indeterminate geometric fading hues had more to do with the forms of refracted glass fronting him than the feeling of finding and losing himself in the booze of a reprobate bar.

The dregs of the workday dragged more people into the tavern, reflected fragments of a couple or three at the tables sliced in the mirror slivers between the bottle labels and clear brown yellow liquid-level deceptions, a pancake-made-up martini older woman daisy sun-dress limp-laundry arm skin on the first stool, plaid-shirt brushed-back back-brace ex-marine farther down the bar blocking most of the big-hair blond woman laughing with and beyond him, man in a green polo shirt swung slinky onto the seat beside Lem.

"That kind of a sissy drink, isn't it? Gin and tonic?" From the montage in the mirror the guy looked maybe Lem's age, long hair, soul patch, bulgy eyes, greyhound-faced.

Lem shrugged. "You say so."

"Come on, man, I'm just fucking with you." The guy leaned around toward Lem, hand open across the bar, skinny arm sticking from his slack sleeve like a broom pole. "Name's Freddie."

"Lem." Lem shook his hand, sinewy sharkskin. The bartender set an amber shot and a mug of pale draft in front of the guy unrequested, must be a regular.

"Man, I'm about whipped to shit. Been stacking bales in the sun all damn day. Rich people want to build a straw bale house. You ever hear of that? Walls like two foot thick. You drive rebar down through and cover up the whole thing with concrete."

"Yeah, I think that's for insulation. And it's more sustainable."

"Sustain a whole bunch of bugs and rats inside the walls is what I think. You ever see moldy old straw? Sheez." Freddie knocked back his shot, thunked down the glass, lifted and sipped his beer. "Hey, so what kind of work you do?"

"No kind of work. I just got fired. This afternoon as a matter of fact." Lem leaned on his elbows, thumbs and fingertips circling not touching his glass, the clear eye of a cyclone, lizard slit of green lime iris. The bartender kinked the bourbon spout toward Freddie's shot glass, soared away from the golden strand, let the last splurt swell the surface slightly above the rim.

"Shit, ain't life a cold hearted bitch," Freddie said. "Before I come up here from Marysville, I was cleaning chickens in the Anderson plant they got there. Man, near about killed me. Couldn't get fired too soon. Hey, you got to get yourself on unemployment. And the disability. Must be something wrong with you, your back, or something, that you can't work."

"Guess I've been getting these headaches." Lem finished his drink, tipped the needy glass in supplication. The bartender complied.

"See, there you go. I got the name of this doctor, you don't even pay him. He sets it all up, all the paperwork, you just give him a percent of your checks. Then you can get a cash job on the side like me. Screw the government, taking everything from the workingman. Between that and my ex-wife and her goddamn lawyer. You married, man?"

"No, we separated when"

"Hey Freddie." Short girl swelling out of a shiny chocolate-milk-color scoop-neck dress, blue eye shadow, crimson lipstick, arched eye brows, thick brown hair pulled back loose in a scrunchy twist, leaned in against Freddie.

"Dotty. How the hell are you?" Freddie half swiveled and slung his arm on the cleft of her offset hip.

"Who's your friend?" Dotty chin-pointed at Lem.

"Oh, this is Lem. Lem, Dotty, love of my life," said Freddie. Lem took Dotty's extended hand, cool and comfortable, a hand you want to smooth the hair from your fevered forehead, something fruity in her perfume, and overripe, turned earth, underneath.

"Dorothy," the erstwhile Dotty said, ungrasped Lem's hand long after the smile crinkled her eye corners and corrected her name. "Such nice smooth hands. What kind of work you do, Lemon man?"

"I'm. I was. In computers." Lem leaned away onto his elbow on the bar rail, so where did this thread ravel, mobile home toothless TV grandma watching the kids while this woman honky-tonked past the service desk day shift, drunk stumble back to fumble around on an unmade mattress, pass out lost last names numb next morning, not his nightcap.

"Wow, one of them high tech fellows. And cute as a coonhound too. Some girl ought to keep you on a short leash." Dotty rested her hand on Lem's shoulder, index finger twisting and tickling his hair below behind his ear.

Freddie tightened his hand around Dotty's hip. "Hey Lem, I know Ms Dotty here needs to go out back for a smoke. You care to tag along?"

"Oh, no thanks, I quit." Lem straightened up as Dotty's hand trailed down his arm, he turned back to pick up his drink.

"No, man, I mean, smoke a number. You'll pass out here drinking all night without something to perk you up. Come on." Freddie unhooked his heel from the barstool cross-rail and started toward the back hallway, with Dorothy a step behind, smiling over her shoulder at Lem. He finished the gin, what the hell, followed.

The back lot browned between twilight and night, muggy, freeway traffic buzz above the building, flies must settle down after sunset, and no light pole to beckon bugs other than mosquito scouts, a murky white sedan backed in against a weed-anchored hog-wire fence bent-meshed between leaning cleated T-posts. Beyond, the dusk defocused a sagging farmhouse extended over to its gap-roofed barn with wood-sided storage sheds, all battened and boarded, buttressed with piles of pallets and drums and the skeletons of farm and/or construction equipment conceding to a bumper crop of bushy thistles and blackberry.

Lem pulled the steel door closed behind him obliging the interior A/C, saw on his left toward the battered dumpster by the building corner a wraparound couple pressed against the wall, her, Lem assumed, bare knee lifted beside his leg, too tall and too soon to be Dorothy pinned under Freddie, so Lem turned right. The yellow flame of a flip-top lighter lit Freddie's puckered face, doused, faded, the shadow of his hand passed an orange

firefly to Dorothy, the bright burr grew and blushed the silhouette of her nose and chin, an ectoplasm exhale smogged the purple horizon beyond Freddie's upturned chin.

"Here you go man," Freddie whispered high and hoarse with the last of the smoke. First frost Lem's father raked the crisp brown sweet-gum leaves into the smoldering mound in the backyard of the gray clapboard Cape Cod-style in which even the dust found no peace from his mother. Lem tweezed the hand-rolled cigarette from Dorothy, held the tip at the gap of his lips, and sucked the smoke side-draft deep into his lungs, topped up with a sip to hold in his breath, tensed against a cough, a bottle brush thrust down his throat. Freddie moistened his fingertip at his lips and quenched the ember, secured the remainder of the joint in his cigarette pack. Lem watched Dorothy release a spume of faintly grey vapor, he imitated in turn, what's with only one hit each, was this Freddie character stingy, or was this unusually potent dope. Then, a jellyfish of pins and needles washed from his soles to the crown of his head, of somebody else's head deploying like a sudden-impact airbag from his locked steering column neck and slamming into his chest, legs buckled like the crumple zone protecting the passenger compartment, definitely door number two, first toke obviated the possibility of a second.

"Whoa," Lem said. "Is this weed?" Dorothy weather-vaned as if a weak erratic breeze blew beside him.

"Sure man, it's peace weed. You know, a wet stick." Freddie vibrated on the balls of his feet like a portable soil compactor, whose oscillation propagated to the quivering whites of his wide eyes and stretched his rocket-sled lips.

"So you're saying it's mixed with something?"

"Dipped, man. It's a dipper. You know, PCP."

Lem examined somebody else's hands stuck on the ends of his arms, squeezed the left hand with the right, a pliable flipper-like appendage, then right with left, same thing, what operated these flexible inert lumps, these rubber prostheses with the spring-clamp fingers an amputee can fasten around a cigarette or a spoon. Way below on the red-dusted bluestone gravel, Lem's sneakers stood stuffed full of somebody else's feet, which was why he wobbled on his ankle bones, standing unsteady on short sheet-rocker ceiling stilts or pogo-stick pegs, until those shoes scrumbled back a step to stagger his shoulders against the wall and press his palms beside him against the stucco spike surface. What operated

these limbs and leaned a building into his back and butt, oh of course, radio control was trivial technology, servo motors, stepper motors, activating scale-model cars and boats and planes in the park, preoccupied people from far away twitching their joy-stick thumbs, wireless puppets singing ‘There are no strings on me’, remote control. Lem looked down at somebody’s knees approach and recede, adjusting balance on the tilting fun house floor, the prickly slab poked through somebody’s shirt, the scale-model Lem, the puppet Lem, the remote control Lem, aha, the Rem. Lem felt pressure on Rem’s groin, a cupping lift, then a downward squeeze, there, whose small back-turned hand readjusted Rem’s crotch, it grew from a bare arm pale up to a black sleeve and out a smooth neck into an upturned round face, that woman from the bar.

“What’s the matter, Lemon honey, you don’t like girls?” The woman’s black-slash lips trembled to contain a satchel of chiclet teeth, they told Rem not to think about the hagfish while the controls quivered his head in an indeterminate manner, if he nodded Yes did that mean he agreed that he didn’t like girls, or Yes he did, or if he shook side to side No that meant he didn’t not like girls, or No he didn’t, because the radio frequency commands could not reach Rem’s disconnected dick, or could, but the hydraulic valves were stuck or the circuits fried or the software crashed, no feedback from the sensors, Lem knew enough about assembly-line robots to know that this technician could not repair Rem’s erection without the proper tools. The hand appeared to disengage but the pressure felt the same as nothing before, like a balloon rubbed on a pants leg until the static clings it weightless, wobbly, barely there.

“Ha! He’s fucked up! Must be his first dust.” The guy from the bar clenched his arms across his chest and pivoted back and forth, inclining his head like an eager terrier looking for a doggy-treat behind Rem’s eyes, the operators had cameras in Rem’s eyes of course in order to steer around this dog man, more of a Chihuahua actually, no fur on the face, but then the prison wall behind Rem would collapse, good thing he was strong enough to hold it up, the strain twitching in his legs and arms and neck, or was that the amplifier jitter, needed a bigger diode, but that was circuits, electronics, Lem did software not hardware. Walk away, but for the foot-object-noun to advance-verb the rigid linkage-sentence onto the surface away from the wall without sensing forward contact, of course the object cannot feel-verb but is acted upon by the they-subject via the move-verb, those in control

are the subject, each segment-word must rotate-verb in a transformation hierarchy, by solving a system of linear equations which Rem knows nothing about, inverse kinematics lock limbs divide by zero at the singularity, why don't they activate the leg linkage, diagram the sentence, the foot fading away. Who was controlling the fading, the night sopping up the last slop of light blue gray over the fence in the detention center where the broken robots rusted behind the rotting black-green ragweed, not even bothering to brush in the shadow and highlight which create an illusion of depth on the flat canvas, only the lazy preliminary under-painting, diffuse tonal washes of blocked-in oblong shapes, who'd believe that was 3D. And who slid the sliders, turned the pots, pressed the down arrows, to lower the contrast, diminish the saturation, and reduce the hue on this screen scene into indistinguishable dusk hulks, Rem can't run the image processing program. What malevolent algorithm plastered him half drunk and entirely stoned against this wall to author these pictures in his brain, turned his neck toward the left, hear the motor whir, so the cameras can capture, above the bone-bright zipper part in the bar woman's dark hair, the grainy monochromatic adult channel sex scene, don't they have a back seat, or a cheap motel, chick's bare legs bent up around guy's butt like a glow stick, dress hem high as her hip, was that why women wear skirts, the lover's frames flexing at their rising respiration rate, like a blacksmith bellows pumping into the hearth, the orange-hot charcoal ember invisible inside, was that what burnt into Rem's back, the thrust of the rounded hump of a Breughel beast, they had turned Rem's head so they could voyeur this video loop of a couple coupling out back of a bar where nobody gives a fuck who gives a fuck.

"Well then, we're going to have to babysit him." The bar woman's voice inside Rem's brain projected little Annie, babysitting Annie, the television, happy jumpy monkey, a videogame controller blue plastic boomerang buttons, was it Annie playing Rem, 'Only connect!' wrote some English lady buying flowers or was that some English fairy in the forest, that was it, the wireless broadband emotional connection to Lem that operated Rem, from Annie, and Suzi, maybe Peter, and Pat, even Gudrun, Greg, Dave, Peter, Alec, with any kind of feeling for Lem not only love, but friendship, fear, envy, lust, disgust, even just knowing him, knowing about him, the thought-picture of Lem in their brains created thought-pictures in Rem's brain. Wait, they turned his head again toward the darkling prison garden painting Bosch-dogface man, so as not to damage Annie with witness to that

hard-wall copulation movie. What did Lem see, a picture in Rem's brain projected by the connection to all the people Lem had hurt, their pain powered the transmission, but when Rem makes amends then they'll release Lem again, now it's so obvious, what Timmerman had told him, they're directing Rem to seek them out and say he's sorry, that's what he has to do. What does he have to do, find the connection, how can Lem move Rem's arm impaled on the wall of thorns, but they want him to know of course, so that he can know what to do, what to undo, undo the harm. They raised Rem's hand in discontinuous increments, hunt and peck, trial and error, he can't execute the linkage equations, herky-jerky the head tips forward, hand finds how perfectly the skin and hair grew back over the implant, the copper dome that capped the gap blown off the back of his skull by the bullet's hollow-point disintegration, an embedded Bug, an audio-visual-motor interface, Rem's bidirectional remote control connection.

Uncertain light silvered the fence wire, flared the parked car fender, greened the weeds, attenuated out to the cross-field junkyard billboard, a white pickup truck grumbled around the corner of the building, its abused underpinnings mewling through the turn, KS Sheetmetal scripted on the door panel, gleaming galvanized crumple-duct game jumbled in the bed, extension ladder bungied on the pipe rack, and parked facing away with its misfit dented tailgate brand-embossed and glinting hitch nipple and busted red-shard brake-light confronting Rem. The rumble expired, the lights died, the driver's door squealed, a bearded wraith taller than the truck-top congealed, the door slammed.

"Damn, Dotty. You know I don't want you smoking dust with this dick-wad." They advanced a dark work-clothed man, shadow eyes tractor cap brim, white embroidered alias oval illegible, toward Rem, what dick, dick what the woman did, the Dotty, no, the sinewy arm snake struck and thumb shook the canine bar guy hand, both faces bared teeth.

"Hey tin man," the bar guy said inside Rem's head, identifying another robot, a man of metal, whether self-actuating or under remote control, no sensation in the sheet metal skin, some condensation on the surface.

"Fuck you Freddie." They redirected the metal man, as tall as Rem, maybe the same model number, but running an better operating system with more powerful hydraulics, so that his lenses aligned with Rem's, weren't they worried about the infinite feedback loop,

camera into camera. No, the people whom he had hurt controlled him, completely different handlers from the Lem people, they couldn't cross-communicate. "Who's this?"

"Hi sweetie. I've been waiting for you forever." The Dotty woman extended her arm mechanism and closed the fingers around Nicky the metal man's arm above the elbow, a puppet show, the night curtain drawn, the stage lights dimmed for dramatic effect, the Lem puppet scripted to react, act, swivel his arm into the greeting position, speak sounds, they wrote into Rem 'How're you doing man?', but a lubrication failure in the oral mechanism, lips cheeks tongue throat seized up low pressure dry sump fluid leak, slick in the armpits and clammy on the neck.

"This here is Lem." The Freddie seismographed his pointer finger at Rem.

The Nicky leaned backward, hands on belt loops, head tilted, the Dotty disengaged, but her visual receptors tracked his face. "What kind of name is Lame?"

"He's okay, Nick." The Freddie said. "He just lost his job and everything. Wife walked out on him. You know, same old sad story."

Nick Nicky metal man black beard sprouted pubic around thick dark lips up-cornered slab gap teeth, arm swung up to the side around in front a punch, no fingers flat a slap, no below jaw level impact, cupped around against the Rem shoulder, no ringing clang of steel on steel, a muffled thump, a pressure counterbalanced thrust of the right leg piston auto-correction. "Well shit, come on then, Lame, I'll buy you a drink."

Chapter 27 Lot

'Stop fidgeting,' hissed Lem's mother, leaning over toward him while looking straight ahead at the pulpit-propped black-suited jowly spectacle-glints of Reverend Bowman between the bristly-neck jacket collars and up-curved perfume perms in the pews ahead, but Lem's scratchy wool-blend Sunday suit the brown maroon of an old scab itched behind his knees and his underwear bunched up in his butt crack and the clip-on tie collar pinched his neck and he was too hot to sit still while the sermon asked him to consider what he would do if the Almighty asked him to offer his own beloved daughter to the mob at the door in order to protect two overnight angels, so instead he wrapped his fingers around the bulb-shaped bench edge and leaned forward to watch the round toes of his good shoes polished last night swing forth and back over the brown blood-splatter pattern on the beige floor tiles nobody washed whiter than snow until his mother pincer her thumb and forefinger in the disabling pressure-point hollow behind his knee, which hurt enough that his leg jerked forward and made his foot hit the underside of the hymnbook holder shelf with the post-and-rail retention slats on the back of the next bench, and dangle unsupported off the edge of the mattress.

Slept on his side with one leg atop the other where the jeans seam along the bone cut into the side of why his knee hurt. Slept in his clothes, shirt twisted tight around his torso, turned onto his chest with his face sideways smushed hot in the pillow. The brimstone crack around the window shade burned though his Eskimo eye slits. Daylight implied a last night and a day before, when Lem awoke naked, wearing the dream that sent him scurrying to the clinic, where the immense man mistook him for a drunk, then to the market full of nothing he needed, discovered outside by Gudrun and driven to hagfish Solaris, to wait to be insulted by that jerk-off CTO, and walk out and into a bar for a drink. He rolled onto his back. Clock radio red lined 9:32 to his keys and wallet on the night table. Credit cards and ID's in the sleeve pockets, but no bills in the fold cavity, did he spend all the money at the bar, take a cab home, to this apartment, that is. Other people in the bar, did they bring him back here, take his cash for their trouble.

Other people. Lem swung around to sit up on the edge of bed, propped on his arms, looking down, they took off his shoes and socks, a dried dirt line around his heel, he needed to go see the other people in his life. His head hollowed out helium filled, tethered by his neck, a little wobbly, that underwater rubbery echo boing-boing balloon bounce, his heartbeat, sips of breath puffed up his chest and belly, empty as his head, didn't hurt. Get up, get cleaned up, get on clean clothes, go see them, see what they think, what they thought of him was the reason to get up, they wouldn't think Lem would lay in bed all day. Remember sitting on a cinder-block abutment with no reason to get up and go anywhere, other people are the reason, the reason to do anything at all, otherwise sit there alone in Lem's empty head. Refill the heart in his empty chest, Annie, they thought him a good father, 'Look at the way he talks to that little baby', but the road to Annie led to Suzi, her resentful shoebox of his red-eye snapshots, no longer a good husband, once upon a good lover, caught him on her candid camera when he no longer loved her. Too weak in the gut to take that punch, beat up the bad Lem, pound him with pictures of pain, no, before seeing how Suzi saw him, he needed to fill his belly with courage. How could the cowardly Lem find someone who saw in him the courage to face Suzi, so he could find his heart in Annie. Friends help friends, who saw Lem as their good friend, not Peter he never even found again, Peter who thought Lem conspired against him, and not Pat he offended moving too fast and now he had not the heart to see because who knew what she thought of him, and certainly not Gudrun who tried to help him face the failure that Tarkoff saw inside him, but do not think about what the was it a wet dream Gudrun thought of him. The cavity behind his eyes rolled around with no magic eight-ball image of an answer, not smart enough to see who could help him. So who thought he was smart, not Frank who thought Lem wasted the opportunity and never made the headset work and never filed enough patents to save Cortez, not Alec who thought he squandered his talent, buried beneath the turf of technology, no return on internment for when the master returned, not Dave who knew that who you knew mattered more than what you knew, and knew that Lem let no one inside the castle wall of his work, not Drebin who he hardly knew and whose supplier he thought Lem had somehow betrayed, although in the Cortez lab that night he did say 'That's brilliant', but he didn't know that Lem had stolen the statistical correlation from an article he read, but Greg. Greg thought he was smart, 'A little Lem goes a long way' he said, so he

saw that Lem had a brain full of good ideas, Lem had to go see how Greg saw him and get another good idea. That interview woman too, she said 'How do I get to be as smart as you', but Lem's headset had sent her into a seizure, so how did she see Lem from the stretcher when her empty eyes fixed on the blank sky. No, better go see Greg.

