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This's radio EFKO, staying with yuns,
hopefully, through the rest of the end of
the world.

Terminal Dogma

D. F. Hall

Hardboiled Babylon

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Death, as we may call that unreality, is the most terrible thing, and to keep that which is dead so demands the greatest force of all.

Terminal Dogma

“Now we’re going to talk about reproduction.”

Life was full of bad decisions. If it hadn’t been, it wouldn’t have been called life, but something else. At least, that’s how one Theory of True Names went.

“We’re going to start with the potato.” Mr Wellington drew a lumpy ellipsoid on the board. “Though some of you may have heard the term seed potato, all the ones you’ve ever eaten were not in fact reproduced through what you would conventionally think of as seeds.” He tapped the board with the felt marker, giving the lumpy ellipsoid a case of chickenpox.

It’s part of the reason God didn’t have a name for a long time. The ancient Israelites, wandering round in the desert, happened to be bordered by nations rather taken with the quite popular, at the time, idea that an individual or group could control anything by the repetition of the object’s name, and this went all the way up to gods. So they (the ancient Israelites) had to keep their god from being controlled by said competing social groups, and the best way of doing this, or so it had been thought, had been simply to state that their god (the ancient Israelite’s god) had no name. It’d seemed like a good idea at the time.

“Okay.” He capped the marker and turned. “Everyone who’s eaten a potato, please raise your hand. Don’t try to be edgy, Mister Bose. Thank you. Well, congratulations, everyone, you’ve eaten a bunch of clones.”

Of course, eventually those competing social groups suffered extirpation or extinction, one way or the other, or if the flesh didn’t, various thochts suffered equivalent fates. And while ideas had almost always traveled at uniform speed, much in the fashion of light, they eventually, of course, came to encode that which was represented as mechanical reproduction, so thereby there came to be a way around

such constraints, something yet to be made manifest in the same or similar terms for the latter.

“What do we know about clones? Everyone can put down their hands now. Mister Malcolm, what do we know about clones?”

“They’re...exact copies.”

“Yes. That is a bit of the definition.” He turned toward the board and drew a second chickenpoxed, lumpy ellipsoid.

“Mister Wellington,” Grace raised her hand. “I thought clones were bad.”

South capped the marker and turned. “Who else here thinks eating a clone is bad? So...everyone... Mister Bose? No problem with clones?”

“Depends on who and how many.”

“Yes, well, if you get that rich, you can send me a little money for informing you of the possibility.”

A couple students laughed.

“So...a quick survey. Everyone who’s eaten a...banana, raise their hand.”

Lily raised hers, and almost everyone laughed.

“Alright,” South said. “Enough of that. So if you have a problem with eating clones, you’re really in trouble, because all of you’ve spent your whole lives eating potatoes and bananas, which means your bodies are just full of cells that’ve been grown from energy produced and extracted from cloned foods and packed with minerals extracted from cloned foods. But, no, Mister Kirby, this’s likely not the origin story to your career as a comic book superhero.”

Laughter.

Some people, though only a select few, or so CrashAngel37 was currently posting on part of what was left of the internet, ever notice that when they go to the dentist and have to get an x-ray, they cover the patient’s genitals with a lead vest to protect that part of their anatomy from radiation, yet they’re shooting these x-rays, essentially, right at that same person’s head. And of course, any kids that might be produced later, they’ll go to the dentist, too, and get the same treatment. Maybe, as PreacherPenguin11 would soon post on what was left of the internet, in reply to this, maybe the moral of the story is it didn’t take something with a brain to reproduce.

“So let’s back up a moment. What does it mean to reproduce? What’s the definition? Miss Tomlin?”

“To replicate... For something to replicate itself.”

“Okay.... Let’s take that definition for a moment. That’s a type of reproduction. It would work in the case of the potato, most of the time. But we’ll get to the other half of that later. And several other types of plants. What about animals?”

“You would need a male and female?”

“Do you?” South turned and drew the male and female symbols on the board. “Do you need a male and female to reproduce?”

“You have to, don’t you?”

“Alright, how many people think you have to have a male and female animal to reproduce? Raise your hands.” ... “Alright. Is that what you actually think, Mister Bose? Or are you just trying to be edgy? In any case, he’s right. You do not necessarily have to have both a male and female in a species in order for reproduction to occur.”

Lily raised her hand. “But...”

“Yes, Miss Anodine?”

“How does that happen?”

“A very good question. It’s called parthenogenesis.” He turned and wrote that on the board, just the one word. “It basically means that a female can get pregnant with her own clones and give birth to them.” Though, he declined to mention the alternative of half-clones, as that would just confuse the issue at the moment.

“Things really do that?”

He capped the marker and turned. “They do. Some sharks, for example, have been proven to reproduce this way. And there are whole species, notably some species of salamanders and fish, that have no members of the male sex, so far as can be determined. They reproduce,” he pointed the marker at the word on the board, as he was the kind of person who naturally moved when he spoke, “entirely through parthenogenesis.”

“So they just get pregnant without having to do anything?”

“That’s it.”

As can be imagined, at this point, the young men looked fascinated or bored, while the young women looked appalled, if appalled were a strong enough word, horrified might come closer, though some

would find a single word incapable of encapsulating such broad and multitudinous states of experience.

“Parthenogenesis is a form of what’s called asexual reproduction, that is reproduction that doesn’t require a male and a female, the organism reproduces itself all on its own.”

“Mister Wellington...”

“Yes, Rachel.”

“Then are plants asexual?”

“That depends on how you want to look at it. And it depends on the plant. Very technically, sexual reproduction is when gametes are fused. It’s just that most or a lot of plants have the male and female parts on the same individual organism. On flowers, the sexual organs of plants, it’s the stamen and the pistil. And the male part, the pollen, gets transferred to the female part, which then produces the seed. And the pollen can either come from the same, or another flower on another plant. However, some plants produce unisex flowers, male or female. Some produce both. So yes, you can have a male and a female plant. But some don’t do that and only reproduce asexually, without a fusing of gametes. And some do both. And here we all were thinking it was pretty simple, the birds and the bees, right?”

Laughter.

Lily raised her hand. “Mister Wellington, would it be possible for both to happen, that is...for something to reproduce parth...enogen...ically, but it still be sexual reproduction, like flowers...but not?”

Laughter.

“Alright, everyone quiet down. Quiet down. No, actually that’s a very good question. There’s a phenomena known as chimerism, it’s when an organism is kinda a composite. The word comes from an ancient Greek legend that had a three-headed beast with a lion’s body and the tail of a dragon and the head of both. And I know what you’re thinking, but the legend doesn’t say anything about that.”

Laughter.

“But besides being a myth, it’s kinda sorta real. Some people and animals have two separate amounts of DNA. There was the case of a woman who almost had her children taken away from her because they weren’t related to her when they tested them. So what the judge ordered was for someone to be standing right there when the baby

was born and take a blood sample and test the DNA. And you know what they found? The baby wasn't related by DNA to the mother who just gave birth to her. So somebody finally got smart and tested the DNA in the woman's reproductive cells. And it turned out she had a completely different set of DNA there. She was, in effect, in this sense, two people in one. So yes, Miss Anodine, your question is plausible, if that is we had an individual who was both parthenogenetic and chimeric. But so far, nothing like that's ever been discovered, at least to my knowledge, which I assure you all is considerably limited."

Laughter.

But he still, obviously, hadn't mentioned half-clones.

"Alright, why sexual reproduction? Why doesn't everything just clone itself?" He pointed the marker at the board. "Through, perhaps, parthenogenesis. Or in the case of single-celled bacteria, just split and half and each half go on their way, a perfect copy. A process which you should all know as cell division. So why sexual reproduction? What's it good for? Anybody wanna take a stab at it? Yes, Miss Tomlin?"

"If they did that...reproduced asexually, then everything would be the...same..."

"Yes. That's a very good logical deduction. If all we had were clones, then everything would be the same. The same number of spots. Or the same color hair. The same height. The same weight. Etc. But what happens when we mix genes from two parties? Does it always come out the same?"

"Twins."

"Barring twins, Mister Summerset. Though, we'll get to that later. To put it simply, unless you're a twin, which obviously we don't have any here, or I should say identical twins, unless there's something I don't know about." Laughter. "So unless you're a twin, your siblings, should you have any, might look somewhat like you, they might not. They might be one gender. You might be another. They might inherit your father's height. You might inherit your mother's eyes. There're a multiplicity of combinations. Anyone know what multiplicity means? Mister Bose?"

"Alot."

Laughter.

South nodded. "Pretty much. So obviously, there's quite a lot of sexual reproduction in the world. So what're its advantages? Why would having a multiplicity of combinations be useful?"

"If..."

"Yes, Miss Anodine?"

"If...everything were the same, it'd have the...same problems?"

"They would. Has anyone ever heard the term monoculture?" He turned and wrote that on the board, just the one word, purely out of habit. "Getting back to the bananas..." Laughter. He glanced over his shoulder. "Anyway, most of the world's bananas, as I hope we've just learned, are clones. So most of the world's banana fields exist as a monoculture. That is, there's only the one kind, and they're all, more or less, identical, at least the ones we tend to eat." Laughter "Okay, settle down. So what would happen, say, if a disease began to spread? Anyone?"

"If they were all the same they'd...all get it."

"That's right." South capped the marker and turned. "They're all the same, so if one's susceptible to it, they all are. Hypothetically, then, what would happen in that case?"

"They'd..."

"Yes, Mister Summerset?"

"They'd all die."

"They'd all die. With no variability, there's little to no chance that what takes out one won't take out the rest." He turned toward the board, uncapped the marker, and wrote EXTINCTION. "And that's what we would call extinction." He re-capped the marker and turned. "So now, before we go on, I'm required by the county to read you something." He lifted a sheet of paper from his desk. "Ahmmm. Alright. The North Carolina Academic Stanford..." He paused, shook his head. Laughter. "Ahmmm. The North Carolina Academic Standards require students to learn about Charles Darwin's theory of evolutionary biology and to at some point in the academic term submit to a standardized assessment on which the subject of evolution will be evaluated. Because Charles Darwin's theory is a theory—" he glanced up—"—we'll get to more about that later." Laughter. "Alright. Now, it continues to be subjected to rigorous scientific and other scrutiny on a daily basis, and new evidence is continually being

uncovered. Charles Darwin's theory of biological evolution is not a fact. It does not explain everything. There are many currently unanswered questions relating to Charles Darwin's theory of biological evolution. A theory is defined as a well tested and reasoned explanation for a set of observations. Intelligent Design is also an explanation for the origins of life on Earth. It, however, differs from Charles Darwin's theory of evolutionary biology, which is just a theory. The book *Still-Water Life As They Apply To A Slice of Lemon Pie* is currently available in the school library, and copies are made available for any student who might be interested in gaining an understanding of the details of Intelligent Design. There are numerous copies available, so take an extra home to your friends or a family member. In regards to any theory, students are encouraged to keep their minds open. But students are advised, as the saying goes, not to keep their mind so open that their brains fall out. This school hereby leaves discussions about the nature of the development and origins of life on the planet Earth with individual students and their respective families, as this is a deeply personal decision, and one that the state should not intrude into. This school district, being a standards driven one, however, must train its energies on equipping students to achieve a certain level of proficiency on the standardized assessments all students will eventually have to submit themselves to." South returned the sheet of paper to his desk. "Alright, I'll leave the grammatical part to your English class." Laughter. "But I want to concentrate on two points in this statement." He lifted the sheet of paper. "First, what does it say? Charles Darwin's Theory of biological evolution is just a...? Theory. Okay, a theory's a theory. Got it." Laughter. "Now, this part, and in case you've forgotten it...um... *A theory is defined as a well tested and reasoned explanation for a set of observations.* What's the problem with these two statements? Yes, Ms Anodine."

"They're contradictory...?"

"Yes, they are." He placed the sheet of paper on his desk and turned, uncapped the marker. "There are two things, first we have hypotheses ...and we have theories." He wrote both those on the board. "What's the difference?" He pointed with the marker. "A hypothesis is a possible explanation for a set of data or a series of phenomena." He pointed to the other word (since it didn't matter, there was no use in trying to

break such habits now). “A theory is a hypothesis that’s withstood repeated scrutiny, enough so that we take it to be a reasonable model of the phenomena, or at least enough to predict something about it with a certain level of accuracy.” He lifted the paper. “So yes, new information is always coming in. New hypotheses are formed. Sometimes old theories get the boot. And yes, Mister Johnson, we’re all aware of the statement you’d prefer to follow that with, but if you could please not. Now, as Miss Anodine’s said, there’s a contradiction here.”

This could’ve been explored more thoroughly with the following excerpt from *Manifold Dimension: How Science Fiction Is Anti-Science*, by Dr Langdon Jones, if he (South) had chosen to do so.

Language is, as pointed out by Wittgenstein, an interplay between exchangers. Sometimes, or often, depending on who is consulted on the point—this consultation itself fundamentally embedded in the very landscape which language itself is embedded in, and it could be possible to speculate that any attempt to properly engage in such would be rendered never-ending, in that an infinite recursive state would be entered upon the initiation between any two exchangers during such a consultation—however, this exchange goes badly, that is, what A attempts to communicate to B isn’t received in such a fashion as is perceived by A, a replication, as it were, fails. Or at least the reciprocal communication of the status quantifiers of the initial communication indicates such, whether falsely or not. In such instances, attempted communicators can exchange symbols in and at cross purposes, each ascribing a meaning contrary to either party’s own internal pre-transmittal ascriptions. However, such a state is not immediately, if ever, noticeable. An example of this is the English word THEORY and how it diverges in its usage among certain scientific communities and in colloquial usage among non-scientists. Traditionally—

Here, he (South) would’ve paused and glanced up and added, “—it means what I’ve just said.”—And then he’d’ve looked down at the book again—“And... Okay....”

However, among so-called laymen, the term most often invokes the receiver to access a set of prescriptively or descriptively quantified definitions that are of the opposite socio-culturo-contextual interpretation, namely that a theory is an undemonstrated, unevinced conceptualization, synonymous with their use of the words speculation or conjecture or, as is most often the case, guessing.

And if he'd made use of such, here's where he'd've said, "Alright." And he'd've looked up. And then he'd've said, "You see, all you have to do is make it through all these English classes, and you can throw it all away so long as you go into academics." Which would've gotten some laughter.

But instead he just said, "What it comes down to is that scientists use the word theory for one thing, something that can be reasonably predicted, at least with what we know at the moment. And everybody else uses the word as the equivalent of a hypothesis, something that might or might not be shown to have enough predictive power to be promoted to a theory." He lifted the sheet of paper. "So what is this saying? Yes, Mister Bose?"

"First it's *just* a theory, as if that makes it less than something. Then it says that a theory is something backed by facts and all that."

"Exactly." South let the piece of paper fall. "So it's probably not worth the piece of paper it's printed on. But, like the school district says, I will leave you to form your own conclusions about that."

Laughter.

"Now..." He uncapped the marker and rolled the cap between his thumb and forefinger. "Let's talk about some of those unanswered questions. Which brings us back to sexual reproduction. Where does it come from? Mister Taylor, did the first organism ever to exist reproduce sexually or asexually?"

"Um...asexually...?"

"Very good. Why?"

Lily raised her hand. "Because it wouldn't've had anyone to reproduce with."

Laughter.

South nodded. "That first organism—and it wasn't even a cell, as

those came along later, cell walls and all that—didn't have anyone else to mate with. Or if they did they might've not liked them enough." Laughter. "And it's not like single-cell Tinder was around." Laughter. "So life starts, and everything gets off to reproducing. And everything's reproducing asexually. So where's the sexual come along? Anybody? No? Well, that might be because nobody knows. Or if you do, you should really tell somebody." Laughter. "It's a mystery. It's a mystery a lot of people have been working on for a long time. Just like gravity. Which, in case you're wondering, we still haven't figured out." He let the marker cap fall onto the desk, caught it as it rebounded. "Still there." That got a few chuckles. "So now let's take one little detour. All the way back. Way, way, waaaaaay back. All the way back to the beginning. Where does life come from? Do you know the answer, Mister Bose? Well if you do, you can send me some money when you receive the Nobel Prize. But seriously, that's one of *the* unanswered questions of all time. It's very much unanswered. But it also has nothing to do with Charles Darwin's theory of biological evolution. Not a thing. Here's why. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution deals with life *only* once it exists. Once that first cell is there after some soup gets hit by lightning, then you can talk in terms of evolution. Before that, it's not Charles Darwin's problem. Well, he's dead, so he doesn't have any problems, or at least, very few of them, but that's neither here nor there." He capped the marker. "Okay, so bringing us back round. We've got life. And how do we know it's life? Because it fulfills the definition of what we call life. That's what definitions usually do."

Laughter.

Here, he could've also deployed an excerpt from *The Parlor And The Living Room: Life Death And The Selective Breeding of The Human Language*, by Gordon Liste, to more thoroughly delve into the area of definitions and their various definitions, but, as with the former excerpt, he opted not to do so.

"So what's one of the things in the definition of life? Miss Anodine."

"Reproduction...?"

"Reproduction." The bell rang. He sighed. "Which is going to be our topic all week. Goodbye and see you all tomorrow."

Though, he still hadn't mentioned half-clones.

«...and to the second of the two stooges...» The battery-powered, portable radio hissed. «...wherever yuns are, this's radio EFKO saying good luck.»

Gordon clicked it off and stuffed the rest of a granola bar in his mouth. He crunched the foil-plastic wrapper in his hand. He pulled the oxygen mask back up over his face as he chewed, his breath fogging against the transparent plastic.

“What’re you doing that for?” Her voice rebounded hollowly against her own plastic oxygen mask, her breath fogging the inside, as well, moisture beading and trickling down.

He paused chewing, a lump in his cheek that shifted the oxygen mask sideways on his face, said, “What?” His voice rebounded hollowly against his, too.

“Worry so much about trash,” Angela said.

He looked down at the foil-plastic wrapper crunched into his palm, started to chew again. “It may be the end of the world...” He swallowed part of it. “But I figure we might as well try to keep it clean, anyway.” He stuffed the crumpled foil-plastic wrapper in his pocket.

Angela balled her wrapper and tossed it. “It’s not as if it isn’t going to dissolve the same way everything else is.” She shifted her oxygen mask aside and bit a fruit bar in half. “What’s it matter if it becomes nonexistent here or in the landfill?” She chewed. “Have you seen the landfill? It’s bleeding off the edge of the world.” She shifted the oxygen mask back into place.

Gordon shook his head.

“Gabriel hauled me up there last week looking for some blasted part.” She shook her head and shifted the oxygen mask to stuff the other half of the fruit bar into her mouth. “To make suncatchers—

of all things.” She chewed. “He waits till the sun doesn’t exist to get round to making suncatchers.”

“That’s the way it goes sometimes.”

“Don’t defend him.” She swallowed, shifted her oxygen mask to one side, uncapped her canteen, gulped from it, wiped her mouth with her sleeve, and pushed her oxygen mask back into place. “If I didn’t love him, I’d’ve had him killed three times over by now, I can tell you that.”

Gordon stuffed the radio into his pack and zipped it. “Some people’ve said that’s the way love’s supposed to be.”

“And when’re you gonna find love?”

“I love myself, isn’t that enough?”

She re-clipped her canteen to her pack, stood, pulled her pack over her shoulder, careful about the line that ran back to the oxygen tank. “Don’t make me start crying.”

“I wasn’t trying to.” He brushed off his cargo shorts and stood, lifted his own pack.

“Men’re all alike,” she said. “Oblivious.” She stooped and lifted the signal-direction-finder, clicked it on, stood there slowly rotating left then right, miming what no one could ever know. *Beep. Beep. Beep.* Still looking down at it, she motioned ahead, along the trail up the ridge. And still looking down at it, she started walking. Gordon pulled his pack straps over his shoulders and followed.

“Since you have someone,” he said, “why do you keep coming out here?”

She’d stopped looking at the signal-direction-finder, instead concentrating on the path ahead. “Because,” she said, “if I didn’t get away from him once in a while, I’d kill him.”

“I guess it’s healthy for a relationship to spend some time apart.”

“It is for me.”

“I’m sure he enjoys the time alone, too.”

“Of course not. He hates it. I’m all sunshine and roses. He never wants me to leave. Are you suggesting otherwise?”

“Oh, no.”

“How dare you imply otherwise.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“But you were thinking it. And if you weren’t, you could’ve been.”

"If we're going to punish people on the basis of what they could've done..." He shook his head, breathing hard as they crested the ridge, those breaths condensing against the clear plastic and trickling down it and pooling against his face. He looked back over the way they'd come. It didn't seem that far. And it wasn't. Maybe gravity was bending space in some hitherto unnoticed way. So he said, "I wonder if gravity's bending space in some kind of unequal fashion?"

Angela looked back at him. "Huh?"

He huffed. "Well, it doesn't seem as if we've gone nearly as far as it feels like."

She shook her head, turned as the signal-direction-finder started beeping. She turned up along the ridge, looking up through the trees that rode over it, great naturalistic waves representing unknown historical patterns of the winds and rains and defecations that'd carried pine seeds up or down the way to create the grove in which they then stood. She pointed up along the supine sweep of that ridge, up where trees and ridge line obscured everything, even the light, a vast amount of earth rising from where it'd buckled upwards from a collision with the African continent so many eons before, a wave breaking upwards, proceeding to roll backwards on them, just, maybe, really slow. It made Gordon a bit dizzy. A kind of hollow sound made it past his oxygen mask. Angela looked over her shoulder. "You alright?"

"Fine...."

She looked down at the signal-direction-finder again. "Up that way."

"I was afraid you'd say that."

"Oh, it's just a little climb."

"Have I ever told you I have problems with vertigo? It's an inner ear thing. I can't even get up on a stepladder. Sometimes I try to fall out of my office chair just sitting in it."

"Oh, don't be such a baby. We'll be on the ground the whole time."

"It's what the ground's on—or isn't on—that's got me worried."

Angela shook her head, started forward, the signal-direction-finder antenna pointed ahead, as if to break the way.

And Gordon sighed and pulled his pack straps tight and followed her and it. After all, all he had to do was not look back. It's too bad

Langdon weren't here, at least then he could ask what the origin was for that cartoon idea that something can run out in the middle of the air...till you look down, then it's all over. She was right, of course, it shouldn't've been *that* hard. After all, they were staying on the ground. It's just...when he started thinking about the ground not being on anything... Oh, hell. But hadn't that technically always been the case? But at least, back when they thought the world rested on the back of a giant turtle, it actually rested on *something*. And at least it used to be that you could *pretend* about the Einsteinian model of the universe that it was just a bunch of basketballs and marbles scattered out across a rubber sheet. Sure, it wasn't true, in fact, it operated in the exact opposite fashion of the principles it was supposed to demonstrate. So instead a person, or anything with the evolved, or programmed, capability to do so, could imagine a big bunch of marbles and basketballs on a rubber sheet with someone or something underneath pulling part of it down, or a lot of someones or somethings. It'd still be wrong in all the ways such analogies are, but at least that was a concrete image, of sorts, even if it were only a badly done analogy, and the whole of it possibly a metaphor.

"You alright?" She paused and looked back at him.

"Just trying to think of a suitable physical analogy for void. The problem is, of course, you want to plug something in where you can't by definition plug something in."

"Yeah," she said. "I think that's a common male problem." She turned to look down at the signal-direction-finder, the device intermittently beeping.

"What's wrong?"

"It's doing that thing again." She looked up the ridge. "Does the light look brighter to you up there?"

"It's always a bit brighter at the edges."

"Yeah.... But..." She looked down at the signal-direction-finder. She shook her head. She started forward, side-walking on the edges of her boots up the slope. There, trees grew outwards as if initially determined to leave the ground at ninety-degrees, but swept upward in forty-five degree elbows; the younger ones, barely a quarter of an inch round, sickly and leafless in the minimal light, curved at odder angles, influenced by newer, and if not for them, unindicated

gravitational shifts. They scrambled upward, almost on hands and knees, doing a real number on Gordon's because of his ever-worn cargo shorts, up between a split in an outcropping of rock, a place that young him would've been tempted to be convinced had hosted, in some primordial dark past, looking much like the present, dark aboriginal festivals of one kind or the other, imaginings all too influenced by Robert Howard. He huffed as they stopped, lay against the side of the ridge, feeling as if he were going to slide down, the surface so vertical walking up it threatened to break his nose if he weren't careful. He made the mistake of looking down. He quickly looked upslope. The light definitely was brighter, harsh between the trees at the top of the ridge, washing them out, blurring them round the edges. After the dimness at the bottom of the world, it took getting used to. Angela sat looking at the signal-direction-finder. "It's still wonky. I don't like this."

"Just one more wild goose chase."

"Well," she slipped her backpack off her shoulder and unzipped it and stuffed the signal-direction-finder in it. "I'm going to catch this goose and pluck it and fucking stuff it in the oven." She pulled out a coil of rope. "And make gravy." She stood. "Come on." And she slipped the coil over her shoulder and scrambled up.

Gordon sighed, followed her, tried to avoid breaking his nose, or at least to avoid jamming the edge of the oxygen mask into the bridge of his nose. Eventually the ground leveled again. He sat there huffing while Angela tied the rope at the base of a tree, fastened it to her harness with a carabiner. "You coming?" Gordon shook his head. "Sure?"

"It's just the edge of the world." He swept his hand in front of him. "It's not as if there isn't more of it."

Angela shrugged. She moved her backpack to drop it at the base of a tree, having pulled the oxygen tank over her shoulders, condensation trickling down the clear plastic where she breathed hard against it. "Suit yourself." She played out the rope, advancing toward the edge, pulling her sunglasses up from where they dangled round her throat and seated them in place over the bridge of her nose to shield her from the increasing brightness as she approached the light head on as it curved up from under the bottom of this remaining fragment of

the world and reality. She stood on the edge, looking down, shielding her eyes, even with the sunglasses. It'd've been better if she'd brought welding goggles, or something heavy-duty enough to view an eclipse with. She looked up at the black void overhead. Static prickled her hair, lifting the ends, making her look like what she didn't have to guess because Gabriel'd once taken a picture of it, refusing to delete it, and burying the memory card somewhere just so he could tease her about it still existing. She stepped back as something moved, a piece of earth, though not near her, crumbling, falling forever and ever down (sideways, or whatever, how could they know?) into that nothingness. She kept one hand on the rope, just to know it was there in case. If she wasn't such a shitty climber, by her own definition, she'd've admitted what she wanted to do. But she hadn't even told Gabriel yet. But if someone were going to do something, repelling down over the edge of the world and seeing underneath, that wouldn't be something to leave off a tombstone, not that there were going to be any of those left, either. But to be able to really see what was bending that light... If it could really even be seen at all. Maybe it couldn't be. Maybe whatever it was was like the light itself, something that math and reason and data showed *had* to be bending, but not something that could be seen bending, only noticeable when it hit her straight in the face, and she should've brought welding goggles. She'd steal some from Gabriel next time. But back to work. She turned and walked back, unzipped her backpack, and pulled out the signal-direction-finder. But she had to push up her sunglasses to read the screen. "Here." She shoved her backpack toward him. "Be useful." And she turned, shielding the screen with one hand as she walked toward the edge. The rope pulled tight. She stood there looking down at the signal-direction-finder. She looked up, out into and onto void. Then she turned, pointing the signal-direction-finder back the way they'd come, out and over the county's valleys and ridges, towards the far end of what remained of the Earth, visible in the very distance by the light that bent upwards at the crumbling edges there. She looked down at the signal-direction-finder, continued to look at it as she turned toward the void again.