If Solaris yesterday was a workday after the hospital stay during the day before following the Saturday night Syzygy episode, then today Greg would be at work which meant at the Cortez office, too far away to walk. Lem could call a cab and wait anxious with no promise about when they'd show up or mis-dispatch, wait long enough to call back and/or call another company, finally squeeze into a stinking smoke sweat back seat, wedged sideways with the front seat fixed beneath the scoured acrylic partition payment slot, up front full of fast food bags, file folders, clothes, tasseled dashboard, mirror necklace, visor photo, and angry yellow-eyed man Lem can't understand whether he understood the address, then this sure seems like a long way around with the money monitor ripping off too much traffic time, and Lem's bobble-head bronco-bucking between full pedal throttle and brake. But then once there, asking the cab to wait meant that the meeting must be brief no matter what the subject or how the conversation con- or diverged, because out in the street the impatient idling meter ran. But if paid off sent on his way with how much to tip, then call another cab when it's time to go, but then Lem can't leave for the indeterminate amount of time it takes the other cab to arrive, so the meeting continues awkward after it ends, or else they know Lem's standing outside and only pretended to leave so soon. Or, estimate how long before the meeting will end to call ahead for a cab, which says he predicted the end of the meeting in advance no matter how long it would have progressed. No, Lem needed a car. That car lot across the boulevard claimed Nothing Down Easy Credit, but they'd verify his employment before they'd finance a car, Gudrun would tell them that he worked at Solaris if he gave them her direct number, but he'd have to call her first to tell her what to tell them, and to tell her why he wanted her to tell them that, which required the courage to tell her what he was trying to do, which was to reclaim the courage he thought people thought he had, but first he had to find out if people thought he had half a brain enough to figure out how to find out if he had the courage, which he did not. However, the sign also said Sales Service Rentals, Lem could rent a car, walk up to the counter and say he'd like to rent a car please, yeah, a subcompact would be fine, drivers

license, major credit card, the cards would work until the payment due date, at least two or three weeks after the end of the billing cycle, and probably for months after that, as much as they loved adding on those late fees and accrued interest charges, depending on when Lem and Suzi, since separated but still joint, hit the credit limit, which his former good job and payment record set pretty high, so go rent a car.

Change in the weather, a sheet of oxidized aluminum instead of sky, dilute ink wash where the shadows lie, a sign at last that the summer season might pass, overexposed Lem across the boulevard, as if the emptiness inside his head might open out and expand the streets cars trees and stores out of reach without their blue bounding bowl of accustomed sun. The third day in a row he arose to walk this way, on the third day Sunday angels rolled away the stone, but if the Lord died on Friday afternoon why buy more than a two day stay in the tomb, go out and conjure up some fish loaves and wine for a fine final meal, then spread-eagle again to spear the bloated cirrhotic liver between distal windmill ribs, take down the sailcloth shroud and wind up low in the grave, roll the rock uphill another day, rise, die, repeat. If the myth built a story that filled the void where otherwise the evil seeped in from the bottom of the cave like black blood, then once again Lem awoke and walked and worked, or went to see someone who knew who he was, sufficient unto the day came the blackout at night. For the knowledge of his good and evil or the fire in his cowardly loins or the pierced heart of dark so unloved his world, he went round again, and down the sidewalk to Meecham Motors.

The fishbowl showroom swam with three shiny-shelled machines and two polyester salesman sitting at their side desk shooting the shit, their feelers twitching at the approach of possible prey. Lem advanced slowly across the slick tile between the black sports coupe and the silver touring sedan, two models well-mannered enough to earn work in the big man's glass house, envy and scorn of the scores of field hands tire-kicked side by side in the elements outside.

"Well good morning young man." Next up in the rotation, moussed hair of wet otter, grin of a squatting constipated Labrador, fingers stamen'd from his sport-coat sleeve bud for the inseminating handshake, intercepted Lem where the cars' rear fenders funneled together like a wolf spider burrow. "I bet you'd love to take a test drive in our new FX-4. Four liter supercharged variable ratio wide track quad steering. And look at that ground

effect flaring. Exactly the kind of ride a up-and-coming contender such as yourself deserves.”

The print-out paper taped on the wall *Complimentary Customer Coffee Cookies* channeled Lem through the choke point toward the table’s nested styrofoam cup stack and dual recess glass flasks and plastic platter bakeshop assortment.

“No thanks, I’m here about a rental,” Lem said. A renter was a customer, so he poured a cup of expired coffee and bit off an arc of peanut butter chocolate chip while the salesman’s exuberance pump shut down and he deflated back over out of commission to commiserate with his colleague. The coffee and cookie bitter-sweetened Lem’s palate but left his innards gaping, filled with the solicitous spirit of salesmanship, what young man was coming up, or was it the clean button-down shirt, could Lem still be a contender, standing in the sultry street shouting out his desire, careful what they tattoo on the inside of his blank tablet skin, calligraphy is character. His parents knew he’d sinned in Adam, saw his flaws and lies, spanked for his salvation, so he honored their covenant, and failed algebra, smoked dope, and mocked god. The art instructors discerned his perseverance, upgraded his ability, subsidized his studio, so he painted their pure form, bespoke its significance, and conformed to the canon. Suzi reformatted his lust into love, his loneliness into marriage, his appeasement into parenting, so he played the faithful husband, conscientious father, and reliable provider. Lem only found his true self when stoned and/or drunk enough to sedate his absent self into selfless sleep, so he grinned jack-o-lantern, his hollow interior bright with what tricks and treats he distributed to other’s expectations, why he had to find the people who knew how and who he should be, before he drove out the door in a new FX-4, meriting merely the meager approval of the dealer’s markup, the rental department must hide down the hall by Parts Service Cashier.

Dish-scrubby orange hair young woman, skin problems unsuccessfully camouflaged, seriously pissed off at her boyfriend or mother or the fates, manned the all-in-one waist-high countered back office with files phone printer copier cash register and cup-hooks of customer keys past the Men Women rooms halfway down to Parts. The glass wall across the hall faced the drive-through Service tollbooth car queue under the tin-roof porte cochere where the clip board guys noted the odometer and that funny noise at sixty-five.

“I’d like to rent a car,” said Lem.

"Are you being serviced?" The sideways woman stared at and spoke to her screen. Lem assumed she did not mean him personally, or mean to imply animal husbandry, but was addressing him with a question about his car, was he the Lem who joked about studs and shafts, or a jump start, or lubing the rear end, not with her.

"Yeah, it's being towed." Was towed, to the impound lot the detective suggested charged more than the scrap value of his car, but close enough, if she meant that they only provided rentals for customers whose cars were in the Meecham shop, or maybe she meant a discount, Lem had an insurance good driver discount, the bit-lip bouncing rumble strip of the farm field where his car caromed and creased off the trees and sloshed to a stop in the cattail mud, did that count.

"We've got a Beranti four-door, blue, will that be okay?"

"Sure," said Lem, the kind of cheap import compact that community-advocate vegan cat-owners who dislike cars drive, as long as it got him there and back, he arrayed his assorted laminates on the mottled span's more worn center. Driver's license photo documented a younger Lem, longer hair blond and the blue-grey under-eye rings erased, wearing the signed-confession expression of everyone broken by the interminable regimen of a line to learn what line to wait in to take the written test, to wait in line to turn it in, to wait in line to learn the score, to wait in line to read the rows of diminishing nonsense words, to wait in line to stand before the background color of personal limitation and look at the lens as if lips remembered what a smile was, and to wait in the line for payment exchanged for the signed temporary form, to wait the month before the license in the mail.

The woman swiveled to the desk-height surface concealed behind the elbow-height barricade which forestalled Lem, reached up to slide his cards over the edge with the practiced efficiency of sightless machinist leaning into his lathe, her four fingers ringed silver with skull garland turquoise filigree, and entered his information on the quintuplicate pastel-spectrum rental form without looking up. Waiting at the knife edge of another counter, assaulting a half-dozen lines at the numbered stations Motor Vehicle counter, beseeching Gudrun's gray cubicle counter, handing his forms across the blonde-wood hospital de-admissions counter, mistaking the woman who was not his mother behind the yellow-orange clinic counter, laying daily siege to the attention of a different

woman defended by her battlements, with her armor dressed in stone around the keep of her indifference to Lem in distress.

“Insurance?”

“Oh, yeah.” Lem gave her his Proof Of paper, he had never called the company about the crash, did that matter if he never claimed the car, could he have automobile insurance without an automobile, the premium didn’t come due for a while, should he cancel, but the family policy covered Suzi’s van too, were they a family. When the time came to concede to the car-seat folding-stroller play-date carpool requirements of a kid in the suburbs, Suzi said why don’t we trade in Lem’s old Mondo instead of her hatchback compact, but he had no intention to ever drive the minivan other than to the rare Sunday social event or weekend duck-pond concession, plus they’d get a lot more for her newer car, so he debited her resentment against the outstanding stay-at-home minivan mom balance he now owed in child support.

The woman set the clipboard form folio, garnished by Lem’s cards, up on the counter. “Check the box and initial in the space for the collision damage waiver and sign on the bottom. Also initial underneath the daily and weekly rental rate, the excess mileage surcharge, and the refueling allowance if you don’t fill up before return.”

How many daily weekly miles must he drive to fill up before return his belly chest and head with some semblance of the former Lem, or better, a newly reconditioned Lem with renewed drive, maybe he needed an unlimited mileage option or an open-ended lease, or better yet fill him up with premium, a higher-powered persona that eliminates the knocking knees, the incessant stalling, and the false starts. Lem initialed as indicated WTM and signed the William T. Narkis scrawl, what was this name ‘Lem’, a baby name, a rubber-lipped lisping toddler’s mispronunciation, his parents’ pet, a schoolboy sobriquet, Lem T., M T, empty, but he hated Bill, a bird’s beak, a payment due, a bucktooth baseball boy, and worse William, some foppish heir to a throne, a seersucker suit with appended esquire, worst Willy, enough said, no, Will, he’d leave Lem here in the care of this commonplace woman, collateral for the car, and become Will.

The woman unleaved the pale yellow second sheet, folded it in four, slid the Customer Copy into the diagonal slot of the advertising-saturated information sleeve, lay it,

and a fobbed key, on the counter, and whinnied her wheels back over to her screen.

“Second row halfway down the lot.”

The Beranti started with a squeal of steering belt, uncreaked its parking brake, walloped into Drive, MAX'd a gust of hot A/C, whoppered down the crank window, and fast-idled out of the parking space around the end-row and onto the apron. Will looked left at his half of the divided boulevard's traffic flow now freed from the last light, then meantime looked right to watch the cars pass, grayed by the cloud-shrouded day and the scent of their exhaust and the haze of roused road dust and the smear of their acceleration. There beside the driveway, rose the featureless front wall of that cabinet company, AJ, the windows morning blinded inside with white shutters, but in the corner, leaning on the glass, a red-lettered black-ground white-edge cardstock sign such as they sell like oversized postcards from rotating wire racks in hardware stores, with the stock messages common to many impersonal interactions, Keep Out, For Sale, No Trespassing, For Rent, No Hunting, and when appropriate, with a white lozenge in which to write a phone number or dollar amount, and in this particular window, the version that read, Help Wanted. Time cards in metal sleeves by the back door near the folding-chair break-room, eight to five with two fifteen minute breaks and thirty for lunch, shoulder unloading the lumber truck, sweeping sawdust and scraps off the floor, soaking the varnish-crusteds spray guns in solvent, heaving finished goods up onto the flatbed, clocking out the guy who snuck out early for his son's soccer game sometime do Will the same, imagine that.

Will swiveled left again, toward a slow-poke municipal bus playing catch-up, he wanted to live in a neighborhood named Out Of Service so that more busses went his way, hey, they had bus service out here, to/from the one-room apartment or single room occupancy on the cheaper higher-crime crappy near East Side where he could afford to live after the first month's rent at River Oaks ran out. Tan polyester work shirt with his new name embroidered on the ovoid badge above the pocket, reading the sports section in the back seat of the bus, the twinge in the knees and back and the warm all-over ache of working the body all day while the mind idled on imaginary whiffs of sex or the insect scent of summer vacation or the blood-lush tingle of a chili cheese dog. Our Savior worked his hands in wood. Have no thought for the morrow, the Book back then instructed Lem, behold the workman in the woodshop, for he analyzes not, nor does he question, nor

innovates algorithms, but glides the rough edge along the hidden spinning jaw-blade of the joiner until the board runs true, would that fill the hollow Will. A diminished life remaindered the minimum wage of sin. All the unfocused photographs in the minds of all those people he knew archived corner-tabbed in attic albums, fading away the way Lem faded away, while Will, the ordinary everyday wake up, work the shift, catch a bus, watch the news, crack a six-pack, take a walk on weekends, walked away from the mob at his door demanding more, brought out the mind of Lem that they may know him, broke down the barrier to the image of his underwater daughter, rained down destruction upon the cities of pride and ambition, the conception and construction of computed imagination, and Will would not look back, not with his wife's salt in his sore eyes.

When the bus passed, Will pulled out of the lot into the street. The blind rear-end of the city transport, the wirework panel over the engine compartment sooted and askew, the bent cylindrical smokestack swirling black at the roof line, the miniscule wall-eyed red lens squares, slowed ahead. Will signaled left to merge into the fast lane and pass, glanced at the rearview mirror, there was no one behind him.

Chapter 28 Dock

From the corner of Pylon Drive, Will could see the painted plywood sign implanted on paired posts in the spindly shrubs in front of the Cortex office building, For Lease +/- 4200sqft. He drove around the side and parked in back, three spaces down from a bright yellow box truck backed up to the loading dock, red lettered toll-free phone number under Local And One-Way Rental. The six steel steps up to the concrete pier, their metal tread punched through with the rough up-turned edges of diamond-shaped grip holes like a giant nutmeg grater, clanged from some far muffled funerary belfry against Will's sneaker soles.

"Hey Greg," Will said. Greg stood on the dock, arms crossed at his chest, watching the guys inside the tomb of the truck-shell strapping a rack of electronics to the slots in the aluminum sidewall frame.

"What happened to your car?" Greg lifted his chin toward the parking spaces along the wall where the rental Baronti clicked itself cool.

"Long story. You guys moving?" Will waved his hand a hands-breadth from the building door to the truck as if directing the obvious.

"Yeah. We just brought everything back up Sunday after the concert, and Monday morning the word comes down that Corporate wants to consolidate facilities for the cost savings. So we're taking everything down again."

"Those guys move fast, huh?" Will counted the yesterdays to when Lem signed the acquisition paperwork in Frank's office, but the result felt like a number less specific than an integer, could time be measured as an irrational number, a fraction whose digits never repeated, this was like one of those Zeno paradoxes where before or after cannot be exactly determined, or did the Greeks only have rational numbers, no, they had Pi, the problem must be that the distance from Will to Lem was not on the one-dimensional time line, but a diagonal off on another axis, like the square root of two for the unit square, and how did the mathematics of reality never get all the way exactly there, when obviously the distance did, or maybe it wasn't real, that is, rational, and what was the referent of that previous pronoun.

"Guess. Hey, I heard you walked out on Tarkoff." Greg leaned back and lowered his chin a notch.

Walked out, that was decent of Greg, not fired because Lem failed his little test, or had decided to dismiss and disrespect Tarkoff as soon as he opened his office door, or even before that. "Yeah, well. I didn't know what to expect. Or I guess I did. But."

"Not too surprising," Greg said. "From what I hear, the guy's kind of an asshole. So what are you going to do now?"

"I don't know. Looking at a few options. Hey, is Dave here?"

"No, he's already moved over to Solaris."

"How about Frank, is he around?"

"Frank didn't come along with us. I hear he's going to Raptor as Entrepreneur in Residence, at least until puts another deal together. You ever find out what happened to Peter? They were asking whether to process his paperwork."

"Oh, no. I still need to track him down." Will took a breath, exhaled imperceptibly like a hit on a joint. "Hey, I'm really sorry how everything came out. I mean, that I never really made the headset do what I told everybody it could do. And then all the side effects, the headaches and the visions and everything. I never anticipated any of that. Are they just going to cancel the whole thing?"

Greg shook his head, grinned. "Oh no, not at all. They'll rebrand it because of the concert publicity, but the military loves it. They call it schizogenic, the imagery seems to break down the personality of some of the subjects, so they become much more susceptible to suggestion during interrogation. Plus there's no trace of physical or chemical coercion, that's even better. In fact, we're starting work on a new rev to ramp up the bimodal amplification of the capture reversal."

By their fruits ye shall know them Will heard Lem remember his Father read Matthew wrote Jesus said, and no wonder, instead of getting a good job with a good company, he ran off to art school to fashion the graven images of the unbeliever and then for filthy lucre built a machine to etch the sign of the beast in his brain, so that now they can reprogram their enemies' brains, or everyone's brain, any way they want, that Will has hell to pay to everybody. How can he find himself in others, didn't that Carnegie book say to talk about the other person, ask questions, connect to a common interest, query Greg about his

son was it Karl or Kyle, his wife Terry they should have had them over for dinner sometime, but Suzi couldn't stand her or was she just jealous, and Lem was never much of a friend, they just worked together, and hardly that, worked nearby each other, never really talked, and what friends did Lem talk to besides Peter, was Peter even a friend. "And you, you're doing okay?"

"Me? Oh, I'm great. My team is basically intact, we've got an important new project, and Corporate is backing us up one hundred percent. You don't have anything to feel bad about."

"Ah. Good morning Mister Lem," said Vikram, stepping from the truck gate onto the concrete dock, with Nikhil behind him pushing a rubber-tired hand-truck that jangled over the mismatched gap.

"Hey guys," Will said. Would it make any sense to explain his new name to them, they undoubtedly heard about the Tarkoff interview, gossip about that sort of incident propagates through a workplace like grade-school pink eye, but this, his attempt to apologize his emptiness away, that would sound crazy. The two techs continued into the gloom of the back bay of the building through the open overhead door.

Greg watched the guys disappear down the hallway toward the lab. Will looked at Greg, then down at his feet. "Another favor? I wondered if I could use you as a reference? You know, if I'm looking for a job, not necessarily anything about Cortez or the technology, just that I'm reliable and all? I mean, since I don't know what Frank would say at this point."

"Sure, no problem. Hey, we didn't do anything with your office yet, if you want to go clean it out and take what you want. Not the workstation though, they're redeploying those."

"Are they taking the furniture too?" Why did Will care about the crappy plastic cubicles, or was it called making conversation.

"Frank's deal on the fit-up? Nah, they're leaving that for if a new tenant wants it, otherwise they'll have a jobber haul it away. Doesn't conform to their ergonomic environmental aesthetic or something."

What else to say, Will might as well go empty Lem's office. "Okay, well, thanks." Will held out his hand, he and Greg clasped, released. "So see you around."

"Yeah, see you, Lem," Greg said.

Will walked into the building, across the open unfinished space Cortez never got far enough along to use for manufacturing shipping/receiving or anything, down the hallway past the propped open lab door through which he saw Nikhil and Vikram waltzing another rack onto the tongue of the hand truck, but he didn't go in. Under the raised floor that concealed the orange pill bottle of powder, was the residue now in an evidence envelop on some shelf in a police property room, from beneath the floor mat when the red blue white lights swerved his car off the road, from the fat fingers of that enforcer who sucker-punched his stomach, he never should have given the drug to Peter, none of the people he needed to see took street drugs, once they saw Will they wouldn't think Lem did drugs, never again.

Unoccupied lobby out front, gray overcast through the glass, switchback stairway echoed his footfalls to the second floor, where the carpet soaked up the sound of his steps. All the overhead lights off like on a weekend, but with the air conditioning shut down too, they sure were saving money, thick and warm up here even on the cooler than usual day. The rows of cubicle partitions and out-turned chairs and unsullied work surfaces, everybody must have moved out yesterday, subdivided the interior like a flesh-stripped skeleton, as if a huge vacuum hose stuck its snout up the stairwell and sucked out the life, Cortez eaten from the inside out, with the truck out back pressed against the cavity like the knot in the neck of a hagfish.

Will sat in the swivel chair in the silence of his window-side cube. They had left the systems powered up, so he ran a recursive erasure on the top directory of his personal files. Everything was backed up of course, but privacy lay in multiplicity, within the glaciers of accumulated data nobody excavated any individual anyway, plus Lem kept nothing to hide at work. Or elsewhere, he should be so lucky as to enjoy pornography or bomb making instructions or Aryan supremacy or poker or plans to kidnap some celebrity's heir or the stalking of a high school sweetheart. Whatever happened to that Janie girl, of the freckles and red-blond braid and green eyes as wide as a fawn and a crooked lower left incisor, letting him kiss her and cup his hand around her sweatered breast on the Christian youth group hayride. Will picked up the picture in the acrylic L-frame from the desktop, long-skirted Suzi standing with sunhat Annie on her hip that weekend at the beach, Annie so serious despite the 'Say cheese', Suzi's eyes squinting from the sun or her stiff smile, after

arguing, did anyone keep snapshots of argument topics, in the thin-walled motor inn while Annie watched morning cartoons, the officemate documentation of family man Lem, Will should take that with him. And the anti-air-conditioning cable-knit cardigan sweater off the back of the chair.

Pens and pencils and paperclips and post-its in the top drawer, why would Will need office supplies, an open bag of oatmeal raisin cookies he cached to postpone going out to get an evening meal until he'd forage the frig when he got home late, Will ate one of those. Nice to have cup of coffee but they probably purged the break room when they departed, like some Slavic abandoned village where after the clamor and crush of its everyday inhabitants fled famine plague war, or the nearby nuke plant meltdown, where all the shabby dirty streets and indifferent half-timbered buildings slouch with scraps of trash and broken glass while the weeds and vines wind around the walkways and the rats run unafraid and the plaster flakes from the wattle. Nothing in the aisle but a file folder and a water bottle and a hardback book dropped in the haste to escape the gunmetal window light on the carpet grit and the scuffed cubical corner and the grainy low-hung ceiling. Lem's shelves of data books and journals and conference proceedings, the stacks of notebooks and print-out paper, was it weeks ago that Lem ditched the incriminating evidence in a strip mall trash can by a dark sedan, what use to anyone, let them consign it all to a dumpster when they exorcised for the next tenant, pulp all the paper and press it into toilet tissue, that's appropriate, shit on shit. Submerge Lem's notes in an acid bath to dissolve the ink strokes and graphite marks of all the text and annotated graphs and flow charts and pseudo-code, recycle rearrange reorder and reformat all the letters symbols numbers into new meanings that mattered to some imaginary artist engineer entrepreneur, not to Will. What configuration would matter, how should he be redesigned, Lem learned the rule back in school, no composition without constraint, the frame and the plane and application of paint defined all possible worlds, the people who knew him drew and diagrammed and described who Will was bound by who Lem used to be, and Greg declared that he had nothing to feel bad about, so now to find something he did feel, and find who would repurpose him anew if he asked their forgiveness for the past. Become again as the little child Lem, who must be born again, not of his horrid mother, and not of

all the women in whom he wanted to slide wet inside, not into the warm dark womb, but in the recycled words that would rewrite him right.

The phones still worked, with their redundant numbers aliased to relocation, so Will called Dave.

“Dave Drewry,” said Dave’s voice.

“Hey, Dave, Will. I mean Lem.”

“Huh? Lem?”

“Yeah. Hey, I’m down at Cortez, and I was wondering if you were free for lunch today.”

“Lunch? Well, let me check.” The phone created the hole in the space between the hiss that it makes when it sucks the empty sound out of both ends of the connection. “Sure, I can move a few things around on my calendar. Love to hear your side of the story with Tarkoff. How about Garavito’s? Over on Columbia? At one, say?”

“Sure, see you there.”

Will hung up, picked up the package of cookies, the family picture, and his sweater, what remained of two years before the fall of Cortez, and stepped to the window. A pacific expanse of parking lot, the peak of another office building, with people inside looking after themselves he surmised, he turned and walked to the stairwell.

Chapter 29 Booth

“Do you have a reservation?” The woman, what was a female maitre d called, wasn’t French a gendered noun language, hostess then, though that sounded more like entertainment, or cream-filled, not mutually exclusive, with an unnecessarily tight white blouse and overly short grey skirt, activated her ‘You’re not the wealthy older businessman who could get me out of standing on these three-inch heels all goddamn day but whatever’ smile.

“No, I don’t think so.” Will scanned the seating area for no sign of Dave, the busy employed in-demand, and hard to think about, but maybe now more important, party always arrived later than the otherwise idle, and why when half the tables sat empty after the lunch rush did she ask about a reservation, or maybe she needed to cross out each name in the spiral-bound notebook on the entry pulpit or else one unlucky table would remain lonely and waiting forever for someone who had long ago dined and departed.

With two maroon padded-cover menus and a wine list version with a stretched aspect ratio under her elbow, she led Will toward a central table, but went along when he indicated one of the single-seat-per-side booths along the mirror wall that duplicated the dining area and squeezed it down to half its size. Will sat so he could see Dave’s eventual entry into the waiting area alcove, or else see the obverse Dave enter the mirror world. White tablecloth proclaimed the place charged enough to afford the linen laundry bill, with the square of white paper on top that said they didn’t want to, and/or distributed four-color crayon boxes to distract distraught children. Salt and pepper, olive oil and balsamic, the square porcelain sweetener packet boat but mini-pitcher cream only if coffee ordered, bread plate for pending bread, wine and water glass whether or not, two forks bread knife and teaspoon as if everyone needed those, no soup spoon until soup, no steak knife unless steak, the down-sized desert fork and spoon held in reserve, he desquared the dining protocol napkin triangle onto his lap.

“Thanks,” Will said. The hardly a busboy, middle-aged man from a hot country that raisin-dried its people, filled the water glasses out of the side of the pitcher so that ice chunks calved with the outflow. In the mirror, Lem’s lank washed-this-morning hair looped

behind his ears, why did Will wear long hair, purple-gray hollows below the eyes, supposedly the skin is thin over the hole in the skull, but why, and why the socket bigger than the eye, and behind the opaque eye the shuttered soul. Will opened the menu, two paper sheets caught in plastic corners like oversized family album snapshots of an Italian restaurant menu where they celebrated Lem's what, his family never went out to eat except for one meal on the all-day drive back from the Christian family camp annual vacation when his mother couldn't pack a lunch because the camp had a dining hall.

"Something to drink for you sir?" The waiter's white-apron'd torso and shirtsleeved elbows angling an order pad and pen toward his chest confronted the table.

"Uh, coffee? Black?" Will said.

"Excellent." The waitperson retreated.

Like an annual performance review for Lem's personnel file back at Unicom, 'meets expectations' read the menu, left page under antipasti the eight appetizers, then insalate for the standard soup and that of the day lumped with the four standard salads, then the eight pizza variants, second page, the eleven pasta selections, half and full-sized primo and secondi, and finally specialita eight main dishes spanning the edible fauna and a couple flora. Will had never eaten here although he might as well have, in some other version, the sort of fare that land-mined the intestinal landscape after noon, what did the Italians call a siesta, why Lem never ate like this at lunch, stare at the screen back at work and watch the characters swim in syrup, the tingling garlic slime swelling his tongue, what did Will eat, besides car-dealer/desk-drawer cookies.

"Thanks," Will said. The waiter set the wide white saucered cup before him, with whatever heat the stale coffee once held half spent on the trip over. Did all the suburbs and cities everywhere offer the identical Italian restaurant with a sneaky franchising scheme whereby the exteriors and interiors and menu printing appeared slightly different, or maybe an incompetent franchising system in which they all tried to be exactly the same and failed, or perhaps an organized crime conspiracy to conceal the fact they were all owned and operated by the same family. Not that this was Italian food anyway, another Americanization of a foreign country's cuisine by blandishing salt sugar fat into seat-cushion-sized servings, like the mongrelization of Mexican and the confabulation of Chinese, each offered in a cartoon abstraction of its native architecture, adobe mission,

carved beam temple, fresco grotto, like the Vegas strip or the Magic Kingdom, and then by deploying the faux-ethnic menu weapon, late military industrial capitalism colonized the alleged nations of origin to fatten their inhabitants out of their knock-off American blue jeans and into elastic-wasted leisure wear to digest dubbed-down American sitcoms on reclining sofas, pacified, not that Lem had ever travelled overseas, did Will want to travel.

While Will drifted undistracted, Dave abruptly beset the other side of the booth, so they coursed through the customary greeting to get quickly to the first course.

“So what happened with Tarkoff?” asked Dave. “I heard you told him you quit right to his face. Boy, I bet that took some guts. Was he pissed off? What did he say?”

“No, it wasn’t like that. I just think I do better in a smaller environment. Not with all the big company process.”

“Yeah, well, you can get away with that. Not everybody is so lucky. You know what they say, you got to get along to get ahead. That’s what I always tell myself. Now I know, you don’t like to play the game, figure out how to tell people what they want to hear. You’re one of those mavericks.”

“Well, not really, it’s just that I can only do stuff I can understand, I mean, if I have the whole picture in my mind all at once.”

“No, I’m not saying it’s bad, it’s good. Didn’t you read the stuff about Disruptive Innovation? How you pull off a paradigm shift in the market?”

“You are ready to order?” The waiter’s bulk again bulwarked the table.

“Is the veal piccata good?” Dave asked.

“Oh yes, very excellent.”

“Okay, I’ll have that. With a Caesar salad. And a glass of the Montepulciano. Oh, and bring us the antipasto to start.”

“Excellent. And you sir?”

“What’s your soup?” Will asked. And what was Montepulciano.

“Yes, our soup today is the sage butternut squash sausage. Most excellent.”

“Uh, I’ll have a bowl of the minestrone.”

“Excellent.” The waiter took away the menus.

“That’s all you want?” said Dave. “No wonder you’re such a frigging beanpole.”

Will shrugged.

"No, seriously. Have whatever you want, I'll expense it."

"Thanks, I'm okay."

"Suit yourself. Anyway, what I was saying was. You're one of those guys that can do anything. I mean, look. You're a painter. You do construction. You program. You do system architecture. You're so smart, I bet you could do anything you set your mind to."

"Boy, I don't know."

"Sure you could. Now guys like me, we don't have that option. We have to find a niche and make ourselves visible. Convince the people that we work for how essential we are. It's not easy, you know?"

"I guess, yeah."

"And here you are gentlemen." The waiter lay the round-rimmed plate of gleaming brownish-red skin-thin mottled slices and thicker yellowish-white strips all curled up like shavings from a wood plane that had dressed the edge of a meaty-cheese-tree plank.

Dave ate the greasy mammalian wind-ups authentically, with his fingers. "Sure you don't want any of this?"

"No, thanks."

"So what do you think you're going to do next?"

"I don't know. Maybe something different."

"You should read this great book I read about finding your true passion. It's called 'A Soul Soars', that's how I reinvented myself in guerilla marketing." Dave rubbed his fingers with his napkin. "Hey, what do you think Frank will do next?"

"I heard he went to Raptor Ventures." As they say, business was high school with money, Lem standing in the cacophony of the cafeteria, hands holding the sticky orange tray still damp from the self-leveling stack, waxed cardboard half-pint whole milk, steamed hotdog the color of it's-a-girl balloons, crinkly air-bag of potato chips, looking at the overflow table of the cool kids, the captains of their destiny, laughing inside their joke, not that they bullied or harassed him, how could they insult somebody that didn't exist, he took a seat at a table empty of anyone, except a chess club aspiring CPA or clubfoot future veterinarian whose names he didn't know, took a seat in a two-man booth with Dave from marketing.

“No, I mean, sure, he’ll look at business plans for a while, dip his toe in a few first rounds, sit on a couple boards, but what will he do? I’d sure like to get in early on his next company, wouldn’t you?”

“Well” Will leaned back as the waiter cleared the empty appetizer plate and set down Dave’s salad and the soup. Will should have explained that this was his main course, now how to stare down a bowl of congealing soup while Dave speared his romaine, he might as well wait later already finished while Dave ate his veal, so he blew on a spoonful, slipped off the lumpy liquid between his lips. What was it they did with tomatoed mushy vegetables and beans, a grainy irritating bite, not spicy at all, but more than salty, something like canned soup chemical mouth-wash, preservatives or the other nine-syllable names swelling the ingredients list, or leached metal from inside the can, or maybe the plastic coating that protected the tin, but why would restaurant soup taste like canned soup, maybe it was canned soup.

“I sure wish they had a decent deli in this town,” Dave said. “I mean this place is okay, but man, there was this great deli where I grew up. I guess you don’t have that in the South, it has to be northern city, where there’s European immigrants. Maybe Los Angeles, I don’t know. Why do you think nobody ever went national with a deli chain? They do bagels and lox and everything, but no corned beef like back home. Maybe something about the meat, like how you have to slow-cook the meat.”

Will rested his thumb on the lip of his soup bowl when the waiter removed Dave’s salad plate and set down the side of spaghetti and the oval dish of what looked like glistening golden-brown dirt clods dissolving into yellow mud, so the waiter left Will the quarter inch of remnant minestrone to mull without asking him, what would he ask, not ‘still working on that’ like a bistro college kid. Dave sawed off a chunk of cutlet, ceding the airspace to Will.

“So, I wanted to say, I’m really sorry about how everything turned out with the Syzygy event and your video,” said Will. “I know it’s my fault for bringing Alec and the dance concert into this. Now that they cancelled your whole promotion and killed the Eluce product name, the whole the marketing effort has to be completely derailed. And I feel really bad that I screwed up what you were trying to accomplish.”

“What? Oh no, not at all.” Dave swallowed his mouthful. “Ha, that’s really funny, you didn’t screw anything up. You see, the underground distribution of the Eluce video was absolutely fantastic, we’re up over two million views. Solaris had no idea they could tap into that kind of consumer demographic, without spending a single dime on advertising time. So they offered me a position in HuPPR.”

“What’s upper?”

“HuPPR. The Human Potential Products Division. We do the idio-metric biofeedback product line. This new thing I’m working on is fantastic, we don’t have a product name for it yet of course, but the internal code name is DiaMind.”

“Like diamond? Diamond mine?”

“Yeah, but ‘mind’. Like in the brain? Now this is all confidential, okay? So don’t tell anybody.”

“I wouldn’t tell anybody.” Who would listen.

“Right. So we have this sensor array that monitors EEG, all those brain waves, Delta, Theta, Alpha, plus your vitals, heart rate, blood pressure, respiration, as well as galvanic response, you know, like for a lie detector? So it turns out we can accurately measure the intensity of negative emotions, anxiety, fear, guilt, shame, et cetera. I think they said the Beta waves are a big indicator of stress. Then with all that, we can give the user auditory or visual feedback on their emotional state, like the more negative the feelings, the higher the tone or the brighter the light, so that people can train themselves to decrease the negative and increase the positive, by learning to think about things that lower the stimulus level.”

“For people to feel better?”

“Well, yes, but that’s not where the opportunity is. Think about it, people believe you when you’re sure of yourself, when you’re calm and confident. That’s like what charisma is. And negative emotions give off subtle subconscious clues that say that you don’t believe in what you’re saying, that you doubt yourself. So the DiaMind can teach people how to speak and interact with their audience without showing those negative emotions, and then the listeners will respond positively, and believe what they say. Think of how much it’s worth to close on the really big deal, to win an important election, to dismiss a class action law suit, by being absolutely convincing. Salesman, executives, politicians, lawyers, in fact,

everyone in the public eye, are going to love this. Plus, there's tremendous price elasticity in these occupations. I mean, the corporate coaching industry alone is worth billions."

"So basically this device teaches people how to lie?"

"No, no, how to be confident and convincing. You know, to act with the courage of your convictions."

"But isn't that like what psychopaths do, they can act without feeling guilt or remorse, these negative emotions you're talking about?"

"That's such a popular misconception. People that hurt other people, you know, serial killers, criminals, those are the psychopaths. People that help other people, create jobs, make our economy grow, like businessmen and elected officials, those are the people we're after. Two completely different things. DiaMind just helps the people that do well, to do even better. Soon as we make this baby small enough to fit in an earpiece or in an eyeglass frame, everybody will want to wear one all the time."

Dave twirled up a fork-full of pasta. Maybe they could make a biofeedback sensor to train Will away from his negative emotions, when he felt hollowed out like the hagfish had eaten his heart, left a hole in his gut, sucked the brain out of his skull, then a pulsing light and a rising bleep, from the metal monitor box above his hospital pillow, would alert the crash-cart crew to bobsled his bed to the surgical theatre where the world-class team waited to transplant the viable core of a suitable donor inside his old skin and bones.

"Oh, by the way, they're bringing your friend Drebin in to consult on Eluce. On the NRI, I mean, that's the name they adopted for the intelligence segment. Anyway, the Agency is very interested in what he's been doing at Visualization Sciences. Apparently his research dovetails nicely to enhance the quality of the intel they're getting from the test subjects. So you see, linking us up with Alec was a two-bagger, you should be pleased."

No way Drebin would disclose Lem's drug use to Solaris, was that doctor-patient privilege, never mind, Will already walked out on Tarkoff and Dave said that meant he quit, so none of it mattered, schizophrenic prisoner induction or sociopathic presidential deception, because as long as Will was what, Dave said he was smart enough to do anything he wanted.

Once the waiter had cleared and verified that his guests declined desert and after-dinner drinks, he brought the check and Dave carded away the obligation.

“Well, I’ve got to get back to the salt mine. It’s been great to see you, Lem.”

“Will. I’m using the name Will now.”

“Really? Well.” Dave stopped talking for a moment and looked at Will as if he might have slipped between the paragraphs in Dave’s autobiography. “Hey, that’s great. Rebranding yourself for your next venture. That’s a great idea.” Dave stood up, crumpled his napkin onto the bench seat. “So, give my best to the wife and family. Will.”

“Yeah, you too.”

Chapter 30 Patio

Although Raptor Ventures financed the first round funding in Cortez, Frank had handled all that, and Lem had never seen their office, but Will knew where it was, out on the north side near the gated estates and college preps and country club golf courses of the financiers and their peers, like where Frank lived. Good thing the overcast sky siphoned the contrast and chroma from the north-bound beltline, not that cross-scored concrete lanes with the white lines almost erased and the gravel shoulder rounding down to chickweed dirt and the spine-like links of the skid-arc'd median barricade adorned with a wiry retread carcass and a fluffy chunk of fiberglass batting held any color, but because the air conditioning in the rental blew out barely ambient air, so any side window sunshine would have sweltered Will. The sound system sucked too, incapable of tuning to anything other than the over-watted country western and the commercial-saturated classic rock and the music Satan plays in hell Christian station, but at seventy-five the sedan roared and rattled enough to cancel everything emitting from the speakers except the high frequency crackle and hiss. Will drove fast out to see Frank, to outrun the growing afternoon gridlock, or because he couldn't afford to keep the car, so he needed to see everybody as soon as possible, or because he needed to get away from that empty apartment, and away from whoever he was, now that he wasn't Lem, not that seeing these people helped, not so far anyway, Greg told him not to feel bad, and Dave told him to feel smart, which he still did and still didn't, but at least he kept moving, while he had the momentum, before he pulled over into the Breakdown Lane, Emergency Stopping Only, and killed the engine. What happened in the bar or after the bar that killed off Lem and left Will to chase down who he was, or maybe nothing happened, and the accumulated toxicity of wearing the Bug and Drebin's drugs and sun-downing the booze blacked out his brain, redacted the sleep-smear'd memorandum Lem read to himself every morning upon awakening, here's who you are and what to do. No, all the text persisted, but like those cut-up novels from the Dada days, with phrases and fragments randomly rearranged, telling him the plot and character of someone else's life. And his hacked up imagination, too, when not occupied in conversation or engaged in conscious control, like now, with the autopilot navigating the

freeway, Will noticed not noticing any visions of anything other than the fast-lane ten-car-length rear bumper ahead, and that not even a low dark late model sedan, just an old van, no vision of emergency surgery or underwater Annie or roiling furrows or out-of-focus sex or twisted nebulae, nothing, Will motored on fully mindful of a mindless endless highway moment.

Right ahead the exit for Old Litchford Road, stop at the top of the ramp, left across the overpass, green lawns and pines and corporate clusters popsicled on their wide drives, identified by tasteful tombstones with azalea surrounds near the curb, no sidewalks. Mile or so beyond the ring-road a single-story Spanish-revival compound, red-tile parapet concealing the flat-roof mechanicals, bronze glass expanse set deep in yellow-pink skip-troweled sills, catenary arch over thick-beamed double doors with wrought-iron rivets, Raptor Ventures. Will parked in Visitor Only, cheapest car on the lot, maybe while he was inside all these big German brutes would jack-boot his little degenerate Beranti into scrap metal for intruding on their homeland.

“Do you have an appointment?” The receptionist’s grammatical question ended declarative, without an uplift, flat as her flawless makeup, or maybe one of Raptor’s portfolio companies was beta-testing a curvaceously perfect female robot here in the lobby area, but they hadn’t debugged the empathy software yet, or maybe making Will feel like an trainee pest control technician who appeared at the wrong address was a feature, when he asked to see Frank Mansfield. He told her he would wait and she told him it could be some time.

From the leather-cushioned sofa’s ornately carved wooden frame behind the iron-strapped heirloom chest since commandeered as a coffee table, Will measured where some the money went from the sixty-six percent equity Raptor took from companies for first round, because so many startups shipwrecked and they had to salvage their twenty or hundred multiple on the rare survivor. For people who specialized in spotting the newest new thing, they sure liked oversized old stuff, the receptionist’s cathedral-tiered dark-varnished desk with filigrees and florets incised around the panels, huge fern-filled earthenware urns with pure-hued diamond circle stripes, that’s lead glaze, Lem knew from Suzi, chain-hung iron-banded light cylinders of smoky yellow mica glass that burnished more gloom into the lumpy orange plastered room and dulled the blackened hand-hewn

ceiling beams, or maybe some automatic machine milled out fake adze-blade blows, or they were those molded foam faux beams, who knows. Huge painting hung frameless behind the woman, fairly contemporary Spanish or South American, one of those tactile abstracts in browns and blacks with scraped off sandy swaths of crumbling corrosion, which approximates a piece of ancient abandoned wall cut out with a concrete saw, but somebody painted it, what did Lem used to paint, depersonalized conceptual optical delusion, and why those, so what would it look like if Will painted Lem's lucid visions. More solid than the disintegration of pastel spots and daubs impressed upon light, more ominous than the vivid slash and smear expressing angst and agony, more sensual than the washed-out melting morphing limbs of surreal flesh, more desultory than the poured or splatter-strewn rage abstracted from lust, more inescapable than the clean-lined repurposed packages advertising irony, can a dream include irony. Why Lem's paintings were bad, because he had sincerely attempted to make good art, when for post-photography everything-goes art, only 'isn't this bad art' was good art, while a bad dream was merely unpleasant, not badly dreamed, and as sincere as a good dream was pleasurable, not a mockery of bourgeois commercial dreams, or of naïve dreams of past eras, unless all dreams mocked waking life, here, look what you thought was real, so a dream did mean irony, not to the dreamer, but to the waker. And what if the waking dream made fun of Will, here, look at who he thinks he is, when he's a vision, a version, a virtual actor in a waking dream, the ironic incarnation of Lem.