She looked up at the black emptiness above and sighed. Just for the heck of it, she aimed the signal-direction-finder up there. But

she shook her head and turned and walked back, squatting and stuffing the signal-direction-finder into her backpack, zipping it with a vengeance.

“Anything?”

“Just the same old damn thing.”

“Maybe what’s his name’s right.”

Angela started to untie the rope. “Who’s what’s his name?”

“The guy who said it might be coming through from another universe.”

“Oh, *that* guy.” She shook her head, and she started coiling the rope round between her palm and elbow.

“It’s a possibility.”

“Only if you take it that anything else still exists.”

“We don’t know that some of them still don’t. In fact, one might even argue that they have to be.”

“Yeah, but didn’t Langdon say something about they all had to end eventually, too?” She tied the rope with itself and stuffed it into her pack.

“He’s been known to be wrong.” An understatement of such proportions that she couldn’t even laugh at it.

She shifted the oxygen tank off, sat, her back against a tree, looking out from behind her sunglasses at the light that curved upwards over this edge of what remained of the world. “If Eva’d just help, we wouldn’t have to guess.”

“She’s not going to risk that,” Gordon said. “Not after what happened last time. Not without anyone to help manage what could go wrong.”

“So we’ve just got to hope they find him before it’s too late.”

“It’s probably too late no matter what anyone does.”

“You don’t believe the legend?” She tapped the gauge on her oxygen tank.

“Do you?”

Angela sat there looking out at the light, looking upward, past the tops of the trees, unable to see where it eventually curved back downwards upon the face of what remained of the Earth. “One can hope.”

“Hope’s an evil thing.”

“Yeah. And where do you get off telling people what’s evil or not?”

“Just quoting your husband.”

“Well, I can get it from the horse’s mouth, thank you very much.” She rose and pulled her pack and oxygen tank onto her shoulders. “And I’d like to get back and kiss that mouth, so...” She offered him a hand, helped him up. “How can someone as bony as you be so heavy?”

“Density.”

She laughed. “Well, just don’t slip on the way down, or your density probably’ll let you punch right through the bottom of the Earth, and you’ll really get to find out if there’s any turtles down there.” She started ahead.

He followed. “Could just be terrapins.”

“Pull over now.” She glanced back and forth between the road and river as she drove, depressed the call button again, the speaker mounted to the top of the Jeep burping static. “Repeat. This is the North Carolina Game and Wildlife Service. Pull over now.” Difficult to tell, but it looked like someone on the pontoon boat currently racing down the Tuck flipped her off. Down from the university, the swollen river hadn’t yet been able to overrun the high banks. Loose asphalt peppered the Jeep’s undercarriage, the whole road torn up, feeling more like gravel. She hooked the mic, hitting the gas. She came out fast at the intersection, jerking the wheel hard, unable to shoot across and down the gravel road that ran along the river, because it was submerged, so she cut toward town, up along the overpass, down through the technical college, lights blaring the whole time, painting the dim perpetual night in flashing red, turning, jumping over the crooked knob in the center of the roundabout, and speeding up into and through Presbyterian, and down and out the other side. It was the long way round, but she caught sight of the lights in the blue pontoon boat as it passed beneath the bridge, and halfway down the hill, she cut the wheel, easing up on the gas as she weaved along roads that really had been mapped from cow trails, till she could see the river below. And because of the bend, she’d come out a little ahead. She cut off the red flashing light. She sped along till she’d found a good overlook, just upstream from where the Helena dam’d been, and jammed the brakes, braced herself to keep from smashing into the wheel, and jerked off her seat belt and shoved open the door and grabbed the rifle out of the back floorboards. Squinting up the darkened stream, she popped off the scope covers, nestled the stock against her shoulder, and looked through. Wait. Faint lights appeared round a bend. She calmed her breathing. She waited, breathing. Wait. She

kept her finger clear of the trigger. She breathed in, held, then out. Wait. Sheer good and bad'd never been the only possibilities. She watched through the scope. People's lives, other lives. She breathed in, held. All the unknowable things that could and couldn't happen. She had to adjust for the distance. The lie about giving the other side its view. She breathed out. As if there could or would only ever be one other. She watched the craft through the scope. A fallback, disprove the one, the other must be correct. She breathed in, held. Everybody has to make their choices about what they're willing to do. She released her held breath. There's always consequences, one way or any of the others. She adjusted the stock against her shoulder. So you're living with *something*, no matter what. She breathed in, held. At least, till you're not living anymore. Her finger still rested against the trigger guard. But then again, that eventually happened to everything. She breathed out. Or so they say. She moved her finger away from the trigger, but she still watched through the scope as the craft steered downstream, through the bend, under the bridge, cutting across the water toward shore. She lowered the rifle. Because of the dimness, they'd've never seen her up here on the road unless the headlights'd been on. So they'd've thought they'd lost her. And down there'd be a good place to put in, at least, one of the best places to put in near any what-might-be-called civilized area, unless they wanted to risk going downstream far enough to risk getting swept over the edge. She sighed and carried the rifle toward the Jeep and laid it in the back seat and closed the door. She climbed in, closing the door, fastening her seat belt. She glanced over her shoulder, back along the road, before she pulled out, leisurely taking her time as she continued the rest of the way into the Helena town limits. Just down from where the dam'd once been, an old shop atop the hill stood with its stained glass windows lit by candlelight. She turned onto the four-lane, drifting through the intersection, turning down the old two-lane that ran by the darkened Huddle House, then along a gravel road that ran down along one of the small streams that fed into the river. She parked and climbed out, standing there looking at the trickle of water, before she bent into the Jeep and pulled out her cap and fitted it on. She reached in for the rifle, checked it, then shut the door. She reached in for the spotlight, clipped it onto her

belt. And then she shut the door and walked down the gravel path that led toward the river. She stopped on top of the bank. "Evenin', boys." She clicked on the light on her shoulder. Bent over, grunting, hauling the inflatable boat onto the small river-sand embankment there where the smaller stream met the river, the motor folded up so the propeller didn't dig into the sand and gravel, they looked up, squinting and shielding their eyes. "Alright, everyone out."

"Who the fuck're you?"

"Well, I could say you're under arrest for attempting to do really stupid crap that could have reactions of apocalyptic proportions, but I'll just ask to see your boating license."

"Fuck off."

"Yeah, I figured that'd be the case."

She tossed a bundle of zipties down onto the sand. "You can put them on yourself, or you can have someone else put them on. I'm not too particular."

"Fuck off."

"Not an appropriate way to speak to a duly appointed law-enforcement agent who happens to be holding a firearm."

"You aren't gonna shoot shit."

"Oh." The three of them jerked at the two quick reports that followed, quick fire momentarily brightening the immediate landscape from the muzzle flare.

"What the fuck's wrong with you, bitch?"

Air hissed from the boat. Though, the sound dissipated quickly as the internal pressure dropped.

"So here's the deal," she said. "You've managed, by some perhaps minor miracle, not to *really* duck up. So all you're gonna get out of it's a fine and free ride back up to the university. Do you really wanna do something stupid?"

One of them knelt and lifted the bundle of zipties.

"Good," she said.

The other motioned. "Fuck this bitch."

"Ah," Hannah said, "behind the back, please."

The one guy looked up, repositioned.

"Fuck you, what're you listening to this bitch for?"

But neither said anything.

"Maybe they're smart," Hannah said.

"F—"

"You know," Hannah said, "the swearing's getting boring." She motioned with the rifle. "You two over there." She motioned with the rifle. "Turn around and face the river. And get on your knees." When they did, she glanced to make sure the ties were actually in place, though she wasn't particularly worried about those two. But with them out of the way, she stepped down the bank. "Now," she said, "place your hands on the back of your head, and drop onto your stomach."

"Fuck you."

"Th—"

Not far from shore, water burst upwards, violent enough and loud enough that everyone jerked toward it, mist sprinkling them. But Hannah'd already known what could've done it and took the opportunity to swing the rifle into the back of the guy's knee, and he dropped onto the beach with a yell, small rocks jamming into his knees. "Fuc—" But with his hands ziptied, and him on his stomach, it didn't take much weight to hold him down.

"Alright," she said, "we're gonna go take a ride."

"F—"

"And do you wanna walk, or do you want me to ziptie your ankles and let your friends carry you?" She waited. "Well?"

"F—"

"The next word you say better be fine."

"..."

"What?"

"Fine."

"Alright." But before she rose, she glanced over at the boat, which shouldn't be a problem anymore. But... She leaned back. "So whose is the spray cheese?" She looked down, over at the other two. "Hm?"

"Nothing illegal about it," the one under her said.

"Well now, that depends on how you wanna look at it," she said. "There's such a thing as illegal baiting. And the law's general enough, I think it can cover whales, too."

She rose, pulling her knee from his back, unslinging the rifle from over her shoulder. "Alright," she said, "Everybody up the hill." The

one pulled his face from the sand. She motioned with the rifle. "Let's go."

He stumbled up, looking at her, sand sticking to his cheek. She motioned with the rifle. More than obviously not happy about it, he finally turned and followed the other two up onto the path. And she walked behind them till they'd reached the Jeep. "Alright," she said. "Hold it there." And without taking her eyes off them, she rounded the Jeep and opened the back door on the far side, then stepped back and motioned. "You two in first." And when they'd gotten in, she closed the door. She motioned to the one with sand still stuck to his face. "Back up." He did, and she opened the rear. "Hop on." He looked as if he would say something. She just motioned with her head. "I say hop on, you hop on, you don't even say how high. Got that?" There was no way she wanted him anywhere near the back seat. And he didn't say anything, but he went over and sat and scooped in and pulled up his legs. "Thank you." She shut the door. "You see," she said through the down rear window, "things go smoother when you act nice."

She sighed as she carried the rifle around. Standing by the passenger door, she ejected the magazine and cleared the chamber and slipped the magazine into her pocket before she opened the door and set the rifle in the floor. Then she walked around to the driver side and climbed in, removed her hat, and dropped it in the passenger seat. And after starting the engine, she reached over and flicked-on the headlights, and the flashing light, because why not. Might as well be official. Flashing red light washed the trees and ground, the two-lane road, the side of the Huddle House as they came out at the intersection. There she stopped, looking out toward the bridge in the distance.

Only parts of the other river road past the bridge down from Presbyterian had been flooded the last time she'd been on it, but she didn't want to take the risk of being swept out into it, it didn't take much moving water to do that. She needed to finish putting out the barricades, which's what she'd been doing when she'd seen this lot's boat.

"You guys're wasting my time, you know," she said, as she started across the intersection and straight through Helena. She glanced into the rearview mirror. "Where'd yuns pickup the boat?" None replied.

No surprise there. "I don't give a crap about private property theft. That's not my business tonight." She'd have to go the long way back to the university, down Mainstreet in Kingsly and all the way along restaurant row and out past the highschool and credit union and back under the overpass. She checked the gas gauge. "And there's going to be an added fine for the gas yuns've made me waste. This stuff isn't infinite anymore, you know. And for whatever was still in the motor on that boat." She glanced into the rearview mirror.

"It's the end of the fucking world," the one said. "What's it fucking matter?"

"It matters because I say it matters." She cut off the flashing lights.

"Fuck who made you queen?"

Well, so far as she knew, she was the only game warden left in existence, which, if these things did operate like, say, the presidency, with everyone else above taken out, the power continually moving downwards to those remaining...so in effect, she could be considered the whole of the department of the interior at this point, and maybe a few others. Or at the very least, the *de facto* governor, maybe...but unlikely.

She glanced into the rearview mirror. "And how would you like to be swimming along, nice and peaceful, not hurting a thing in the world, when a set of rotating blades slices into your head, or cuts off a fin, or chews up your back, or cuts off part of your tale, hm? You think that sounds like fun?"

"We weren't doing nothing. And you can't prove nothing."

"I don't have to prove anything, you idiot. At this point, I'd be within my rights to execute you if I so desired." Which wasn't something she was *quite* sure of, but it had an amusing effect.

She continued through the intersection, over the bridge, the closed-down ice cream shop dark on the side of the river.

"You're lucky, you know," she said. "If something'd happened to one of those calves—"

"Nothing was going to happen to them."

"We just wanted to see one," another said.

Hannah glanced into the rearview mirror. He had the countenance of a virgin who just knew he was never getting laid before the world ended (a combination of circumstances that would have a non-zero

possibility of occurrence in the event that both propositions were available simultaneously, which they weren't at the time, but that didn't stop the appearance of a similar aesthetic). Hannah sighed, but only so's she could notice.

They came through the gap, and the campus appeared in the distance.

"If you want to see them," she said, "there're better ways." She glanced into the rearview mirror. "So I'll make you a deal. We—" by which she meant *she*, because, as stated, she was kinda effectively the government's position on natural resources, at least for the moment, depending on how far she wanted to push it, "—could use some manpower in helping with the conservation efforts."

"What's the fucking point?"

"And anyone who's willing to, I'd be willing to commute their fine."

"Fuck off."

"It's up to you."

She slowed. The traffic lights no longer worked, as there was no electricity, the high-power transmission lines dangling out there over the edges of what remained of the world. And she checked the intersection before she turned onto the bridge that led onto campus. And she made her way up toward the campus police building. Light shot upwards from there, spotlights aimed up at nothing. Generators must've been running full tilt. She stopped in the middle of the parking lot, unable to find a space because they were all filled with secondhand and surplus military support vehicles, along with a kind of small tank. She climbed out. "Alright." She opened the back door. "Out." They filed out. She went and did the same in the rear. "Turn round." They did. And she removed the cutters from her pocket and snipped the zipties. "Yuns're free to go. Campus police'll be round to collect your fines."

The one started away. "Fuck off, bitch."

She motioned for the other two to head out, which they did hesitantly. Really, she couldn't do anything to them. And if a fine ever got collected, it'd've been a minor miracle. And who was there to give it to anyway? "If any of yuns wanna take up that offer," she called, "I'll be at the town park tomorrow."

The one turned, gave her the finger while walking backwards, almost tripped.

She shook her head, sighed. She glanced round at all the lights and equipment, at the lit-up campus police station. The only reason she ever brought them up here was because it made them less likely to try something when she released them. She sighed as she climbed into the Jeep. She gripped the wheel and glanced in the direction they'd gone. It'd be nice to get laid. She almost literally (satisfyingly stupid as it'd've been) slapped herself, but instead looked over her shoulder and backed the Jeep to where she could turn it. She started through campus, noting the few candles that lit some of the dorm windows. She sighed and reached toward the radio.

«... everybody. We say, we say it's good evening, ain't it, everybody or anybody out there who might be listenin. And if we sound a little too much like a cartoon rooster, we don't apologize, but we just couldn't resist. But since we're all of us now in the eternal evening, or the last evening, or whatever yuns wanna call it, well, quite frankly, we just might be gonna say it every time we come on the air, till we're all of us sick of it and puking. But that's just the way it is. So to everyone out there listenin, good evening....»

“A nuclear sub’s alot like a spaceship, you know.”

“Except for the inability to maneuver without water.”

Everyone lay strapped in their bunks

“So I guess if we ever ended up floating in a void, we’d be fucked.”

“And how’s that going to happen?”

“I’m just saying.”

“I don’t see the point of continuing these drills while the engines’re down.”

“How much longer you think before the captain puts out a call to have us towed back in?”

“I don’t know. Ask me, everything’s gone screwy on this boat.”

“How so?”

“I don’t know. From what I hear, helm says the instrumentation’s all screwed up. They can’t tell if we’re upside down, coming or going.”

“You know, I saw this thing once that they take astronauts up on to train them with. They take up this plane, and they dive with it, and while it’s diving, it acts like weightlessness.”

“Yeah, just better not hope we hit bottom.”

“They filmed a porn on it, you know. In weightlessness.”

“No way.”

“Yeah.”

“Ever see it?”

“Some of it.”

“Any good?”

“So so.”

“What do you think it’s like to fuck in weightlessness?”

“Guess you two can unhook and find out.”

“But serious.”

“You think they do it on the international space station?”

“Y—oh, fuckin’ hell. Who left their shit out?”
Toiletries floated through the crew compartment.

August banged the gavel. “Everyone please come to order.” But the room barely settled. He banged the gavel again. “Everyone come to order now or the safety technician’s department will intervene.” A few glanced at the riot-gear clad deputies scattered throughout the room, their helmets, luckily, obscuring their faces, otherwise everyone would’ve seen they’d had no clue what to do other than stand there. At least the helmets, besides what other things they did, saved them from having to look someway other than bored. But everyone settled down, though most of the council chamber had standing room only. “Now,” August said, “In light of certain facts—” —*certain facts* being, here, a euphemism, obviously, but not so obviously, for reframing—though some might prefer the term covering up the fact—but the euphemism—with the full support of the people that is—but the euphemism was for covering up the fact that no higher authority existed above this group of county commissioners, who, in effect, had become kings, and two queens, of what remained of the world. He banged the gavel as a murmur went through the audience. “Now, in light of certain facts, public input already having duly been held—” He banged the gavel. “Public input already having been held, we move to vote. On the first proposal—” They’d already voted a little over a week before, though that’s by clock reckoning only, as there’d been no sun or moon anymore, that all new laws took force immediately upon having been passed in order to save time and expense since several members of the courthouse staff had disappeared over the past several weeks—he banged the gavel. “On the first proposal, that government functions, being primarily a masculine occupation, are to be hereby remanded to male officials alone. Ayes signal with the raising of a hand.” He raised his own, glanced left and right, looking over his

glasses. “Nays.” He glanced left and right. He banged the gavel. “Ayes carry, five to two.” Worth noting: only one of the women voted against. August scribbled on his ledger. “Two deputies please come forward and remove the two former female commissioner members.” He continued to scribble in the ledger as the body-armored individuals did just that. August banged the gavel. “On the second proposal—”

“Fuck you.” A former female commissioner yelled as they escorted her out. (That is to state she was a former commissioner who was also female, not that she was yet a former female.)

August banged the gavel. “Arrest that woman for violation of the Communications Decency Act.” He put down the gavel and scribbled in the ledger. Then he set the pen aside and lifted the gavel. “On the second proposal, in the event there is a certain difficulty in determining exactly when an election should be held, and there being emergency circumstances underway, elections for replacement council members are to be suspended, and new council members put into place by temporary appointment to fill any vacant position. Ayes signal with the raising of a hand.” He glanced left and right. “Nays signal with the raising of a hand.” He glanced left and right. “Ayes carry, four to one.” He lifted his pen and scribbled in his ledger. The candle on the bench guttered and flickered. He banged the gavel. “On the third proposal, it is held that, during any such time of emergency, a quicker government response would conceivably be needed than can be provided by this commission alone, so to achieve this, an office of emergency presidency will be established, appointed to by the commissioners, the details of such powers as outlined in the attached document—” He held it up. “—being a separate body not above this council, but neither below it. Ayes please signify with the raising of a hand.” He looked left and right. “Nays please signify with the raising of a hand.” He looked left and right. “Ayes carry, four to one.” He lifted his pen and scribbled in the ledger. “On the fourth proposal, the nomination of myself to said office, necessarily vacating my former position of chairman of this commission.” He looked up. “Ayes please signify with the raising of a hand.” He looked left and right. “Nays please signify with the raising of a hand.” He looked left and right. “Ayes carry, four to one.” He lifted his pen and

scribbled in the ledger. "As I am now recused from this commission, I turn my further duties over to commissioner Frederick."

Commissioner Frederick accepted the gavel. "We are now voting on a new chairman of the commissioners...."

August moved the candle closer as he continued to fill in the ledger, which, as aesthetically interesting as it appeared, he was only doing because the secretary who usually took the minutes had recently disappeared. He scribbled as the other commissioners droned on, purely as an automatic function, as being immediately interested in their proceedings was no longer one of his jobs.

On the one hand, it may seem ridiculous that things were moving with such rapidity. But after all, there were rather dire extenuating circumstances, whether anyone wanted to admit to them or not. And in fact, most didn't. The audience slash citizens looking on did so in silence. Their interruptions before had been only those boisterous episodes that happen par the course when so many people are packed together, shuffling round for so few seats. Nothing was different, but everything was wrong in many ways, the standard state of affairs, which necessitated the usual kind of bifurcated solution, though, perhaps with a bit more umpf than had been previously enacted, but only so long as each half umpfed roughly the same so one didn't run the risk of over-umpfing the other. The cynic might wonder how they explained the difference, the missing sun, the shattered moon, the recycled light that came up from the edges of what remained of the world, the water flowing off one end and onto the other, the preponderances of the seeming same amount of gravity there'd always been, the whole thing about being able to take the four-lane up to the top of Cowee or Balsam and look over the crumbling edges of the world, so long as one had adequate oxygen, the ghostly white creatures people driving along what wasn't submerged of the river road claimed to have seen surfacing and blowing plumes of water into the air, the lack of stars, the aforementioned tendency of people to keep disappearing, and the previously unmentioned tendency of strangers to keep appearing as if outa nowhere, not to mention other and sundry items. Not that he was scribbling any of *this* down—and scribbling would be the appropriate word here as that, after it was all said and done and written, it'd never be read again because no one,

not even he (August himself) would be able to decipher or decode his handwriting. But that didn't matter; the most important part was that the records were kept; who would ever want to look at them, anyway? And in any regard, there were laws in what was left of this state about not releasing public information like that, or at least it'd be so long before all the legal hurdles were cleared, should anyone've ever have requested it, anyway, the non-acid-free paper itself would've yellowed and disintegrated, or the ink'd've eaten through it, one or the other, if not both. And of course, no one need be concerned with these things for any kind of archaeological record, as this was the final form of society and was going to continue on into the future as an unbroken chain forever and ever, so in effect, it was the end of history, and archaeology could just decamp on the idea of digging up anything after the twentieth century. He paused in considering something like this, though in none of these terms, a kind of warning signal, a canary in the proverbial mental coal mine, alerting him that he was approaching too closely something dangerous, or that, to anthropomorphize it, the truth might be in the bushes sneaking up on him. So he turned his attention back to the droning voices. This would be his last time doing this tonight. So he could afford to give it a little more attention, at least for a little while.

But, however, a little more explanation needs to be brought to bear vis-à-vis the first proposal. In effect, the whole was nowhere near as radical as it might appear at first exposure. Setting aside the rather small contingent of internet talking fingers—or more accurately, what remained of the internet—but there'd been plenty of such posters who'd actually admitted outright that men were the only ones with the intellectual equipment to handle politics and such related things, etc—and it hadn't just been the ones with such supposed equipment typing this—but a larger, and large enough, segment of the populace—though this does necessarily vary, depending on from where the particular demography is selected—in any regard, a sufficient segment of the populace slash population already tacitly held the same conviction, whether they knew it or not. Looking back, they owed some of their thankfulness for the supposed new lack of a female president, though, technically, the office no longer existed, though, depending on what procedure any party cared to invoke, as

somewhat previously stated, one or two of the remaining previous federal workers still resident in the county might qualify for the position, or the position which had been proposed somewhere on the broader internet, before it'd been reduced to what currently remained of the internet, but it'd been proposed that, seeing as how the position seemed to be wholly masculine in nature by definition that the only solution would be the establishment of an office of female president, in much the same way that fundamentalist women preachers could end run the New Testament's injunction against women teaching by arguing it in fact only referred to women teaching men, and that women could preach to women, so therefore their accrual of capital as proof of God's favor toward them could continue beneath the auspices of certain particular tax laws, so the office of female president could therefore be an office of presidency over women, which the office of president would have final say over in the end, however, the world'd ended before this could get much traction in the comment sections, which's what some claim on what was left of the internet, and had claimed, too, on the former broader internet, that the news'd wholly become such by that point, but others claimed, both on the broader internet and then on what remained of it, that that was beside the point even before the world'd ended, but among those who considered the office of president, a worrying conspiracy theory'd arisen of late, this theory going, in general, that the previous candidate had in fact been completely horrible. In one sense, of course, this'd already been known. This'd allowed them, the voting populace, so it went, to assuage their sense of anxiety by admitting, somewhat truthfully, because that's always the best kind of truth, the little bit of truth that kind of acts like salt, seasoning the dish way out of seeming proportion to its size or seeming self-quantity to make whatever else may be in it at least somewhat more palatable, however, some suspected there might've been a mashup with a cooking forum in here somewhere, a peanut-butter-chocolate moment not exactly unequivocal to that time Melville ran into that guy that'd written a whaling manual and the combined and intermingled foul papers ended up fluttering along the street and sidewalk as they'd tried to collect them, jaywalking laws having yet to be invented, but'd also allowed them (people in what's called the present, not Melville and that other guy, those in

what many posters would've called real life), and not just those on the internet, but it'd allowed them to admit that she was really a really terrible person, and in some cases even failed at pretending to be a person, but that was a completely different conspiracy theory.

The phraseologies against the candidate, as they did with all such candidates of the type, remained the same, and in fact had been the same phraseologies employed against all such candidates of the type in politics since there'd been candidates of the type in politics, and technically, even before (if you wanted to dip into the history of Grecian plays), but that was a whole other forum slash thread, burning cycles on an already nearly overheated processor and network card, the firmware and microcode of both of which'd already been patched to and out the proverbial wazoo to mitigate exploits instilled in and by the cultural need to go ever faster, so another forum slash thread went, their performance thus impinged, somewhat, but only after the official benchmarks'd come in, and considering that there were actually very few woodpeckers left... well, even without the metaphor, it still behooved them to fulfill the very end of their implicitly ideological function, so it went, to the degree to which they could, even if everything was already ending without them, or because of them, but that was yet another argument slash thread, not that they wouldn't play their part, as they'd done or not done before or not, such justifications, of course, contributing, one by one, post by post, to a general decrease in their available thermal headroom. But everything has its fans, thermal headroom, or not, notwithstanding. Even if only to fuel the fire. So a whole lot of people could admit she'd been horrible. But she'd one thing going for her, and it's the only thing that'd allowed her to get as far as she had, and that was the fact, if the word fact is appropriate here, the fact that she'd so convinced, in her years of political entanglements, she'd so convinced the voting populace that she, indeed, did have a virtualized pseudo-penis. It carried along with the spirit of the times, where women in movies were allowed to be 'strong', whatever that meant, and military professionals could refer to a senior female officer with 'yes, sir.' – as academics would've pointed out in non-fiction texts issued by university presses decades after the fact, not that some weren't already pointing it out, but it didn't have the firmness of history yet, so therefore such was just a set

of opinions. But what *was* a virtualized pseudo-penis? Well, exactly. And no one else knew either, though they'd been convinced she had one, and still were. Unfortunately, even then, it hadn't been enough to overcome the anxiety that that virtualized pseudo-penis might, in fact, in reality, merely be obscuring a void, or worse—exist.

But these were just the normal kinds of speculations among a certain group of human beings familiar with a specific and general set of subjects and didn't even make it up to the level of conspiracy theory, they just being some of those aforementioned non-fiction opinions of the type which some actual conspiracy theorists charged with being one of those many attempts by academics to postmodernize the American landscape, and thereby creating the conditions for the release of the Fifth Horsewoman of the Apocalypse, eventually, after and following something else that was much less well defined.

Not that August was a conspiracy theorist in the sense that he considered himself one.

And of course the major legal theories of the age contributed their part, the argument that an X-year-old female judge and an X-year-old male judge would come to the same conclusion implicitly held that since a given society already had male judges, and male judges would rule the same as female judges, the members of that given society might as well stay with male judges, as why go to the expense to replace them with what would've been the same thing? But this was just what some people would've called sound economics. Though this, being implicit, as stated, was never stated as such, either explicitly or implicitly, in regards to whether or not it was implicit, because that'd've defeated the whole point and contributed even further to a general decrease in available thermal headroom.