Man, how long before Frank freed up, 'some time' described a subtle interval, like saying he'll be here in 'no time' meant wait for him, while 'some time' meant longer than Will wanted to wait, so then leave, but how about the return on time invested, this was pointless, what could Frank say anyway. Always the big buildup, the daydreaming, the anticipation, all for a few lines of forgettable dialogue, and then on to the next futile scene it seemed. When what Will wanted was a reason, what had kept Lem moving, beyond aversion to discomfort, once warm and dry and fed, with enough money to afford that forever, which was why Cortez, to do what he wanted, he wanted nothing. Why he needed somebody who cared about him, who he wanted to win over, prepossess, who Suzi once was, and then Annie, when his father become proud grandfather told him how wonderful, his family, home, career, but he prayed every day that Lem would find Jesus. Maybe that's

why sinners let Him into their hearts, a hidden locket-sized lover to impress with their good works, a reason to believe in a quest for a source of eternal bliss, but how to fake belief, even if faith in the falsehood offered salvation from the emptiness. Or was grace the anticipation, like sex, absolutely certain how essential the consummation, when only friction, a biological ruse, a natural deselection of disbelief, deluded propagation, perpetuation, spent disappointment on release. Or like the opinions which Will came to confirm, what a good guy Lem was, the reputation treadmill ladder to heaven, Lem's brilliant work, frigging genius, perfect in its future realization, but once inverted by the instantaneous lens of the actual, then projected backwards to into retrospective crap. Sentenced to this silent sofa-sitting stasis not by the side effects of the headset, or the drinking and the drugs, or Suzi's demands, or anything else, but by failure, Lem's failure, Will was not a guy who failed, he lost not what was, but what he wanted, praise, acclamation, adoration, love, but a one-way love, he did not love, he told Suzi he couldn't say the word, because he didn't know what love meant. His parents said Jesus loves you, and you are damned to Hell for Adam's sin, but Lem gave in, love was the word one used with a woman, a convention, as in Adam authorized to name all things, maybe love wasn't the word for what Will wanted. At least a painting was exactly and only what it was, pigments on the plane whatever their name, maybe he should paint, and who would pay or praise or love him for that.

"Let's go out on the loggia." Across the scarred plank top of the sea chest stood Frank, open collar short sleeve dress shirt, hands jangling keys or coins in the pockets of his khakis like a distant impatient railroad crossing. He turned and walked toward the glass doors that opened onto a colonnaded courtyard between the wings of the building. Will stood up and followed, what did Frank want out of the logic, right, the patio, an upscale Italian name for the back porch of a pseudo-Spanish office building.

"What's up? I don't have a lot of time." Frank about-faced before an arrangement of outdoor-cushioned wicker chairs, with a table forged from twisted iron bars that held a hubcap-diameter glazed ashtray with a couple half-smoked cigars poised in its indents, an Aladdin-lampish brass lighter, and an overnight-case-sized rosewood box that might be a humidor, this then where the partners smoked their alpha-male entitlements. Maybe lit

with C-notes like Scrooge McDuck. Frank did not sit down, so Will didn't either, and not even actually inside the building.

"Well, I wanted to reconnect. To try and," Will said.

"Look, I don't have anything for you," said Frank. He widened his stance and flattened his hands into his back pockets, which angled forward his hips. "I heard about you at Solaris. Pretty shortsighted, I'd say, but like I said, you do what you want to do. But geez, Lem, you could have negotiated severance or something. You can't go around pissing people off like this, it looks bad."

"No, I mean, I think I want to do something different now." Will looked down at his hands clasped at his waist, programmer's hands, painter's hands, carpenter's hands, praying hands, let us now bow our heads in silent prayer said Reverend Bowman after the last hymn of the service trailed off into discordant reverb and Lem knew his agony neared its end for another Sabbath morn, he had only to stand the benediction. Take up a collection, give alms, to support the less fortunate among us, poor Will, for example, nay, verily Frank already gave at the office.

"Well, Lem. I got you a shot in the big leagues. Now it's back to the farm team for a couple seasons. You can probably get somebody to take you on as a programmer. But you're not going to call the shots for a while. You show people you're back on your game, then maybe I can find you a slot in another startup. But you're going to have to pull some serious weight for a while. This business has a real short attention span, but a real long memory, you know." Frank tutored the tiles on the top of the wall above Will's head.

"I understand all that. I just wanted to say I'm sorry"

"Sorry? Don't be sorry, man up and get back out on the field. What do think this is?"

"No, I mean about getting the product out and the patents and all. And the concert movie getting out of control."

"I told you. I told you I didn't want Cortez mixed up with that weird artist shit." Frank wagged an index finger toward Will's chest. "And lose that Peter. That guy's a liability."

"No, you're right, I know. I know you gave me a huge opportunity and I blew it. I'm just trying to figure out"

“Look, Lem. You’re a smart guy. You do good work. You’re convincing, you can sell your vision to people. This is not a disaster, it’s good, it’ll keep you hungry, motivated. So get mad, get even, get back out there and show people what you can do. Okay?”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll do that. I’ve just had a lot of stuff happening all at once lately.”

“Yeah, well. Gudrun filled me in. Sorry about that.” Frank turned his palms out to the inexplicable, the unavoidable. “I warned you, it’s not worth it, stay married.”

Sorry to be filled in, about how much, beyond the separation, the hospital, the car wreck, how much did Gudrun know, not the drugs. Lem had read, to win friends, ask the other person questions about themselves. “So, how’s Sarah doing?”

“Oh, fine. Just fine.” Frank squeezed his eyes tight closed as if swallowing acid reflux. “So I’ve got to get back.” He held out his hand.

“Okay.” Will shook, one squeeze, Frank’s grip like tenderizing chicken scallopini.

“Good luck then.” Frank walked to the door leading back into the building.

“Thanks.” Will had forgotten to tell him his name was Will. He looked around the terrazzo patio, at the easy chairs, the iron table, with the sweet brush-fire smell of the stale ashtray, he never understood why guys liked cigars anyway.

Chapter 31 Salon

“Hello?”

“Hi Mary, it’s Lem,” said Will. If as Frank had said he needed to lose Peter, he’d have to find him first, so without other recourse, even though he promised he’d help her and hadn’t done anything so far, he called Mary.

“Oh, Lem, I’m so glad you called. I tried to reach you but there’s no answer at any of your numbers.”

“Yeah, I’m sort of in between things, sorry.”

“But I had to tell you, Peter called. He says he can’t come home, it’s not safe. And he didn’t want to stay on the line. But he said something like now he’s on the cutting edge. I don’t know what that means, whether he’s going to hurt himself, or is that something you guys say about computers? I mean, at least he sounded okay, but I’m more worried now than ever.”

Will hesitated, cutting edge sounded like a hair salon, Peter had talked about the only place that understood how to cut his hair correctly, he’d go once a month, someplace on the south side. “Well, I’m glad he finally called. I’m sure he’s okay. Look, I’ll check into it, and see if I can find out anything else.”

“Please do, I really appreciate it. You’re a good friend.” The breathless endless shush of the idle connection. “Oh, and Lem? I’m so sorry about you and Suzi, we always thought you guys were the perfect couple.”

“Yeah, I don’t know about that. But, thanks. So, talk to you soon.”

“Okay, bye Lem.”

Outside the parking lot splotched dark with shallow puddles intermittent in the pavement, the shrub leaves and grass blades glistened, must have rained last night. Flushed all the dust and crud from the air too, the power lines cut though the blue like a slash of scimitar, and the building profiles protruded like collage cut-ups. Or else Will focused farther after distilled dreamless sleep clarified his eyes without the blur of drinking them closed, or both. Above, those white puffer-belly clouds like children’s picture book steam locomotives, the sweet clean white blobbies of imagination, not the gray-black sideways

torrent of wood/coal smoke, sequenced across the sky, like sponge painting on the end of a pogo-stick, why did condensation occur in widely spaced clumps. Will started the car and rolled down the windows, flushing the sun-warmed interior with the day's decently dry cool air, foreboding autumn, the darker days, the end of year.

The directory listed Cutting Edge Unisex Salon on Rockridge Ave, where the city ceded to suburbs on the south, Will took Edwards Mill toward town. Lem and Suzi the perfect couple, the perfect coupling, how it felt back in college, a perfect couple of idiots, where they ended up, so sorry said Mary, a sorry state of affair he never consummated, a sorry excuse for a husband. And a good friend to who, certainly not Mary, nor Peter who Lem led into oblivion, and lead us not into oblivion, but deliver us from good intentions. When Lem started at Unicom in software, his first serious big company job, way over his head, they assigned him to the brain-sensor program where Peter worked as Senior Staff Engineer, probably the least socialized of the dozen technical misfits on the team. An unlikely pair, the tall fair Caucasian and the little dark Asian, but Lem asked Peter lots of questions and attended to his opinions, and Peter, pleased with the attention of an eager pupil, taught Lem whatever Lem could learn, which was enough to produce a viable prototype, praise, promotions, and the purview of Frank Mansfield, VP of Engineering at the time. Would've, could've, should've Lem done differently, seen Peter's isolation and oddities as more an omen than a quirk, found another hardware lead when Frank offered Lem the opportunity to start Cortez, predicted the effects of the Bug on them both, known better than to bring in the drugs, acted a good friend, complemented a perfect couple.

Damn less than a quarter tank, this Baronti ate a lot of gas for no power and less top end, Will pulled into a self-service station, authorized the credit card in the Remove Quickly reader, one more day denying no ability to pay anyway. The fold-down prong tooth that held the spring-loaded lever went missing, or they plier'd it off the handle so people couldn't wander away from the fill-up and squeegee the windows or check the oil or mill around like manikins, so Will had to press the nozzle into the filler neck, his back bent uncomfortably to reach down, can't bend his knees and half squat for ten gallons, like standing to piss in an airplane restroom where the fuselage bends into his forehead, either leaning backward or forward at the waist, or lowering on his legs, puts enough tension in his torso to make it impossible to pee, what with the turbulence sea-leg swaying, but just in

case he forgot the seat spacing too near for his knees, reminded again with the low curved ceiling he was too tall to fly, but sit on that splattered seat no thanks. Flying back with Suzi, how could she sleep on planes, after the Thanksgiving trip for his parents to meet her, before he abandoned, in his actions anyway, asking for their approval, and to establish all parties' mutual disapproval, when she entered his room from his brother's, away at college, bedroom across the hall upstairs in the mid morning and woke him with 'where's my clothes', oh yeah, his mother probably came up early and gathered them to wash, and then found the half smoked joint when she emptied the pockets, which gave both Suzi and his parents lots more to mutually disapprove.

Coming along Rockridge, metered parking both sides, assorted storefronts, clothing, nails, cafe, furniture, liquor, pets, coffee, hardware, market, every everyday need except what Will needed, there, Cutting Edge Unisex Salon, one bay of a retail triple-wide, windows overlaying over-life-sized posters of impossibly nubile models as, presumably, exemplars of hair, puppy-eyed boyish girls with fat lips and stubbly skull sides, smooth girlish boys with slick bangs swept over one eye, Will found a parallel park up past the alleyway, put in a quarter for fifteen minutes. Stroller nanny, yoga mat matron, shuffling shopping bag senior, drip-front painter with bucket, then the array of hair care containers sentry'd on the sill inside the salon window, an aluminum framed glass door dangling OPEN from translucent suction hooks.

"Hello?" Will said as the door closed behind him, tripping the little bells that announced an entry/exit. Peter sat in a folding director's chair near the back of the narrow shop, beyond the two adjustable upholstered styling chairs facing the mirrored sink counter and shelves of styling products. He held open a celebrity gossip magazine, looked better than last time at Cortez, groomed, clean shaved, crisp fitted purple dress shirt, skinny black jeans.

"Ah, I've been expecting you. I knew you'd parse the code." Peter stood and dropped the magazine on the chair seat, did he read that stuff. "You should let me do your hair. Something layered on the sides, a bit longer on top, brushed back, a little shaggy. You have such a nice high forehead, but that center part pinches your face and exaggerates your nose."

"You work here?"

"Of course. I wash and blow dry, and Klara's teaching me how to cut and color, so I can get my certificate. But she says I have the gift. So what do you say?"

"Uh, no, I don't think so. I really just wanted to talk to you."

"Not here." Peter leaned toward an open doorway into the back room. "Klara, I'm taking my break. Back in ten."

"Okay, Pierce." A husky voice muffled from the rear. Peter walked quickly across the shop and out the entry door, Will followed, caught the door as it swung closed after Peter, before it re-jangled the strand of sleigh bells suspended from the casing.

"Pierce?" asked Will, hurrying to keep up on the sidewalk.

"More appealing to the clientele," Peter said. "And of course better for the other thing." He turned into an alley, with parking on one side interleaved with utility meter bollards and service doors and garbage dumpsters, where his Vexra hid behind a green panel van halfway up to the next through street. Will squeezed sideways into the passenger side, trying to keep the edge of the door from scraping the stucco wall.

Peter waited until Will straightened into the seat, then locked the doors and flipped a toggle switch on a grey metal box hanging from the underside of the dashboard above the console. A ladybug-sized red light glowed, a high-pitched hum like an invisible pin-hole in an inner tube annoyed the car interior, a yellow light blinked four times, then a green light came on. "There, now we're secure."

"What's that?" asked Will.

"A full-spectrum transducer with a two-meter envelope that I rigged up."

"Oh." Will knew that Lem knew better than to try to converse about Peter's stealth electronic intentions. "So, you're Pierce now. You know, it's funny, I just yesterday decided to change my name to Will."

"Naturally. LEM was only an acronym. Law of the Excluded Middle. Either a proposition is true, or its inverse is true. Either you are Illuminated, or you are not Illuminated. There is no third way."

"Illuminated?"

"We who see the signs of the impending Transformation. We who walk through the shadow of the invisible mother ships in orbit around our planet."

"I'm not sure what you mean." No point in pointing out Will hadn't seen any orbiting alien spacecraft, cloaked obviously, or would that be secretly.

"When you were Illuminated. Remember the lost time, when you felt held down, paralyzed, and taken outside of your body?"

"Yeah, but" That clinic guy claimed blackouts for what Lem couldn't explain to Will how Peter hinted more than booze and drugs and Bugs.

"That's when they transported you up into the vessel and determined if you were suitable to be Illuminated with the knowledge of the Transformation. Otherwise you wouldn't have come here to see me."

"Well, actually, I came to apologize." Returning to our regularly scheduled terrestrial programming. "I'm the one who convinced you to join Cortez, with Frank and everything, and I know the headset really messed you up, plus I should have never tried the drug on you, that was stupid. And now we didn't make any money off the acquisition, we don't even have a job anymore. So I'm sorry."

"Don't be ridiculous. Everything proceeded according to plan. The device conditioned the brain to be ready to receive the transmission. Once we were transported and Illuminated, our work there was finished. Now we must assume an ordinary identity to attract no undue attention while we wait for the signal."

"And you don't care about the money? The worthless stock options?" Will said.

"Will," said Peter. "There never was any money."

Will looked over at Peter, but he sat with his hands around the top of the steering wheel, staring at the windowless rear doors of the van in front of the car. "Did those guys from CSA ever track you down? A couple detective-looking guys in a dark sedan? They asked me about you, but I didn't tell them anything."

"My duty as a citizen was to inform the authorities of what I knew, of course. The agents responded appropriately to my telephone message about national security, and assured me that the situation is entirely understood and under control. Apparently Illuminated individuals at the highest levels are preparing for the Transformation. Obviously, a premature announcement would cause panic and mass hysteria. They advised me to go about my ordinary business and remain undercover."

“So where are you staying? I really think you should at least go home and see Mary and Tara, let them know you’re okay.”

“And make them a target too? No, I would never do that. I assume you stay away from Suzi and Annie as well, in order to keep them safe?

“No, well yeah, we separated, but that’s completely different.”

“Yes, and now that you have completed your task at Cortez, you should find some unremarkable employment, something no one would notice. Your new name is useful, of course, but once the signs of the impending Transformation begin to appear, the forces of resistance will become more relentless, so you want to distance yourself from your prior activities. You told me that you used to be an artist, a carpenter, that’s good, they would never suspect that someone in that line of work would matter to anyone. You need to go underground until you receive the signal.”

Go underground, like the farm team Frank assigned him to, where no one knew his former name, Dave said Will could do anything, maybe he should go work in an anonymous manual job, like that cabinet shop, mindless, not a sleepwalker, more like awake outside the dream, or inside an imageless dream, in an unbounded color-field canvas without color, since Lem’s visions had evaporated. Will felt like his own immanent Transformation had already happened, and now he awaited the Illumination informing him into what he had been transformed, so like a pulpy yellow larva, a soft-shelled egg, a wound-up shroud, roll the stone to block the tomb and stay safe undercover until he understood. And exactly what kind of Transformation was Peter anticipating, and what about the images of Annie in the capture sequence, and what was the point of asking.

“You know, that’s actually a good idea,” Will said.

“I should get back to the salon before they notice. But it’s good you came. I know there are many others who are Illuminated, and waiting eagerly for signs of the Transformation, but since we can have little contact, sometimes we feel quite isolated.”

“Is it okay if I tell Mary you’re okay?”

“Certainly. And tell her we will all be together soon in the new world.” Peter turned off the transducer box, and got out of the car. After Will sidled out of the passenger door, Peter clicked the lock button and walked rapidly away up the alley the way they came.

“Good to see you, Peter. Pierce. Glad you’re doing better,” Will called, but Peter did not look back.

Chapter 32 Manse

Although Lem never remembered directions unless he drove, and Dave drove the last time, Will found the Semplar Sanctum over on the eastside easily, late morning, what kind of schedule did Alec keep these days, used to go to bed after dawn in art school. Same bright blue door, gold lettering, same but different scruffy overall'd young guy answered the same buzzer, seemed like a year ago when Lem visited.

"I wonder if I could see Alec?" Will asked.

"Achayra remains in the manse," said the presumed disciple.

"Manse?"

"The residential quarters."

"Oh, could you give me the address? I'm an old friend."

"This is the address."

"You mean he lives here? Can you ask him if he'll see me? Will Narkis?"

The young man turned and walked into the unadorned hallway, Will remembered the door at the far end opening into the large open studio, seven doors, but the guy stopped and opened the second door on the left and stood beside the opening. Will entered a roughly square living-room sized room, carpeted, windowless white walls, dimly and diffusely lit by low-watt milk-glass sconces on all four walls. The door closed behind him. A circle of twelve folding chairs, the beat-up grey metal ones whose seats pling like Caribbean steel drums, took up most of the room, around an arrangement in the center of the floor of odd-shaped shiny rocks and a driftwood twist and a blue-green bowl of curly paper strips and a little round four-legged brass vessel, like a fairy barbeque cooker, but with ornate woven grillwork on the lid, so an incense burner, since room stank of something sticky sweet, like the burnt bone smell of a dentist's drill. A room for Semplar meetings or teachings or maybe mediation, but then why the chairs, didn't they sit in aching cross-legged tailbone pain, something else to let go of, Will went around outside the circle and sat in the chair facing the door, feet flat, hands in lap, maybe he should meditate.

He attended to his breath, remembered to let his thoughts skitter away like water-bugs on a mud puddle, looked down at the junk on the floor, a roadside shrine to a high

school daredevil who higher powered off the pavement and became one with a tree trunk. The pieces of paper in the bowl had printing, like oversized pastel fortune cookie fold-ups, he stood and took one out of the bowl, it read Bliss, another Compassion, a third Emptiness, that one Will pondered, hard to imagine enlightenment felt the way he felt, he sat back down. The breath. Manse, odd word, maybe Alec lived behind one of the other hallway doors, hardly a mansion, not a minister's residence, different origin from romance, or from man, or the hand prefix, a man's field, yesterday Frank Mansfield dismissed him to the bush leagues, told him to man up on the field. Remember breath. And why did he call Alec 'a chariot', those Krishna skinheads staged an annual parade with huge painted chariots, and offered you a free feast likely laced with something that made you want to sell flowers on the roadside, Alec wore one of their yellow robes at the concert, with that a bullet eye hole in his forehead. Breath. Pat certainly wouldn't have slept, wouldn't be sleeping with, Alec, not her type, she only went to the concert for a diversion, see how the other half gets high, what was her type, the newborn working class Will perhaps, no money, slumming, the fixer-upper farmhouse where she wrote children's books for their future children faded like blue-lined loose-leaves scattered around the school bus stop where the big kids snatched and played keep-away with Lem's three ring binder, crow-wing black covers flapping. Forgot breath. Lem swore he'd show those three-sports student-council daddy's convertible prom kings when his paintings sold in the galleries, when his tech IPO made him millions, but those were the kids that grew up to run the money and sit on the boards and collect the art anyway, so that now Will could sweep the floor of the sawdust from the construction of the custom cabinets that would outfit the wine cellar in the guesthouse on the grounds of their second summer homes.

The door opened. A different young guy stood outside the room, gazing up the hallway without a word, as if Will knew what to do, which he sort of did, got up and walked around the circle of chairs, seemed wrong to cut through, the door across the hall stood open to a dark wooden stairway, Will climbed. This made sense, the studio space in back had a high round-vaulted roof, so these low-ceiling front rooms could underlay a second story where Alec lived. After a half-flight, the landing U-turned to a second seven steps, seven times seven stories at Solaris before the tavern and the lost time, up to another door opening into a large room, with an immense sky-blue skylight punched between the trusses

at the apex of the cylindrical ceiling, with all the wood decking and beams and struts and steel strapping painted white, with yellow and brown blotches where the sap and rust and mold bloomed through. Directly below the skylight rose a room-sized box with crazy-color batik curtain sides, and a ladder leaning up about eight feet, a tabernacle bearing a bed beneath the stars and staring moon, or at present, an angular bright swath of sunny dust motes.

As Will stepped up into the doorway, a tall woman appeared in his path, light brown curls to her shoulders, a short silky almost shear baby doll top pleating from her nipples and ending above her navel, gray cotton men's boxer shorts slung by their loose black elastic waistband below her hips. She pressed her palms below her chin, smiled her hazel eyes, and said "Namaste."

"Hi," said Will. "I'm Will. William."

"Phaedra," said the woman. She turned sideways and swept her far hand toward the open space beyond her. Between the skylight sleeping platform and the front wall of the building, an open living area arrayed a plank-edge wooden coffee table, a canvas-sling chair on a curved chrome frame, a rose-upholstered Windsor chair, and a low square-cushioned lime-green sofa, in the center of which slouched Alec Atman, wearing a long-sleeved gray nightshirt that ended at his knees, his hair pulled back in a pony tail, leaving his sharp features conical and mantis-like, or maybe invisible mother ship alien-like.

"William, welcome," Alec said. "Come, sit." He waved toward the sling chair. "Phaedra, serve William some tea."

Will sat in the chair, which squeaked and rocked backward, leaning him slightly below Alec's eye level, while the Phaedra woman undulated over to a kitchenette counter beyond the bed pedestal. None of Alec's artwork, or anybody else's for that matter, on the unevenly patched off-white plaster walls.

"We have been expecting you. Many ripples propagate in the continuum after the discontinuity of the Syzygy. I sense the beginning of a transformation?" Alec smiled at Will.

"Uh, sort of," Will said. "I decided not to take the job with Solaris."

Phaedra placed a misshapen handle-less mug, the kind of slump-rimmed carbon-spotched raku that says accidental aesthetic, on the coffee table, in front of a bowl of floating pink blossoms, maybe carnations, or was that peony, and a bronze Buddha. She sat

beside Alec on the sofa, tucking her long bare legs beneath her, and turned sideways toward him, with her arm along the back of the cushion behind his head, her own head inclined slightly toward him like a puppy dog, her curls purgatorial in the skylight sunbeam.

“Ah. It is good you have come to seek my guidance.” Alec said. “Perhaps you are ready to disengage from the jaws of the machine and begin your spiritual journey.”

“Yeah, I wanted to tell you, I’m sorry about how badly everything ended up with the headset and the concert movie,” said Will. What was it with Alec and chicks, with his hairy thin chicken shins angled in front of him, his golf-ball sized Adam’s apple bobbing along, maybe Will should try that, tell women to begin their spiritual journey by spreading their legs.

“Oh, on the contrary. Your Syzygy documentary has fomented a planetary upswell in the ether, and immensely furthered our mission. Millions more now see the key to the portal beyond their temporality. However, the cosmic energies remain in balance, positive and negative, opening and closing, light and dark. I fear that your devices have fallen into the pull of a dark sun, sinking inside its seven towers, suppressing the distribution of our video recording. You see, all these illusions, the technologies, the pharmacologies, the ideologies, the images, can either heal or harm, can expand minds, or contract minds. The powers which seek to control the minds of others are arrayed against us. But, the timeless battle, the endless shadow play in which we are all but actors, continues.”

“You mean Solaris? Yeah, I heard about them using the side effects for the military interrogations. And I hear Drebin’s going to consult there?” asked Will. Phaedra shifted slightly, perhaps her foot had fallen asleep, the smooth sweep of butterscotch thigh bulging out against the calf behind the knee, was she that tan all over.

“Ah, Richard.” Alec as usual used Drebin’s full first name. “I’m afraid the baubles that fall from the tables of the moneychangers in the temples of power have blinded his eyes. But he will see through the trappings of fame and fortune and return to the Way. If not on this turn of the wheel, then perhaps on his next time around. But you, you now have the opportunity to evolve toward the actualization awaiting you in the art you abandoned for the allure of the marketplace.”

“That’s the other thing. I’m sorry that I looked down on what you were doing, I mean, your painting. I didn’t take it seriously. But you stayed with it, you stayed true to your art. And I think a lot of that.” Will leaned way forward, the canvas seat squeeching against the frame tubes, and retrieved his tea, but when he raised the rim to his lips, the steamy aroma of up-spaded beat bog where sumac bushes long lay buried, had him set it down again and sit back.

“Yes, you are indeed beginning the transition,” Alec said meanwhile. “You see, each soul develops like an embryo, through all the stages of consciousness. The child-mind experiences self-love, with only instrumentality toward others. The young mind hides its self-doubt inside its pride, and mocks others in its envy and arrogance. The adult mind extends its love to others, first to the family, then to friends, and eventually toward strangers. The mature mind expands its compassion to all humanity in the humility of its own insignificance. So you see, you must become as a child, and begin your journey. Simply take the first step, and all the rest will follow.”

“Uh, okay.” And where on this journey was Alec, he certainly circumnavigated once around to the child self-love stage. “But I’m really not clear about what to do next. I’m thinking about maybe something with my hands. Woodworking or something.”

“Your intuition is perceptive. You have been given the eye and hand. The gift. I saw that in our student days, a glimmer of the transcendent. Recently in the Semplar Sanctum, a vision appeared to me of an unfolding into higher dimensionality. We need to emerge from the image in the plane and project into space of the observer, just as the attuned eye extends into the space of the image, to form a fuller symmetry. My vision however has not yet coalesced into the concrete. Yes, I see carved wood. Perhaps figurative framing, or a frieze of iconic creatures, or caryatids incarnate around an altarpiece, or even the freestanding statuary of the ancients, in all its gleaming gilt and polychrome. I of course am only a vessel, and must wait to be filled. But I know you have been directed to us because you possess the skills of the third dimension. You can participate with us in this new phase. Since you have been of great service to our mission with your Syzygy movie, granting you this opportunity repays your good deed. It is karma.”

“You mean come work for you?”

“An apprenticeship. Those who come to us contribute of their unique gifts, while they refine the spiritual practice of their art and drink deeply from the well of our wisdom. We offer you the honor of membership in the Semplar community.”

“How much money are we talking about?”

“A nominal contribution, simply to cover our operating expenses. For those in financial extremes, we sometimes provide partial scholarships, but of course after your digression into the service of the computer, you have already been granted greater means than our younger students.”

“You’re saying I would pay you to come work here and make sculptures for you?” asked Will. Maybe Alec ought to consult at Solaris too, with Dave’s DiaMind project, so they can measure the biomarkers of a control subject who can say anything at all with an immutable beneficent grin.

“No, more like a tithe, or a giving of alms, a donation in support of and gratitude for our mission. Semplar Sanctum is a 501C3 non-profit corporation, so your donation is fully tax deductible. As it is written, we are blessed to give what we have and follow the Way.”

“Boy, I’ll have to think about that. With my family obligations and everything.”

“Simply open your mind to the One, and the path will become clear to you.” Alec patted Phaedras bare knee. “Escort William?”

Phaedra stood and walked toward the stairway door. Will bent forward to incline his chair enough to for him to lean way out over his knees and stand. He looked down on Alec, a lumpy exoskeleton draped with a worn cotton nightshirt, pale skin peeking between the thinning hair pulled back from his unlined brow.

“Oh, have you seen Pat? Since the concert?” asked Will.

“Patni?” Alec smiled up at Will, turned his palms upward above his lap, weighing the column of air up to the ionosphere. “No, I cannot say when we may again walk on the same path to the deity.”

Will turned toward the door.

“You know, William,” said Alec. “Nobody really knows what they’re doing. Nobody really knows who they are. This” he raised his hand and swept it slowly across the room, “is all illusion. Maya. We all make it up as we go.”

Will looked back at Alec, his smile unchanged but also, like the smile of the little Buddha statue sitting somnolent on the table, cast in bronze. He followed Phaedra down the stairs.

Chapter 33 Institute

“Pat Steele.” Equal stress on given and surname, flat, one-two, all business.

“Hi Pat. It’s Will. I mean Lem.” Amazing she actually answered her work phone.

“You don’t know who you are?” Pat chuckled. “How are you doing? I hear there’s been a lot happening.”

“Yeah, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Could you meet me for a drink after work?” Dinner sounded presumptive, but even casual acquaintances meet for a drink, they went for dinner after the demo, he home cooked after the colloquium, this was different, not a date, back then was Lem.

“Tonight? Uh, no, I can’t get away tonight. How about coffee tomorrow morning?”

“Sure. Where do you want to meet?”

How about Delfinos? Out on Newbridge? Then I’m close to work. You don’t have to be anywhere, do you?”

“No, that’s good. When?”

“Like eight? That’s not too early is it? I’ll have to leave in time for a nine o’clock, okay?”

“Sure, that’s fine. Thanks, Pat.”

“Okay, see you then, Lem.”

Jeez, eight in the morning, when would Will have to head out with all the commuter traffic on the beltline, seven thirty, but not drinking as much anymore, he could handle that. Another empty evening alone in the apartment, no where near as tired as last night, when he fell asleep by eight, unless visiting Drebin this afternoon led to something else, or Will could look for Suzi, not yet. Running out of people and learning little. Alec said Will had the gift, maybe he could return it and get the money back, no receipt, probably only a store credit from the wheel of reincarnation, wouldn’t even pay his tuition at Semplar school, Will knew nothing but at least he knew he was no obsequious student. Turned out that VSI resided out in the western suburbs, not far from Will’s, well Suzi’s, house, with the cross-town traffic coming from Alec’s not bad after Will stopped midtown for a sandwich.

A nondescript building, sixties' commercial, aluminum frame single-pane windows with slatted blinds, beige board-and-batten siding needing paint, flat roof with deep boxed eaves, perimeter shrubbery grown high as mini-trees, single door recessed up one worn concrete step with Visualization Sciences Institute black-lettered inside the glass, so that the larger leading capital letters formed a columnar VSI. Inside, an inconsequential anteroom, two rigid molded chairs divided by a pressboard magazine table, *Annals of Clinical Endocrinology* on top of the pile, table of contents in black on the sepia cover, no picture, a solid-core flush door opposite the entry, brushed nickel doorknob, the other wall breached by a reception window opening onto nothing but file cabinets and a farther door, but on the narrow window sill a chrome-dome bell with short cylinder protruding out the top like a miniature mechanical nipple. Will flicked its ringer piston, a penetrating pure tuning-fork tone filled the little room, lingered.

Footfalls, the inner door opened, misaligned or worn or un-oiled hinge announced a man about Will's age, short-sleeved white shirt and narrow blue necktie, black rimmed glasses, remnant adolescent acne scar wars.

"Yes?" said the young man.

"I'm here to see Doctor Drebin."

"Is he expecting you?"

"Tell him it's Will Narkis, from Cortez."

The man shut the door. Will considered sitting down and learning more about endocrinology or one of the other exciting specialties secreted in the stack, what sort of client would wait here and want to read those, hardly artists or trauma survivors, what sort of client was Will, both and neither, probably just old issues the staff discarded on the table, or props attesting to the credibility of the enterprise. The door opened again, squealed again, presenting Doctor Rick Drebin, silver mane nicely set off by dark gray dress shirt and yellow tie, apparently not a lab coat or suit jacket kind of place, or the air could be better conditioned.

"William. This is a surprise. What can I do for you?" said Drebin.

"Uh, I just wondered if I could talk with you for a minute?"

"Of course. Come in." Drebin turned aside and held the door for Will to pass into a narrow hallway, then closed the door and motioned him farther along. "I'd give you the tour, but we have subjects in the lab."

The second doorway stood open into a small office made smaller by over-laden bookcases on three walls and a large wooden desk barely bearing up under stacks of books and journals and papers before a window, must be one of the street-side windows, with closed blinds leaking enough light to twilight the room. Drebin edged around the desk and sat in a worn reclining russet leather chair, leaving obvious for Will the single similarly-upholstered side chair that faced the desk.

"So, I decided to leave Solaris after the Cortez acquisition," Will said. At least he need not explain the Lem name change to Drebin, who had picked up the William usage from Alec. Drebin sat quiescent, shaggy eyebrows shading complacent eyes, waiting for Will to continue.

"Yes, I heard that from Mansfield. Everything okay?" Drebin said, after an adequate analyst's interval.

How would Drebin know Frank, though with both Dave and Greg at the concert, probably everyone knew everybody by now. And everything. "Yeah, I guess," Will said. "I heard you were consulting there. At Solaris? Is that for the military market?" The MXP and MXD were experimental, not illegal, but would Solaris actually administer Drebin's drugs, not that Lem's own usage history much mattered for Will, or anyone, any more.

"Oh, no, we wouldn't be involved in that sort of thing," said Drebin. "VSI was on the list of beta sites for Cortez, so they asked me to come in and talk about our application. Well, one thing led to another, and it went up the chain of command, so now we're looking at a very interesting collaboration at the executive level. But, tell me how you're doing. What are your plans now?" Drebin leaned back in his chair, pressed his fingers and thumbs together, tensed a triangle, a tent, a steeple.

"Oh, I don't know. I seem to have lost track of who I am. Like I used to be somebody else, and now I'm just empty." Will sat flat-footed, hands resting on his thighs.

"Hmm." Drebin tilted his head to the side. "Any other stressors in your life lately? Besides the job transition?"

"Yeah, well, pretty much everything. Suzi wants a divorce, we've separated. And I totaled my car the other night."

"Yes, that would be a lot to process all at once. Are you feeling unusually low mood, or worrying more? Sleep disturbances? Sudden weight change?"

"No, that's the thing. I don't feel much of anything. Like I'm hollowed out. Numb."

"And drug or alcohol usage? Anything out of the ordinary there?"

"Guess I was drinking too much, but I cut way back on that. A couple times I'm not sure exactly what happened, whether it was a dream or a vision or whatever. I think using the headset so much may have affected my brain, somehow mixed up my imagination and my perceptions. And the uh, you know, substances we used to enhance the visualization may have made it worse. Then the other day I woke up feeling like I wasn't anybody, and I had no reason to do anything ever again. Even the visions I used to get from the headset were gone. And the visual sensitivity I always had, like in art school, that was gone too. Like I was nothing at all, nobody."

"What you're describing is a flat affect, a loss of agency, disassociation, perhaps even depersonalization. There's no evidence whatsoever that the experimental protocol could have contributed to anything like that. Were you taking any other drugs?"

"No, I don't think so. But as I said, I had some, what is it, lost time?"

"Any family history of mental illness? Bipolar disorder? Schizophrenia?"

"No. I mean my parents were crazy, but like religious fundamentalists. The Rapture, fire and brimstone, all that stuff. I don't remember much about any other relatives, we didn't have much contact with anybody. Except in the church of course. And my brother seems okay, I mean he's in the church too, but no crazier than they are. You're not saying I'm mentally ill, are you?"

"No, of course not. We just need to exclude any potential contributing factors, in order to establish what might be happening with you. Did you ever think that people you couldn't see were talking to you?"

"Hearing voices? No, nothing like that. Just this idea that what I was, was only what the other people in my life think I am. That the only reason to do anything was because of what they expected. It's hard to explain, it's like I'm outside myself watching another person who is controlled by what other people want. Which is why I decided to go and talk

to the people I know, like you, for example, to find out who they think I am, and see if I can get back to whoever that used to be, so I can figure out what to do next.”

“Very interesting. This false self, this feeling of powerlessness, is quite similar to what we’re addressing with our executive clientele. It’s called ESD, Executive Stress Disorder. They feel controlled by the various stakeholders of the corporations they manage, investors, employees, customers, communities, as well as all the outside forces, journalists, activists, analysts, government regulators. They are filled with a sense that they are blamed for anything that goes wrong, a missed profit estimate, a product recall, but are given no credit for what goes well, so they feel like failures despite their wealth and alleged power, and in fact feel powerless, even fraudulent. Behind their outward trappings of success, they find themselves hollow, emptied out inside, as if devoured by the perceptions of all these other parties they must interact with. This results in a kind of splitting, a separation between the public professional self and the private wounded self, between the external status and the secret shame. Something similar may be happening to you. You may have split off this previous person whose marriage and career have fallen apart, because you cannot accept responsibility for that failure, and are struggling to self-identify with a different persona, one that feels strong and safe.”

“So how do I do that? Identify with this different person?”

“Well, to treat ESD, we’re testing a new compound, methylbenzylamine -N-methylamphetamine, or MBMA. Our subjects experience an overwhelming sense of well being, even joy, a love for others, and more importantly, self love, with the insight that they are exactly who and where they should be, and that everything in the world is exactly what and how it should be. Sometimes even a single administration of MBMA suffices to give the subject a new sense of self-worth and self-satisfaction that dramatically increases both job performance and overall quality of life. We’re very excited about this new protocol, and it meets a need in the business community that will place VSI on a much firmer financial footing than our former work with creatives and trauma victims. If you’re interested, it might be possible to enter you into the trial. Confidentially, of course.”

“And take this MBA?” “Boy, I don’t know. I think maybe I should stay away from drugs for a while.”

"Perfectly understandable, given your state of mind. But I do strongly urge you to seek treatment. Young adulthood is a fragile time, when these disorders often present their initial episodes. The kind of disassociation you describe can lead to fairly negative outcomes, if left untreated."

"Like what kind of treatment?"

"Well, your options are, either enter into a course of psychotherapy, which can be quite a long, and frankly, an expensive and unpredictable process, or try a prescription for one of the newer antidepressants, which can be surprisingly effective for a wide range of disorders, and covered under your health insurance, or more commonly, through physician's free samples. I can give you a name if you want to see someone."

"Yeah, thanks, I'll think about that." No, no lying on the couch recounting his childhood, nor swallowing another round of side effects. "But you're sure nothing about the drugs or the headset could have done this to me?"

"Extremely unlikely. From what you've told me, there's no indication of a psychotic break, rather this appears to be simply a stress reaction, but severe enough that you'll want to address it with professional help."

"Okay, I'll look into that." This was going nowhere. "Well, thanks for your time."

"Good luck then, William. Can you see yourself out?"

"No problem."

The vinyl seats of the Baronti had softened in the sun, and soothed Will's back and thighs, a deep-burning balm, he sat and soaked up the heat without starting the car, staring at nothing through the windshield bug-spot streaks, occasional passing cars, the motionless leaves of a sweet-gum tree trapped in the curb verge. Talking to Drebin as bad as that obese idiot in the County clinic, so now Will was what, mentally ill, Drebin didn't know him at all, jeez, depersonalized, sounded like somebody unstitched the embroidered monogram from his handkerchief. But Drebin was a medical doctor, or at least he said he was, maybe he was the fraudulent false self, no framed diplomas all over his office walls, didn't they always hang those. And then why didn't he prescribe the antidepressants himself, Will wasn't depressed, shit, messed up once already by Drebin's drugs, no twice, now he's supposed to take more drugs, or guinea pig this new MBA, makes sense for Solaris, management by assholes, that Tarkoff guy. Alec said Drebin was blinded by the money, right, as if Alec

wasn't, pay tuition in his studio so Alec can sell Will's work while Will starts on his spiritual journey. He said we all make it up as we go, they're all faking it, what did any of them know, Peter hiding in his secret spaceship hair salon, Frank knocking off serial startups, Dave selling his psychopath self-help path to success, Greg welding whatever iron maiden the grand inquisitors wanted. Will twisted the rubbery rim on the top of the steering wheel, warm in the sun, slightly loose over the inner steel. Mid afternoon, not that empty apartment, a movie matinee, an iced coffee fern bench in the mall mezzanine, library reading room art magazine, definitely not another tavern, out here on the west side of town anyway, go by the house and see Suzi.