Not that August thought anything like this. Economics, of course, were one thing, but even entertaining the argument would've already been proof of a problem.

Other academics argued that the human mind, in a general sense, whenever presented with the option of $1 + N$ possibilities, where $N > 0$, that one of such possibilities had to be fundamentally defined as better than the other(s), and that this was just a fundamental psychological disposition.

Math, of course, could be good and evil. Which was why many

curricula issued by certain Christian presses declined to mention set theory.

There was, of course, the general stereotype that those who are linguistically inclined tend to ‘fail hard at math’, as many students in the Eagleton Computer Science Department tend to put it. And then generally the reverse was invoked by the members of the English department, though not necessarily typically in what some might refer to as a more-refined manner, or was put forth in such a manner such that it generally prompted STEM students to lay the charge of postmodernism, which then generally invoked the opposite side to charge the other with anti-intellectualism, prompting the other side to point out who the real anti-intellectual postmodernists are... etc.

But stereotypes often do have to have a little so-called salt of truth. And in the case of August, while math hadn’t been his worst subject, it hadn’t been his best.

But the real worrying thing was, the most horrible of conspiracies, so horrible in fact that even the conspiracy forums themselves, both before the world had begun ending and after, had barred any discussion of such, as well as any discussion of the discussion of such, as well as the discussion of the discussion of the discussion of such, as well as the discussion of such of the discussion of such of the discussion of such, etc. This, of course, had also required that immediately such a ban be lifted by the implementation of such a ban. So, in general, they just tried to forget it’d ever existed. But like that part of the mind that says to jump off a bridge—or to push an old lady off one—the so-called ‘call of the void’—well, actually, it was the same part of the mind, this part of the mind, as some scientific hypotheses stated, these hypotheses not having yet been granted the status of theory, but these hypotheses stated that such thoughts are the mind reminding itself what it *absolutely* shouldn’t do at the moment, and which would, in general, really really really duck things up (as Hannah would put it). So to state it even more simply, the problem with this, of course, was that what should be avoided in this instance was the thinking of the thing itself, which the thinking of in order to not think of it impeded.

But the real conspiracy theory was that they might’ve (completely without knowing, which would be their only defense, if they could’ve contemplated the contemplation of conceiving of such in the case

that they allowed the case of the contemplation of that which the defense was supposed to defend) but the real conspiracy theory was that they might've done what some might've called the right thing for what those same might've called the right reasons.

This was why it was important, as August could point out, why it was important not to forget what was important.

"There're two distinct sexes," August'd said, though that was some-time before. "That much can't be argued about." Of course, that would depend on who a given arguer was arguing with. He was a classical man, however—and could actually read ancient Greek, even—though he wasn't nearly as old as such an ability might make most suspect—and, again, science, at present, is generally unaware of any direct connection between the final issued grades in this category of classes and any of the math-related (or in the Commonwealth sense, maths-related) classes listed on those same documents—in fact, he'd learned such while attending a Christian university, which, as many of them had, most of them being gone now, unless some're still floating autonomous out there in the void, beyond detection (meaning that, for some, being as how a negative could never be proven, or so a set of hypotheses and theories went, hope could spring for what remained of eternity), but most of them, right up till the end, continued the pre-Catholic's work of Platonizing the Christian religion, which, it being the modern day and age, some of those posting on what was left of the internet thought they'd just jump ship and go full Platonist—what with Kierkegaard's arguments and all that—not that there also wasn't an Aristotelian schism in there amidst all that, as it was he that the curriculum of so many former Christian schools, and the two still extant in the county, could trace their thoctological origins to—but tradition was tradition, and by this time there was only one Muslim literary scholar, and no such mathematicians, to save the world from the Neo-Greeks. Though, that didn't stop August from being continually unconsciously vigilant. One must ever be vigilant. But in regard to the statement about *depending on who a given arguer was arguing with*, he always took great care against Neo-Sophists, one of those cares being sure to oversee a vigorous enforcement of the Decency in Communications Act, which the real (whatever that might mean) Congress, when it'd existed, had

allowed to languish, never realizing its true potential, not to imply that they didn't achieve as much with later bills. But in any regards, as August'd've said, there're two distinct sexes. But where he broke with his predecessors and compatriots was in an admission: that there were realms suited to each. Though, they had said that, too. However, they didn't mean the same thing. (And that was the problem.) Too long his predecessors had gone on about the finitudes of given phraseologies, that the position of men in society was in fact natural and not a patriarchal conspiracy, etc, etc, ignoring that the real threat no longer came from dictionaries. Not that there shouldn't be an eye kept on them. And besides, defending aloud what naturally was, well, that just undermined the very definition...though, this was different than merely stating such aloud, which of course was necessary to a degree, especially by those who stated such things were unnecessary to state as they then stated them, or stated them through such statements of unnecessariness themselves. The dividing line, of course, was narrow. But a line nonetheless. This, of course, was what'd gotten them in such a mess over those necessary, ridiculous transgender laws from sometime back, a noble, but obviously flawed attempt, as anyone with even a modicum of common sense could see, to attempt to preempt the possibilities granted by the culmination of recent medical technology and technique which would allow some former-female to reassign themselves into the equipment endowed for the acquisition of power—or worse, the forcible reassignment of they, the male legislators, out of their equipment vested with such power. (All of this, of course, as some pointed out on what was left of the internet, implicitly verified the entire notion of the patriarchal conspiracy that'd so long been denied.) At the moment, however, he could afford to feel some safety in the disposition of his equipment. But any member of such a species as his, who'd survived this long, had generally accrued an evolutionary predisposition to extreme paranoia.

Not that there were really all that many so-called RadFems remaining in the county—actually, there were two, depending on what definition was employed, in which case some definitions also indicated that there were zero, while others indicated there were an infinite number. But they really needn't exist at all, so long as the idea of them existed. So long as they existed out there *somewhere*,

that'd be enough. In fact, it'd've been better if they didn't exist at all. That'd been the major problem with the rise of neo-Nazis not that long before, not that they'd been there, so much—each side had long been quite comfortable with the idea of Nazis, constantly flinging the term at members of the opposition—but that they *were* there, that is to state they'd, as SuperCocaine88 put it, de-virtualized themselves, that'd been what'd caused the real panic; virtualized Nazis and neo-Nazis, like corpses, were deployable however and in whichever way and in whatever fashion the invoker chose to do so; de-virtualized Nazis and neo-Nazis, like a live corpse, could contradict that. Virtualization was the key, or so Langdon would've argued. Though, August didn't recognize this, at least not consciously, instinctually, however...

He continued to scribble the minutes.

So if they never found one to point to and say *see, here's one*, all the better, because, if they weren't readily apparent, then they must be everywhere.

Occasionally he glanced up at the audience slash citizens, candle-light flickering over the faces of those immediately in front, those in the back submerged in heavy shadow, almost vague figments. It could've almost been inspiring; the founders themselves had worked under conditions like these. (And though they'd located sufficient extension cords to run at least one light throughout most of the rooms of the building, a prior resolution kept candles as the primary luminescence in this chamber partly for this connection.) Though, Thomas Jefferson hadn't taken notes with a ballpoint pen. The pen, itself, was a very penis-like instrument, not just in shape, but in the way it drooled out ink in the purpose of creation. That's why only upper-class men'd been scribes, and why, till the coming of the typewriter, which'd allowed the pseudo-mechanization of a cheaper and feminine workforce, thus also introducing the romantic office entanglement, but before that, men had been the scriveners. Cheerleader's also once had been only men. In fact, one could chart the history of civilization marking what professions were dominated by men through till only a few women were let in, then—poof—there were no men at all and society expected it to be that way. So the history of civilization was the history of invasion. It could be supposed that

knowing things such as this was a sign of a liberal education, of sorts, maybe, in the old sense of the word. But in any regard, it seemed reasonably evinced that the only reason men'd held on as long as they had was because women couldn't yet reproduce without them. That, of course, could be immediately altered should a given fertile male be reassigned post coitally. No, it was a dangerous time, and everything bore watching. There remained plenty to be nervous about, if only implicitly. They weren't out of the proverbial woods yet.

August scribbled.

Water vapor saturated the *Girls* Restroom to the point it looked like a Turkish bathhouse, except without any of the pleasantries. The tampon slash pad dispenser on the wall, existing only as a referential nod, as always, hung there empty, quadruple-anchored to the wall in the event someone should try to rip it off out of frustration or vengeance.

"Here," Juliette held out her vape. "Try this."

Lily pulled her shoulders away from the tiled wall enough to allow her to wrap her lips round the stem, the whole device like a miniaturized, technolyzed version of the caterpillar's hookah. She drew in, pulled away, situating her shoulder blades against the wall, and blew out. She pulled a face. "What is that?"

"Lemon and Cinnamon and...something I can't pronounce."

"If you can't pronounce it," Harmony said, "should you really be inhaling it?"

"Yet you're always drinking di-hydrogen-monoxide," Crystal said.

"I'm not." Harmony drew in on her vape, tilted back her head, formed her lips to blow a couple smoke rings, then a third, but the third came out more like a pancake. "What's that, anyway? You made that up."

Crystal blew out a cone of the stuff. "You're so dense."

Harmony wrapped her lips round the nozzle and drew in, tilting back her head and blowing the stream up into the rest that'd collected above their heads. "I'm not dense. I'm a cloud."

Lily snorted, and planted her hand over her face, starting to laugh.

"Shhhh." Juliette glanced toward the door, or at least what she could see of it. "One of the dogs'll hear."

"The dogs're out taking a shit," Crystal said.

They laughed.

Juliette took one last draw and slowly blew it out before she shut

her vape off. "This flavor's making me hungry. I'm gonna go get something to eat." And she slid down the wall and probed through her backpack, pulling out a small stuffed bear and feeding the vape into a small incision along the back. And she stuffed the bear into the transparent backpack so its nose smashed against the clear-plastic sides. It was better to show it right out that way; it was less suspicious; though, few would've thought it suspicious in the first place; but if a person thought it was suspicious, they'd act suspicious; and they said the dogs could tell when someone thought they were acting suspicious.

Lily expelled a half-a-lung-full of vapor. "I got something new," she said. And she slid down the wall and pulled the cardboard box out of her bag, from where it'd been wrapped in an extra shirt, though everyone could already see the extra shirt. She held it up.

Crystal snorted. "They'll never look in that."

"Nope." Lily took one last draw, cut the vape off, her outward breath rendered visible as she slipped the unit into the tampon box. She zipped the bag and stood and pulled it over her shoulders, the transparent plastic material crinkling and not quite molding to her back. "I'll come with you," she said.

Crystal said, "I want to get a bite to eat before practice." She glanced at Harmony. "You coming?"

Harmony, lips wrapped round her vape stem, nodded.

"W—"

A siren went off, and they all looked up.

"Oh, hell."

Crystal expelled rapidly, bending down to snatch her backpack.

The siren continued.

"We'll never make it to the cafeteria. It'll be chained up by the time we get there."

"Shut up," Crystal said, and grabbed her shirt, "and just get moving."

It was ordered pandemonium out in the halls. Doors slammed, locked shut.

"Why'd they have to do this now?" Juliette said.

The siren continued.

"We can make it to the cafeteria," Crystal said.

"It's too far away."

“Not if we run.”

“You can’t run in the halls.”

“It’s a shooting,” Crystal said. “Just tell em that if they pull you over.”

Juliette didn’t look too sure of that, but she kept up with the rest of them anyway. The crowd’d thinned by the time they’d turned the corner and saw the cafeteria double doors.

“Come on come on come—”

Crystal slammed into the bar, the bar biting into her hip because the door didn’t budge. A face appeared through the segment of bulletproof glass slotted into it. Crystal banged. “Let us in.” The person on the other side, without even mouthing anything, taped a sheet of paper to the glass, black permanent-marked letters, scraggly from having been traced, bleeding into the cheap paper, rendering: SHOOTING IN PROGRESS. Crystal slammed her fist against the door as the hair-netted student on the other side stepped out of sight. “Fuck you.”

“Shhhh,” Juliette said.

“Oh, it’s not like anyone can hear obscenity over all this racket, anyway.”

“We’d better get back to a classroom.”

Automatic weapons fire echoed from a distant corridor.

“What about the teacher’s lounge?” Lily said.

“They won’t open that.”

“Mister Wellington will if he’s in there.”

“Whatever. W—”

It’d been difficult to distinguish the dogs barking over the sound of weapons fire, at least, till one skidded to a stop at the far end of the hall and started barking at them.

“Oh shit.”

It gained traction, charging down the hallway, trailing spittle as it snapped its jaws. Harmony screamed; others would’ve bet it’d’ve been Juliette who’d’ve screamed first, but it was Harmony. And of course, with four targets, a single dog could only pick one, so it picked her (Harmony, that is). And it’d’ve done some real damage, too, if it hadn’t gone flying into the air, yelping, having been punted in the jowl by Crystal. (It should be mentioned that Crystal played soccer, and was best known for being able to punt a ball all the way across

the gym and hit the opposite wall, which's one reason she'd always gone with vaping, the tar in quote unquote real cigarettes being a performance penalty in terms of being able to breathe while running fast, or running at all, something there were several conspiracy theories about on what was left of the internet, the banning of vaping products to get teenagers to move back to real tobacco products in order to make them easier to catch.) The GSD lay there trying to get up, whining. Crystal grabbed Harmony's shirt. "Come on." They started down the hall, only to have to skid to a stop, the soles of their shoes *really* making skidding sounds as a wall of black body armor appeared, a mass of fully automatic rifle muzzles pointed at them, such that, had they been wearing different uniforms (and pointing muzzle-loaders, among other and sundry differences), the four of them would've known something of what it felt like to be looking across a battlefield at a contingent of soldiers wielding muskets circa the American Revolutionary War slash War of the American Rebellion, but they were wearing black body armor, so there was no connection between the two other than in the most abstract sense, a sense none of them were capable of recognizing or acknowledging in the moment, the majority of their brains taken over by a fight-or-flight response, which, had there been an immediate way to hook a meter up to measure such things, the needle would've pegged out for almost everybody. But with a dozen men in black body armor shouting: "GET ON THE GROUND" "SHOW YOUR HANDS" "GET ON YOUR KNEES" "SPREAD YOUR LEGS" – all in variable rhythm and cadence, three over-lapping and out of tune barber-shop quartets, the whole fight-or-flight idea had to give way to the freeze response. Of course, what they lacked in musical or vocal talent, they made up for with enthusiasm. After all, how many jobs not only let but *pay* one to go around yelling "*GET ON YOUR KNEES*" and "*SPREAD YOUR LEGS*" at teenage girls? and then make them physically comply, but only if necessary, of course, which, considering the whole freeze response thing, it was, of course, necessary. (Though, to be fair, neither the teenage girls nor the freeze response were mentioned explicitly in the non-fine print of any recruiting materials.) But what other job not only allows but *pays* one to straddle and pat down and otherwise search teenage girls for any and all

weapons they might be capable of hiding in a pair of panties or in a bra, which could be innumerable, the number of weapons that is, though some had been known to wear more than one pair of underwear when the occasion'd called for it, but in regards to weapons, given the ways in which science had allowed weapons technology to progress in the previous half century, what with all these shoe bombs and underwear bombs and such, it, of course, would behoove any conscientious law enforcement personnel to mitigate any of these areas of attack. And according to official procedure, as the weight and size were greater, therefore capable of concealing a larger explosive charge, they removed their shoes first.

Lantern light flickered through the open doorway of the office at the end of the hall. But after all, it had to go somewhere, the office itself being so full of junk—in the local colloquial sense of the word—there was space for only a few photons. The books and cardboard boxes, as per usual, threatened to collapse inwards on the narrow walkway that led to the desk. The desk chair couldn't be shoved back because of that. It could only be very carefully rotated. Blueish screen glow intermixed with the yellower-oranger lantern light, Langdon's face lit more so by the blue than the orange. Somewhere, in all this junk—again, in the local colloquial sense of the term—he had a set of papers on the movement towards a predominance of orange and blue lighting in the modern film landscape. One of them detailed an attempted speculation to connect, via a tentative virtual-modernist framework, the predominance of blue as a dating mechanism for religious texts—that paper had then been reference by another author in a speculative article in a small journal, which he also had a copy of, somewhere—but a speculative article involving a series of conjectures relating to how the preponderance of blue and orange would come to affect future religious texts, while a third document, also somewhere in this stack—actually, it was in the third (from the bottom) cardboard box on top of the dark-grey filing cabinet, under a stack of back issues of the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*—but in any regard, the document, which he hadn't gotten round to reading yet, dealt with speculations on a series of novellas that were, supposedly, supposed to've originated in another universe, having been transmitted to this one in some yet unexplained fashion by a temporary breakdown in certain (or all) laws of physics due to the collapsing of the one universe and the weakening of the barrier between the two, resulting in a series of static bursts, which, supposedly, when sifted from the mass

of radio telescope telemetry from that period and analyzed, had been found to contain a base64 encoded UTF-8 byte stream, interspersed, unexplainedly, here and there, by a series of UTF sequences from the high order of the Basic Multilingual Plane, which yet another article speculated might be some kind of custom formatting coding in an unspecified, or possibly home-brewed, file format. Though, certain fringes maintained there had actually been a shift in the file format, a transition to an ascii-based scheme related in some way, an even smaller contingent of this contingent said, to HTML, but not HTML, though, this tangent of hermaneutics was largely considered heretical among most of the members of the lit forums that still existed on what was left of the internet. And yes, he did, briefly, consider all this, or at least speculated about the contents of these documents from the contents of what abstracts he'd as of yet read, each time he looked away from the screen long enough to notice the interplay of the two colors of light.

He looked at the screen. The lights may've been off, but gas generators on campus were slotted in to keep the network up. And with the phones in the state they were, the only thing keeping the county connected were WiFi hot spots interlinked by a few strands of ethernet and fiber. And with no information coming in from the larger world because, obviously, there was no larger world, they'd had to create their own. Angela'd been instrumental in that, at least, getting everything hooked up so that it *somewhat* functioned. But even something that half-worked was better than something that just lay there like a starfish. And that last was one of her sex jokes, though no one would recognize it without being acquainted with her and her husband's brand of humor. Langdon was acquainted with it, but he wasn't thinking about that at the moment.

They'd had to go somewhat back in time. On the last evening of the world—he liked that phrase, and'd written it on the small whiteboard he'd taped to the wall behind his computer—but on the last evening of the world, they'd found themselves a little back in time. Or at least, since the most of them'd almost never been around in the golden age to begin with, they just found themselves adjusting to something seemingly new. In this case, in lieu of any more-recent communications technology—which was distinct from better

– as certain individuals on what was left of the internet, including Langdon, would’ve pointed out—but Angela’d cobbled together a set of Usenet services, which, for anyone who’d figured out how to use them, were now the central communications hub for the county. However, the barrier of entry hadn’t proved too great. And in no time at all they’d replicated a functioning microcosm of the greater former world. Part of that microcosm was what Langdon was dealing with at the moment. He started typing, or more accurately, henpecking, though he’d done it long enough it would be more accurate to call it two-finger touch typing. In any regard, it got the job done. Though, there were several stacks of papers and articles...over there next to the tan filing cabinet, relating to the American obsession with rapidity and its connection with firearms and typewriter manufacturing, particularly in its relation, or lack of one, to ergonomics, and the history of the Dvorak keyboard. Though, Langdon didn’t use the Dvorak layout; he used the standard QWERTY, content to be subject to that particular thochtetic strain (though, he would’ve referred to it as the memetic)—which actually showed several signs of having, at some point in the early twentieth century, and continuing to modern times, as having been promoted to the level of ideology, being as how it’d broken its bounds as being the solution to the constraints of a particular physical device, to being produced and reproduced as the standard on phones and remotes and onscreen keyboards. That it was ideological was easily demonstrable in the vehemence with which any criticism of that system of symbol arrangement would be met. But he wasn’t concerned—directly—with ideology related to, or related through, keyboard layouts, at the moment. Though, he did halfway speculate as to the possible inter-relationship between dogmatism for a keyboard layout ideology and other political or social views in both the extremes of liberalism and conservatism. Which, so far as he knew, only the latter was involved, directly, in the issue at hand.

The nice thing about Usenet (for some) was the messaging system wasn’t real time. And that left a little breathing room for response. Though, at present, he and his two other correspondents hadn’t yet come up for air.

(However, it should be mentioned that certain self-styled rogue individuals had, as well, instantiated a couple workable IRC instances

in opposition to the newly re-established Usenet hegemony, citing that true communication could only be practiced in real time, and implicit in this was a given weightedness to typing speed—this, too, obviously, connected to the history of American firearms production via the typewriter—and from it a certain strain of purported cognitive clarity was supposed to arise from the combined necessities of speed and brevity, so the theory goes, breeding the digital cognitive equivalents of ancient hunter-gatherer warriors, and since participants had to be online at the same time, it was a step toward the resuscitation of the seemingly failed merging of the collective human consciousness into the virtual space, something that would never be possible with only fragmentary past pieces of posters' individualized and threaded mental algo-code blocks just sitting there on hard drives, which would just lay there only ever to be subjected to one-sided interrogation, and thus could never be truly refuted.)

The topics at hand, or fingertip, were the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act and Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act, or more accurately, their local incarnations, as implemented by the county commissioners, which, much like a former constitutional amendment of the prior state of North Carolina, the titles, to certain people, sounded nice, and almost everyone, whether they thought it sounded nice or not, just took the title to be the whole of the thing.

It's stupid too

He repeatedly tapped the backspace key.

it

He repeatedly tapped the backspace key.

This whole mess

He repeatedly tapped the backspace key.

(Langdon, however, was not in the IRC camp.)

And he just sat there awhile, consciously and unconsciously aware that the battery was running down while he sat there doing nothing. And scrunching forward, he started to type.

Any law that creates a situation where people can be killed or raped against

He repeatedly tapped the backspace key.

can be raped or killed without their consent, isn't a good law. He paused, index finger poised over the enter key, then hit it.

He sat there staring blankly at the screen, waiting, blueish back-light reflected in his eyes. She must've been sitting there with nothing to do, same as him. He navigated, via the arrow keys, because the software he'd had at hand, pulled from a floppy disk dug from somewhere in this office, connected via USB adapter, set up by Angela to run in an emulator, also hailed from another computational era, and it was all he had, so he tapped the arrow keys down to the reply and hit enter. But it was just the same old thing. When he'd backed out of the thread, another'd come in, this one from her supposed political antipole. He navigated down to it just for the heck of it. The words were different, but the underlying structural synthesis the same. It resounded through Langdon's consciousness in a speciest cave-man voice mediated almost exclusively by and through twentieth-century filmography's inheritance from Victorian Britain's bequeathment of Roman linguistic and nationalistic fervor: *Porn bad. Prostitution bad.* But it was always amazing, and depressing, to see how certain strains of conservatism and feminism could restrict women's sexuality in *exactly* the same ways, as if unconsciously they were following the same playbook, or at least headed to the same end. Of course, in the end, what wasn't? He'd once speculated it was the reason they could argue so much and so passionately, they being actually one in the same argument, no different, except in the particulars of *who* got the power, but otherwise different in the way in which they attempted to maintain the same core thochtic (though, he would've referred to it as memetic) societal structures, like the two major political parties, having to scream louder and louder at each other to accentuate some minor details and to use this to obscure their own realization of this fact and its preceding ones. Actually, he'd come back to this often. He had to agree, here, and only here, and only partially, with Chomsky on the nature of the bifurcated political system in the former these United States being a way of channeling energy against real change. Not that that was new, just look back at the history of argumentation and debate between Jewish Rabbis. But was there *really* such a thing as a non-Jewish Rabbi? So wasn't that kind of redundant? He rubbed his eyes, tears breaking out from having stared at the screen unblinkingly so long. Something flashed, and he looked up. According to the threading indicator, or at least the information

he took from it, the two of them were back at it again, having taken over his own reply chain to continue their argument above in his absence. Maybe he should leave them alone. After all, if they had a common target for too long, they might become subconsciously over-anxious that they were really fundamentally the same, or equivalent. But, oh, wouldn't he've liked to've known the truth. So rather than wade into it, he stroked the trackpad to get to the menu to shut the whole thing down, the screen temporarily going purple before it went black, taking with it the visual indications of GoldStarLesbian32 and GodsFistsOffFury316 having existed in the world at all.

He stretched backward in the chair, at least, as far as it would go before it and his arm impacted a cardboard box. At least he wouldn't have to clean up all this junk himself. He could just let the end of the universe take care of that. He turned his head as best he could, looking at the stacks, yellow lantern light flickering over them, rendering shadows that might be feared to hold eldritchian monsters, which might be a good term for certain kinds of academic writing, but he looked over it considering what of it he *really* wanted to read. Though, whatever spirit was in charge of such things wasn't, apparently, guiding him at the moment. The spirit, in this case, being some sub-part of his brain, which was otherwise occupied, without his awareness. However, he was lucky in that he'd long subscribed to something like Umberto Eco's notion on the notion of a library not being a kind of trophy room where one mounted the severed and taxidermied heads of various *Big Books*. Still leaning back, he turned enough to reach into a stack of yellow-almost-to-brown, mass-market paperbacks and pulled one out, the lot of them collapsing to a heap in the narrow walkway, acidic stench wafting upward. He turned to get a better angle on the lantern. Might as well go all the way back to the original Mills and Boon. This, of course, was his personal indulgence, the only thing he'd never written a paper or book or essay on because he didn't want to cross-contaminate work and any semblance of a personal life he might've had. Though, in all these years, he'd never read bodice ripping by lantern light. It might be a novel experience of a novel, or at least, possibly somehow more authentic, in the sense of an authentic simulacra. Though, for the full effect he'd probably have to come up with some candles. Which

Anime'd probably already... Oh, so that's what he'd forgotten. He sighed, held the paperback toward his nose and fanned the pages with his thumb, breathing deep. He snapped it shut, though carefully, as the glued binding wasn't up for much more abuse in what was left of its service life; in fact, if it made it to the end of the end of the world, it'd be a miracle. He ripped apart the velcro that held closed one of his larger cargo shorts pocket flaps and stuffed it inside. Hopefully, the car still had enough gas to make it through town. He wondered if he should try to pick up something from the store, *if* there was anything left. Out of habit, he reached for his phone. But Anime wouldn't be in WiFi-range unless she'd gone to the café. And ...the café'd shut down already. And Ruth'd hauled off the industrial espresso and cappuccino machines for *personal reasons*. Though, he had to admit, he didn't exactly understand how personal reasons and industrial espresso machines went together, but then again, he had to admit he didn't understand lots of things. He rotated the chair and stood, bending over the desk to close the laptop, and carried it (the laptop) out of the office. He stopped at the door, hand on the handle, looking back at all the junk, though, at the moment, he wasn't sure in which sense the word applied, colloquial or dictionary. Though, since the rest of the world didn't exist anymore, the broader context was the obsolete one, a historical footnote. There was no paper or article or monogram on that anywhere in those stacks. But then again, there probably weren't articles on many things that they hadn't known they hadn't known about, not to mention the number of articles that should've been written on the things they knew about but didn't want to know they'd known about. However, would such've actually've undermined the very definition of such a category as it would've seemed to've at face value – or the opposite? But, oh well. He closed the door. This might not even be the last time he saw any of it. Who could say? Of course, standing there in the darkened hallway, he remembered he'd forgotten the lantern, and yellow-orange light struck him, again, when he opened the door, went in, and carried it out, yellow-orange light bathing the end of the hall, and the door as he closed it a second, and maybe *this time*, final time.

He walked down the hall, his footsteps echoing in the emptiness. Since the world'd ended over a holiday, there'd been few students

or instructors in attendance, just those who'd already lived here, or students that couldn't go home, for one reason or the other, that is, before there'd been only the one reason. He passed the elevator, which, obviously, didn't work, but which that he'd never liked anyway, and pushed open the door to the stairwell. The sounds of his footsteps were more ominous here, as footsteps always were in empty stairwells. There was a paper upstairs in the black filing cabinet that speculated on why that might be. Part of it may've been the darkness, or the lack of an alternate exit, the very predefined nature of...but his office didn't have a window, either, so... In what'd been Germany, the law'd required workers, whatever the dye of their collar, not be kept out of natural light for...he couldn't remember the number of hours...thereby causing the architecture to skew towards lots of windows. There'd been no such law in the country formerly known as these United States, for that matter, so far as he knew, anywhere on the continents formerly known as North and South America, including, obviously, this little bit on the northern one that was the only extant piece of the former planet formerly known as the Earth, in the solar system formerly known as Sol, in the Galaxy formerly known as the Milky Way, in the universe...well, so long as this bit existed, they weren't quite there yet, that and he had no idea as to the name of it, so the best he could do was 'formerly universe', which didn't have much of a ring to it and, obviously, didn't fit into the overall pattern. But anyway, his office did have a window. It just happened to be behind a filing cabinet. Though, that filing cabinet had been inherited with the office, which is why he'd never seen what was behind it. But it (the illumination) was better out in the parking lot. The light streaming up over the edges of the county rendered the ambiance not unlike that of a full-ish moon, except maybe more so. But it wasn't much good for telling the color of paint. And he held up the lantern as he moved down the row of cars, though whose they were he didn't know, and he'd've thought he could recognize his beat-up hunk of junk—again, in which sense, colloquial or not, he couldn't say—but he figured he could've recognized it anywhere and, probably, blindfolded, but it turned out he was wrong, because he stepped off the curb too early and had to step back on and go down two more cars. It'd've been easy to identify had he just held the lantern to the back window, as the

back seat was piled full of vhs tapes, which'd been foisted upon him by a colleague just shortly before he (the colleague) had disappeared. What was on them he didn't know, one, because he didn't have a vhs player, and hadn't had one in twenty years, and two, because all the ones the university still owned remained unpowered. He'd considered pushing one of the roll-around carts up the hill, one of those old tv carts designed to hold those old, huge, black CRT TVs and roll them from class to class. He could've rolled that up the hill and plugged it in. But he hadn't gotten round to it yet. Technically, however, he did have a Round-Tu-It, which was a kind of crocheted ornament, kept by Anime, and given to them by their mother, who'd gotten it from her mother's great aunt. He glanced over his shoulder at all those vhs tapes while he reversed, becoming distracted to the point he bumped over the curb and scraped it against the tail pipe. They were all unlabeled. Some people's extreme lack of organization was just appalling.

A tractor trailer coming from the direction of the new court house and the post office and the former bowling alley and everything out that way stopped four car lengths back from the railway crossing, which's where the stop sign was, due to the way that intersection worked (and it'd be best not to try and inquire why it was that way), and after waiting the appropriate period, the driver turned right, onto Backstreet, along behind the motel, then hung a left, turning up onto the end of Main, passing the fountain, headed up off Main, up toward Highstreet, where he hung a right, continuing up the narrow, windy two-lane road to the old court house turned library. Being as how Mainstreet was *the* main thoroughfare through that section of the county, tractor trailers, and all manner of heavy equipment, weren't an uncommon sight there. However, it was a little more unusual for one to be headed up to the library.

The library, as with everything else, was completely out of power, except for what it could supply itself. They'd brought in a couple small gasoline generators, but their use'd been limited. Though, that didn't make the institution completely useless. While card catalogs had gone the way of the proverbial, and literal, dodo, though not in the sense of being clubbed to death for sport—though, they both would've tasted terrible, so they still had that in common—but the card catalogs, like so many things, had been victims of being fussed over by people who had nothing better to do than fuss over what they believed esoteria too far leftover in, this, the modern age, dinosaurs that needed to be slayed to prove that it was, in fact, now and not then, and that dragons were meant to be slayed, and all that, however, though the card catalogs had been reduced to a single set of mini-drawer filing cabinets that'd subsequently gone up to state auction some unknown time before, down in the basement there still

remained the typewriter room. Though, it had only one unit, and that outfitted with an original Dvorak-Dealy keyboard circa 1932, or thereabouts; no one'd ever bothered to look up the serial number, and yes, there were still enthusiasts who maintain databases of such information, someone having uploaded what remained of their private copy to what remained of the internet, but no one'd yet bothered to look up in what part of what year it'd been assembled, and now that the internet had ceded to the county intranet, no one was likely ever going to do so, statistically, though, as with many things in quantum mechanics, or so a hypothesis went, the probability could never (wholly) be reduced to zero, just be rendered very, very, very, very, very small, which it was. The typewriter room, itself, remained only because of the conditions of a special bequeathment that issued the library with an endowment, in part, for the proliferation of whatever esoteria the chief librarian cared to engage with. Unfortunately, the card catalog'd gone out before his time, or Absolute (let alone Karen) would've had something to say about it. He stood there looking out one of the windows, over the whole of downtown, and everything in the distance, all the way to the crumbling edge of the world, stood there sipping a lukewarm espresso, which Karen, and it must've been Karen, because she was the only one, besides himself, who still had a key, but it had to've been her that left it on his desk, a sticky note with a smiley face sticking to the side of the cup. But he had no way of knowing for sure, since she'd just disappeared, leaving all the pertinent material on his desk. It was from this view that he'd watched the truck make its way along.

The low light wasn't so bad once gotten used to, and it remained enough to guide by as he made his way downstairs, still sipping what remained of the lukewarm espresso as he descended. Someone was knocking at the door. He set the espresso on the librarian counter on his way around to go out the side door. Knock. Knock. Knock. He threw the lock and pulled open the door. Exhaust scent wafted in from the truck idling outside.

"Delivery."

"Of what?"

"Says books," the driver said. "I don't know." He offered a clipboard. "Sign, please."

Absolute took the clipboard and pen, squinting at the former in the low light while he mechanically fished a pair of glasses from his front shirt pocket and slipped them on and clicked-on the small LEDs mounted on either side of the frames. "Where the hell did you bring these from?"

"Distribution center in Cotiard." That was in the far southern end of the county. The driver motioned over his shoulder. "They're on pallets. Where's your loading dock?"

"Don't have one," Absolute said, without looking up from the clipboard.

"You're supposed to have one to receive a shipment like this."

"We weren't ever supposed to receive a shipment like this." He flipped to the next sheet pinioned to the clipboard.

"You must've. The order's right there. And it's here."

"What the..." Absolute flipped through the sheets. "What the hell would we want with fifteen-thousand copies of... Still-Water Life As They Apply To A Slice of Lemon Pie?"

"How the hell should I know that. I just take the stuff where it says it's supposed to go. So if you could please sign and get this unloaded. So I can make the next delivery."

"Where the hell were these at?"

"I told you, at the distribution center."

"Yeah, but—"

"Look, guy, just sign it and get on with it. All of this's paid for, and it's here, now it's just gotta be unloaded."

"I won't sign for something I didn't order."

"It says you ordered it. Right there." He didn't actually point to anything when he said this. "So—"

"No, it says the county commissioners ordered it. Not me."

"I don't care who ordered it. Look, all you gotta do is sign for it so's I can get it off my truck."

"Ain't gonna happen till I get an explanation."

"Look...you the only guy here?"

"Yap."

The driver removed and re-situated his cap. "Look, I don't wanna problem, but I've got a schedule."

"What schedule? It's the end of the world."

“Look, you think what you wanna, and I’ll do the same. All I know is, I’ve gotta job to do, and I wanna get it done. So why don’t you help me with that?”

“This’s more than seven-point-five copies per person living in this town.” (However, that was only him going by previous official census numbers from the former state of North Carolina and the former these United States, as he couldn’t know the *actual* number of those remaining. So that figure wasn’t exactly accurate.)

“Look, I don’t know about that. It’s not my problem.”

“Is the whole warehouse fulla these things?”

“Maybe. Look, I just wanna get on with my—”

“I’m not signing this. I didn’t order it.”

“Look, all I need is a signature, so—”

“Well, you can go get it somewhere else.” Absolute handed him back the clipboard and pen.

“What’s the problem?”

“The problem is I didn’t order it. I’ve got no use for it. Who the hell would? I—”

Headlights appeared coming up the curvy road that led toward the library, illuminating the truck and a small part of the library building, and momentarily blinded the both of them as the car pulled into one of the parking spaces.

Crossing the parking lot, Candi lifted a plastic bag to eye level as she approached. “They were all outa the teriyaki, so you’re just gonna have’tuh make do with... What’s going on?”

The driver shoved the clipboard toward her. “Sign this.”

Plastic bag hooked on her finger, Candi took the clipboard and lifted the pen with her free hand.

“Wait—”

But she’d already dashed off a contiguous skwiggle and handed it back to the driver. She offered the plastic bag to Absolute. He just stood there watching the driver turn and walk toward the tractor trailer. “What’re we going to do with all this shit?”

“Don’t worry about it,” she said. She kissed his cheek. “You always worry about things too much. Besides, the world’s ending, what else could *possibly* go wrong?”

“Hey!” The driver’d opened the cab and stowed the clipboard in

its appropriate compartment. “You’ve got to unload this stuff. It’s not my responsibility.”

“Great,” Absolute said. He looked at her. “And’ve you got any bright ideas?”

Candi looked over her shoulder. “Well...maybe....”

«Attention. We'd like to inform yuns that we'll have a very special guest later who's kindly agreed to be grilled like a...shiitake mushroom. So stay tuned. This's radio EFKO, and it's the evening of the world. So cheer up. Or they'll send someone round.»

«Now, since there's no longer any wire service, and no national or international—»

«Or even extraterrestrial news, for that matter, we'll just have to make it up as we go along. So...»

«So.»

«Right. If it were still round, Israel'd probably still be trading nuclear volleys with Iran. Of course, as all yuns out there know, it was just a matter of time before that happened, anyway.»

«Japan's population, if it still had one, would be facing it's most significant decline of the past fifty years. Okay, since it doesn't exist anymore, it has an effective population of zero, and they can't get much more declined than that.»

«But since we're making this up as we go along, anyway...»

«In national news, everyone who was against the previous White House administration is invited to a pancake mourning event...some-time. We'll have to get back to everyone on that. So if anyone needs anyone to commiserate with, or if you're trying to hash out something else to hate in order to give your life meaning, you might want to go on down. It's going to be held at... Well, we don't have that information, either. But when we do, we'll let everybody know.»

«A second support group will also be held at the...Presbyterian Baptist Church, for all those despondent that the previous administration no longer exists, and who actually liked'em.»

«So since we're now an advertising-free station—»

«Yeah, deal with it, bitches—»

«But since we've already mentioned the support groups, we've got an announcement here from a local gun shop owner that we're not going to read. Getting closer to home, in local news—»

«That's right here, fer yuns that don't know.»

«But in local news, Lifespan Baptist Church is scheduled to protest the local feminist boutique book-lending establishment—»

«Which, in case yuns didn't know, is one of those little glass-fronted library things yuns might've seen around, well, it's one of them, somewhere in Helena—»

«And there's a protest scheduled there for...well, since there's not going to be tomorrows anymore...let's say...five hours from now. So plus five hours from now there's going to be a protest around a glass cabinet somewhere in Helena. The reason for the protest is that someone apparently stuffed a few planned parenthood brochures in there. So Lifespan invites out everyone who wants to take a stand against abortion.»

«Even though planned parenthood don't exist no more, don't let that ruin yuns's fun.»

«Also, the Tuscanalon Priorative Reformed Baptist Church will be holding a protest and prayer meeting at the same location and on this same issue, but they want to make it clear they have nothing to do with anything to do with Lifespan Baptist Church. However, they will be praying that all the rest of us only spend eternity in hell, rather than longer.»

«Cool.»

«However, members of the Tuscanalon Reformed Priorative Baptist Church have sent us a statement here that they have nothing whatsoever to do with the actions or opinions of the members or the leadership of the Tuscanalon Priorative Reformed Baptist Church.»

«So if yuns wanna have a good time, yuns know where to get it. Tune us in while yuns're out there. We're commercial free—oh, shudder—but if we weren't we'd run something topical about now. We'll see what we can come up with.»

«Also, oh, this's a good one. We have a note from Professor Gordon Liste stating that, seeing as how there's little to no future left, the reception party for any and all time travelers is hereby canceled.»

«And what a shame—we had new dresses ready and everything.»

After all, we were hoping to find ourselves. Does anyone out there know if having sexual relations with yuns's past or future self actually counts as sex, or if it's just masturbation? How 'bout if yuns went back and touched yuns's pre-eighteen-year-old self? Sex crime or not? If yuns've still got WiFi, message us with yuns's answers, or give us a voice aye pee—he he—but give us a call if yuns can. We might even answer. But we won't be held responsible for what happens if we do.»

*«Now, since the Noyse estate's been disintegrated, let's continue our selected readings from **That Thing Before A Funeral For Sheamus.**»*

«So to everybody out there listening, this's EFKO, it's the evening of the world, and we're bout as live as it gets.»

«After this reading, make sure and stay tuned, remember that extra special guest we've got coming up.»

«Yuns don't wanna miss it.»

«Unless the world finishes ending before then, that is. But technically it won't be here to miss, either. So there's that.»

«And now, heeeeeere's Sheamus. Also note, yuns'll wanna keep that Shining reference in mind for our extra special interview later on. But here we go, we're off and reading....»

«Also, for later, we have a recording of Will Self, who's going inform us how the codex's reign is about to come to an end.»

«So we know yuns'll wanna stay tuned. Also, to anyone out there who's listening, if yuns happen to have a pink convertible, doesn't have to run, but it should at least still inspire vroom vroom noises if yuns get behind the wheel, but if yuns have one, there seems to be a hot market for'm right now. Two posters, GoldStarLesbian32 and GodsFistsOfFury316've both posted classifieds for one. Price's no object, folks, after all, it's the end of the world, in case yuns didn't know, and if yuns're just finding that out, well, where the hell've yuns been?»

Principal Anderson looked like a puppet, but that's only because he was, at least colloquially that's what he'd've been termed. Some would've thought he'd been more accurately classified as a similar word that started with an 'm', the difference, arguably, being one was animated by strings or wires or sticks, or some combination of such, whereas the one with an 'm' has a human appendage shoved up inside it. But this, in fact, was a mistake. Both would properly be classified as puppets. And the variety that starts with an 'm' was just a marketing designation. Irregardless (which some people didn't regard as a word, but which had been the case for many former not words that'd later become so and no longer so), irregardless, this'd caused some to label these puppet constructs as gay, or at the very least, as gender proved more difficult to determine in such instances than initially thought, at the very least, in violation of sodomy laws (which were gender neutral, and thereby could cover an infinite number and variations of such, which made some people nervous), but they weren't merely classified as sodomites just because they happened to have human appendages shoved up them, no, it was also because of the very nature of their design, that is, requiring a human appendage be shoved up them, thus, their design, obviously, being obscene in and of itself. And they were currently banned in the county. Though, no one had to worry about the broadcast of such material from outside agents, as Sesamum Row'd disintegrated, but only the literal instance, (or actually the literal pieces of it that contributed to the simulation of such an environment in the tv medium, as Sesamum Row itself hadn't really ever existed, or so one theory goes) however, the fictionalized landscape still remained extant within the thochtic landscape of several yet living (humanoid-embodied and not) minds, as well as encoded within certain human artifacts. A

general sweep of thrift stores and church rummage sales'd allowed police to round up most available copies that'd remained on the market, though there were rumors that somewhere, on secret servers set up on what was left of the county's intranet slash what was left of the internet, black market criminals and profiteers were currently dealing in such paraphernalia. (Though, among themselves, they were generally referred to as the chartreuse market, that being the primary color of one of the favorite characters to have been developed in the recent decades.) However, for the moment, that was neither here nor there. In the case of principal Anderson, as well as his associates, an exception'd been made to the law, which's what allowed his visage to appear on the CRT TV that sat on a trolley in front of them, the signal itself coming from some undisclosed location, accessible, for security purposes, only if one could follow the coaxial cable up through the hole drilled in the ceiling and into that maze of intercellular wire that formed the institution's nervous system.

"Are you aware", the human appendage sticking up through his body animated his mouth, "*that because of your negligent actions an entire scenario will have to be reconvened?*" No answer was expected to this question. "*Don't you know the amount of money each of these exercises cost?*" No answer was expected for this question either. "*Are you not aware that these exercises are to keep you safe?*" In fact, no answer was expected for any of these questions. "*Do you not understand that these live-fire exercises are critical to ensuring this institution's continued survival? Are you not aware of the consequences of interfering with officers of the law in the course of the performance of their duty?*" Here, the signal glitched, the principal's mouth continuing to move, but with no sound.

A black runner appeared across the bottom of the screen. Blocky words scrolled across it.

"You may return to class now", a narrator said. "*But remember the principal is your pal. And he's watching.*"

The four of them rose from their plastic chairs and lifted their transparent backpacks over their shoulders and turned and walked out of the office.

"Oh, god..." Juliette hung her head as they stepped into the hall.

"What's the matter with you?"

Juliette looked up at her, mouth slightly open, unconsciously attempting to communicate that she couldn't believe that Crystal'd ask something so obvious to the plainly obvious.

"It's just probation." She glanced round. "At least nobody cracked about the you know what."

"Shhh." Juliette glanced round, too, though more widely and less discretely. "Someone might hear."

"Who? Your pal *principal* Anderson?"

"Shhh."

Crystal shook her head. "Come on, let's just get to class."

"You don't understand," Juliette said, as they walked.

"Of course I understand," Crystal said. "I just don't care. Everybody's gotta get their first violation of the semester sometime."

"What about you?" Harmony said. "This's your second, right?"

"And?"

"Then you just got one more, then..."

"Then just don't get caught," Crystal said.

"Shhh," Juliette said, as they neared the classroom. The fifteen second bell sounded, everyone in the hall hustling that much faster. They found their seats.

One of those roll-around TV carts sat at the front of the class, a large CRT TV sat atop it, looking like the monstrous single eye on (what some on certain parts of what was left of the internet, and not, would've called) some Lovecraftian creature, a single blue image in its retina, a pattern kept constant, never to be interrupted even only occasionally by a minor blip somewhere on a live-black screen, which would've been the only tell-tale reminder that cosmic background radiation'd once existed.

Students mumbled among themselves, but stopped when the final bell tolled, looking forward as the image on the screen momentarily went darkly schizophrenic, light growing to fill the bulging square space, slowly fading in to reveal the visage of Mrs Turtle. "*Good morning, children.*" And in response to a round of *Good morning, Mrs Turtles* that didn't exist, she said, "*Thank you, children. Today...*" But the picture momentarily froze, something else seemingly superimposed over it. But it disappeared too quick to consciously identify. Mrs Turtle came back into focus. "...*see, children, this is the shape*

of the world. “The human appendage inserted into her held her up beside a globe. And she smashed her plushy face into it to keep it spinning. ”*And it just keeps spinning round and round, really fast like that. But what is that? How come everything does not go flying right off the surface? Well, children, that is because of gravity. And it is gravity that keeps you and me and everything else from flying off into outer space. And what is in outer space? Well, the sun is out there. That is the biggest thing in the daytime sky. But you should never look at it directly. If you do, you will hurt yourself. There is also the moon. But it only comes out at night. And there are stars, too. They are all up there. But what is that? If they are all flying around out there, how do they keep from running into each other? Well, children, that is because of gravity.*“

Lily glanced up at the wall clock. This would be one of those points in life when relativity (that was one of the ‘R’ words, though knowing this would’ve been a violation of those selfsame, not technically extant laws which outlawed them), but relativity as a human emotional concept, rather than a scientific one, comes into full force here. However, even though, in fact, she wasn’t aware of that word ‘relativity’, she understood the feelings of a concept that she would’ve attached that word to if it’d been presented to her with that definition. Instead, having no official means to voice this, and demolishing the notion that if there isn’t a word for something it can’t be conceived or perceived, much to the administration’s chagrin had they yet known about such, or were capable of knowing such, the usual student phrase to describe this feeling was *turtle time*, or shortened, teetee, which, only coincidentally, re-created the colloquial phrase some locals used with their female children when speaking of the physical process of urination. But Lily was unaware of this. However, her mind wandering, mostly back to the full-body searches from earlier, she suddenly felt as if she had to go. But of course, there was nothing to do for it, so she pressed her legs tighter together, and whether this did anything to help, she didn’t know, but at least it was something to do while she looked at the clock.

”But what is that? How come the people on the bottom of the world do not walk on their hands? Well, children, that is because of gravity.”

She stabbed yet another cardboard cup, brought the stick up so she could pull it off the nail and drop it into the garbage bag she drug round behind herself. That was one point. Styrofoam cups were rarer. They were two points. She had to play games like these with herself while she doodled round the park, between the swings and the slides and the things meant to be climbed over and upon, as she walked along the perimeter of the chain-link fence, the basketball court, under the picnic area. She stopped a moment, looking out across the river, at the bandstand and, past that, at Backstreet. Then she looked down, garbage along the riverbank iridescent in the light flowing up from the edges of what remained of the world, though she couldn't see any of that in the distance, from where she was, just its general consequences. She stood there looking down at the water, having put the garbage bag and stick on a picnic table, when she heard the gate open, and she turned, unable to distinguish who it was entering the park. But as he came up the path toward the picnic area, there was a enough light to discern his face. And he stopped there a moment, standing on the walk, hands in his pockets. Now, *that* was a surprise.

"The rest of them," he said, "didn't wanna come."

Hannah almost laughed. "I'm not surprised."

"So what do I need to do?"

"Well," she said, "there's a box of trash bags on the table over there. You can get one and start collecting anything you see." She gathered up her half-filled bag and the stick. "What's your name?"

"Alexander." He tugged one of the bags from the roll and pinched it to try and find the end that opened, failing the first time and having to rotate it. "But everyone just calls me Alex."

They worked in silence a long time, the only sounds between them the crinklings of black plastic garbage bags.

"There's so much of it," he said.

"Yap."

"Where does it all come from?"

Another black plastic bag lay there just on the other side of the side of the fence that ran along the perimeter of the parking lot, the bag busted open, torn into by squirrels and raccoons and birds in their turn.

"I think some people come round and dump their trash here now," Hannah said. She pulled a two-point cup off the nail-end of the stick.

"But why?"

"Maybe they have something against children. I don't know."

"But they don't use it anymore."

"Maybe that's why." She continued on in silence. "Or maybe not, I don't know."

He knelt, transferring refuse from a gutted plastic bag to his fresher one. "So... Why do you come down here and do this?"

"Why do you ride down the river trying to kill whales?"

"We..." He stammered. "We weren't trying to kill anything. I just wanted to...see them."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Just...do."

"They're not zoo animals." Not that she was in favor of keeping animals in zoos.

"I know that." He shook his head, forcing garbage from one bag into another. Something in it smelled bad. "I just...there's nothing wrong with looking, is there?"

"They say just looking at them can make things happen."

When he looked up, Hannah'd turned her back to him, stabbing cheeseburger wrappers in sequence, so that a stack of them added up on the end of the stick. "Like what?"

"I don't know," she said. "Different things." She turned the stick and pulled off the spiked papers. "Everybody says different things."

"But're they true?"

"Who knows?"

After a protracted silence, Hannah turned to find him standing there ahold of a full garbage bag, looking across the park at the chain-link fence that lined the river.

"I figure cause they might let them out one day," she said.

He looked at her. "What?"

"You asked why I do it." She motioned with the spike end of the stick. "Why I clean this place up. I guess I hope one day they'll unlock, wherever they're at, the doors and let the children out and it'll be used again." She turned and stabbed cheeseburger wrapper after cheeseburger wrapper after cheeseburger wrapper. When she looked round again, he'd set down the bag and gone to get another, jerking it to inflate it as he crossed the park.

He squatted and began filling it, instinctually perusing the trash before he tossed it. "I told'm it was the wrong kind of boat." He paused. "I guess you don't believe that."

"I might."

"It's just..." He paused, looking blankly at a french fry container. "They were going to do it anyway, so I figured...it's not like it could get any worse."

"Well," she pulled off more cheeseburger wrappers and wadded them and tossed them into her bag, "it's not the best excuse I've ever heard."

"I didn't say it was."

He crouched there, the only sound garbage impacting other garbage, impacting the crinkling black-plastic membrane of that which now contained it, bound it into a kind of single-celled garbage organism.

"Did you see one?"

He paused. "No."

"It's not illegal to see one, you know. You could tell me that much safely." Actually, it wasn't legal to see one anymore.

He wadded a clot of cheeseburger wrappers and tossed them into the bag. "Couldn't see any. Jake...one of the other guys kept trying to shine a light."

"Spot lighting's illegal."

As were photographs.

Drawings or depictions or any kind of rendering, really, were also illegal.

"I know that, and...besides, it scares them away."

She leaned the stick against the chain-link fence, lifted the garbage

bag, and shook it to get everything to settle before she tied it shut. "You seem to know an awful lot about them."

Though, none of these recently passed laws specified anything about water-bound mammals, as that would've been counter to any express expressed and unexpressed intent, it's just that they could be construed to do so.

"I can't get em outa my mind." He paused, having said too much too fast, but continued picking up garbage.

It'd been enough to expand upon the broader possibilities of the idea of exactly *what* obscene material constituted, that is, to make it yet more nebulous, something that some commentators wouldn't have thought possible.

"I know what you mean."

Hannah dropped the tied bag by the fence and went to fetch another. It made an uncomfortable sound as she jerked it to get it open, and empty, it dangled limply from her hand in a pathetic way as she took up the stick again and spiked a crumpled one-point cup.

"Do you think..." He paused, looking out through the chain-link fence. "Do you think they're capable of knowing their mother's dead."

"I think so."

She pulled another one-point cup off the spike and shoved it into the bag, which, being fresh and empty, didn't want to accept things easily.

"Do you think they're lonely?"

"I don't know," she said. She spiked a series of cheeseburger wrappers, and they were always cheeseburgers, no one in what was left of America seemed to buy just a plain hamburger anymore. "I suppose everything gets lonely, at least once in a while."

He didn't reply. He finished filling the bag, stood, his knee popping, and tied it off. He dropped it against the chain-link fence and turned back for another, when he jerked it open it made that same uncomfortable sound as hers'd made. He squatted, forcing garbage into it. "There's a guy on the internet... well, what's left of the internet, who is supposed to be some former biologist, or something, who's started calling them *Balaenoptera melvillei*, since they don't have an official scientific name." And they didn't have an official scientific name

because the state, when it'd still existed, had passed a law banning any scientists receiving state aid, or such, from speaking on the subject, or such. A federal law'd've surely come down, too, but most of the North American continent'd been gone by then. None of this, of course, had been seen as violating the First Amendment, or in the case of the state, the former Establishment Clause, as they weren't restricting speech as such, merely issuing a stipulation attached to an amount of money offered by the state, which no one was obliged, if they didn't want to, supposedly, to take in the first place, so that made everything okay. And there was precedent for it, after all, it wasn't, as it'd been argued, all that different from how the federal government'd enforced what used to be known as daylight saving time in the majority of what used to be these United States. And of course, since hobbyists don't count for anything in a professional world, that is, it only matters if someone gets paid for it, and even then only if they make the majority of their income from it, and even then only if that income was what some might call sizable or substantial, and as most scientists who did count touched state or federal money at least indirectly...well, as stated, they had no official scientific name. Gordon had argued this was a very paleo-conservative tactic that would, in the long run, undermine the very foundation of that which it tried to maintain. However, Langdon had said that, in fact, though the implementations were slightly different between the parties, the fundamental underlying structure they sought to maintain was the same (as stated, he came back to this often), so it might be thought of as a part of a long-term strategy to undermine the opposition which perhaps looped around to some kind of inbuilt variant of a death drive. However, some posters on what was left of the internet disagreed with his usage of that term.