Chapter 34 House

Two vehicles, a white full-sized pickup with tool bins bracketing the sides of the bed and, behind it, a white panel van with its rear doors open onto a jumble of boxes and cans and five-gallon drums and junk, occupied the driveway, so Will pulled up parallel on the street in front of his former house with two tires whispering on the pine needles. Between his car and the drive, the white post and cross-piece realtor convention, the 4x4 fir stock solid as a fence post but actually stuck in the dirt on a thin metal spike, with the big HomePlace sign hanging on hooks and the COMING SOON placard stuck in the slot on top, as if the house wasn't there yet. He got out of the car and walked up the slope and onto the deck, the front door stood wide open, so he stepped into the foyer part of the great room.

Drop cloths wrinkled over the floor, a six-foot stepladder triangled near the wall, spackle dust speckled the sun-beamed back windows, and the fruity ferment of latex paint curdled the air. Suzi must be painting the place before the listing, probably that friend the realtor put her up to it, everything gone, emptied out, was Will gone long enough for her to move, boy Suzi moved fast when she wanted something. Or didn't want something. What about the rest of his clothes and papers, his tools, at least they weren't in a pile on the street.

"Help you?" Guy in white coveralls, white cap, holding a paint roller, also white, came out of the hallway.

"No, I'm the owner. Was the owner," Will said.

"You must be the ex. Hey, I been there. Come for a last look around the old homestead?" Serious black sideburns, dental issues, those dreamy defocused eyes housepainters get from eons of fumes or smoking pot or both.

"Yeah, no, actually I was looking for my wife. Suzi."

"Miss Suzi was round this morning. Don't know since then." The painter shifted the roller into his left hand, held out a white-coated right with the dried creases crackled at the knuckles and palm, and a haze of white freckles splattered past the wrist and clinging like nits to the forearm hairs. "Name's Lenny."

"Will." They shook hands, the dried latex rough and stiff against Will's fingers, when was the last time Lem painted, not a house, the last semester in school, the large red and yellow chevrons on the saddle-shaped compound curve, the one in the senior show, kept it up in the attic when he and Suzi lived in the city, tore off the canvas and broke apart the stretchers when they moved out here, into the dumpster, even thrift stores refused to resell abstract student artwork.

"Nice to meet you. Well, we're getting her all spiffed up, you want to take a look around. Not too bad on the tape and nail pops. Good adhesion on the old paint. Couple places you let the chairs and stuff run into the walls. Kids must have got into some crayons, but no big deal, little TSP'll take that off. We're going all white and off-white, the way you people do when you stage them. Don't you worry, we'll get her all turn-key, you'll get your money back out."

"Oh, no, I." How or why to explain to Lenny that Lem gave Suzi the house. "I mean, that's good."

"Yep, that's the business. Paint them when people sell them, paint them when people buy them. You know, sometimes I paint the same house twice in a row, first time all white for the sale, second time the colors people want. Lot easier the second time, on top of the white. Don't know why people don't just let the buyer paint. But hey, double paycheck works fine by me."

"Yeah, I guess so." The house like a canvas, primed with gesso awaiting whatever genre the next occupants paint within its walls, smug Dutch domesticity, slathered German angst, diffuse French decadence, vacuous American commercialism, Will's non-objective divorce.

"All right, then, Mister Will, I got to get another coat on that bath before I knock off. But you take your time." Lenny receded into the hallway.

"Thanks." Will crossed the kitchen, the refrigerator door caught open by its power cord looped over the top, a dark crevice airing the interior, no more cold beer and leftover enchiladas for late nights after Cortez, and opened the door to the utility room. Nothing but an inactive two-headed halogen work light muzzled on its yellow three-legged prop, all of Suzi's ceramics gear, the wheel, the electric kiln, shelves, work table, gone, no mound of laundry on the floor for Annie to excavate in front of the two spigots, drain tube, and fuzz-

lined vent sleeve punctuating the back wall where the washer dryer left crime scene outlines on the vinyl tile floor. Back down the hall, Lenny back-turned on a step stool blocking in the corner with a three inch bristle brush across from Lem and Suzi's, the master, not of his destiny, later Suzi's, bedroom, the rooms doubled in size without the furniture, her grandmother's walnut heirloom set, varnish soured black and crinkled, the low dresser, the tallboy, the leaf-carved headboard and footboard between which Lem drew up his knees an inch to fit, the flaccid comforter he pushed off in between them. Annie's room, an entire ecosystem of stuffed animals gone extinct or boarded no one's ark before the deluge of vacuity or beamed up to an invisible mother-ship, the pink lime turquoise bed and dresser gone, the little pony poster pulled off the wall, nobody wide awake beyond the open door with a finger gap of bath-light to tiptoe past. Across the hall, the guest room, Lem's last days resting room, held only a paint-speckled tarp mounded in the middle at whose corner Will bent and lifted, a pile of the clothes he'd left behind, three cardboard file boxes, the scratched black tool box he kept behind the seat of the green mini-pickup, socket set and spark gap, great, Will could tune up the truck he sold seven years ago, she took the power tools and the hand tools, not that he planned to remodel anything any time soon. Where was the guy from the truck in driveway, if that was Lenny's van, maybe outside fixing the dangling downspout elbow Lem had intended to repair.

Hard to believe only four years ago they moved here bearing Lem's grand plans, maybe there's a different time measurement, four is twenty-eight in disintegrating marriage years. When Suzi weaned Annie from the bedside crib, Annie needed her own room, with Lem already gone ten hours a day to his first serious software job at Unicom way out in the suburbs, he saw their live-work space in the mixed-use section of the city emerge cramped and shabby in a toddler's bright eyes, time to consider better schools and backyard swing sets, a lot of potential in this older ranch on a quarter acre of pines, where his new-gained income qualified for the loan. He tossed the carryover art school stiff brushes and dried-out paint tubes when they moved, a regular guy, day-job husband/father fixing up the house on weekends, the end of the beginning for him and stay-at-home Suzi, her promised studio postponed after he started Cortez, their future mutual international art world fame fizzled, their muses fled, their promise compromised, their conversations

reduced to chores and child and which one had it worse. When was Lem what she wanted, and what was Lem then, Will needed to get hold of Suzi.

Passing the bathroom, Will said "See you Lenny," probably didn't hear with the crusted radio cranking tinny country, footsteps muffled on the drop cloth floor covering, stepping high over the folds and creases. That realtor's name on the sign, the little panel hung below HomePlace with the phone number, had to be the art center friend Suzi mentioned, they always answer the phone, she'd know where she was.

"HomePlace. Satya Ripkin." Melodic and soothing as a six percent commission.

"Hi. This is Will Narkis. Lem Narkis. Is Suzi there?"

An earful of recalibrate from client solicitude to ex-spousal stalking silence. "She doesn't want to talk to you."

"Tell her it's important."

An entire houseful of vacant rooms and fresh paint, thirteen hundred square feet of silence.

"Hello." Suzi's voice like the take-home training tape from anger management class.

"Hey Suzi."

"What do you want?" Some inflection on the 'you'.

"I just wanted to talk."

"Talk? You can't disappear for a week without saying anything. Annie has no idea what happened to you, she's traumatized." Rising growl of she-bear with threatened cub.

Not a week, four days. Not counting today. And Suzi's the one disappeared as much as Will, he's at the house. "Let me talk to her."

An apartment full of solitary separated all day Sunday sofa cushion silence.

"Hi Daddy," said Annie's voice.

"Hi honey."

"Where are you Daddy?"

"At our house. The old house."

"Daddy! We're getting a new house. And the ceiling is so high you can't touch it!"

"Wow. Could you touch the ceiling before?"

"Of course, silly. When you held me up in the air. Remember?"

"Right. Hey, I'll see you this weekend, okay?" Keep the Baronti that long then, the park, maybe there's a matinee kids movie, teach her mini-golf, something.

"Okay. Mila has measles."

"Does she?" That's her friend Mila from school, did Suzi drive Annie all the way back out here every day, or maybe not any way, where were they living, with this Satya, could be in the next block, or anywhere.

"Yes, and she can't go to school. Can I have measles Daddy?"

"I don't know. We'll see."

"Okay. Bye Daddy."

"Bye. Love you."

A four o'clock classroom detention ten-page essay assignment pen-scratch silence.

"I'm back." Suzi back to monotonic.

"She sounds okay," Will said.

A hospital waiting room unforeseen complications as soon as we know discarded newspaper silence.

"Hey, can we get together tomorrow? For lunch or something?" Will said.

"You want to go out to lunch with me?" Accent on lunch.

"Yeah, sure," Will said.

"You destroy your marriage and disappear for a week and now you want to have lunch with me?" Funny word, lunch, funny odd, when it jumped out like that, twice, not a Romance language sort of word, some old Saxon sound, a broadsword splitting a horned helmet.

"Yeah, well, I thought we could talk," Will said.

A snowstorm cancelled-flight 3AM airport gate fluorescent floor-vacuum silence.

"I'll come pick you up. Like eleven thirty? What's the address?" Will said.

"No. I'll meet you."

"How about that little place we used to go? Ruby's?" Before Annie, macramé spider-plants, earthenware plates, cheesy veggy scramble.

"That would be fine."

"Great, I'll see you there."

Chapter 35 Counter

7:49 by the green numerals of the oblong clock on the wall above the shelves of mugs and filters and French press coffee makers at Delfino's café, a strip mall center slot one exit down from Solaris on the beltway, Will had overestimated morning traffic, but better early. Pat sure hadn't picked a spot for comfort or privacy, two tiny round tables with wire-back chairs, occupied, six stools at the counter along the window, four vacant, three more tables outside on the sidewalk, chilly in the shade and shrill facing the four-lane. Will wanted a coffee, waited to order, sat on a stool, the one by the door, surveilled the parking lot.

Hiking shorts backpack guy, pinstripe suit yellow tie guy, sweatpants headband woman, business suit heels hose woman, where was Pat, Will turned half around to see 8:03. Maybe she'd show up and say hey let's take the day off, drive out to Moorehead Lake, rent a canoe, buy a box lunch, paddle out to the little island in the middle, lay down on the soft bed of needles under the pines, look for creatures in the cloud shapes. First he'd have to call and cancel Suzi, the reason he arranged lunch with Suzi right after this, to tempt fate that Pat would want to spend the day with him, because then he'd pay the price of further conflict with Suzi, which made an excursion with Pat more likely, doomed as Will was, but Pat wouldn't ask. At least she agreed to meet for coffee, he shouldn't tell her how he lost himself, about the emptiness, then she'd surely lose interest in him, if she hadn't already, better that Will portray the old Lem, whoever that was, whoever she once seemed to like enough to go out for dinner and hike alongside and almost make love with on the sofa, if she did like him that much, but if not why else did she.

There she was, her weather-dulled compact Allestra pulled into a just-vacated space across from the café, a bright bare leg and another out the driver's door, walking toward him, high-buttoned yellow blouse, short pleated black skirt, hair slicked back wet yet from the shower, hands at her sides and feet in flats like a puppy or colt yet to grow into them, closer now, clear eyed, that slight smirk she wore for the world. She pulled open the door as Will stood from his stool.

"Hi," Pat said.

“Hey, thanks for meeting me,” said Will.

“Oh sure, sorry I’m running late. Did you order?”

They approached the barista behind his battlements, but both ordered unadulterated and unadorned coffee, for here, so the attendant immediately turned to fill mugs from the urns. Pat paid without asking Will’s permission, he presumed she’d expense it, or could better afford it, and they returned to two stools at the counter, to look out at the parking lot by default and not need to avoid one another’s eyes.

“So, I heard you came in for a meeting with our CTO. What happened?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I can’t work for somebody like that. It was like some kind of stupid high school aptitude test. So I walked out.”

“Are you okay? Do you have something else lined up?”

“No, not really. Maybe I’ll do something different for a while. Take a break from the computer business.”

“And get back to your art? That’d be interesting.”

“No, I’m finished with all that art world crap. Maybe I’ll just get a regular job for a while, something where I don’t have to think.”

Pat sipped her coffee. Will cradled his mug, that was brilliant, she worked in technology and wanted to write literature, and he aspired to what, stupidity, that would impress her. Change the subject.

“Hey, what’d you think of that concert the other night? The Syzygy?” Will asked.

“Oh, that was amazing. Your friend Alec is so funny. And all those people, it’s like kids out for Halloween. Why’d you leave so early?”

“I don’t know, not really my kind of scene. But it was sort of a fitting grand finale for Cortez and the headset.” Or was the correct phrase coup de grace. For Lem anyway.

“Yeah, Marketing was blown away by the free publicity Dave’s video got. I think they made him a Product Manager over in HuPPR.”

Will sipped his coffee, bitter, these places always featured some Bengali blowtorch blend instead of like coffee, enough of Dave’s success at Solaris leading into Greg’s interrogation enhancements and next Will’d ask her if she slept with Frank back at Lustek.

Maybe with Dave's biofeedback machine Will could learn to project confidence and charm instead of anxiety and self-doubt or a numb nothing, say something.

"I wanted to tell you I'm sorry. I mean, if I pushed you too fast into something you didn't want. It's just. I really liked you. I really do like you."

"Well, gee, Lem." Pat turned and looked at him. "I mean, we hardly even know each other."

"I know. But I really felt something between us. I was hoping we could see each other some more. You know, to see where it went."

"I like you a lot too, Lem. I mean you're a sweet, funny guy. Smart. And kind of cute, too." She smiled. "But I'm not ready to get involved in another relationship. I'm still trying to work things out with Brian. You should do that too, you have a wife, and a wonderful daughter. I know Annie means the world to you."

"Yeah, I know. But I lost all that. I don't know what happened, suddenly I lost track of who I was. So now I'm sort of trying to construct a new person. And I thought maybe you could help me with that."

"Well, I'm probably not helping you very much. And I shouldn't say this."

"No, please, it's okay."

"You know your name, Narkis? That's the Greek for Narcissus, the beautiful young man who fell in love with his own reflection? Well, I think you tend to fall in love with your own story, who you think you are. That's why it's so hard for you to work with other people. You want to be the one making it up. It's like they used to tell me in the writers' workshop, don't fall in love with your own descriptions. You've got to let the characters advance the plot or you lose the reader. I mean, it's not all about you, or how other people reflect you, you have to think about other people's point of view, your family, the people you work with. The other part of the Narcissus myth is about the girl who falls in love with him, Echo. When it turns out he can only love himself, she is doomed to wander forever and repeat what other people say. So you can't just treat people like an echo of yourself. Does that make sense?"

"I don't know. Narkis is just a name, the family name, I don't have anything to do with them. But yeah, I kind of see what you're saying." Or not. Wasn't Will running all over trying to find out what other people thought he was because he couldn't remember who he

was, let alone falling in love who he was, or maybe worrying what other people thought of him was the same as falling in love with himself, so he should think more about other people independent of what they thought of him, and what did Pat think of him, she obviously expected him to say something else, holding her cup at her lip without sipping, looking out at the parking lot, something clever about this narcissus myth, new topic.

“Hey, I didn’t tell you, I decided to change my name to Will, I’m not Lem any more. The new me, Will.”

“Ha. Is that Will like in the future, or Will like what you intend to do? Or maybe what you intend to do in the future? You know, that’s pretty existential, like Schopenhauer’s World as Will. The life force. You ever read him?”

“Uh, I don’t think so. Isn’t he like the really pessimistic guy?”

“Yes and no. More like life just keeps going on no matter what. That’s all it does, the will to live. What we all do.”

“Then what about all our reasons and motivations? Why we do things?”

“That’s just what I was talking about. The story we tell ourselves. We need to come up with a story that works for us. See, when Narcissus realized he was in love with his own reflection, he lost the will to live.”

“Yeah, I see what you mean.” Will could come up with a story all right, in which Pat would be a character, not an echo, a sweet funny smart cute character, the hero’s sidekick, alter-ego, muse, confidant, lover even, but was Will the hero of the story, or was he the anti-hero, who then had an anti-sidekick, a character written out of the story, or never in.

“Well, I’ve got to get into work. It’s been nice to see you, though,” said Pat.

“You too. Thanks again for seeing me. And the coffee.”

“Sure. You take care Lem. Will.” Pat slipped off her stool, standing not much taller than Will on his elevated seat, and leaned to brush her lips against his cheek, then turned and pushed out the door, off the curb, across the lot, to her car. He watched her reverse out of the space, but couldn’t see through the sun glare on the side window to tell whether she looked back at him. He needed somebody in his life, a woman, not necessarily a wife, but a person to provide a reason to do one thing instead of another, or instead of nothing at all, finding a job, fixing up a house, somebody whose expectations he wanted to meet. Or avoid, like doing something she didn’t want him to do, surreptitiously, drink another beer, watch

a psycho-killer move, was more reason to do that, because her expectations both limited the depth or frequency of the transgression and made it more enjoyable, than doing anything alone in an empty apartment or sitting on the wall of a vacant lot where nobody cared what he did. But where would he meet someone, usually people met in school, but look what happened with Suzi, or at work, and see there goes Pat driving away, not that he has a job, or in church, yeah right, or in some bar, like whatever happened in Ozzie's tavern the other night that started or ended this whole escapade. And if he takes a regular job and becomes an ordinary guy then wouldn't he meet ordinary women, as messed up on a downward trajectory as he was, or uneducated or otherwise compromised enough, that the situation was a step up for them, but not them for him, or more likely in some menial job with hardly any women at all, which was the problem in technology, way too much competition for so few women who worked in the field, and now what did he have to offer, no money, no title, no cool invention, no startup company founder. No wonder Pat lost interest in him. Who else did he know, should he go see Gudrun, no, not that she wasn't competent and kind, and lean and strong, or maybe because she was, and he preferred little tomboy girls he felt safe around, not like that weird dream he thought was Gudrun but she claimed she never came back that night, the night which also started or ended this whole crisis, if breakdowns could have two beginnings or two endings, or three, if the concert crash counted, if this was indeed a breakdown or a crisis and not just self indulgence. And how could he explain to Suzi that he had lost himself, oh right, Pat told him that he doesn't love Suzi anymore because he's in love with himself, Suzi will accept that explanation for sure, with over two hours to kill before the time to meet her, might as well drive over by Ruby's and walk around their old neighborhood.

Chapter 36 Courtyard

The two hour parking limit, a real hassle when Lem and Suzi lived in this neighborhood just south of downtown, while intended to discourage working people from leaving cars there all day instead of paying for a parking lot or garage nearer their jobs, and to encourage transient traffic for the mix of stores and restaurants, didn't help the neighborhood residents whose cheap flats provided no off-street parking and whose self-employment, as artists and writers and other creatives, that is, impoverished young adults, kept them working at home most days, with a break every two hours to go out and move the car. At least they only had the Mondo back then, before Lem began commuting out to Unicom and they had the money to buy the used Duran hatchback for Suzi. But Will remembered to turn six blocks farther south into the warehouse district along the train tracks where Lem usually found an unrestricted space, not a place where anyone who knew the area would leave a newer nicer car that they ever wanted to see again. He parked by the ready-mix concrete plant, huge silos and conveyer belts silent in the sun, necklace of gleaming-graffiti hopper cars rusting on the siding, chain link locked, guess they shut down, Lem used to plow off the thin layer of cement dust with his windshield wipers like those prairie irrigated quarter crop circles.

Four blocks up Fourth Street the huge grey county office building, brutal and angular as an Eastern Bloc architecture prize, why did they build it here, probably the commissioners got a grant under the guise of urban renewal, glowered as always, hovering flies and scrap paper flitting around the recessed four-door-wide entranceway, two sleeves-turned-up smokers on nicotine break in the shade of the overhang. Lem once worked in this building, not as an employee, but after he taught himself enough computer skills to get taken on as a temp by Software Solutions, a consulting and contracting company which didn't care about credentials, they assigned him to a project they low-bid, computerizing the real property tax records, and billing the county for his services five times what they paid him. Remotely related to graphics and thereby to art, Lem rationalized, rooms of curling yellow plat maps to digitize before they crumbled into confetti, racks of dictionary-sized quill-pen deed record books to scan, yielding only mute

electronic image files until someday somebody retyped all the entries and redrew all the property lines into a language that machines understood, or waited until cursive handwriting recognition improved immensely, Lem thought that might offer a start-up business opportunity but he never pursued it. Evenings and weekends at home he programmed his aesthetic algorithms, running like an art rat in a pixelated maze, one dead end after another, trying to process fields of random noise into significant form, whatever that was, balance, harmony, unity, contrast, proportion, which made the image processing programs really hard to write, not knowing what he wanted to do, leaving him almost relieved when he went to work full time on brain sensor software at Unicom and he dropped the whole idea of autonomously computer generated art.