"They probably aren't bothered too much by it either way," Hannah said.

He paused, crumpled wrapper in hand, snorted, nodded. "Yeah." He stuffed the crumpled wrapper into the bag. "You...mind if I ask you a stupid question?"

"Shoot."

He paused, remembering what'd happened before. "Um... No..."

"What?"

"Nothing." He shook his head. "It's just...why is it all fast food

stuff?” He combed through it, hamburgers and french fries and cokes.... It should be mentioned here that the lower-case ‘c’ is most appropriate, as it does not, though it would seem to, to refer to a brand name, however, due to the linguistic composition of the part of the state in which the county’d once existed, or the part of the state which’d once existed around the county, the term ‘coke’ was used liberally for any kind of sweetened carbonated beverage, regardless of the manufacturer. He said, “But... why ain’t there any... I don’t know... household garbage? Where’s it coming from?”

“Good question.”

He was looking down at the mass of refuse that remained littered across the unmowed grass. Another one-point cup landed among it. He looked over at her.

She said, “Notice anything about it?”

He looked down at the cup, picked it up, turned it over. “Nope.”

“That’s because there’s nothing to notice,” she said. She spiked another cheeseburger wrapper and pivoted the stick to tear it off the end. “Completely generic.”

“So it’s not coming from a chain restaurant. One of the independent places? Or a food truck?”

“Except,” she said, “it’s more generic than generic.”

“Huh?”

“Well, look at it.”

He did, picking up another cardboard drink cup. “I mean... it’s just a plain cup... has *soda* written on the side.”

“And the cheeseburger wrappers all have cheeseburger printed on them. And the fries *fries*. White cardboard. White paper. All the same font. All the same size. Nobody uses stuff like this. They use branded. Or they just use plain, single-color stuff, or two-tone checker patterns, that kind of thing.” She stuffed another couple one-point cups into her bag, the bag now full enough that it held itself open and allowed material to settle atop the rest without trouble.

“I never... I never heard of anything being too generic. There’s something...”

“Disconcerting?”

“Yeah.” He stuffed the cup into his trash bag. “What’re we gonna do with it?”

"We'll shove it in the bin over there. It's got a lock and a key, so at least no one can get it out and re-spread it."

"They do that?"

"Oh, yes." She leaned the stick against the chain-link fence and worked at tying the bag. She carried it with her toward the gate. "There's a rake in the Jeep."

In the semidarkness, he could only barely discern her on the other side of the parking lot, the sound of the metal lid slamming down was far more distinct. The interior Jeep light came on when she opened the door. It (the light) stayed on for several seconds after she closed it (the door) and as she carried the rake across the parking lot and opened the gate.

"What're you gonna do if they come mess it up again?"

"Clean it up again, I reckon." She raked the small paper ketchup and mustard cups and remaining beverage containers and wrappers into a small heap. And she squatted and held them against the rake with her gloved hand, rose, turning the rake up to carry it toward him. "Hold the bag open." He did, and she dumped them inside, bent, and picked up the one that'd missed. She leaned the rake against the fence and took the bag, pulled two opposite corners to tie it. "Thanks for the help."

"Well..." He rose. "With what...you know..."

"Yeah, that." Carrying the bag, she grabbed the rake and turned. "Don't worry about it." She walked toward the gate. "I don't really have any authority left to do anything to you, anyway."

"Huh?" He followed her.

"Yeah," she said, "I mean, what've I got backing me up now? Just myself."

He followed her all the way across the parking lot. "You could've said something about that before."

"Yeah...." She lifted the metal trash bin lid over her head. "I could've."

He reached up and held it. She glanced at him. "Thanks." And she tossed the bag in. The thing'd almost been filled. "You can let it down," she said. She pulled the lock out so the latch would drop into place, and she stepped back, looking down as she searched through her keys. She fitted one into the lock. "Now I just gotta hope they

don't bring bolt cutters." She glanced over her shoulder. "Luckily, the bears haven't yet evolved thumbs."

She turned and glanced round the parking lot, finally asking the question, "How'd you get here? I didn't hear anything."

He pointed to the bike propped against the fence down the way.

"You really must be crazy."

"It's actually not bad. There's... Well, there's alot fewer cars now, so..."

"But the ones that're left aim for you," she said. And added, "Of course, I guess that's just normative," and kinda, faintly something like smiled.

They both stood there with nothing to do.

"So..." she said, "you wanna ride?"

"Well..." he said. "I don't know where I'm going, so I don't know that there's much point."

"So it's the end of the world, and you're gonna do nothing?"

"Well..." He faintly smiled, his teeth semi-luminescent in the faint light. "What can anyone do but nothing?"

"Have you been talking to Doctor Jones?"

"Uhm... No. I don't have him for anything. Or... I guess I should say I didn't *have* him for anything. But I've never spoke to him, I don't think. I've seen him round on campus though. Why?"

"Oh, just wondering."

"What're you going to do?"

"Oh, probably pick up garbage."

"Doesn't seem like much to do."

"Well, I'd like to think this world'd be a little cleaner when it went out."

He faintly laughed. She did, too.

"I guess..." she said. "I guess I'll continue on as always. Pick up garbage. Shoot a few boats here and there."

He mumbled. "Yeah...."

"Maybe if I get bored and there's still some time left, I'll try to figure out where all this excessively generic garbage is coming from."

He glanced toward the bin, then toward the park. "Hm." He looked at her. "Want some help with that?"

She looked at him. "Okay." She grabbed the rake. "You can put your bike on the back."

"Ah..." He followed her toward the Jeep. "It can just sit here. Not like it matters much, anyway." He opened the passenger side door. She tossed the rake in the back and slammed it (the rear door) shut, came round, and opened the driver side door.

"Buckle up," she said, as she climbed in and inserted the key.

He pulled it diagonally across himself and fastened it. "A stickler for the rules, I see."

She started the engine. "You never know when it might save your life."

"Except it's going to end anyway."

"You in a hurry?"

He looked over at her. "Not really."

She turned on the headlights. "Good."

The battery-backed-up alarm clock'd become August's totem, his means of keeping some semblance of reality. The 12v battery inside didn't have enough power to light the display, just enough to keep the oscillating circuitry inside oscillating, which it'd done till they'd gotten the gasoline generator hooked into place in the garage. But without that battery, the clock'd've just died, leaving him who knew where in time. He could've just picked something and gone with it. And where would've that've left him? Automatically, he reached over and cut the alarm, as much to save power as to end that horrible sound. August rolled over, planting his face in the pillow. The faint light that came upwards round the edges of what remained of the world, not that he'd've put it that way, came between the open blinds, much like a night with an overly full moon would, if the moon, and the sun from which it'd reflected its light, had still existed. He rolled onto his side and pushed off the covers. One of the things he didn't bother to inquire about, either introspectively or otherwise, was why the outdoor temperature'd seemingly stabilized at, approximately, sixty-three degrees—in Fahrenheit, incidentally, though that word wasn't legally mentionable for several reasons. And the problem was neither was the c-word. And every time someone tried to use Kelvin a not-small proportion of the listeners thought the speaker'd been referring to an underwear brand. But in regards to the f-word, mostly, it had to do with a series of earlier events involving, one, Joshua Perkins, who'd been, for a while now, otherwise unlocatable. But in one sense that didn't mean anything, as on the other hand, even though it couldn't be mentioned, the fact that, in one sense, it still existed bound to the still extant localized thochtological sphere, that is, the number 63 was simply stated without a qualifier, beyond that of the general term degree, which tended to be applied even

where it wasn't applicable, in regards to the c-word, especially, the qualifier, of course, implicit when it were so, even if it were a word that mustn't be said, though, in any regard, as the rest of the world, being gone—with the exception of the country formerly known as Burma—which was also gone—it the only other country, even when the rest of the world'd been extant, which'd employed the mustn't-be-spoken word—there was no competition on the matter, lending proof, to some, of the incontrovertible superiority of non-metric systems of measurements. Though, a small stir'd started when it came to light that several fifth columns existed yet in the county, mostly on the part of automakers, who'd, for the most part, moved to the metric system on their vehicles decades before. Computer-related equipment, as well, was in that category, however, that fact didn't do as much damage to what remained of the American psyche as did the infiltration into their most intimate areas; it was almost as bad as if someone'd taken off the paneling and found Arabic prayers painted on the door frame interiors. But luckily, that hadn't happened yet. So all August had to deal with, as de facto president of what remained of the world, and therefore free world, were the problems at hand, the first of which being getting out of bed, which, apparently, every what-remains-of-it world leader had to do, and that there was no exception from.

He put his legs over the side of the bed and sat up in the dimness and reached forward and clicked-on the lamp. He felt like shit. And he wondered what he could've possibly done to feel so bad. He stood and stretched. His body didn't even feel like his anymore. He rubbed his eyes and yawned as he made his way to the bathroom. He had no need to feel for the light switch just yet, as an infrared beam'd detected his movement, one of those conveniences modern fixtures had, and'd turned on the little light within itself, the tiles cold against his bare feet as he made his way toward the toilet. A habitual nude—nude being a less dirty word than naked—but he was a habitual nude sleeper, so all he had to do was stand there and release, which could be easier said than done first thing in the morning. This was possible, in part, because he always left the seat and lid up, unless needed otherwise. This, of course, was an unconscious retaliation against a litany of ideological attacks that'd been mounted in the past

several decades, mainly centering around male-ism and female-ism and related 'isms' and in relation to the sexual disposition of bodily facilities, such as bathrooms and restrooms, both of which refused to take their respective names from the actuality of the majority of activity that often occurred within their confines. Akira2020_007, posting on a (non-literal) corner (though the server that housed it was in the corner of a closet), but posting on a corner of what remained of the internet, speculated this was, in part, though not claiming the largest part, because that'd be idiotic, as expressly pointed out in the TLDR section of the post, but that, at least in part, but that this was a portion of the ideological motivation for these former United States entry into the second world war, and one of the reasons behind the underlying acceptance of Pearl Harbor being a pretext for entering that conflict. In particular, it related to so-called former traditional Japanese architectural layout, which, in many ways, had persisted even through Japan's westernization and modernization efforts in the period just prior to that war. And in this tradition, it was repeated and recorded, the bathing facilities and the defecation facilities were kept separate. So whether they could, or would, admit it, the American populace was faced with the possibility, though only the remotest possibility, of the de-integration of their bathroom units (the reciprocal psychological function related to this being the gender and slash racial segregation of such integrated facilities within the same period). This, of course, would've left them with the possibility of having to name this newly created room something in relation to what went on within. And it's the effects of this blow to the American psyche which's most prominently missing in Philip Dick's alternative take on an American continent half-dominated by Japan, following an Axis victory in the aforementioned war. However, today, for August, the sound was wrong, which sometimes it was; sometimes he missed; sometimes the stream bifurcated; sometimes it seemed to flow freely but also dribbled down onto the toilet bowl. And he reached down and adjusted himself till liquid splashed into liquid. It was also one of those days when he'd shriveled more into himself than usual, his penis and testicles acting as if they wanted to retract into his body, which one of his testicles already'd done, as sometimes happened, so there wasn't any obvious or immediate

need for concern. He sighed as he finished, his bladder satisfied but still somewhat achy, and leaned forward to touch the handle. He stepped toward the sink, reached for the light, the luminescence of the bulbs not quite so painful since he'd first adjusted to the lesser, infrared-activated illumination, always a good thing, and another of the pleasantries of modern technology brought about by enlightened Western values. But listening to the toilet fill as his eyes adjusted what more they needed to, he looked at himself in the mirror as he turned on the faucet and rinsed his fingers. He dried his hands and touched his cheeks. He might even get away without shaving today. Maybe it was something with getting older, but what little facial hair he'd ever had did seem to be thinning. He opened the cabinet and pulled out the razor and cream, just out of habit. He watched himself in the mirror, turning his head as he drew the razor over a swatch of his cheek, rinsing the blades without having to look down. And after the last stroke, while some of the cream remained on his face, he reached into the shower and turned it on so the spray'd be warm. He turned, again, toward the sink and wetted his hands and wiped his face. Puffy, too. A definite softening of the features. He was going to have to sleep better. He dried his face on a towel before he stepped into the shower. He turned so the hot water struck his back, and he stood there a few moments just letting that happen. He reached for the soap, lathered himself while hot water ran down his back. A little flabbiness, especially round the pectorals. He'd have to get back to working out. He lathered up. But when was there going to be time for that? With everything going the way it was... He soaped his armpits. But he was naturally equipped to deal with such issues by virtue of being a member of a social species that'd survived this long on the planet—or now, what remained of it. Dealing with the duality of the end of the world and the fact that the world was never going to end was easily reducible to its generic form, in fact, several million years of evolution'd produced circuitry—not to run the risk of dipping into a computational metaphor for human consciousness, among all those other dominant technological metaphors that'd been used throughout the history of the co-evolution of human beings and technological thochts all the way back to when the human or pre-human mind'd been likened to a stone ax, the first great schism then

rupturing proto-human affairs when the spear came to be invented—but evolution'd produced, though that's only a colloquial phrasing, as South Wellington would point out, evolution doesn't produce anything, it's not an acting force—but it'd come about through evolution, and thus was modeled through the theory of natural selection, that he'd been born as a member of a species equipped with millions of years of development within portions of the brain which regulated contradiction. For example, the aforementioned patriarchy, which he'd've admitted in no way as being a part of, or even of its existence, yet – except, of course, in the way in which it obviously was, as mentioned – well, as's already been mentioned, he existed as the beneficiary and product (some would say slave of, though others would generalize this to all and everything capable of such as being in possession of such patternologies, by the very nature of biological systems as originated through one or more processes of evolution, so even those who pointed out such with glee were contained within the same or a similar enough systemology in regards to both their possession of such a patternology and their expression of it, barely to mention the glee from such – so likewise others' expressions manifested themselves in the extended phenotype of that of the sneering disregard – and others yet still a complete disregard) of such a system of direct and tangential and counter thoctic deployments and dispositions, at least in certain theories and frameworks of knowledge, such as those that still populated Anime's bookshop, or at least, of such a system close enough to be considered in the same terms till some better hypothesis was conceptualized (which it wouldn't be). And he also deployed a kind of admittance to such a system for the attempted preservation of his own thoctic (of which this function and its admittance slash avoidance was a part) and (possibly) physiological existence, because, if such existed, it (the patriarchy) was merely natural and thus right, or right and thus natural, if not both feeding back into one another eternally, the ring of truth surrounding the obscenity that was most often the perversion of the world. But in any regard, these processes, as can be imagined, expended no insignificant amount of mental energy. However, selective pressure'd driven the human brain to handle such quite efficiently. Though, still, it did take a not-insubstantial portion of the organ's total caloric requirements

to carry this out. The alternative, however, for the species, is death, or at least, had been such at all previous points of selection in the history of the species' evolution, so far. It would be tempting to indicate here that it's also a matter of the present environment, that is, for some to speculate that the present state of the environment, or its rapid unbecoming, could then, should there be enough time at the end of time, breed this out of the human race (which would be simply a fundamental restatement of the process of evolution), however, such a series of events would likely precipitate the requirement that a new species label be devised, as they would lose one of their core definitive properties, however, such aspects of etymology are beside the point at the present moment, except, that is, in select corners of what was left of the internet, where two practitioners of such still remained, having nothing else to do. But in any regard, though it would be tempting to postulate such, it fails to take into account that, by definition of its existence, the human brain itself generates the primary contradictory state, that was the base state, in which it finds itself, so even deprived entirely of an environment, as was slowly happening, the prime source of contradiction, as stated, remained, and thus the evolutionary defenses required for the survival of the species, and which protected its constitutive members from themselves, yet remain deployed and non-vestigial. But of course, he (August) didn't think about any of this as he raised his arm and turned to let the stream of hot water wash the suds from his armpit, and lowered that one to raise the other and repeated the process. If he had, those same mechanisms would've had to activate and the cycle that could ensue from such circular functions had been known, at least in some cases, to kill, if the given individual hadn't been evolutionarily equipped with sufficient safeguards, the technological metaphor of the fuse being something that some on what had been left of the internet would have argued appropriate here. However, regardless as to whether he contemplated it or not, or whether or not his survival might've depended expressly on *not* doing such, it was still the process his brain was primarily engaged with at the moment. (As was the case with all the members of the species, to one degree or another, as per to the definition, to be fair.) Though, neither did his brain particularly care to be engaged in the process; it was just one of the

things it did, a purely automatic response to a set of conditions and stimuli that'd allowed his ancestors, though not him, yet, to not be selected out of the human population, usually, by means of their own devices (and not necessarily referring to technology) and, and this was the part he hadn't yet accomplished, that is, reproducing such traits in offspring capable, themselves, of reproducing and perpetuating such traits among and amid others of the same, capable of the same. And sometimes, on a basic socially conscious level that'd evolved to deal with those dynamics generated by a social species, he worried that there was something wrong with his yet failing to fulfill the very definition of life. And others, whether they knew it or not, for and through and because of the same inbuilt social consciousness imbued them through their ancestors' reproduction, they thought the same, or close enough, or at least equivalent. There were quote unquote circuits to deal with these aspects, as well, not all that dissimilar to the aforementioned—and in fact, due to the compact nature of the Homo sapien brain, they were effectively actually the same quote unquote circuits and schemas as already discussed, depending on the definitions of such, this generalized multi-utility, of course, also a product deriving from the necessities of efficiency also related to the species' evolutionary history and the generalities of the processes of evolution in general.

He felt a bit hot, but even so he closed his eyes and ducked his head under the shower stream. Blindly, he turned and reached for the soap and coated his palms before he returned the rounded bar to the tile nook and rubbed his palms against each other and rubbed the lather against his face. No, it didn't matter what he felt like. He had a job to do and it had to be done. Relatives and acquaintances of his ancestors that hadn't had that kind of drive, they'd been too easily outproduced. A body had to keep working. That's why Protestantism had been naturally selected for, after all. He rinsed his face, turned away from the stream, and wiped the water from his eyes. And he was a naturally selected Protestant.

One of the reasons, indeed, the primary one currently, more than ever, as to why Anime never managed to make almost any money as a secondhand bookseller was because she so often didn't sell books. But obviously, that would, usually, be rather obvious, though not as much as it might seem at first. Many businesses had had very rapid turnover of product only to find themselves in the red too long and, eventually, dead. After all, the capitalist and free markets, like the natural world, were littered with corpses. That's the reason so many'd evolved to consume carrion.

«... *ain't that right, folks?*»

She'd propped the battery-powered radio on a stack of books, or more accurately, on *one* of the stacks of books on the desk, as she did her usual work of ferrying and organizing, an LED utility lamp strapped to her forehead.

«*Of course, maybe we're just farting into the proverbial wind and there aren't any of yuns out there to listen anymore.*»

But Anime did. She ran her index finger down a paperback spine, turned the volume over and opened it, the book flopping apart, the glue broken, like it had a broken back. And she didn't know, as she never did, whether to feel sad because it'd been injured, or happy because it'd been used.

«*And don't think we've forgotten about that tape of Will Self telling us all about how the codex's reached the end of its life.*»

Anime set the book aside. The problem was, without electricity, she couldn't use the electric iron, and without the electric iron, she had no chance of repairing a broken spine—paperback glue often being heat-set, so that if it were heated, it'd flow together again, making it, almost, good as new, which was the best she could do since Josh was no longer available.

«But first, and if yuns've been listening this long, yuns know enough to know by now there's gonna be things come up between here and there. That's why we've got a tape from...well, we don't know who, but here's an old cassette on pre-Socratic Greek philosophy, just in case any of yuns out there need to be convinced the end of the world's a good thing. A few minutes of this, and yuns'll be begging for death. So we won't give yuns too much. Just a taste. Learn to savor the poison, folks. Learn to savor the poison. So...here we go? Oh, we found the right button. Imagine that.»

»One can imagine it like a race.«

«Let's get a load of this voice, folks. If this's your gender we're sure about half've yuns've either just popped a boner or've geared up to drown a toddler in yuns's panties.»

»And it's run on a track, as races tend to go.«

«Anybody know any races that don't go on a track? If yuns do, pop us a message.»

»Now, the runner starts.«

«Bang! We're off.»

»Now, in order to get to the finish line, he first has to reach the halfway point.«

«Makes sense so far, right? Though, we could do with a little less sexism up in here.»

»But in order to get to the halfway point, the runner first has to get to a point halfway between the starting line and the halfway point.«

«Yeah. We can go with that.»

»Now, the same is true of that point and the starting line again, so there's a point halfway between those points, which the runner has to reach first.«

«Is anyone else out there beginning to get a sinking feeling?»

»Now, you can surmise, as Zeno did, that there are an infinite number of divisions, one could keep dividing, then dividing that by half, so on and so on forever. So one can then argue that the race, the length between the starting line and the finish line, is infinitely long.«

«Uh, can we hear that again.»

»gnol yletinifni si, enil hsinif eth dna enil gnitrats eht neewteb thgnel eht, ecar eht taht eugra neht nac eno oS.reverof no so dna no so, flah yb taht gnidivid neht, gnidivid peek dluoc eon, noisivid fo rebmun

etinifni na era ereht taht, did oneZ sa, esimrus nac uoy, woN. tsrif
chear ot sah rennur hte dna tniop«

«Whoops, sorry bout that. Little heavy on the rewind button. But contrary to what anyone out there who's listening might think—if any of yuns even still exist—we're not drunk. So if any of yuns have the bright idea to try and bring us in on a public intoxication charge, this supposedly being the public airwaves, and all that, yuns can give it up now. And now...let's see...oh, yeah. Play.»

»point and the starting line again, so there's a point halfway between those points, which the runner has to reach first. Now, you can surmise, as Zeno did, that there are an infinite number of divisions, one could keep dividing, then dividing that by half, so on and so on forever. So one can then argue that the race, the length between the starting line and the finish line, is infinitely long.«

«Yeah, yuns heard it right, folks. So let's see where this goes.»

»However, depending on how you want to view Zeno's purpose in proposing this, you can, as later pre-Socratic philosophers argued, solve this paradox with the introduction of time.«

«So just a little pinch of time, everyone, that's all yuns need. It's also good for soup.»

»With the introduction of time, each part of the race must be completed in a certain amount of time. To move, for example, from the start to the halfway point will take a certain amount of time, and to get from there to the finish line will take a certain amount of time. And it is the combination of time plus distance that allows Zeno's descendants to resolve these ideas of motion in the physical universe, as they're observed by us. So here, we could argue we have an early framework for a kind of scientific wor—«

«Alright, that's enough. So time fixes everything. Well, we guess we've all already heard time heals all wounds, right? So here's our question. What happens if time gets screwed up? Or goes away? Does that mean it takes infinitely long to go to the bathroom? Will we ever get to the bathroom? Will we ever get to Will Self? Who knows? But if yuns're out there listening, yuns're approaching infinity right along with the rest of us, so hang in there. Now, since we don't have commercial breaks, allow us to bring yuns something that hasn't been heard in a long time.» sssssssssssssssssssssss «That's right, folks,

also pointed out, but that was a whole other deal. So books, in this case, like some species of birds and butterflies and moths, migrated, going from shelf to shelf, section to section, sometimes grouped with this, sometimes grouped with that, but always, or at least, mostly, true to themselves. Although, it could be argued, it's difficult, if not impossible, but again, that'd depend on who any given inquirer were to ask on what was left of the internet, but it could be argued that an inanimate object can't ever be anything but true to itself, whatever that might mean, which was, obviously, another topic entirely. But Anime did her best, and if the shop, at times, seemed to have a certain...flow to it, that was alright, too. There was a theory espoused by, one, JRogerMaximus, on what was left of the internet, that any group of inanimate objects, like, say, a bunch of gravel in a driveway, if arranged according to patterns and operated on, that is, moved about, by a system of rules, they create a patternizing system which, in this case, can be thought of as a computer that was capable in theory, though only in theory in the colloquial use of theory, that is to state, in the hypothetical sense, of simulating whole universes, albeit, rather slowly; but from the point of view of the universes themselves it wouldn't be slow at all, in fact, time, if there were such a concept in the simulated universe, as it wasn't a given that there *had* to be such, at least some speculated, but if there were, it would pass exactly as it should according to the rules of the simulation, regardless of how fast the physical objects that formed the patterns that constituted their encoded information were arranged, or at least so one later extension to the theory went, as proposed by CosmoPuppet77. So according to this, one theory, again, in the colloquial sense, one theory holds—though, here too, it'd be more accurate to employ hypothesis, as Wellington'd point out—but one theory holds that, in fact, this process was currently being undergone in the confines of Anime's bookshop, where the constantly shifting arrangements of volumes constituted a simulation, or set of simulations, of a secondary universe, or set of universes, and that within each could thus be instantiated a multiverse of its own, however, the latter was an even later speculation by DialecticBandaidd99. She (Anime), of course, doesn't think about this, specifically, in this given moment, but does spend an inordinate amount of time flipping through a book titled

An Infinity In Ones and Their Opposites: The Reflexivity of Recursive Possibility and The Philosophical and Practical Implications and Applications of Turing Complete Patterns As Implemented In Conway's Game of Life Through Recursive Implementations Of Such; A Treatise On The Possibility Of Possibilities, Sixteenth Expanded Edition, With Commentaries, which, incidentally, has no cover image, as the text of the title itself takes up that whole space, even relegating the authors' names to tiny initials, the title on the spine printed in such a small font she had to lean toward the lantern and near press her nose against it to make out, and still might not've been able to do so reliably had she not read the cover text first and had a general idea of what it should've been.

She looked up when the door opened, the little bells tied to the top corner jingling pathetically. "Hello. Is there anything I can help you with?"

The teen shook his head. "Just...looking..." And hands in his pockets, he walked across the front of the store and squatted to peruse through a box of old paperbacks.

"You can take whatever you want," Anime said. Of course, this's also one of the reasons she couldn't make money. Though, that phrase *make money*, is interesting in and of itself, at least it had been to some, as if it's almost being implied—or stated rather explicitly, rather—that money was somehow manufactured via these processes in some way, that is to state, that it didn't exist, but then it did, as if there'd then at any given later time been more, rather than a stream flowing round and round. Though, technically, yes, it did get *made*, because, being a human physical and thochtic construct, it did have to be manufactured (barely mentioning at all the purely thochtic conceptualization that came from its creation via institutional loans—which itself, of course, must find physical expression, at some point, as well, if only in the arrangements of magnetic wells and voltage variances) and at least, in regards to cash, which some people felt was more real than ephemeral ones and zeros in distant electronic circuitry (if even it existed there) but introducing the idea they were equally imaginary, but that that didn't necessarily mean either weren't real, and maybe were realer for it, had already caused one explosion in the last, approximate, relative, twenty-four hours,

sometime before, so it was better to avoid that. Or maybe it was simply because the phrase *making money* was more ego gratifying and grandiloquent than *monetary transfer*. In any regards, Anime, it being the end of the world and all that, just couldn't see the point in either *making money* or *monetary transfers*. "Everything's free this evening."

He looked over his shoulder at her. "Like...for real?"

"Yap." She looked down sadly at a poor paperback that'd had its cover ripped off to be sent back to the publisher as proof of its destruction...like a classical savage taking a scalp.

"So..." he said. "Like...all of these?"

"Everything."

She set the poor mangled thing aside. The teen stood, lifting the box of mass-market paperbacks. "You're sure."

Anime leaned over and glanced into the box. "Yap."

And looking as if the cops were going to swoop in on him any minute, he lugged the box across the shop and hastily opened the door and trumbled (this word being related to, but separate from, trundle—as individual words mean something individual, or so MarquisdeSloth has pointed out on one of the SHOM threads on what still remains of the internet, in part via a quote from Theodore Sturgeon—that is, similar in fashion but referring to walking slash perambulation), but he trumbled out, looking left and right over his shoulders as he hurried down the sidewalk. Anime watched him till he disappeared past the shop windows, then looked down at the piles of books on the desk. She selected one, turning it over. Eventually, she'd gathered a stack in her arms, carried them across the shop, back into the darkened spaces between the shelves, where the minimal light coming through the front windows and doors failed to reach, the LED lamp casting a blueish-white glow on rows and rows of spines, the volumes piled along the floor.

The recording of the staticky former background radiation of the universe'd continued all the time the teenager'd been there, continued, actually, till she'd only two books left in her arms as she squatted at the end of the aisle reading the spines, running her fingers over them, finding just the right place to slot the next.

«*Sorry bout that, folks. A little bit longer break than we'd expected.*

But no need to be alarmed, we're still here. Just be thankful yuns were listening to a buncha actual static, rather than a buncha commercials, right? We're not here after all to get people to kill themselves. And to any of yuns out there thinking of it, the world's almost over, idiot, so why bother to expend the effort? We here at EFKO advocate laziness. Pure. Simple. Unfettered. Unadulterated. And if yuns think the last part means something to do with adultery, yuns either have dirty minds, or yuns need a dictionary bad. So let's give a shout-out.»

«We have it on very good authority that local bookseller Anime Jones is having a special Evening of the World Sale, all you can carry away for free. So if anyone out there listening actually wants to find out what Marxist-Feminism and Intersectionality are before those things cease to exist, along with everything else, just go on down.»

«But if yuns do, we suggest yuns bring yuns's own light because, unlike some of those rich folks in this county, most people don't have full-house backup generators. But while we're talking about it, let's give a shout-out to Pat Taylor. What's it feel like to be the new richest man in the world? Yes, yuns heard it here first, folks. Real-estate mogul Pat Taylor is now, officially, the riches man in the world. Problem is it doesn't take as much as it used to, these days. And our recommendation is that Mister Taylor hurry up and spend it as fast as he can.»

«But then, of course, he wouldn't be rich anymore.»

«To be rich orn't to be rich, that—»

The bells tied to the top of the door jingled pathetically, but Anime didn't look up from what she was doing, till after she slotted the last book into place. Of course, when she stood, she lifted a fresh stack from the floor, volumes that'd been culled for re-sorting, and carried them toward the desk. "Oh," she said. "I didn't expect you till later."

"Really?" Langdon, phone in hand, looked down at it, the back-light illuminating him from the chest up. "I thought it was later." He turned it off and pulled up one of the velcro straps on his cargo shorts, which made that horrible ripping sound velcro always made, and slipped it into that pocket. "So do you wanna get something to eat? Or wadda yuh wanna do?"

"I don't know. Wadda bout you?"

"Hadn't really thought of anything particular," he said. "We could eat out. Or I could just go get something, if you wanted."

"Where're you going?"

"I can go wherever you want."

She sighed, looking down at all the books stacked on the desk. "Whatever." She looked up at him, the headlamp shining in his face, blinding him, so he had to put up his hand. "Oops." She clicked it off. "Sorry." She stood there contemplating. "What're your plans?"

"Nothing real definite yet."

Anime nodded absently. As her eyes adjusted, she looked round the shop again, over the books stacked on the desk. "Well, I guess I can ride out with you. If you don't mind dropping me off back here when we're done."

"No problem."

She lifted her bag and stepped out from behind the desk. "I've still got a few things I want to get sorted."

They walked out onto the sidewalk, Anime not bothering to lock the doors. Langdon climbed in and lifted the laptop from the passenger seat and reached back and wedged it in among the VHS tapes and leaned across and opened the door because it wouldn't open from the outside. And she climbed in. She glanced over her shoulder, into the back seat. "What're all the tapes for?"

Langdon glanced over his shoulder as he started the car, as if he'd forgotten about them. "I have no idea."

"Do you even have a VHS player anymore?"

"Nope."

For once, since only two cars were parked on the street, and those far away, it was easy enough to back out without worrying about being hit, a not-so-borderline miracle.

"What're you going to do with 'em?"

She glanced into the back seat. "The invisible library, hm?"

"Hm." He shifted the car into drive, though it protested. "I guess so." One of the headlights no longer worked. "Maybe I'll go back up to the university later and see if I can track down a TV. Hey—is the pizza place up here still open?"

"I don't know."

"Aren't they supposed to use real fire stoves...?" Around the corner, across from the cardboard plant, an outdoor eating patio was lit with candles. "You wanna give it a try?"

“Well...” She checked her bag. “I’ve got lactose pills. So I’m good.
If it’s what you want.”

“Is it fine with you?”

“Whatever. You?”

“Whatever.”

“Alright,” Absolute called. “It’s hooked up.” And he barely had time to step out of the way before Candi’d gunned the engine in her small car and the cable’d pulled tight, and the car went squealing across the parking lot, and the cellophane-wrapped pallet skidded out of the back of the truck and slammed onto the asphalt. He climbed down out of the back of the tractor trailer. And the driver, without saying anything, as he’d done the whole time, closed it up and locked it down. And he walked along the truck, checking underneath as he moved toward the cab, and finally climbed in. Absolute stood there watching the truck weave its way down the hill, brake lights glowing red. Because of the noise, he hadn’t heard the car door slam, and when he looked over his shoulder, Candi’d almost reached him, coiling the rope as she came. She dropped the coil atop the cellophane-wrapped books. The wrapped pallets’d held up remarkably well, many things considered. He looked at them. “So now what’re we supposed to do with all these?”

She kissed his cheek. “You worry too much.” She grabbed his hand. “Now, come on, let’s eat. I’m starving.”

“Oh,” he said, as they walked, “that reminds me. I think Karen left a cappuccino for you. But it’s probably cold by now.”

“Well, that’s terrible. What about the generator?”

“I turned it off to save gas.”

She sighed. “Where’s it at?”

“It’s in the parking lot in back, where it’s always been.”

“Noooo. I mean, where’d you put the cappuccino?”

“Oh. I set it in the break room.”

“Well, let’s just go find it then. Did they leave you one, too?”

“Yeah.”

“And I bet you’ve already finished yours.”

"I didn't know how long you were gonna be gone." He held open the door.

"And after all the trouble I went through to find just the right kind of potato salad. Do you have any idea how hard it is to find potato salad with red potatoes and no onions right now?"

"You're the one who wanted it."

"And you're going to lovingly watch me eat it." She removed her flashlight from her pocket and clicked it on. "But you could've at least had the courtesy to wait till everything was assembled before you pigged out."

"I'd hardly call a coffee pigging out."

They made their way along the hallway and toward the break room. She released his hand as they entered. "You get the coffee," she said, and she went over to the microwave and pulled the plug from the wall and held the flashlight in her mouth and lifted it.

"You want some help with that?"

"*Nup.*" She turned, motioned her head for him to get moving. And carrying the room-temperature cappuccino cup, he went out ahead, the flashlight beam spreading over his back. He lifted his own cup and what remained in it, from the front desk, and pushed against the door with his elbow, holding it open for her. "*Tnk yuh.*" And she waited for him to do the same with the outer door. "*Tnk yuh.*" And they walked across the parking lot.

The generator definitely wasn't some industrial model, just some small something they sold at Lowes, the smallest. An extension cord ran from it and up through a window. Candi squatted and set the microwave on the asphalt, turned her head to shine the flashlight on the generator to find the plugs. "*Arit.*" She removed the flashlight from her mouth, the end a little wet with drool; and she wiped her lip. "Start it up." He turned the key and pressed the starter with his foot, and after a few attempts, it sputtered, then puttered along. Still squatting there in front of the microwave, she raised her hand. "Coffee." He set the cup in her palm. And she popped open the microwave door with her free hand. And she squatted there, watching it go round and round, glowing from the light inside. But after thirty-two seconds, she glanced over her shoulder. "You gonna bring the food?"

"We eatin' out here?"

“I figured we’d have a picnic.”

“Alright.” He turned and crossed the parking lot and stepped inside and went over to the librarian counter, hooked the plastic bag on two fingers. It faintly swung as he carried it across the parking lot. By the time he’d returned, Candi’d set the cappuccino atop the microwave and squatted there with the door open. He offered her the bag. And she stacked the instant-Thai containers beside the cappuccino, pulling out one of the water bottles, uncapping it, pulling back the plastic film covering a noodle dish, splashing water haphazardly into it, before setting it (the dehydrated noodles) inside the microwave. She watched it go round as the microwave hummed. He didn’t bother to comment, as he sometimes did, though purely out of habit, about how she could comfortably squat that long that way.

“Are you looking at my ass?”

“Yes.”

The microwave beeped, and she punched it open, carefully gripped the hot plastic tray, and set it on the asphalt. “Well, just for that, I’ll add water to yours and hit a button.” Which she did. She finished removing the plastic from the one cooling on top, ripped open a seasoning packet over it. She reached into the plastic bag, brought out a container of plastic utensils, and ripped the cardboard, hunting through it for a fork, fighting to get it out because the tines’d tangled with others of its kind. The microwave beeped, and she punched it open. She stood, a heated plastic tray in each hand. “I’ll let you get the rest.”

“Alright.”

“That way you can follow me and keep an eye on my ass.”

He lifted the plastic bag. He was still carrying what remained of his cappuccino. “Yes, mam.” And he did.

They stepped off the asphalt, over the curb, and onto the grass, the hill sloping steeply below them all the way to Mainstreet. Even with the darkness, which simulated night so well, the air’d remained dry, and’d kept the grass from gathering dew, so she sat without issue. He dropped down beside her, setting the plastic bag between them. And they sat stirring their noodles, sniffing them, as they looked down at Mainstreet and beyond, over the hills out toward the edges of what remained of the world and the glow that diffused over them. Candi

set her noodles down and reached for the cappuccino, pulling off the lid, sniffing it. “Mmmmm.” She picked a plastic knife from the utensil box and stirred it (that is, she stirred the cappuccino with the knife; she didn’t stir the knife, or stir the utensil box with the knife). She inhaled deeply. “Mmmmmm.”

Absolute sat there still stirring, the container still too hot to rest on his lap. “It sounds as if we’re getting close to When Harry Met Sally territory.”

She inhaled deeply. “Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm.”

Absolute brought the container up as he simultaneously bent forward toward it and brought a forkful of noodles to his mouth, blowing on them before he closed his lips round the fork tines and bit them off (the noodles, that is, not the fork tines).

“Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm. Mmmmmmmmmmm. Ugggggggggggggggggggggh.”

He swallowed. “Uh hm.”

She laughed, then finally sipped the still steaming cappuccino. “Mm. Even reheated, it isn’t too bad. You said Karen left this?”

“I reckon.” He slurped, opening his mouth and breathing out to keep from burning his tongue.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full.” She lifted her own noodle tray and spun noodles onto the fork, putting the whole glob in her mouth. “’ts bd mnrs.” She looked at him as she chewed, while he sipped what was left of his room-temperature slash outdoor-temperature cappuccino. She pointed with her fork, swallowed enough to say, “You’ve got some on your lip.” He licked. She shook her head and leaned in and kissed him, pulled away. “There.” She stirred her noodles so they didn’t coagulate as they cooled. His lips tingled from the spices, but he couldn’t tell if it was from his own noodles or from hers.

Below, a lone car made its way up Mainstreet, headlights fanned out before it, licking old brickwork buildings.

“You get to do the dishes,” she said. She set down her noodle tray and twisted and hunted through the plastic bag, coming up with the potato salad container and snapping off the plastic pieces that anchored the lid. “Just so you know.”

“Noted.”

She dug out a plastic spoon. “After all, I did the hard part.” She

looked down Mainstreet, watching the car disappear in the distance, obscured by various smoldering structures as it turned up toward McDonald's and points up that way, savoring the combined texture of boiled potatoes and eggs (that is, Candi savored the boiled potatoes and eggs, not that the car she'd been watching was doing such). She compressed her lips round the spoon and drew it out of her mouth to clean it. "And after that you get dessert."

He leaned over and peeked into the plastic bag.

"It's not in there."

He pulled out the utensil box and set it on the grass, then stuffed his empty noodle container, coagulated sauce sticking to the plastic sides, into the bag. He reached over. "Finished with this?" She nodded as she chewed. And he stuffed her noodle tray into the bag as well. He collected the cappuccino cups, which, incidentally, were just plain, white, and unbranded and unlabeled. They sat there in silence, her still eating, till she'd started scraping the sides of the potato salad container, and finally set it on the grass, Absolute collecting it and stuffing it in the bag, which he tied off. He reached for the utensil box, stood with it in one hand and the bag in his other. "I'll set these in the break room."

"Alright." She stretched as she sat there, leaned back on her elbows. "I also brought tooth brushes," she called. "There were plenty of them left. They're in the back seat." He took the hint and went to the car before he went inside, dropping the plastic grocery bag into the bin out back. Since the water didn't work, obviously, with the combination of no electricity and therefore no way to pump it uphill, he cracked open one of the water bottles, rinsing his mouth with it a few times after he was done. He carried the water bottle with him as he went out and crossed the parking lot and stepped onto the grass and settled down beside her. He uncapped it and sipped as he looked across the county.

"Pretty," she said, "isn't it?"

He re-capped the water bottle. It, and the others like it, were some of the only pieces of Michigan still extant, that being where it'd been pumped from—the still liquid part, that is, as the formerly liquid material that then eventually came to form the bottle that held the still liquid part had originally been pumped out of the ground near

Cruxifiction Plains, Texas, during a latter-day expansion of American oil and gas production. "I reckon."

She sat up, turned, rolling across him and straddling him. "You reckon, huh?"

"Yap."

"Well, I reckon..." She glanced over her shoulder as a motor revved. And he shifted and sat up to look over her shoulder, as well. Below, a tractor trailer passed the fountain.

"Probably the next load," Absolute said.

"What next load?"

"You signed the paperwork," he said, "We've probably only got about a dozen of those to go still." Though, this wasn't exactly accurate.

She turned and stared at him. "You're joking."

"You're the one who said not to worry so much."

She grabbed his collar. "Why you..."

"I guess we could always go inside and lock the doors and pretend we're not there."

"Shhh," she said. The truck'd started up the hill. "Stay quiet and still and maybe they won't notice us."

“I leave for one goddamn afternoon and everything goes to hell.” Angela poured herself a glass of lemonade from the pitcher that’d been left on the table. A pile of lemons remained in a steel bowl on the kitchen counter, softening, also needing to be squeezed. That was the benefit of everything that’d happened happening so suddenly, at least, from the perspectives of most of those in the county who could admit to such things, not to mention the rest of the world slash universe, which was the same thing, for the most part, depending on the viewpoint of the observer, that anything and everything could just be thrown into it at once, as there was no such thing as hedonism at the end of everything. She tilted back her head and half-emptied the glass, sighed. She crossed the living room and stepped through the open sliding door and onto the covered deck.

Gabriel wiped his hands on a rag, tossed it onto the worktable. “Good hunting?”

Angela rolled her eyes, touched the glass to her lips, and threw back her head and downed the rest of it. She looked at the empty glass. “Not a damn thing.”

“Better luck next time?”

“Ughh.” She rolled her eyes again. Then she rolled her neck. “I’d just like a nice hot shower.”

“I’ll turn on the generator,” he said, and passed her. “You’ll have to wait for the tank to heat up.”

“You’re supposed to know when I’m coming and have these things ready.” She shook her head after he’d gone, looked over the tables that’d been arrayed on the back porch, covered with bits of metal and glass and pliers and wire and solder spools and clamps and cutters and pincers and nippers and gas-powered soldering irons and blowtorches and their associated canisters. A small battery powered LED, wires

trailing down to a box of interconnected alkaline 12v units, hung clipped over where he'd sat perched on the stool till she'd come in.

Around the side of the house, the generator rumbled. The screen door slammed.

"Well, I'm sorry I can't tell the future," he said.

"Well, you should," she said. "But even if you did, you'd just forget it, just like men always do."

He squeezed past her, through the doorway. "You should've used your women's intuition to remind me of that before you left."

"Sure, blame the women. It's what men always do when things get the least little bit rough. You might as well erect a stake out back and tie me to it and set it on fire and get rid of the witch."

He took up position on the stool again. "I did try to impale you this morning."

"And did the usual horrible job of it."

"Women always keep thinking it's the man's responsibility to get them off, so they can just lay there."

"Belligerent," she said. "As usual. I don't know what else I'd expect from you."

"Bitchy. As usual."

She pursed her lips. "I expect a massage after I get outa the shower." She turned. "But you'd better not expect anything."

He called after her, "Entitled."

She turned, came back, and stood in the doorway. "On second thought..." She stepped between the tables and crossed the porch, stepped right up against him, and hooked her boot on one of the stool's support struts. "I'm sure you've done something wrong while I was gone that I just haven't found out about yet. So maybe I should just go ahead and preemptively punish you."

He stared up into her eyes. "The thing women just won't ever admit," he said, and grabbed her wrist and stood, grabbed her other, forced her down, straddling her on the deck floor, "is that men are just the naturally stronger sex." He pinned her wrists over her head, against the deck-stained wood.

"All men're just rapists, anyway."

He winced. She noticed. "A little strong," he said.

"Sorry." She looked up at him. "You still in the mood?"

He leaned down. "Always."

"Just like—" She didn't get to finish before he kissed her. He pulled back, raising his head out of reach of her mouth as she came up after him. "Also there was a call from the university. Apparently, something's crashed up there, too."

"Fuck'em."

"Now, that isn't very ladylike." He moved her wrists together so he could hold them with one hand. "Don't you want to be a good girl?" He reach between him and her as best he could and unbuttoned her pants.

"No."

He paused as she wriggle beneath him. "Green or red?"

"Green."

"Okay then." He reached up onto the table and felt for a roll of cord, held it between his teeth as he grabbed her wrists in each hand again and pulled them up, holding them with one hand as he wrapped them. And he pushed her arms up and wrapped the cord round a table leg. Done, he looked down, worked his fingers into her pants and beneath her panties. "So you're gonna punish me, huh?" He pulled them down, moving back to make room to get them halfway down her thighs. He leaned down and smelled her, breathing deep.

"You're worse than a dog."

"Isn't that what all men are?"

"Yap."

He shifted to pull her pants down so they bunched at her ankles and overtop her boots. And he touched her knees and pushed them apart so her legs had to fold open like some piece of architectural equipment. Silly. Not to state such was considered in regards to her legs or their movements, just that the simile was labeled so almost immediately upon generation. And there was something horribly embarrassing about it, one of those things he was glad to've managed to never've said aloud, at least not yet. All of this, of course, being internally recognized and discarded to concentrate on more soon to be pressing involved matters.

"Ow." She shifted. "Yellow. Yellow."

He leaned over her. "What's the problem?"

"My foot..." She shook her head. "I can't do this with boots on."

"Alright..." He moved back. "Just a minute." And he worked to unlace her boots and slip them off. "Better?"

"Yes. Pants, too, please."

"If I take those off I'm going to have to tie your legs open."

"Green."

"Alright." He stood and stepped toward another table for a coil of rope. And he knelt and worked at her pants, which wasn't a small job, with the way they'd bunched. And he looped a cord around an ankle, threaded it round a table leg, did the same with another cord and her other ankle. And he sat back on his knees, gently pulling, her legs opening, and he tied the ropes off so they'd have to stay that way (her legs and the ropes both, that is). He moved up and leaned down and kissed the inside of her thigh. "All this work just to get to a sweaty twat."

"If you were capable of controlling yourself, these things wouldn't happen."

"And if you'd quit using your pact with the devil to bewitch me, this wouldn't happen either."

"Men just like to make up shit because they can't control themselves."

"It's your fault for dressing like a slut." He kissed the inside of her other thigh. "What do you expect?" He pushed her t-shirt up her stomach, leaned down and kissed it (her stomach, that is). "Walking around with bare arms." He moved back down to her knee.

"Men," she said. "No sense of direction."

"You're only lucky you made it this far without this happening to you."

"And none of them could find the clitoris, even if their lives depended on it."

"But really you all just want it, don't you. You just can't admit it."

"Does it make you feel like a man, controlling somebody else's body 'cause you can't control your own?"

He leaned over her. "Maybe." And he pulled himself up and stepped over her. "Since you're so empowered, why don't you take care of yourself." And he walked off into the house.

She lay there, craning her neck to try to follow him, but the interior was too darkened to discern anything. She lay there noticing, in the

silence, her heart hammering against the inside of her chest as it (her chest, that is) expanded and contracted in the tangled confines of her sports bra and shirt. She looked up at the underside of the porch ceiling, just unstained wood beams. The stream trickled not far away. For a moment, lying there, she considered if there'd been more than just this house built along here, other decks and porches down the way, where someone might step out for a breath of air on the last evening of the world, catch a glimpse of... She looked toward the doorway and the sound of footsteps.

“So much for the empowered woman, I guess.” He knelt beside her, setting a bottle of coconut oil on the deck. “For later.”

«Hey, any of yuns out there who still exist, we just wanna remind yuns that if yuns happen to have a pink convertible stuffed out there somewhere that yuns'd like to sell, now's yuns chance. And if yuns can't make up yuns's mind whether yuns wanna get rid of it or not, well, yuns'd better hurry, cause listen to this any of yuns that might still be in existence, GoldStarLesbian³² and GodsFistsOfFury³¹⁶ have just updated their posts, and now money is no object, which for any of yuns out there thinking so is not some subtle statement of metaphysics. No, it means exactly what yuns think it does. And somebody out there's gonna get very rich on this deal, we here at EFKO can just feel it, yuns, yuns, might even be the newest richest man or woman, or anything else yuns wanna call yuns'sselves with that kinda money, in the county, for what it's worth, so howsa bout that? And we don't know who of yuns're left out there, but we're sure somebody's got the goods, and yuns'd better hurry up, cause yuns're running outa time to spend all that money. Also a note out there for any of yuns who've ever played the lottery, yuns know that the best thing to do is not win. That way yuns can say yuns lost two-three-four-billion dollars, whatever, and people'll just assume yuns actually had it to lose in the first place. And they won't ask yuns for none of it, because yuns done told em yuns don't got none. After all, yuns all know that a broke millionaire's more moral than somebody who's always been poor. But let's get offa economics. We mean, yuns know, there're some theories out there that state that everything's about economics. Hell, even God got in on it. Give him sheep or a few doves, and he gives yuns forgiveness. Economics, folks, it just might be what the entire universe is about. Now we could segue from that into this tape we just happen to have right here in our hand titled as...some lecture on the bourgeois influence on the western religious tradition, but as we've just

spent a very long while on a diatribe on why suicide is stupid, we'll try to not then turn round and encourage it. So we here at EFKO do not with one hand giveth and one hand taketh away. Now, that's cute, we gotta admit. We did like that. And yes, we're sitting here self-aggrandizing ourselves, since, well, since we have no advertisers—we know, we're Perverts. But at least we're not Hysterics, right? And yuns can stop with the messaging already, people. We get the message. Yuns know, we bet more than half of yuns on here aren't real. It's probably bots. Ah, yuns see, one of them's saying it's not a bot. So obviously, that one has to be a bot. On what's left of the internet, no one can tell if yuns're a chatbot. Well, we're here to tell yuns, folks, we're not a chatbot. However, we might be robots. We do seem to have a lot of plug-in attachments. So at minimum we're probably cyborgs. Which reminds us, also, there is currently a charity drive ongoing to collect batteries for those in need. Also, for any women who prefer the corded variety—a shout-out to all yuns Hitachi Magic Wand users out there, yuns know who yuns are—ConnieMultispan1973 is currently hauling a generator round in the back of her truck, and if yuns'd like to get on the schedule, yuns can find her on what's left of the internet.»

Hope was the last remaining purely bathroom theorist left in the world. Unlike Langdon and Gordon, whose work sometimes tacitly veered into such territory, she'd spent her whole career there. Generally, she'd been referred to as the sewage worker of the theory world, though the words that'd been more often deployed are easily deducible.

However, currently, she sat on a stone outcropping above the granite quarry that looked down upon Helena. Friday lay with her head in her (Hope's) lap, her (Friday's) eyes closed, while Hope stroked her (Friday's) hair. "It's much more peaceful up here now," Hope said, "without all the equipment and blasting and all that mess." Friday didn't reply, but Hope continued to stroke her hair. "You can't stay mad forever, you know."

"I'm not mad."

"She's doing the best she can under the circumstances."

"I didn't say..." Friday sat up. "I don't wanna talk about this right now."

"Well, what do you wanna talk about, then?"

Friday sighed. She turned and scooched up beside Hope. She didn't say anything, just looked down at her army boots where they protruded past the hem of her gown. "Damn it." She bent forward and pulled a boot lace, which was already coming undone anyway, and retied it. She sat back. "I just wanna see dad again, too."

"You're going to," Hope said. "It's only a matter of time."

"But if they were wrong? What if he isn't anywhere anymore?"

"You can't think like that."

"But it's possible."

Hope looked down at Helena in silence, a few minimal lights here and there, hardly more than candles, overwhelmed by what

must've been the only generator in town, illuminating the Jameson House.

"And what," Hope said, "does Thursday think?"

Friday hauled back and threw a stone over the edge, it falling and falling and falling into the quarry below. "Oh, she's just the same. Just the same as she always is." She felt around for another stone. "She never changes." She hauled back with it. "This place makes me so *mad*."

Hope tried to stop herself from laughing, but failed. Friday looked at her. "Don't laugh at me."

Hope shook her head. "I'm not laughing at you." And while Friday probed for another stone, she (Hope) grasped her (Friday's) hand. And she leaned over and put her head against her (Friday's) shoulder. "You're just like her, you know."

"Who?"

"Thursday."

"I am *not*."

"You're both war children," Hope said. "You don't know how to be anything else."

Friday remained silent.

Hope said, "You know the first time I saw you?"

"After End of the World."

"No," Hope said. "It was when M—— came. When you were lit up with nothing but fire and fury. It was the most awe-inducing thing I'd ever seen. It literally made me piss my pants."

"Eww."

Hope laughed. "I fell in love with you right then." She sighed. "You know we were the same age then?" She raised her head from Friday's shoulder. "Now look at me. Five years difference. And you're wasting the latter half of your twenties with me."

"Oh, quit feeling sorry for yourself." She added, "Old lady."

Hope gripped Friday's hand tighter. "I believe he's still out there. I have to believe that. Because...because, for the longest time, I thought you'd died, too. And then Thursday came back. And then your mother came back. And then you came back. And so far as I know, he's been the only other ever capable of unmaking anything, so by the very laws of thermodynamics, I would think, at least, he's

still gotta be around somewhere....” It should go without stating that this made little sense to anyone involved. But that didn’t stop it from being somewhat effective. Though, only somewhat.

“I’m not gonna go find a worm and talk to it,” Friday said.

Hope sighed. “You’re so damn infuriating.”

“Well, I am fire and fury.”

“Well,” Hope said, “maybe you need to expand your repertoire.”

“It’s just that this waiting’s too hard sometimes.”

“Well, if you would just, maybe, have a little hope, maybe things would start to look up.”

Friday looked at her, paused. “Eww. Have you been waiting this whole time for that pun?”

“I plead the fifth.”

Friday shook her head.