In the next block, up three flights in the gloomy apartment building where Mike and Larry lived, maybe still lived, although Will remembered that Lem heard that Mike had AIDS, hanging out on their broken-down sofa getting wasted, laughing so hard the tears ran down Suzi's cheeks, with her college theatre friend fat Sue, who never got near off-Broadway, though Suzi was skinny back then, and Sue's brother Guy, who worked for the state government, where they'd take turns answering one another's phones so they could take naps, and that hillbilly hooker girlfriend of his, what was her name, all over his lap in her short-shorts, even Larry looked away, and that time Lem and Suzi helped Larry's friend Gary move out of his apartment after a bad boyfriend break-up, with his twenty cages of the crimson-orange finches he bred all strapped on to the back of the U-Haul truck singing up a storm out in the street, and Suzi's friends Rose and Margaret from the craft gallery, Rose divorced but her husband Joe lived downstairs in their up/down duplex so they could share the kids, she said the first time she ever had sex she got pregnant, and again the second time, Joe called her the fertile crescent, and Margaret made these heavy lopsided stoneware mugs and teapots, her husband Robert worked in cryogenics or something, they were maybe ten years older and had a house in the suburbs, which seemed like a dream refuge at the time, but Lem never saw any of those people since he and Suzi moved away and he started Cortez, they were more Suzi's friends anyway. Did Will have any friends.

More commercial establishments in this block, Benton Books, Will could kill the rest of the waiting interval in the bookstore, hadn't changed much, other than the selection of newly-released hard-bounds in the window. Inside, the island tables for the isolated tribes

of best sellers, celebrity self-aggrandizements, remaindered coffee table glossy nature/culture, self improvement in a small number of secrets or steps, dispersed against the palisade of aisled shelving units guarding the precipitous cliff of fiction along the back wall. Lem never cared for fiction, neither the popular entertainment crime adventure romance historical whatever-genre which read for longer than it took to write, nor the excruciatingly-honed literary fiction whose sole plot line comprised, surprise, 'people are fucked up', so Will browsed through the partitioning of human delusion into subtypes of non-fiction, the stuff people don't admit to making up, looking for what interested him, not philosophy, religion, socio-politico-economics, science, certainly not technology, or art, craft, architecture, music, poetry, plays, essay, auto- and regular biography, travel, whoops ran out of reality at the far wall, reverse. The children's section, Pat wanted to write children's books, maybe he should buy a present for Annie, Annie loved animals, why were so many children's books about animals acting like people, guess to compensate for all the adult books about people acting like animals, tearing each other apart, she need not read that yet, her mother and father torn apart, better off with fairy tale animals, the safe and sanitized kind, he could take her to the zoo, they hadn't gone there in years.

About twenty after, Will ambled the last half block to Ruby's, early for lunch on a weekday so no weekend brunch line where talking on the sidewalk until they called the party's name was half the point, at least in nice weather, of going. He wanted to sit outside out back in the courtyard, but no way he'd see Suzi's arrival through the narrow hallway past the restrooms and kitchen that led there, so he sat on the waiting bench, an old oak church pew with the flat horizontal seat and nearly vertical back cresting at the back of his neck that made sitting there as unpleasant as the final judgment promised by the preacher whose sermons once soaked into the wood, across from the cash register candy-case, gum, lifesavers, chocolate bars. Lem and Suzi carefully kept the concept of candy outside of Annie's world, until the month after they moved to the suburbs when Lem hired somebody to power wash the outside of the house, in lieu of painting, because Suzi said the siding looked grungy with the cobwebs all over the soffits, which Lem didn't want to deal with, and the guy showed up with his girlfriend or wife and her toddler, who sat on the front step, before Lem built the deck of the unfinished porch, in the shade where Annie joined them, while the husband worked, and the woman gave her one of the candy pacifiers that

occupied her own offspring, and Lem witnessing Annie's eyes lighting up with the first suck like the revelation and the rapture.

Those were Suzi's cross-strapped sandals and ankles and the hem of the yellow-checked gingham skirt, Will stood up. "Hey. You want to sit in the courtyard? It's pretty nice out."

Suzi said nothing but followed him across the indoor seating area down the hallway and out into a small brick-paved area enclosed by the walls of other buildings with trellised flowering vines and a wooden overhead frame draping green meshed fabric to filter the sun, with a half dozen molded one-piece white plastic tables and chairs. They sat and looked at the laminated menu cards. A waitress brought water glasses and utensil sets swaddled in paper napkins.

"So what did you want to talk about?" Suzi said.

"Well, it's hard to explain, but I wanted to let you know, I had some kind of nervous breakdown. I'm not sure what happened, I completely lost any idea of who I was. And Saturday night I crashed the car, so they kept me in the hospital overnight for observation. Everything checked out okay, but maybe the impact somehow messed something up. So I went and saw a doctor, and he said I had a stress reaction that might cause this kind of depersonalization, but that people usually recover okay."

"And you're better now? What do they do about this?"

"Mostly I just have to reduce the stress in my life. I guess everything kind of built up, with me working way too much, and then my, I mean, our splitting up, and on top of it all, selling Cortez. Which is the other thing. The common stock got cancelled in the deal, so there's no money from the options. And Solaris, that's the company that bought us, decided I wasn't a good fit for them, so they let me go."

"They fired you?"

"Well, more like they decided not to hire me."

"So you're saying you lost your job, and all the money you promised me is gone, and it's all because you had too much stress? Boy, you'd better not be trying to con me out of paying child support. I mean Jesus Lem, it's your own daughter. I don't want to get the lawyers involved, but you owe her."

"I know. I will. I just need you to understand that I'm going through a rough patch, and it's going to be difficult for a while. Everybody knows that startups are really risky, like nine out of ten of them fail. If you want to take a shot a big payoff, there has to be a lot of risk. So sometimes these things don't work out, I'm sorry, I really thought I could pull this one off."

The waitress took their order without introducing herself or mentioning what a pleasure it was to serve them or listing the day's specials, following the minimal functional interaction advisable toward a couple engaged in a conversation that might turn against said waitress as unpredictably as petting two dogs clamped on one bone or snatching a spoon from a spinning sink disposal.

"Mary told me you found Peter," Suzi said. "So you two lost your jobs and left your families at the same time, what is this, some kind of plot you're in on together?"

"No, nothing like that. I couldn't believe it myself, he's learning to be a hairdresser."

"I told you he was creepy."

"Yeah, he's kind of gone off the deep end. I don't think we have much in common anymore. I saw Greg and Dave too, but they're pretty much locked into Solaris."

"How about Frank? Why can't he help you out?"

"He is, I talked to him the other day. It's just that I have to prove myself again, and show people that my stuff works, in order to get another opportunity with him."

The waitress set the sandwich in front of Suzi and the salad before Will, topped off their water glasses, and retreated without asking if they needed anything else.

"So what are you going to do?"

"I'm looking for a job, to get back on my feet. I cut way back on the drinking too, you were right about that. I'll probably have to move to a cheaper place, just a room or something. And I got a rental for a few days, but I can't really afford a car right now, so it might be hard to pick up Annie for a while. So could I see her this weekend?"

"She has a birthday party to go to on Saturday."

"How about Sunday? I could keep the car until Sunday."

"I guess so."

They ate in silence for a while, Suzi's BLT with avocado looked a lot better than Will's whatever it was he ordered, hedge trimmings with vetch thatch and tuber slivers and

fruit-punch reduction or something, which he turned over with his fork like a miniature compost pile.

“So where are you guys living? If I’m going to pick up Annie?” Will said.

“We’re staying with Satya. We put a contract on a loft, contingent on the sale of the house.”

“Yeah, I went out there yesterday. The house looks great. You should be able to sell it no problem, so at least you’ll have the money from that.”

“You’re not going back your word about the house, are you?”

“Oh, no. I meant it. It’s all yours.”

When Will and Suzi declined anything else, the waitress cleared, left the check, returned to take the card, then came back again with the check and the card.

“I’m sorry sir, but your card was declined,” she said.

“Oh, here.” Will pulled the secondary card, the backup card without the reward program, from his wallet and swapped with the waitress.

“Did you put a lot on the card?” Will asked when she had gone.

“Well, moving, and fixing up the house, yeah, there’s a lot to do.”

“Okay, well just use the other one for a while.” Will rotated his water glass with the tips of his fingers and smeared the condensation ring into a waning moon. “Can you cover part of the balance when the house sells?”

“I thought you’d ask me that.” Suzi lifted her eyes. “Well, I should do some things before Annie gets out of school.”

“Sure.” Will lay his hands flat on the tabletop, braced to take the ruler across his knuckles for talking out of turn. “Hey Suzi, I’m really sorry about everything. How everything turned out.”

Suzi’s eyes brightened, a crescent of light blended the iris orb to the lower lid, eased oblong into the outer corner, caught round above the bulge of her cheekbone, and convex’d the table and the trellis and the back wall of the restaurant and half the whole courtyard around Will, if a reflection that small could be seen. “You never believed me. How much I loved you. You still don’t understand anything, nobody really cares, and when you find somebody who really cares about you, who really loves you, then you have to keep them close. And you didn’t.”

"I loved you too. I do love you." Will folded his hands the way they taught him in Sunday school. "Do you think there's any way we could try again? People can change. I'm trying to change. I know I was a jerk. But I can be different. I need you."

"So now that everything fell apart for you, you want to start over? No, I can't be hurt like that again. Your abuse. Indifference. It's like you became another person, I don't know who you are. I'm sorry, I have to move on." Suzi touched her fingertip to the corner of her eye, then the other eye. "I suppose it didn't work out with this Pat, and now you want to come home? You never could be alone."

"No, it wasn't anything like that, I just knew her from work."

"Water under the bridge, they say."

The waitress placed the receipt on the table and thanked them, Will tipped the expected percent and signed, should he tell Suzi he changed his name nearer to the one he scrawled. They both stood up.

"So I'll pick up Annie on Sunday, right?"

"I don't want her around that Peter."

"No, of course not. We'll go to the zoo or something." Will waited while Suzi walked into the doorway and back through the restaurant, but she didn't look back. Max'd out the cards and child support payments and nobody left to talk to, Will needed to find a job, was that Help Wanted sign still propped in the window of the cabinet shop.

Chapter 37 Shop

The piston closer on the white steel door sighed and squeezed the bright street rush down to a sliver and then to a dim clunk as Will stepped into the front room of AJ Custom Cabinetry. A disjoint collage of cabinet styles and counter tops lined the walls, flush flat maple modern, raised panel classic oak, shiplap knotty-pine country, pickled picture-frame farmhouse, with twin islands half-centering the space, their sides also diverse styles stuck together, supporting bulky binders of plumbing and lighting and kitchen appliance trade catalogues, alongside key-chains of laminate and veneer round-cornered sample cards. A plywood placard propped on one counter arrayed a grid of hardwood sample squares sporting assorted stains and gloss degrees. Did anyone ever build an actual kitchen like this, well we couldn't make up our mind, so we went with one of everything.

"Help you?" A deep cross-grain voice sounded from the connecting room.

"Uh, I'm here to see about the job?" Will advanced toward the doorway of the apparent office, six-drawer gray-metal file cabinet, shelves of catalogues and folders, boxes with bouquets of rolled blueprints. The half-open blinds of the far wall window warmed the smaller room yellow against the blue-green recessed fluorescents in the showroom.

"Come on in." A balding man with a big gut lurched to his feet from the chair behind a high-piled desk and held out his hand. "Andy Jellema."

"Will Narkis." Will shook the man's hand, campfire marshmallow, puffy under tough crusty skin.

"Have a seat," Andy said. Will sat in one of the worn ladder-back chairs, yellow varnish butt-rubbed off the seat and crackled on the spindles, guess the AJ office didn't showcase custom fine furniture. Andy sat back down, straightened the ruler and mechanical pencil on the graph paper pad on his desk to align with the grid marks.

"Now this is a general labor job. Nothing fancy. Starts out at minimum wage. No health insurance, can't afford it. You got to worry about your own retirement. Get your six holidays, then we shut down for two weeks in August, but there's no pay for that. And much as I try not to, things get too slow, I'm obliged to furlough a couple boys 'til business picks

up again." Andy took off his reading glasses, and squeezed the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger, his fleshy face running downhill but still solid and jut-jawed.

"Okay, Mister Jellema."

"Andy. So, you had any shop experience?"

"Well, I used to work in a woodshop in Morava City." In art school that is. "And I've built a few things, done a little carpentry." Around the house anyway.

"That's good. Now, we work from plans here. So you need to be able to read and write. And your basic math. You finish high school?"

"Yes, I've had some college." Graduated sounds overqualified.

"College. What'd you do before this?"

"Electronics technician. Testing, a little assembly. But the company got sold and they let me go. Solaris, you ever hear of them?"

"Can't say as I have. You ever been arrested?"

"No, sir. Just, you know, a couple traffic tickets." Unless those cops come up with something on Lem's MXD, how long does that take.

"Now, I don't put up with drugs. You do drugs, you're out of here. And no drinking on the job. You come in hung over, you're out of here. And you make a habit of calling in sick Mondays or Fridays, you're out of here. Understand?"

"Sure, no problem."

"You a family man, Will?"

"Well, divorced. I have a five year old daughter."

"Ah, children are a blessing. My Maggie, don't know what I'd do without her, ever since my wife passed." Andy paused. Will imagined a hospital bed or the wreaths around a white casket or the green blanket over the red dirt beside an open grave. "You go to church?"

"Uh, no, not since I was younger. Guess I kind of drifted away."

"That's okay. But I can't abide no cussing, or taking the name of our Lord in vain. You can handle that?"

"Yes sir."

"All right then. Well, you look to be a notch above the sort what usually walks in here. Mind my asking, why you're interested in the job?"

"Well, I need the work, something steady. And I like working with my hands."

"Not much of that, to start off. Mostly sweeping up and moving material and doing what the crew tells you to do.

"That's fine."

"Okay then. I'll need the number for a couple people I can call. And some papers you need to fill out for the government, and for the credit check. Assuming that's all okay, you can start Monday."

"That's great. Thanks." Better call Greg and Gudrun right away and get the story straight. The credit card that Suzi ran over the limit wouldn't hurt, balance not late for months.

"Now I need you ten to seven. The shop works eight to five, but you stay on a couple hours after to clean and straighten up. Two fifteen minute breaks and a half hour for lunch. Not much overtime, unless we get backed up. Payday's Friday, for the week previous. No jewelry, loose clothes, anything that'd get caught in a machine."

"Sure."

"And the long hair don't bother me, but you got to tie it back. And no smoking inside the building or out by the sheds. Some of the boys chew, but you got to spit in a can, you do that."

"Oh, no, I quit a while back."

"Good for you." Andy pushed up heavily off the arms of the chair, held his hand out across the desk. "Okay then, Will. Monday morning."

"Thank you, Andy."

Waiting on the curb for late afternoon traffic to pass on Edwards Mills so he could cross the two lanes to the median, and then the other two, Will had left the car at the apartment, easier to apply for the job with no car than to explain later why he came to work without one, he did the multiplications and found his child support took half his monthly take-home, would they, Suzi, her lawyer, some judge, let him renegotiate the amount with his diminished earning capacity, or more likely tell him stop shirking and man-up in computer programming like Frank said. But if he was indeed done with all that, Will had better look this weekend while he kept the rental car for a lot cheaper housing near the bus line. Could he live that life, a run-down room, public transport, the corner

market mark-down spoiled/expired shelf, he did that in college, how about the evenings and weekends, with no money to paper over the gaping time hole, but the free public library, he could read all those books Lem never read and impress the next Pat, should he meet one. A lot easier if he didn't think about it, was that how everybody did it, look at Dave Greg Frank Alec Drebin Peter, well maybe not Peter, they all knew what they wanted, knew how to get it, went to work everyday, could they do that without being aware of what they were doing, could zombies do that. What purpose did self-awareness serve anyway, was survival or reproduction enhanced by thinking about who Will was and what to do, natural selection had hardly favored Lem, though he had bred, and Will lived, could he plan a future without watching himself from outside himself reconstruct what the person he watched had done before this, and imagine what that person would do from now on, or could he stomach carrying out this plan at AJ Custom Cabinetry every day while watching that person from outside. Or maybe the crown of creation, or of thorns, human self-consciousness, clung to the cortex as a side-effect of the mindless mechanisms of recollecting and predicting and acting, not often enough detrimental, as in toxic mind tailings, to compromise fitness enough to breed out of the population, like lemmings off the cliff. Better to lose himself, as they say, behind a broom or bearing a beam, whistling, lost in thought, outside of time, in the moment, in the flow, mindfulness means mindlessness, simultaneously not something and not nothing. Lem once believed a robot could be built that did everything people do without being self-aware, animals got along okay, knew what they wanted and went about getting it, some of the mammals, primates and pachyderms, passed the mirror test and knew who they were. Pat was wrong, Narcissus didn't fall in love with his own reflection, but with an image on the water he thought was somebody else, his soul mate, his destiny, he didn't recognize himself, didn't know who he was, they didn't even have mirrors back then, maybe the myth meant that self-awareness kept Will from loving himself, an anti-narcissus who wanted to drop a rock in the pond of his past and ripple into incoherent sparkles the way Lem saw himself, blacked out, depersonalized, without thinking or planning or knowing that he wanted to do that. Lem or Will aware or not aware of what he was aware or not aware, like a vanity mirror hand-held out over silent water with only mindless infinity in between.

Chapter 38 Cage

Will stopped at the steps of the souvenir gift shop just inside the entrance of the zoo, which rented hide-patterned (zebra, giraffe, leopard) fabric sling strollers, singles and doubles, three-wheeled like jogging strollers, for parents who didn't want to end up carrying children otherwise too big for baby strollers back through half the winding walkway when they tired, the children, with the parent tired then too. Last time Will and Suzi brought Annie here she was still in a stroller, the folding stroller that fit in the car, back before Cortez, when he still took time for family weekend excursions. "Should we get a stroller? It's a long walk to see all the animals."

"No, that's for little kids," said Annie. "Can I get a souveer?"

"Let's do that on the way out, so we don't have to carry it now." Will anticipated the inadequacy of pocket-sized animal cards or animal marker pens, probably the requisite heft of plush or plastic animal facsimile or a large-format animal picture book. They walked along the wide curved macadam path, lots of family clusters, a few young couples, Sunday so no school groups. Annie's yellow straw sun hat hovered like a tiny UFO a half-height and a half-step ahead of Will, her short pink sundress loose and limp, her sandal soles slapping faintly, the miracle smooth perfection of a child's bare calves and shoulders, her hair braided back between where her wings would sprout from the sharp shoulder blades in a Poussin putti painting. The multi-story soaring steel and glass of the monkey house shrieked up ahead, an arch of aluminum block letters correcting Will with Primate Pavilion.

Annie stopped and squinted at the sign. "What is prim it?"

"Primate," said Will. "It means the first group of animals. Monkeys and chimps and gorillas and people." Confusing that they were actually one of the last groups to evolve, but of course humans put themselves first, and this was the first zoo attraction walking in this direction, never mind.

"But the people are outside," said Annie.

"Right," Will said. They watched the spider monkeys swing from pole to bar to wire mesh like eighth-notes allegro on an invisible score, watched the morose orangutan languishing on his pole-top platform throw poop against the plexiglass barrier probably

installed once he started aiming at visitors, watched chimps sitting in the shade picking for bugs between the hairs of back to front pairs, watched the sleepy silverback gorilla enthroned on a weedy mound with his harem scattered in the shade, watched the baboons scamper up and down the hierarchy of their fake-rock outcropped island.

“Look, they have a rash on their bottom,” Annie said.

What was that, a food allergy, wheat, dairy, or some kind of infection, months of Lem or Suzi anointing Annie’s nethers with the stinky sticky white cream before bed after bath to ease the itchy red inflammation. “No, honey. I think those are the mommy baboons, and the daddy baboons think it looks pretty. Like lipstick.”

Annie giggled. They walked on to Big Cat Kingdom, a large orange stucco building circling a concrete courtyard ringed by a railing guarding the barred cages, with passage to enclosed outdoor pens in the back, housing the full-size felines, though as the explanatory sign informed, felids as well, which included the seriously scary ones. The lions splayed asleep in the dark cool corners, the tigers absent perhaps striping between their backyard foliage, the panther two yellow eyes in a back wall cloud of midnight, the jaguar pacing side to side a foot inside the bars, pouring around the two turns like slinky liquid then six silent steps of silken spots.

“He looks lonely,” said Annie. “Why can’t the jagger play with somebody?”

“Jag-war,” Will said. “Or jag-wire or Jag-you-are. Some of the animals might hurt each other. So they have to have their own place.”

“So if you hurt somebody you have to be by yourself,” Annie said.

Will nodded. Back out on the pathway they climbed the steps to the viewing platform looking out over Savanna Safari, an extensive open fenced field, with erratically dispersed giraffe, zebras, ostriches, and a couple kinds of antelope, almost too far away to see very well, the cost of a less constrained cage. Will lifted Annie up onto his hip so she could see over the wooden railing, on which the information placard clarified kudu and gazelles, and the fact that antelope wasn’t actually a species, but rather the leftover bovines humans didn’t domesticate.

“So these animals play nice together?” asked Annie.

“Looks like it,” said Will. Out of Africa, they followed the trail to Temperate Zone,

another constrained plain of bison and elk and bighorns, then on to a long building backing several high-walled rock-strewn yards with a dry moat far below the observation bulwark to see the bears. A massive brown bear with dragging matted fur about its belly ambled toward the low doorway into the private quarters at the rear, with a much smaller cub zipping close behind, prancing front paws side to side.

"Look Annie," Will said. "A baby bear with his mommy."

"Where's the daddy bear?" asked Annie.

"Well, with some animals, the daddy might hurt the baby, so he has his own home."

"But you're a good daddy, right daddy?"

Will leaned to kiss the top of her head but met sunhat instead, said "Of course," slid her down on to her feet. The polar bear, yellowed like curbside city snow-piles, emerged streaming from the greenish pool and stood dripping on the concrete faux floe.

"Polar bear!" Annie said. "He needs ice."

"It's too warm here for ice," said Will.

"Do the animals want to come here?" asked Annie.

"Well, they're safe here. And then we get to visit them."

No ice for the penguins either, only a wide moat around an oblong fabricated-rock island, weathered and white-streaked, with a knee-high round-top concrete wall surmounted by a chain-link fence separating viewers from captives. Will lifted Annie so her toes caught the wall curve and her fingers entwined the wire diamond loops, and she could see down into the water, where black/white bowling-pin-shaped bullets ceaselessly circled counterclockwise below the surface.

"Why do they go round and round?" asked Annie.

"I think they like to swim," Will said.

"Do they go round and round in the ocean?"

"I don't think so. Just here."

They stopped at the wall above the down-slope into the deep opaque pool where gleaming black hippo islands surfaced and snorted and submerged, then the dusty cracked body-armor folds and emasculating horn-stump and twitching ear origami and undersized pull-toy tail of the rhino, next the three-walled confinement of an old pleated-ear elephant, eyes closed near to slits, shifting weight from left to right fore-leg pillars and swinging its

tapering trunk with tip turned up from the dirt, back and forth, like an immense grey adagio metronome.

“Look, he’s dancing,” Annie said. “Why does he have a bracelet?”

Will traced the links of the anchor chain from the barrel-girth leg band to the concrete-embedded inverted U-loop near the right back foot. “So he won’t wander away, I guess. To keep him safe.”

Some sort of wild pigs big-bellied on their sides in the shade of a tree at the back of their corral, the sign said warthogs, then the pathway widened into plaza with a half dozen tables around a refreshment stand.

“Can I have a lemade?” Annie asked.

“You want a hot dog or something, honey?”

“I’m not hungry. I’m thirsty.”

Actually the pale yellow iced liquid went by Lemur-Aide on the menu board behind the counter of the Snack-Oasis, a blue building with jig-sawn yellow-green palm frond roof trim. They sat on the forest-green molded-wire benches budding via bent-tube legs from the round woven-wire table under a parrot-colored umbrella staffed into the center hole. Annie gurgled her straw, Will sipped his iced tea, actually Orangu-Tea, neither liquefied primate particularly appealing names.

“I’m tired,” said Annie. “Can we go on the Jungle Train?”

“Sure.” Will bought tickets for the train, really more of a tram, no tracks, rubber-tired red/white carts with three bench seats shaded by primary-color camouflage awnings, pulled by a similarly decorated golf cart, that ran along the walkway carrying visitors who preferred a sedentary zoo with running commentary, or for conveying spent five year olds.

The train wobbled and jerked back the way they came, with the speaker box bolted to the awning frame of each car echoing the explanations of the guide/driver up front and scratching out his high-frequency sibilants, past the Great Plains and an account of the habits and history of its denizens. Annie slumped in the seat, eyelids heavy, half listening, with the Lemur-Aide sugar dose kicking in. The bison not buffalo like brown blotches, heads bowed, grazing the strew of hay spewed on the far dirt, imprisoned in a cage so large that maybe they no longer noticed the fence. Like back when England sentenced criminals to Transportation to Australia, a jail the size of a continent, no walls or bars required. And

what about a baby bison born in the zoo, or the children born of antipodean convicts, what would they have known of incarceration. Or the life sentence of any human born on earth, the penitentiary planet, the shackles of gravity, the wall of ionosphere, the wire mesh Van Allen belt. The pen that Lem's parents, were they Will's parents, sang and prayed and praised, this world is not my home, a veil of tears, expelled from the garden, got a home in glory land way beyond the blue. Even Alec said iron bars illusion make. Or AJ Custom Cabinetry, where Will would surrender to a mindless menial job tomorrow for the rest of his confinement, with an explanatory plaque mounted on the white front wall facing tourist traffic strolling Edward Mills Boulevard, William Narkis, Homo, what was the Latin word for weak and stupid, Homo Imbecillus, a solitary, omnivorous night feeder, burrows inside during daylight, amounts to nothing. No consequences, no crisis, no climax, certainly not with Pat, nothing but feeble foreplay and no release, not even parole. And that dark sedan, nothing ever came of the tinted threat, Lem never heard from the chemist again, or the cops, and all those two CSA stooges sought was confirmation that Peter was not a threat, nothing but a loony hair stylist. And nothing came of Peter's paranoia, he never showed up black-clad body-armor guns blazing. Even Lem's precious invention, the headset, never created art, or anything, now nothing but a torture device to disable the brains of detainees interrogated in a cage, nothing amounted to anything.

"Are you sad daddy?" Annie looked up at Will.

"Oh, no, I was just thinking," Will said. Annie amounted to something, something to someone, when would she first see the bars of the cage.

"Mommy was crying. She said she was sad."

"Oh." Will looked down on the white-blond wisps escaping Annie's braid and reaching out to the tram's lurch though the mid-afternoon. "Sometimes people get sad, and they cry."

"But then they get better, and then they don't cry. Right daddy?"

"Yep, sometimes they do."

Chapter 39 Carcase

Andy led Will through the door at the back of the showroom into the high-ceiling'd open shop area that occupied the rear nine-tenths of the building. Bins and racks and stacks of hardwood and sheet goods on the left, stationary shop tools in the center, work tables with hand tool hang-ups and hardware cabinets on the right, with a separate sealed-off finishing room at the rear.

"Lonnie, this is Will, the new man I told you about," Andy said to the guy who approached, lanky, tan work clothes, mustache.

"Howdy," Lonnie said, and shook Will's hand.

"All right then. Will, Lonnie's my foreman. He'll introduce you around and show you what to do." Andy went back out front and shut the door behind him. Lonnie led Will to meet Duane, cutting sheets on the panel saw, then to Cliff beveling the edges of drawer fronts on the shaper, and finally to Phil, vacuuming completed cabinet doors near the drum sander before taking them into the finishing room. Then Lonnie walked Will over to the incoming material stacks.

"Okay, College. Need you to rotate the MDF. So the whole pile gets flipped over. Top sheet facing down on the bottom, right back here on the pallet where we keep it."

"Why do you want to do that?" asked Will. Looked like about forty sheets of medium density fiberboard, what they made the cabinet box, the carcase, from, because even customers willing to pay for solid hardwood face frames and fronts didn't care about the backs and sides no one could see, plus the MDF was cheap and straight and stable.

"You know, so it doesn't warp, lying on the one side. Got to flip over every sheet."

"No, I'm not doing that." Each sheet weighed about eighty pounds, and to put them back in the same place in the opposite order meant Will had to pick up and move each of the forty something sheets twice.

"You're telling me that your first day on the job, the very first thing I ask you to do, you're not going to do it?" Lonnie folded his arms across his chest.

"This is ridiculous. It's MDF. It doesn't warp. There's no reason to turn it over." Might as well get fired first off and save everybody the trouble.

“So you’re not going to do it, College?”

“No.”

Lonnie looked around at the other guys, standing waiting and watching, then back, his head inclined, looking out from under raised eyebrows at Will, lowered his arms, and grinned. “Aw, you’re okay, College. I’m just fucking with you. Go on and help Duane on the panel saw.”

Will ended up picking up and moving a lot of the MDF anyway, but not as a joke, instead, to slide the sheets onto the bottom rail of the panel saw, a near-vertical frame with a circular saw mounted on slides to make it easier to cut the four by eights into smaller pieces than running them through the table saw, because the saw moved to make the cut, not the heavy and awkward MDF moving over the blade. When Will pushed the sheet near enough to the measure mark on the bottom rail, Duane said “Yo” and tapped the edge back a fraction as needed with a wooden mallet, then ran the saw down the sheet, and moved the piece, now the dimension of an entry in the cut list, to lean against the stack of panels behind him. Then Will pushed the remainder of the sheet farther along the frame for the next cut, until a piece too small for the next panel in the list remained.

“Put that with the other cut-offs against the wall, you can throw them out when we’re done.” Duane said.

“You don’t keep any of the smaller pieces to use later?”

“Nah, cheap as this stuff is, you can’t pay somebody to dig through a pile of scrap, trying to find something the right size. Costs less to pull another sheet.”

The workday went through the motions, sheet to saw and panel to stack, listening to the guys talk sports and sex and automobilia at break and lunch, panel to bench to screw and glue and clamp, sweeping and dusting and restacking and replacing and discarding into the dumpster out back, the sunset curbside wait for the late city bus, staring at nothing smeared by the scratched side window, a burrito or gyro or slice of pizza and a soft drink walking back to the barely furnished single room, bath down the hall, in the senescence of a last-century house sectioned into A through H hovels for its unnamed mailbox Occupants. And the workdays went through their motions too, round again, with a skipped sprocket gap in the daily chain on weekends, working through the consensus list of great books in

the downtown library reading room, or another bus over to the south side to take Annie to the park or museum or a matinee.

Cliff, the oldest guy on the crew, blue overalls, wire-rim glasses, stiff white brushed-back hair, handled most of the joinery for the hardwood drawer and door fronts and face frames. Will took up the out-feed on the cherry that Cliff ripped down to two inch from the wider stock, pulling slow and gentle against the growl of the table saw, keeping firm against the fence, as Cliff fed the ten foot length from the front.

"So does Andy ever come back in the shop?" Will set the piece aside while Cliff pulled back the remaining plank and the saw whirred to its quiet unloaded high whine.

"Not so much any more. But you should have seen him back in the day. Man could eyeball a dovetail with a backsaw, fit tight as a tick." Cliff aligned the board parallel against the fence for another cut.

"I'd like to see that," Will said.

"You can't afford to do that kind of handwork anymore, we use the router and the jig for dovetail joints. But any time as we can't figure out how to do something in the plans, Andy'll come back and straighten us out." Cliff pushed the leading edge of the cherry into the blur of the blade, the carbide tips raged like a barrel of wasps, the dark kerf spread along the length, the fruity scorch sweetened the air, and a pink-orange dusting danced on the brushed steel surface.

Paydays passed. Lem liked the shop quiet late at night, and after his shift ended, he'd fool around on the computer if Andy had already left, or sit at a stool at one of the worktables and sketch on an old notepad he kept, maybe someday he'd make a piece of furniture himself after hours, nothing waiting back in his room but carry-out Chinese and floundering his way through Faulkner's Sound and Fury, determined to read the hundred best.

"You still here?" Andy walked into the workbench area.

"Yeah, just sketching a couple ideas." Will straightened up and set his pencil down.

"Let me see."

While Andy held the pad out focal length, Will explained. "I was thinking if we had a half-inch reveal under the counter edge, with a black walnut kick and edging, to get them

dark, then if we beveled the face panels, the shadow would fall away and they'd seem to float, like they were weightless."

"Hmmm. That's pretty interesting. I ought to take you along on my customer calls, you can draw like that."

"Sure," Will said.

"Well, I'm heading out. Lock up when you go."

"Night, Andy."

Over time the crew taught Will more of the operation, John, the hauler that AJ hired, took him out on the truck for deliveries, Andy gave him a dollar-an-hour raise, Lonnie still called him College, but let him run the planer and joiner and some of the saws by himself, once it looked like Will wouldn't ruin too much stock or severe a finger. On the machines, Will floated back to that place in his paintings, where he had to attend entirely to his eye and hand, on the canvas, for the loaded brush to flood the form, or here, because an inattentive slip on the miter saw would take his thumb clean off. Meanwhile not not thinking, but not thinking about thinking, the incessant waking turmoil of words and pictures simmered below the surface like a television set left on in another room, out of sight, a distant flicker and murmur he need not mind. And afterwards, the warm ache of working in the body, the impaled spike from heel to knee from standing all shift on the concrete floor, the knotted rope through neck and shoulder from the lift of lumber and the press against a work-piece, but not the old agitated pain vibrating behind the eyes, the compressed and breathless chest, from staring at streaks of numbers and symbols on a screen blue into the night. What work would unite material and muscle and mind, a scene in sight and the hidden vision of desire and the fingers around the resistance of the grain against the plane, nothing Lem or Will had ever felt and seen, not art, nor Cortez, nor cabinetry, not Christ, nor fiction, nor family, nothing but going through the motions of unnumbered days.

Will came up through the showroom to the office door. "Excuse me, Andy. Lonnie says he needs the elevation on the Anderson job?"

"Oh, Will, this is my daughter, Margaret Ann." Andy gestured toward a young woman at the table by the computer, high-waisted long dress with marbled lavender floral print

and ruffled hems, long light brown hair in a loose braid, a little on the heavy side, creamy smooth skin, maybe twenty something.

"Pleased to meet you." Margaret half-turned toward Will and half smiled, but didn't look up to meet his eyes.

"Maggie took a couple business courses at the college, so she helps me out with the accounts and the payroll. Otherwise I'd have to bring somebody in, or do it all by hand myself." Andy rummaged through the pile of drawings on his desk.

"Papa," said Maggie, "now it says 'File Corrupted'. I don't know what to do. I hope I didn't lose the whole month's billing."

"Let me see," Will said. He leaned over the computer as Maggie pushed back in her chair, the smell of his sweat and sawdust, her scent of unscented shampoo, and lingering sharp sunshine, out weeding that morning in the Jellema homestead flowerbeds.

"Usually when that happens, you want to quit the application. Don't just close it. And then rerun it with the recovery option, see?" Will did those operations as he spoke, and the file opened without an error message.

"Thank you so much." Margaret hazarded a full smile. Will's long straight fingers hovered at the keyboard, with the band-aid around the knuckle where the brand new band-saw blade sprang out of its coil and nicked him when Cliff showed him how to change blades.

"No problem."

"Ah, here you go, Will." Andy pulled the drawing out of the haphazard stack that served as his filing system.

"Thanks." Will turned to the door. Maggie watched him walk away, long purposeful strides in the loose fitting tan twill work pants slung low around his waist, while Andy watched his daughter.

Chapter 40 Finish

"Now if you want a smooth finish on here," said Phil, muted through his mask, hard to hear with the exhaust fan and the compressor running, "you got to stay close. About nine inches. So it's wet. Otherwise the varnish dries in the air and you get speckle. Too close and it runs. And keep the same distance, side to side. With just enough overlap on the pattern to blend into the last pass." As he talked he slowly swung the spray gun back and forth over the vertically hung door panel, his arm paced and precise as a pendulum. "Here, you try one." He lifted the door by its suction hook and hung it on the wall rack, put an unfinished scrap panel in its place, handed Will the gun.

"No, no, don't turn till you're past the edge," Phil said. "See, it's running where you slowed down to go back." Will adjusted his stroke. "That's better. But you got too much overlap, bring it down another inch." Will widened the interval for the last pass. "All right. You'll get it," said Phil. "Most important thing in this business, a good clean finish."

Will varnished a couple more scrap pieces, might be a while before Phil let him near a panel that mattered, then soaked the spray nozzle and can in solvent, blew them dry with the compressor hose, hung up his mask and gloves, and shut down the finishing room for the night.

"Got a minute, Andy?" Will stood at the doorway of the front office.

Andy looked up from his bid sheet and adding machine. "Sure, son. What do you need?"

"Wonder if I could show you something on the computer." Will sat down in the typist's chair at the side table and brought up the program he'd been playing with nights after he cleaned the shop, with no reason to rush back to his rented room, as long as he caught the last cross town bus at 10:35. Andy crab-wheeled his chair over beside Will and leaned forward, with his head tilted back to see the screen through his reading glasses.

"Now I don't know anything about these computers," Andy said.

"That's okay," said Will. "See, this is the cut list for all the panels in the carcasses in one of our jobs." He scrolled through a column of width and height measurements. "Then for the number of sheets you need, this shows how to layout the panels to use the minimum

material." He brought up an array of scale four by eight foot rectangles subdivided into the requisite panels dimensioned and numbered by their entry in the cut list. "Then there's an inventory number assigned to the leftover pieces, and if we keep those for the next job, then the program can figure out how to use them for another panel. The guys just have to follow the layout drawing, and pull the right piece from the scrap bin." Will opened another project. "See, here's another cut list for a different job, which uses the two partial sheets from the last job and seven new sheets."

Andy sat and looked at the screen for a while. "So you're telling me this computer will use the scrap we throw out?"

"Yeah, I figure with that, and the optimal layout, we'd save about thirty percent on materials for the carcass. More if we do the drawers and shelves and door fronts this way."

"And you think the boys would go along with this computer telling them what to cut?"

"Well, I talked to Lonnie, and he said if they only had to look for a number on piece, and didn't have to measure everything every time, yeah, they could do that. And that the order they cut the panels from the sheets didn't matter much."

Andy rubbed his chin between his thumb and forefinger for a while. "Well golly, Will. If what you say is true, every cabinet shop in the country will want one of these computer gizmos."

"So could we try it on a project? Maybe something small, to see how it works?"

"Well, I'm doing the bid on this pool house up on the north side. That comes through, I guess you can give it a shot."

"Great." Will closed the program and pushed back his chair.

Andy swiveled a quarter turn toward him. "You're doing good, Will. I think you've got a real future in this business."

"Thanks, Andy."

"Even my Maggie, she said you were nice. She can read people right off, just like her mother, bless her soul. Me, it takes me a long time to figure people out. But she knows right away whether a person's somebody you can trust. She sees into the heart."

"Yeah, she seemed nice. Your daughter."

“You mind my asking, how’d a bright young fellow like yourself end up here? I mean, you’re smart, you work hard, you got a feel for the craft. And I see you drawing new designs, none of my boys ever did that. Now, you show me this computer thing that’s going to save me money on materials. How in the world did you ever learn computers? I just know you’re going quit any day for some office job what pays five times as much as I can pay you.”

“No, I like it here, Andy. It’s a good place for me.”

“But help me understand why. It don’t make any sense you working at AJ Cabinetry when you could be doing a lot better someplace else.”

“It’s hard to explain. Once I wanted to be an artist, that’s what I studied in college. But I got interested in making art with computers, so I taught myself programming. Then, with a family and everything, I ended up working for big computer companies. I don’t know, things just got out of control, too much stress or something. My marriage fell apart, I lost the house, crashed my car, ran up the credit cards, pretty much lost everything. So I’m trying to keep things real simple these days.”

“I can understand that,” said Andy. “You know, in the Good Book, the Lord takes everything away from his servant Job, his home, his family, everything he owns, even his health. But Job never loses his faith, he never curses God. So in the end, the Lord restores everything Job lost, and even more besides. I think that’s maybe what happened to you. This is a test of your faith. But you just hang in there, and praise the Lord’s mercy, and everything you lost will be restored unto you.”

Right, Will remembered when Lem learned that story, God and the Devil placing bets on whether Job would lose his faith, laughing at him while they destroyed his life, who’d want to believe in a god like that, nothing better to do than sit around with his buddy the devil and torture people for the hell of it, and then when it’s over nothing gets restored, maybe replaced by something different, but what’s gone is gone, better to believe in a mindless empty universe where things happen for no reason at all, Cortez and Suzi and the house and car and the friends who weren’t even friends after all, all lost, even whoever Will was back when he was Lem lost, whatever limitless pacific expanse he once thought he saw lost, and now going back and forth from his dingy room’s sagging single bed to the push-broom sawdust in the shop via the lurching dirty bus every day, the same smooth side-to-

side stroke over and over, traversing an already spoiled surface, and now what, learning the business and selling cabinet cut-list software on the side and someday the son-in-law takes over after Andy's stroke and Maggie would want a bunch of kids and church on Sunday and a cute little cottage where she'd put up peach preserves in the summer.

"Could be," said Will.

The End