“Maybe you should just give your mother a little breathing room.”

“That’s who told you, wasn’t it? She told you where I was. And she sent you up here in real time.”

“Well, I didn’t walk up here.”

Friday pulled her hand away, and Hope reached over and took it again and clasped it in both hers. “Ego’s the best semi-human or demi-human divining rod in... what’s left of the universe. I believe he can be found. And I believe that, if he can be found, she can find him.”

“Not if he doesn’t exist.”

“Will you stop that. You know the only thing that could’ve ever taken him out was himself. And he’d’ve never done that. Never done it in a million years. All you have to do is look in you or Thursday’s or your mother’s eyes to know it.”

“But there could be something else out there. Something we never knew about. And if Levi can be gone...” Tears started, and Hope pulled Friday against her shoulder and rested her (Hope’s) cheek against the top of her (Friday’s) head.

“You can’t blame them all for something that couldn’t be avoided. She was just protecting them the same as he was protecting you.”

“I didn’t need protecting. If he’d...”

Hope stroked her hair. “It’s not your fault either. It’s no one’s fault. And it doesn’t matter, because he’s coming back.”

"You don't know that."

Hope remained silent, looking out at the light at the edges of the county. "I'm not going to ask you to stop crying. Do you know why?"

After a while, Friday said, "Why...?"

"Because what feels like a very long time ago, I did the same thing, because I never believed that I'd be here to see you do the same. And it proves to me that things can turn out like you didn't expect them to."

Friday shook her head, rubbing it against Hope's shoulder. "That sounds so stupid."

Hope faintly laughed to herself. "Maybe that's what happens when you get old. You get silly and stupid. And whatever you say don't make sense half the time." She hugged her. "But I don't reckon there's ever been a rule that said anything had to make sense. A lot of thing's sheer existence was enough to prove that."

They sat there in silence awhile, till Hope said, "Would it be alright if we moved now? I'm afraid of falling off this thing."

Friday pulled away, faintly smiled. She sniffed and wiped her nose. "What's the matter, don't believe I'd catch you?"

"I'd be afraid I'd have a heart attack before you did. That's one of the other things about getting old. Along with getting these old bones broken. We don't mend as well as you young whippersnappers, you know."

Friday shook her head. "Cut it out." But she faintly smiled, at least till she looked up, out to the edges of what remained of the world. "We'll go home. But... Just a little while longer, okay?"

"As long as you need."

In the silence that followed, Friday reached over and clasped Hope's hand.

The lunch bell rang, and Mrs Fox continued to animatedly gesticulate, but the sound'd been cut off, so she just silently whispered or shouted at them from behind the tv glass, as if she'd been locked away there, as they filed out into the hallway. A moment or two later, preceded by a haze of schizoid artifacting, the screen went black, that kind of blank black that'd been lighter than the black of the surface behind the glass when power'd been fully cut and after the energy remaining in the tube'd not been enough to make the surface appear anything but cold and inert, the tape continuing on with that nothing that would continue till the tape'd been entirely spooled from one spool to another.

"I have to go to the commissary," Lily said. She held her copy of *Still-Water Life As They Apply To A Slice of Lemon Pie* against her chest as they moved through the crowd. "I've gotta get a new shoelace." She had no time or ability to look down to see if the temporary fix she'd knotted into it after they'd broken it while doing the strip search still held.

"I need a new toothbrush," Harmony said.

"If we don't hurry," Juliette said, "they'll only have the last of everything in the cafeteria."

"Go on ahead then," Crystal said. "Nobody's keeping you."

"What about you?"

"I'll go see," Crystal said, "if they've got anything new."

"They've never got anything new," Harmony said.

"I didn't say anything about *that* commissary, did I?"

"Oh."

But if Juliette'd gone to the cafeteria by herself, that'd meant she'd have to go by herself, so she said, "I'll come with yuns."

And all that meant, since it was lunch time, and they were heading

in the opposite direction, the commissary being on the far side of the school, they had to fight the flow of the crowd the whole way. Even after all that, when they turned the corner, there was a short line ahead of them, those, like them, waiting to speak through the grated window set into the wall at just over head height, the person already immediately before it extending onto tiptoe to see over the sill.

“This’ll take forever,” Juliette said.

“You got money?” Harmony said. She pulled out her phone.

“A little,” Lily said. She pulled hers out, tapped the screen to bring up the wallet app. “At least, what’s left after the fines.”

Harmony glanced over at Lily’s screen. “You won’t be able to afford lunch with just that much, not if you buy anything else.”

“I gotta do something,” she said, and she looked down at her shoe. She could’ve used it shorter and just threaded it through the top four holes, but that’d’ve been a violation of the dress code. And she was already on notice, as it was, so if she didn’t get it replaced... “I’ve got no choice.” She’d only have six more hours before another fine. And if she couldn’t pay that one...

“When’re your parents supposed to put some more money into your account?”

“Um...” Lily pulled up the calendar. “Two days...?” But there’d be two days for the processing, for which there’d be a percentage charged, in addition to the weekly account maintenance fee, which would depend on the total amount of credits within the account, whether they were under, over, or within a given set of rotationally calculated ranges, along with other numerical and numerological and computological esoteria.

“I could transfer you some,” Harmony said. “But it won’t show up till after tomorrow.” Also, there’d’ve been a service charge for that based on the amount, the academic standing of the recipient, the academic standing of the sender, the records of the prior academic standing of the parents of both, and the time of day the transfer was initiated and another for the time of day it was completed, in addition to the day of the week, the time of the month, the phase of the moon—even though it didn’t still exist—whether or not it was initiated on, completed on, or in processing over a holiday slash holidays, and which holidays, among other more esoteric points of consideration.

Or she could've allowed the account to be charged and let it go negative, but there'd've been various penalty charges for that.

"There's another option," Crystal said. She nodded to someone passing, accepted a slip of paper in the practiced fashion that left even those standing immediately near her unaware of the handoff. "We could just go down to the cafeteria and have lunch and forget about all this."

"But—"

"Let's just go have lunch."

After a moment, Lily nodded, and she slipped her phone into her pocket.

Juliette started, "But—"

But Harmony elbowed her in the shoulder. "Let's go get something to eat, I'm starving."

"That's what I said to do in the first place," Juliette said.

Most everyone'd already made their way there, because the halls were almost empty, except for people transferring books in and out of the lockers so that the tags within could be dutifully scanned by the RFID units either side of the door to each classroom to ensure that they, a given volume, were where they, that same given volume, should be when they, that same given volume, should be, that everyone who was supposed to have them, that same given volume, had them, and so this information could be verified in order to pay the publisher the rental price for each use of such. Notably, this price was calculated on a kind of pool model, rather than a specific per-page basis, though there'd been some rumblings in county meetings in regards to a change in this direction. They made their way to the cafeteria to get their trays. But a couple people were still ahead of them. The last pulled out his phone and hovered it over the payment processor. But the screen lit red. This, of course, was the other problem with a negative balance. A hair-netted student behind the counter took out a red tray and went to the large stainless-steel machine in the corner and inserted it, pulled the long black-knobbed handle, and a chunky, brown morass squeezed out of the nozzle and coiled onto the tray. A single cycle of the handle produced a pre-measured portion, and she handed this pre-measured portion and red tray across to the boy, who, head down, took it and continued

down the line and out into the cafeteria. Of course, it made the four of them, each to their own degree, hesitant, even though they knew what was supposed to be in their accounts. But still, they breathed easier when the screen lit green and they slid their trays down the line of square containers, while, though the consistency was the same, at least the colors were brighter.

They went and found a table, consciously and unconsciously wary of the various territorial boundaries that fractured that space.

Crystal sat by Lily, said, "What length?"

Lily glanced at her, had to think a moment to realize what she was talking about. "Number three."

"I forgot my utensils," Crystal said. And she rose and walked toward the front of the cafeteria. Harmony glanced up and watched her go as she (Harmony) mechanically broke her plastic spoon from its plastic sheathing. Other forms of cutlery weren't permitted. But for what was served, it wasn't as if anything else were needed. What it had going for it was that the consistency, usually, was just the right combination of dry and wet. Too far on either end of the spectrum tended to make it hard to swallow, both literally and figuratively. (Though, some people on what was left of the internet claimed—depending, of course, on whether the giver arguer was a descriptivist or proscriptivist—the new variant of that phrase was (or should be): both literally and literally.)

Crystal returned bearing a plastic-wrap-encased spoon. "Everything's arranged," she said, as she sat down, casually as could be, while she broke the spoon free. "Check your locker after lunch."

"What's it going to cost?" Lily said between bites. They'd long been used to this kind of casual chatter.

"Don't worry bout that now."

"But..."

"He owes me a favor," Crystal said. "We'll work something out."

No one asked what the nature of this favor was.

"What about tomorrow's math test?" Harmony said.

Crystal said, "What about it?"

"My bra's busted."

"So?"

"So, I've got a paperclip wiring the latch together."

Crystal chewed, even though it wasn't required, and swallowed. "Well, can you get something else?"

"It's the only thing I've found that works."

"I don't know what I'm supposed to tell you."

"Could you," Juliette said, "kind'a tie it in a knot or something?"

"But that means I'll be sitting with my back against it the whole time."

"Buy a new one."

"I don't have the money yet. And they're so expensive."

"At least yours somewhat fits," Juliette said. Underwear, of course, was part of the school-mandated uniform clothing standards, however, they had only three sizes of bra available, and two of them were technically the same size, and the same color, only with different ID numbers on the inventory tags.

Harmony stirred her blue mound of food into the orange one, swirling them together, as if she'd been combing a zen garden, but with a shovel and without the benefit of a rake.

ATTENTION. Everyone glanced up. ATTENTION. THERE WILL BE A SURPRISE SCHOOL SHOOTING IN THIRTY MINUTES. ATTENTION. THERE WILL BE A SURPRISE SCHOOL SHOOTING IN THIRTY MINUTES. END OF MESSAGE.

"Better hurry up," Crystal said. "We can get to class right now if we hurry, and we won't have to worry 'bout it."

Harmony leaned forward, scooping inter-twirled-blue-orange morass into her mouth. She wiped her mouth. "Let's go, I can't afford another fine." They rose and carried their trays toward the recycling bin. All trays, by county law, had to be recycled, sent to wherever it was that melted them down and spat them out as trays again and shipped them to schools and other such institutions.

"Should I go check my locker now?" Lily said. She glanced toward the cafeteria clock as they headed out.

"Don't worry bout it," Crystal said. "It'll be there when you get out."

"What if they check lockers while we're in class?" Harmony said.

"It's just a shoestring. She needs a new shoestring. It's completely explainable. Now, hurry up, unless you want what happened last time

to happen again.” She added, “Unless you maybe like that sort of thing.”

Harmony pulled a face.

“Yeah,” Crystal said, “that’s the problem, with those black face shields, you can never tell if the one pulling down your shorts’s cute or not.” The school-mandated uniform clothing standard didn’t allow for shorts, but the point was taken anyway.

“Cut it out.”

“What? It’s not true, is it?”

“Sssh.” Others’d started to fill the hall by then, most of them with the same idea the four of them’d had. “Somebody’s gonna hear you. You just wanna get caught.” Which wasn’t likely at the moment. But that’d never stopped risky behavior before, for the obvious reasons, as South could point out. Though, he and Coraline’d once had an almost knockdown-dragout fight on something similar, though not identical, to this, which’d devolved into him yelling that physicists always thought they knew everything about every other branch of science, which’d prompted Langdon to mention something about being a woman in a hard-science field was likely to mean that such a person would’ve been institutionally and self-selected for and by a high degree of tenacity, and perhaps even dogmatism, which’d prompted the both of them to turn on him.

“Let’s just get inside,” Juliette said. The biology classroom lay ahead, the door open. Two others’d already beaten them there, were sitting in the back of the class whispering among themselves. They stopped as soon as Lily and the rest entered. And they had no time to talk before everyone else’d started to file in, followed, lastly, by Mister Wellington, who closed the door.

“Good afternoon, class.” He laid his stack of textbooks on the corner of his desk. And he went straight over and took up the whiteboard marker, popped the cap. “We’ve got alot to cover today, so we’re just going to start right into it.” The marker squeaked as he stroked the whiteboard. Some teachers used to complain about whiteboards, saying they produced a kind of powder, just like the chalk boards they were supposed to replace, just different, so they might as well’ve stayed with chalkboards. And this was one of the reasons the blackboards yet remained in the micro-electronics department

at Eagleton Technical College. He dotted a few 'i's, stepped back, reread what he'd written, stepped toward it and erased two letters and rewrote them transposed. He did this for himself alone, as what reason would there've been for it otherwise? "Alright." He capped the marker and turned. "Let's talk a moment about what evolution isn't. Because that's where everyone screws up the most. We've already gone over a few of them." He raised his fingers, counting off. "We have more evidence for it than we have for gravity. It's not about where life comes from, only what happens to it after it's here. And it's just not about humans. That is, it's not *only* about humans." He uncapped and re-capped the marker with one hand as he talked. "So what else? One, it wasn't discovered by Charles Darwin. People'd come up with similar theories for a long time. Darwin's own grandfather had a similar one, or at least something close enough. What Darwin *did* do first was collect a systematic argument *with evidence*. That's what sets him apart. He didn't make an offhand remark to someone. He wrote a book that pointed out here's evidence for it," he tapped the marker against his fingers in sequence, "and here, and here, and here. Two, Darwin was wrong about a lot of details. Yes, that's true. So was Newton." He held out the marker. "But just because Sir Newton was a tad wrong in some of his math on gravity..." He released it, and it struck the desk. "Doesn't make gravity not exist." He snatched up the marker. "In that vein, let's talk about natural selection. Now, we're going to talk about it in detail later, but the thing I wanna point out here is it's not the same as evolution. Evolution is an observable phenomena, like gravity. Natural selection is an *explanation* for what we observe. So it's the biological equivalent of gravitons in physics. It is not random. Or at least it's not random all the time. There are feedback loops, limitations, and numerous environmental factors all operating together in concert. But it's *also* random. We'll get to that later. And it was not in any way invented to undermine religion. Now, that may be what happens at times, but Charles Darwin didn't set out to do that. And finally, it doesn't happen to individuals, only populations. A cow does not give birth to a kangaroo—unless a scientist or possibly an alien is involved."

That got a few laughs.

"Good, so you all haven't fallen asleep first thing after lunch."

He uncapped the marker and turned toward the board. "Now, we're going to back up a bit to something we were talking about in a previous class." The marker squeaked, its timing at odds with the flow of his voice. "Evolution occurs through genetic modification. A small change, a small change, a small change. All these small changes aggregate. Get enough of them and you have the makings of a new species if enough changes accrue such that a significant part of the population doesn't want to hop into bed with the other half anymore." This got a few minor responses, mostly along the lines of suppressed noises of one kind or the other. "A few of them, and you get some people who are lactose intolerant and some who aren't, but they're still humans, now, the ones that can eat cheese, they're dirty mutants—" Laughter. "Alright. So we've got cloning. And we've got things like genetically modified food. And everybody's complaining about this, right? And people want it labeled, and things like that." He re-capped the marker. "So what're the problems with genetically modified organisms? Anyone?" He turned. "Yes. Miss Tomlin."

"They...might make people sick?"

"They could." He uncapped the marker and turned, writing NATURAL FALLACY on the board and underlining it. He re-capped the marker and turned. "Natural Fallacy. Basically, it means thinking something's good just because it's natural." (Though, this was incorrect, in that he was actually talking about the fallacy *appeal to nature* without quite realizing the distinction between the two. However, some posters on certain corners of what was left of the internet would have maintained that, in fact, the use of 'good' here would in fact indicate the applicability of *natural fallacy*, as within certain segments of the former American population it could've been argued that the preparatory rituals around and connected with food had long taken on a moralistic air, that is, as a certain subset argued, if they hadn't already always been so and been possessed of or by such. Others were also arguing that the employment of the tactic of accusing arguments of being fallacies or accusing their espousers of having fallen prey to fallacies should itself be classified as a fallacy. While still others argued that the entire notion of the category of the fallacy was itself fallacious.) "But arsenic's natural. Snake venom's natural. Now, that doesn't mean there's not something

useful for, say, curing cancer in it. We use poisonous things all the time. And while plenty of people inject the toxin botulinum into their faces, you might've heard of it as Botox, I wouldn't suggest you run out and get a syringe full of rattlesnake venom shot into you." Some laughed. Most winced or grimaced. "However, there is some research on developing painkillers from it that could be very promising." He uncapped the marker. "Now, back to genetically modified organisms. Okay, what's the thing about them? They're modified. Okay. We got that. Buuut, let's think a moment. Life starts a few billion years ago. And...if nothing ever got modified, what would've happened? Anybody? Mister Craft?"

"Um... There'd still just be the one kind of life, wouldn't there?"

"Yap. You're correct. Very good. Logically, if it doesn't change, it's either gotta be dead—which we will discount as change, for the moment—"—laughter—"—or it's gotta be the same as it was. If it hasn't changed, it's gotta be the same. So maybe the Earth's oceans would probably be filled up with something that looks like a slime. It wouldn't even be cellular life, because, remember, that's a later evolutionary development. So by definition, to get from there to here, we need change. And what's evolution? It's the aggregate genetic modification that affects a population. So let's look at a bowl of cornflakes, what's it got in it? Anybody? Mister Johnson?"

"Corn...?"

"That would be a good guess. And corn comes from?"

Harmony raised her hand. "The Indians."

"That's correct. It's a species native to the North American continent. It's a type of grass. It's a grain. So if you go out and look at a stalk of wheat...or you look at the picture of one in your textbook, you'll notice they look very similar. But corn just didn't grow here when the first peoples migrated into this part of the world. It was bred by the ancestors of what we call the Indians. It was over countless generations genetically modified through selective breeding to go from something we'd recognize as wheat-like, to an ear of corn. And the same thing happened with all livestock. Dogs don't go out and live in the wild. House cats do not go out and live in the wild... well, most of the time. Sheep don't end up looking like giant puffy cotton balls in the wild if they go untrimmed." Laughter. "They

wouldn't live very long." Laughter. "Okay, they wouldn't die from wolves, they'd never make it down to the meat." Laughter. "But they'd try to walk through a bush and, you know, get stuck there." Laughter. "Or stumble around with wool hanging over their eyes." Laughter. And he laughed as well. There had long been theories, theories in the sense of hypotheses, on the subject of truth in or through humor, even before the internet'd been reduced to what momentarily remained. He cleared his throat. "So we've talked about clones. So let's talk about bananas—"—chuckles—"—alright, bananas, if you'll remember, are all cloned. Now, the thing of it is, you wouldn't wanna eat a real banana. A real honest to god wild banana is the most disgusting seed-filled thing you'll ever come across. It's terrible. I feel sorry for the monkeys that eat them." Laughter. "But what we call a banana, where does it come from? The same place corn comes from. It was selectively bred to be that way. And selective breeding is just a very crude way of moving genes around and selecting which ones reproduce and which ones get to take a hike. And—"

ATTENTION. A SCHOOL SHOOTING IS NOW IN PROGRESS.

ATTENTION. A SCHOOL SHOOTING IS NOW IN PROGRESS.

South raised a hand. "Excuse me a moment, if you will." And he opened a desk drawer and removed a red card and walked toward the door, locked it, and slipped the card beneath it. He turned. "Now, are we starting to get an idea from any of this? Anybody?"

Lily raised her hand. "So...you're saying that almost anything anyone eats is already genetically modified?"

"That's about it. Or if we want to be really pedantic, as in splitting hairs, it's been genetically modified by human beings going all the way back to pre-history. The first grains that were farmed, they'd've been wild grains. But the grains that made civilization as we know it were the results of human genetic tampering. But also, evolution's going on completely independent of that. Otherwise we wouldn't have human beings that planted grain in the first place."

The sounds of shots carried dully through the heavy door and cinder-block walls. Instinctively, everyone glanced that direction. Even South, who then turned, again, toward the class.

“So everything’s genetically modified. Are there any useful questions that we can ask about that? Or around that? Or having to do with that? That is to say, could we draw a distinction if we wanted to?”

“Could... Could we divide it between...human-made and nature—non-human...?”

“Yes, we could. And that’s a distinction we make all the time. Rocks, generally speaking, look pretty much the same. And if you open one of your textbooks and you take a look at a picture of a neolithic stone tool, it’s not going to look much different than any other rock you might pick up. But the difference is a human used it for a particular task. Alright, so we can divide things into human origin and non-human origin. Is that useful? We could look at *how*, say, genes are transferred and modified. Maybe we won’t have much of a problem with pairing up certain cows. But what about cloning? Do you wanna eat cloned meat? Miss Tomlin, would you eat meat from a cloned animal?”

“I...don’t know.... I guess it’d be...the same...wouldn’t it...?”

“Well, that’s the definition of a clone. But as we’ve learned, we’re already eating clones. So what’s the problem? Is it just which specific plant or animal we’re talking about? Maybe you might wanna think about that topic for a dreaded presentation. Okay, but what are some other ways of genetically modifying an organism? We can take a big scientific machine, right, and do something, scrambling the genes around, inject this, take out that. Well, that’s gotta be unnatural, right? Well, not so much.” He uncapped the marker and turned and wrote on the board. “There’s this thing called horizontal gene transfer.” He re-capped the marker and turned. “Basically, what it means is when an organism directly exchanges a fragment of DNA with another organism and incorporates that DNA into its own DNA. And they don’t even have to be the same kind of organism. Mostly, we see this in bacteria. It doesn’t scale very well to multi-cellular creatures. But it does exist. In fact, it’s very hard to find anything that humans do that nature hadn’t figured out how to do about a few million years before our species ever walked the Earth. So in effect, we’re playing catch-up and think we’re inventing it all. You know, like those people who find out about a new trend and’re going round everywhere telling everyone about it, and everyone’s known about

it for a month, and they just want them to shut up.” A few laughed at that. “I’ve often been that guy.” A few more laughed. Echoes of shots dully carried through the heavy door and cinder-block walls. “Now, the thing—”

He turned as something dully slammed against the classroom door, the frame buckling round the lock, wood splintering. And a second strike with a battering ram sent the door crashing into a cinder-block wall. Black body armor, shields, moved too fast to be perceptualized in any useful way, just a stream, a flowing black indescribability across the front of the class room, at the point of which an AR-15 butt collided with South’s jaw, and he saw only simulacra of stars, then, not even them, as he fell backwards, struck by varied parts of other AR-15s and such military surplus equipment, falling behind the desk, the black body armored figures flowing over him, crowding in front of the whiteboard. Dogs barked in the hallway.

The surge moved out with less magnificent grace than it’d come, bearing away South’s body, his limp figure collapsed deep within them, parts of him dragging, blood smearing along the floor.

A few minutes later, after the dogs’d quieted in the distance, the PA system blared, momentarily overtaken by static that was not, in fact, related in almost any way to the former background radiation of the universe.

ATTENTION. FOR STUDENTS OF BIOLOGY 45. A SLIGHT INTERRUPTION WILL FOLLOW IN NORMAL CLASS ACTIVITIES. PLEASE REMAIN SEATED AND CALM UNTIL THE NEXT BELL. THIS ANNOUNCEMENT DOES NOT AFFECT STUDENTS ATTENDING THE THREE PM BIOLOGY 45 CLASS. A MESSAGE TO STUDENTS AT PRESENT WITHIN BIOLOGY 45. NORMAL CLASS SCHEDULE WILL RESUME AT ITS NORMAL TIME TOMORROW. PLEASE REMAIN SEATED AND CALM UNTIL THE NEXT BELL. END OF ANNOUNCEMENT.

Which they did. Though, there was a certain dampening of adrenaline that was necessary following the initial events. However, for the most part, this merely required a prolonged period of quietude and steady breathing, which, at least the former was in

ready supply in the minutes that would've constituted the final part of class that day, had it continued.

And depending on who'd been asked, it might've seemed odd, to some at least, that the students' reactions would be so docile during the whole prior event. However, to quote Crystal, it's easily explainable. As this (however, this is not a quote), and such like it, had happened so many times before, there wasn't any reason to expect that it wouldn't happen again. In fact, everyone reasonably knew it would. In fact, they, in a way, depended on it much the same way their human (and non-human) ancestors'd depended on the change of the seasons. Evolution'd long primed (in the way that it does, and not in an active way, as South could've pointed out had he still been there) but the course of evolution'd developed the species to be pattern recognition engines, and patterns, of course, required repetition, and without patterns, there could be no planning, so anxiety drives and etc. So it was something to be expected and therefore something to be fulfilled. For it not to've happened, would've, on the whole, as can be reasoned, provoked more anxiety than would've, or had, been momentarily raised during the event itself. And it's not that it wasn't sad. After all, South'd been quite entertaining, and many'd quite often looked forward to his class. But this was just the way the world worked. And it can't be put mildly what extremes human beings could accept as normal, though only a handful of posters on what was left of the internet would've agreed with this, and some of those only provisionally. So when the bell rang, they took up their transparent backpacks and filtered out into the halls. A blood trail still remained smeared across the epoxy-coated floors. But through sheer force of habit, everyone unconsciously knew to step over it. After all, there was a fine for the vandalization of state property, and bloody shoe prints down a hallway, other than those obtained or produced by official personnel in the line of duty, were, of course, classified in that way.

"I'm going to go to my locker," Lily said. "I have to get this thing replaced."

"We'll have to hurry to make it to chemistry."

They hurried.

Apparently, after sufficient proof that no help was going to be otherwise forthcoming, Absolute, at the time, being pinned beneath Candi, her hand clamped over his mouth, the driver'd decided it appropriate and necessary to take matters into his own hands, though, not without an insignificant amount of swearing as he shoved pallets of books out of the back of the tractor trailer, repositioning the truck whenever the piles got too large and blocked him in. At one point, comically, he *had* almost blocked himself in back of the trailer, Candi fighting laughter as she watched him squeeze between the dumped pallets and out of the back of the truck, as if the truck were giving birth to him, but Absolute didn't see any of this due to the position he found himself in. Candi finally removed her hand from his mouth after the truck started back down the hill. "Now you see," she said, "that wasn't so hard. All you had to do was nothing." She leaned down. "Now, where were we? ... Oh, yes. I think...right about...here..."

He wrapped his arm round her waist. "We should at least go inside."

"Why?"

"I would feel more comfortable."

"Oh, you just wanna smell the old books and get high."

"Huh?"

"Nothing," she said. And she kissed him. When she pulled away, he instinctively ran his tongue over his lips.

"Shit," she said. "We might as well go inside, cause you're gonna have to brush your teeth again."

"Well, if you took dental hygiene as seriously as you make me, it wouldn't've been a problem."

"You," she said, and leaned down and kissed him again, "may like eating spicy tacos, but I don't like *having* a spicy taco."

He burst out laughing. And if anyone'd still been round, they'd've been able to hear him all the way down at the far end of Mainstreet.

"Oh..." She grabbed his collar and shook him. "Quit that."

But a dam'd broke, and it just wouldn't stop. His side began to ache. And his chest hurt.

"Quit it."

He panted, an occasional laugh still erupting painfully between breaths.

"Think tacos are funny, do yuh?" She released his shirt. "Well, maybe I'll make sure you don't eat any for a long time."

Finally, eventually, his panting gave way to him breathing deeply. "I'll go... brush my teeth."

"Now, that's a more appropriate attitude. You..." She glanced along the hill, down the road, unconsciously drawn to movement and light. "Gaaaawd. Don't people know we're trying to be busy here?"

He shifted up onto his elbows to see, but the darkness and headlights made it impossible to discern anything about the vehicle, other than it definitely wasn't a tractor trailer.

"Just stay down," she said.

But the car couldn't get into the lot because of all the cellophane-wrapped pallets. The car stopped, headlights still on, shinily reflected in all that cellophane, as the driver climbed out. Absolute rose and craned his head round. "I think that's a county commissioner."

"Who gives a shit," she said. "Just be quiet and he'll go away."

The figure in the distance called, "Is anyone around?"

"Shhh. Just be quiet. And—"

Absolute rose up, so she slid back into his lap. "I wanna find out who ordered all this shit."

"Why don't you just learn not to worry about it and..."

"Hello?"

They looked over. He waved at them. "Shit." She sighed and climbed up. "I'm going to make you pay for this."

And they walked up into the parking lot and along the curb till they'd gotten within range of the headlights.

The commissioner waved. "A little trouble, I see."

"Yeah," Absolute said. "We're not equipped with a loading dock."

The commissioner shook his head. "Well, we'll just have to make do, won't we?"

"Somebody's gonna make do," Absolute said, "gettin' them outa here."

"Well, they obviously can't do that, they're for the library."

"I didn't order these. And I know Karen didn't order these."

"Of course you didn't." The man raised his hands as if that were the most obvious thing in what remained of the world. "They're a donation."

"I don't need one copy of this book, let alone fifteen hundred, or how the hell ever many there still are in existence."

"Now, don't go talking about censorship. We—"

"And where'm I supposed to put em?"

"Well, you might have to get rid of a few things. And there'll be plenty of room after that, I'm sure. But of course, that's your department."

"What're you not hearing here? I'm not stocking so much as one of these. I'm not even going to cut the plastic. I'd not look at them if I could avoid it."

"Well, you have to, you see." He puffed up. "We've voted to make this the official book of the county."

Absolute had no reply for this.

"Oh," Candi said, "like a state bird."

The commissioner nodded. "That's just it."

"Of course," Candi said. "So, commissioner, would you mind answering a question for me?"

"Yes, mam."

"Well, we were just talking about tacos before you arrived, and I was just wondering, what's your opinion of them?"

He paused. "Well... I mean, I can't say I like them so much, myself. Never cared much for the Mexican stuff. Why?"

"Oh, just curious. Absolute here loves them, don't you?"

But he didn't even bother to look at her. He pointed at a cellophane-wrapped pallet. "Get these goddamn things outa here. Or I'll bring somebody in here with a bulldozer and they can shove them down into Mainstreet, and you can pick them up there."

"Now, you do not have the authority to—"

"I have absolute—" —Candi giggled—" —authority here."

"And who gave you that authority?"

"I do."

The two men looked at each other.

"So get someone up here and get this shit moved. Or I will."

"The county commis—"

"Or let it sit here till the rest of the end of the fucking world. I don't care. But it's not going in that building."

"You—"

"And that's all I'm going to say about it."

"There's no need to be ridiculous."

Absolute didn't reply.

"After all, it's your job to do what's best for the people of this county."

Absolute still didn't reply.

"I... You know, this'll be reported."

Absolute still didn't reply.

"Yes.... Well... There will be consequences from this." He stood there trying to find something to add, failing, and finally, turned toward his car. He looked over his shoulder. "There will be consequences." He turned and walked round his car and climbed in and u-turned and started down the hill.

"*There will be consequences,*" Candi said, and laughed. She glanced at Absolute, sensing his aggravation in the way he still didn't say anything. "You know..." And she stepped behind him and put her hands on his shoulders and whispered beside his ear, "authority's really sexy." She said, "So why don't we go inside, and you can exercise a little more of it."

«A note to our friends out there if yuns're listening, yuns know who yuns are. The pitchfork emporium's opened again. We only mention it in the hopes yuns'll keep the collateral damage to a minimum. We'd really appreciate it. That'd be great, thanks. Now, for all yuns listening out there, if yuns really are out there anymore, that is. It's finally here. Or rather, he's finally here. Our extra special interview. And he's right here in our studio with us right now.»

«So with great pleasure, for the very first time on any station in what's left of Western North Carolina, it's our very special privilege to introduce our very special guest, Mister Clive Amerika. Thanks so much for being on the air with us, Clive. You don't mind if we call you Clive?»

«Not at all. Thanks for having me.»

«In case yuns don't know, any of yuns out there listening, we already hashed out this introductory business before coming on the air, so we're just doing it for yuns's benefit. So, well, Clive, you know the first question's gotta be how the hell do you end up here, of all places, right?»

«Well, I'd come down to lend a friend some moral support on a project and...»

«One thing led to another and the world got ended.»

«Yeah.»

«So for those sheltered people out there in the audience who might not know, you're, like, what, the most prolific porn director ever to exist?»

«Well, some say that.»

«Barely to mention you're also an accomplished poet, with fourteen volumes published, eight of them award winning, award winning composer, former NFL linebacker with two Superbowl rings, lead programmer on two award winning games, and just before you came

here you sold your second startup for thirteen-billion dollars. That's good timing.»

«Not so great timing, really. The bank that had the money's gone now, too.»

«Oh well. At least yuh had it, right?»

«But, really, we can't fit much more of your resume in here, after all, the end of the rest of the world's not that far away...we think. But we also understand you play the glass harmonica. And that you're about to release an original composition on it for the first time in two-hundred years of the original Tchaikovsky pieces for The Nutcracker.»

«Well, we put together something in a garage. But that's about right.»

«Wow.»

«It's really not that big of a deal.»

«You've actually got a selection of that for us later though.»

«Yes.»

«And we almost can't wait. But we'll have to. First, let's talk about your career as a director. There used to be a rumor on the internet, when it still existed, that you'd vowed to spoof every Hollywood film ever made. True or not true?»

«Well, the internet... You say something, and it kinda just hangs around over your head forever.»

«Till the world ends, that is.»

«Yes.»

«But you have made alot of films. How many?»

«To be honest, I've lost count.»

«What's your favorite?»

«Well, I'll have to give the patent answer and say it's the last one that I did, because that represents all my artistic potential up to that point, what of it there is.»

«And is this the one you were down here working on?»

«Oh, no. I was just...lending a hand. Really, just moral support. David's quite out of my league.»

«So do you think we might get a new film from him before the final end of the world?»

«Maybe.»

«Oh, if there's anyone out there listening now, yuns just wish yuns

could see his face right now. But we won't ask any more about that. At the moment, that is. After all, we're here for yuh.»

«Now, you're a very...diversified man.»

«Thank you.»

«But you're most widely known for your directing.»

«That's quite likely.»

«Of course, you also write all your own films, too.»

«Yes.»

«What made you decide to get into the business of porn spoofs?»

«He he.»

«But why did you decide to get into this area?»

«Well, I guess part of it was a challenge, really. You always heard everywhere that you couldn't do real sex in serious movies.»

«And why was that?»

«Oh, lots of reasons. There was never any seeming reason to it, you know. About why you couldn't have real sex, that is. I always imagine John Wayne saying how he didn't need to ride a horse, he just needed to act like he was riding a horse. Just people coming up with an excuse to justify a feeling they already had. So it was just something that people said was impossible, and I've always been attracted to impossible things.»

«Which's how you ended up flying a 747.»

«Yes.»

«Tell us about that.»

«Well, I'd always been told it was impossible to do a loop de loop in a jumbo liner. So at the time I had a job flying planes to an aviation graveyard out in Arizona, or I guess I should say what used to be Arizona. And while we were out over the desert, I took it up, well, you know what happened.»

«That must've been terrifying.»

«Well, I figured crashing in the desert and all that.»

«But you didn't crash.»

«Not accidentally, anyway.»

«So that's kind of like a metaphor for your whole career.»

«Well, maybe.»

«So then, why is having real sex in a serious film so impossible?»

«I have no idea. Everyone who says that has their own pet theory

as to why that's the case. But no one hardly ever agrees. So make of that what you will.»

«So do you think you've succeeded?»

«I have no idea.»

«You've kind of ended up at the nexus of a small group of people who call themselves porn creators, while a vocal contingent of viewers and academics say no wait, actually this isn't porn porn, this's art.»

«Is there a difference?»

«That's what we were about to ask you.»

«Well, whether or not something's porn has probably got something to do with how much you pay for it. You know, you can buy a few portraits of naked women labeled Venus, Aphrodite, etc, and you're a great patron of the arts. Not so much when you rent a video.»

«You've actually seen quite alot of technological change within the industry, haven't you? We mean, when you started you literally were probably still using actual film.»

«Yeah. Well, I'm not that old.»

«No, we weren't saying that.»

«No, actually in highschool, when I first started filming, I was using a cassette camcorder.»

«We hope everyone was legal.»

«Yeah, it wasn't that kind of filming yet. I probably would've wished it was. But I had the same camcorder that Marty McFly uses in Back To The Future.»

«Really?»

«Yeah.»

«Cool.»

«But I never encountered a time machine with it.»

«There's still time. Do yuh still have it?»

«No. No, that got thrown away a long time ago.»

«So it's not sitting under glass as some kind of mystical good-luck totem.»

«No. I try to keep the clutter in my life as minimal as possible. Otherwise it tends to reproduce and get out of control.»

«Kipple.»

«Perhaps.»

«Well, since that's come up, we were gonna go into this later, but

we might as well do it now. You're an acknowledged fan of Philip K. Dick and Philomena Kinkirk Dunwitch.»

«Yes.»

«No, but we mean, as in a huge one. What we wanna know is, did you ever find the robot?»

«Not yet. Of course, given the circumstances, it's probably unfindable by now.»

«You never know.»

«No. No, that's true.»

«So how is it that a Blade Runner spoof ends up being more accurate to the book than the Hollywood movie?»

«Well, accuracy is a relative thing. To kind of illustrate that if you will, there's a seventies porn based on Alice in Wonderland, which probably stands as the most faithful adaption of the book yet to be produced, even if you count the sex scenes.»

«The Star Trek triple-X parodies also tend to be closer to the themes of the original series than the Hollywood movies, don't they? Not that we're talking from experience or anything.»

«Liar!»

«You know, what they talk about out there on what's left of the internet and all that.»

«Well, I must admit I've never seen the original Star Trek, so it's difficult for me to say.»

«Yuh've never seen Star Trek?»

«No.»

«Well, if we may interject...»

«Please.»

«It just seems to be that with some of these films there often seems to be a tacit connection to your own work. But in a different way. That is to say, they're almost exactly the same sort of pulpy, low-budget science fiction. It's just that we see the captain actually have sex with the green-skinned alien, not just the kiss, and then he's putting his boots on. So it's almost like spoofing it by simply including the little bits the Hollywood version would leave out. And that seems very much like what you quite often do. Do you think that's a correct speculation?»

«Or're we just bat-shit insane? Though, just in case yuns're wondering, no, we haven't been drinking, alcohol, anyway.»

«Uhm, well, the best way to parody something is to take the thing that's otherwise glossed over and sort of give it some attention. Probably. Of course it's difficult to think back too far, I am about that old now, I will admit. But I would probably think that, back then, that was part of the problem. That is, I'm getting all tangled up.»

«Oh, don't worry about it. Getting tangled up with you's much more interesting than the majority of what we do here.»

«Yeah.»

«Well, there's always been simulated sex in Hollywood, so doing exactly the same sort of thing with unsimulated sex just seemed to be a way of jabbing at that. Though, I think I was probably a bit naive at the time.»

«How so?»

«Well, it was just this kind of anxiety we had over it not being real. As if it were supposed to be more real than anything else that happened onscreen. I kind of think when I was younger I didn't separate fantasy and reality very well. I don't know if I want to get into the details. But suffice it to say I had a lot of relationship issues at the time.»

«But you're still in porn. And obviously, after a while there, you didn't need to do it for the money.»

«No. But the change really came, I think, from Hollywood's end.»

«A lotta people regard you as a pioneering trailblazer, but it seems like you're saying you were kinda doing the opposite.»

«I'm probably much more reactionary than even I want to admit. I think that's provable simply by the fact that people watch my films. Or I should say I think of David as the real boundary pusher. He's the one that will go out there and listen to the muse, no matter the direction she takes. And not to say that people don't watch his films. I wish more did, whether he does or not. But if we're going to be honest, I outsell him by...more than a lot.»

«You're talking about David Stoker—»

«For any of yuns listening out there who mightn't know who that is.»

«But we kinda have a question—»

«But we don't wanna intrude.»

«Go ahead. The second worst thing that can happen is that I tell you I won't answer it.»

«And the first?»

«Saying there's possibly no answer.»

«Got yuh.»

«But we're just wondering if a situation like that, sort of that kind of disparity, ever creates tension in your relationship with each other.»

«Oh, no. I think David prides himself on how few viewers he has. If there were even half as many people who were watching my stuff, watching his, he'd probably be pissed as hell, thinking he'd done something wrong. So we complement each other well. Though, we've never actually worked together in any significant way. That probably helps us stay friends more than anything.»

«So you've never wanted to do a collaboration?»

«Only once.»

«Oh, and what was that going to be about?»

«We both have a, what you might call a, significant passion for Don Quixote. The difference between the two of us being that I can read it in the original Spanish and he can't. And we kind of joked about doing something with it.»

«So kind of like Terry Gilliam's film meets...what?»

«Probably something like if an Escher painting produced a litter of pups with a Regency Romance.»

«Really?»

«Well I mean, that's probably as good a description as anything else. But it just turned out to be really unworkable.»

«Can we ask why?»

«Just the differences in the two of us. There's a quote that comes to mind, that I can't quite remember, but if you'll bear with me.»

«Oh, we're bearing with you.»

«Well, it uh, it's kind of about men and women, and goes, um, something like, for men having sex is like riding a horse, and for women it's like riding a bicycle, and if you try and put them both together, what you get is a horse riding a bicycle, and of course that's ludicrous.»

«And why can't the bicycle ride the horse?»

«Either way, it's probably the best description of the two of us trying to work together.»

«I'm just imagining a bicycle on a bicycle and...suddenly that part

in the triple-X version of A Theory of Everything makes so much more sense.»

«Well, I will admit to stealing things now and again.»

«They say great artists steal.»

«Bad ones steal, too.»

«We doubt anyone here's going to say that.»

«Thank you.»

«But we want to go back just a bit.»

«I'm sorry to have gotten you off track.»

«No, no. No, this's what we're here for. But what was it about Hollywood that changed?»

«Mostly, I think it was the shift towards taking sex out. I think it was when I saw the, what – third? – Daniel Craig James Bond film, and you might've noticed it's the first one, I think, where he never has sex with the other major non-villain female character.»

«We admit we've never been James Bond fans. Except for Honor Blackman.»

«I never have either. But that interested me. It was kind of the most forward example, the big-name example, if you will, of what was starting to happen around that time.»

«So Hollywood started taking sex out.»

«Yes. Before that, you know, it was reasonably famous for shoe-horning sex into something.»

«Hello, Happy Broadcasting Organization.»

«Yeah. You could say that.»

«You think that was mostly economic, with more Hollywood films going to China, and China becoming such a big market? Or do you think it was something else?»

«Partly that, I think. But partly also cultural. If you look back... You can find plenty of conservative critics who lament the supposed political correctness of, say, recent Disney animation, and point to the social messages in older films from the forties and fifties to justify this line of argument. But what I think they fail to do is apply their own pet economic arguments to the situation. Companies aren't interested in being politically correct. They're interested in making money. And they do what they do to make money. And the values represented in film currently are the ones they think will return the

most profit. I'm sorry, I guess I'm sounding a bit too much like an Hysteric.»

«Why be an Hysteric when you can be a Pervert?»

«Perhaps. Maybe I'm still holding out for that mythological third way.»

«So how does independent filmmaking fit into this?»

«It really doesn't. Hardly anyone watches it. It's like ballet. The people that can afford to go to festivals consume it.»

«So you don't think there's a chance for real social change to come out of filmmaking?»

«I think people see what they want to see in it. But it's like that with everything. Even real people. I remember a couple years ago I heard a pastor talking about Doctor King, Doctor Martin Luther King, about him being this proud capitalist and a defender of capitalism, and if you know anything about him at all, you know he heavily criticized capitalism in his sermons, he was an ardent socialist, and even when he was shot, he was helping black sewage workers to unionize. So it's kind of hard for me to have much faith in that. Of course, the biggest one is the so-called founding fathers.»

«Well, no one's ever going to claim you're politically correct.»

«You'd be surprised.»

«Oh, can yuh give us examples? Anything good?»

«Just the usual, really. You kind of get used to it after a while. And it just doesn't stick anymore. Really, it tends to repeat. Or cycle. So you don't know if it's just the same person over and over again. Or if they're all getting the same newsletter.»

«We get that too. Personally, we're convinced it's either one guy, or an artificial intelligence.»

«Well, I have to admit, I would've hoped an artificial intelligence could spell better.»

«No one ever said *how* intelligent they were supposed to be.»

«I guess this is true.»

«So, speaking of founding fathers, you've just recently announced your latest film.»

«Yes.»

«Can we ask about it?»

«Well, I mean, there's not much to ask.»

«And it was all filmed here, right?»

«Yes.»

«And was this something you had planned?»

«No. Not originally. It was just something that I had considered doing quite a number of years ago but ended up putting it aside. And it was just, during everything that was happening, I started writing on it again and it went very well. And I just decided, since this may be my last, and I had everything I needed, I'd take a crack at it and see what happened.»

«And what's it about?»

«Well, basically, it's a kind of biographical work, a day in the life of George Washington.»

«And when will we be able to see it?»

«Well, distribution's the hard part. Since the internet's not what it was, so to speak, we were kinda stumped. We kind of had to go backwards a bit. We actually found a bit of old equipment in the back of the local Radio Shack for dubbing VHS tapes, and we got some help and had it hooked up so we could feed it from a computer. So we've got a short run of tapes for whoever wants one.»

«You're getting back to your roots.»

«You could say that.»

«We can't wait to see it.»

«Well, actually, I brought one along with me just in case.»

«OMG.»

«Now you'll just have to have something to play it.»

«Oh, we've got it. We've got everything still round here. Nothing's been thrown out since radio was invented. As yuh can see.»

«Or can't. If they're listening.»

«Well, that's their fault. Though, any of yuns out there listening, yuns have no idea, believe us. We're, like, the hoardiest county in the universe, but yuns already knew that. Of course, we guess we're the last one in the universe, so duh. Have you noticed the amount of storage facilities?»

«I have.»

«Line em up end to end and they reach to where the moon used to be. Yuh know, there's some that claim that's why gravity still works, the density of all that stuff packed into them makes it almost like some

kind of black hole. We guess we just have to hope nobody stuffs one more sweater or doodad into one and pushes it into some critical density and really does turn one or more of em into a black hole.»

«But on a more interesting note, where're those who might be interested, and if there're still listeners out there—»

«We know yuns are, whether yuns admit it or not, yuh Perverts.»

«But for all those who're interested, where can they pick up a copy?»

«It hasn't been quite decided yet.»

«This's probably an artisanal product, yuh could probably charge a proverbial arm and leg, or a literal leg, at least they might still need at least one arm.»

«No, there's no point in that. We're just giving it away.»

«So's David Stoker rubbing off on you? You're trying to devalue your own art by giving it away for free?»

«I will neither confirm nor deny.»

«So no public showing?»

«No. It isn't worth that. Besides, I wouldn't want to upstage any other project that might be out there.»

«Oh, can we expect something from Stoker?»

«I can neither confirm nor deny that.»

«He'd better hurry up.»

«I wouldn't put it past him to take to the very last minute. He does think, after all, that the best movie is one that was never viewable.»

«Well, we're definitely going to be viewing this one.»

«I hope you'll enjoy it.»

«If we may pry, since you've nowhere to go and everything, do you have any plans?»

«Not much.»

«Not going to retire?»

«No. No, I'm always working on something.»

«One final question before you go, if you don't mind.»

«Not at all.»

«For the sake of what's left of the internet, do you feel bad you weren't able to fulfill your promise to them?»

«Not in the least.»

«Well, then, if there's anyone out there left to listen, there we have it. Thank you very much for sitting down with us.»

«It was my pleasure.»

«And coming up we're going to introduce Amerika's newest album, which will be exclusively available here—»

«That is till some pirate out there uploads it onto what's left of the internet. Don't let the grand traditions down, guys—and gals, and everyone else. We need digital hoarders just as much as the physical variety.»

«So up next we have selections from the Nutcracker Suite.»

«So while yuns're listening to The Dance of The Sugar Plum Faeries as it was originally meant to be heard, some of the rest of us're gonna finally get a piss break. So if there's any of yuns still out there to hear this, we hope it's gonna give yuns as much a relief as it's gonna give us.»

Tom—short for Thomas, Tom having a friendly sound, something preferable for a local news anchor, friendliness, vs the relative colder formality of national anchors—sipped a mug of acrid instant coffee and looked down over the valley. Most of the homes remained dark, though a few, like his own, were lit by personal generators like the one his former job'd afforded him. It's not that he made that much, a solid middle working middle-class income, nothing more, nothing less. Though, everyone'd always assumed he'd made more. Seemingly, or as most people thought, he'd have to be unemployed, what with recent circumstances. After all, the county had no local broadcasting services, and his office, along with the totality of the News 10 office space, as well as, almost, all its constituent property, as those who could admit such would have assumed, had ceased to exist. Though, that'd've been an incorrect assumption. He was, as his contract stated, though not in these exact words, quite quite quite employed. In fact, it could be seen as legally debatable as to whether he was free of his job even if the entirety of the world slash universe slash multiverse slash whatever-else-may-exist ceased to be. Like the vast number—as in, more than three quarters—of local news stations in the former continental former these United States, News 10 had been wholly and completely owned by the single largest broadcast group in the former these United States. And while these United States may appropriately be referred to in the past tense, this broadcast group cannot, for many of the same reasons as the contracts of its still extant employees would likely remain as valid as those that still bound already non-extant employees. These contracts, of course, stipulated the normal things such contracts had stipulated, that if the signee should quit at any time they owed a certain portion of their already received pay based upon various factors up to and including

when they chose to leave, as well as reimbursing the organization for any sick or vacation leave, reimbursing the organization for any costs it might incur publicly or privately from the loss of said signee, an agreement not to work in any similar field for a period of X or Y time, if at all, continued prohibition from negatively affecting the company's assets through any revelation of any prejudicial materials or opinions to third parties, as well as compensating the organization for any perceived and slash or calculable value that might have been acquired by the organization in the future, etc, etc. They, however, also stipulated a few items that might not've been seen as exactly standard, however, every organization does, after all, have its own quirks.

So he'd been looking out the window, sipping his instant coffee when he heard his wife enter the kitchen. And he turned as she was opening the fridge. "Do you want a salad?" she said.

"No." He sipped his instant coffee and turned, again, toward the window.

"You need to eat better. You heard what the doctor said."

"Yeah. I know." He looked at her in the reflection of the darkened glass. Because of the generator, the house was as lit as it'd ever been. It almost didn't seem as if anything at all'd happened. In fact, anyone stepping inside would've assumed nothing had. And so long as they'd stayed far enough away from the windows, which wasn't hard, you almost had to press your nose to them, as he was now, but as long as they didn't do that, the glare and reflection from the light obscured the lack of everything beyond.

His daughter ran in, crossed the kitchen floor, and wrapped herself round his leg. "Daddy, do I have to eat an icky salad?" He looked down at her as she looked up at him. And he looked over his shoulder, his wife standing there behind the island giving him *that* look. And he gave her his own. He looked down at his daughter.

"And what would you like?"

"Fish fingers!"

He looked over his shoulder at his wife. "That doesn't sound that bad."

She shook her head, but didn't even argue and just opened the freezer.

His daughter squeezed his leg. “Yeah! Fish fingers!” She squeezed him. “I like having you home, daddy.”

“Why don’t you go help your mother put them out.”

“Okay!” And she released him and ran across the kitchen.

He watched them over his shoulder, as she pulled over a chair and climbed up in it and helped arrange them on the pan after her mother’d dumped them out of the box. After all, the reason he’d done the things he’d done had always been for them. He turned toward the window, momentarily focusing on his own reflection, rather than everything mostly unseen out there.

His phone went off, and he pulled it from his pocket and looked down at the alarm-clock app that’d popped up. All he had to do was look at the screen. He turned and set his coffee on the counter, still unfinished. He held it up (the phone, not the coffee, because, as stated, he’d already set that down) and motioned with it (the phone). “A bit of work,” he said. His wife looked at him knowingly. “I’ll just be a little bit.”

“I’ll keep them warm for you,” she said. She looked down at their daughter. “Now, what do we do after we’re done cooking?”

“We wash our hands!”

“We wash our hands. So come on.” And their daughter hopped out of the chair, and his wife pushed it toward the sink with her foot so the girl could climb into it again and pat the fixture with her arm to make it come on, which she always smiled when she did, and she stuck her fingers under the water.

He pressed the power button on his phone, slipped it into his pocket. After all, it’d all been done for them.

He went back through the hall and into his darkened office. He turned on the light. And he crossed the carpeted floor and shifted the books stacked atop the old 8-track player, which’d long been gutted and turned into a normal storage cabinet. And he opened it, pausing as he always did, his armpits dampening, as always happened. The hair prickling on the back of his neck, he looked over his shoulder, realized he’d left the door open, and quickly crossed the carpeted floor and closed it, checking the hall was empty when he did. He locked it. He went back over to the cabinet and reached into it, lifting the system out. It was heavy. It’d taken him a long time to learn

to balance with it on his head. He wondered how much his neck muscles must've strengthened in his time at the station. The arrays of wires and antennae and small satellite dishes and blinking lights made it look like some sort of bomb, something someone in some bad movie would make victims wear on their heads, parading them in front of the cops, threatening to remotely detonate them. He'd've been more comfortable if that'd been the case. The only markings on it were stenciled on one side: DUMMY PLUG. His heart did funny things whenever he looked at it. He forced himself to control his breathing as he turned and carried it toward the chair, where he sat, looking at it.

A knock. "Daddy?" Barely hear-able. He looked up, but before he could say anything, he heard his wife's muffled voice through the door, "Don't bother daddy right now. He's got to work." And he could *just* barely hear them. He'd done a reasonably good job of soundproofing the room, many things considered. He looked down at the DUMMY PLUG. He'd always promised himself he wouldn't bring work home with him. But this's what he had to do. He did it for them. He'd always done it for them. Already, several surviving anchors, one of the meteorologists, had all disappeared after they'd posted things on what was left of the internet. Maybe it was true the organization couldn't *not* exist. But if this's what he had to do for his family, this's what he had to do. He tried to breathe normally as he raised it over his head, his vision swallowed in blankness as he lowered it into place, it kind of making a sucking sound when it was locked on. And the lights blinked, and little parts of it whirled and whirred; a cooling fan spun at full bore. And he gripped the swivel chair's plastic arms so hard the muscles in his forearms knotted. But this's what he had to do. He did it for them. He'd always done it for them.

They'd sat there in the Jeep a long time, there in the car wash parking lot, the lights off, saying nothing, watching the darkened strip known as restaurant row. Only a few lights remained on in the distance, at the gas station, where it must've been eating part of its own reserves to supply a generator. Hannah glanced down at the needle canted within the fuel gauge. "This's sorta ridiculous," she said. "We already know it can't be any of these places." All of them had their own branding, or just used plain, blank cardboard cups.

Alex'd sat there studying about that awhile, which'd been one of the reasons he'd been so quiet. It was almost a mockery of the concept of the generic, really, putting the generic names on already blank cups and wrappers and fry containers that way, or an insult, as if to make sure everyone knew their intended purpose, or to avoid some kind of misuse, whatever that could be. He mumbled, "It's almost as if it hedges against alternative."

"Hm?"

He looked up and shook his head. "Nothing. Didn't mean to say that out loud. Stupid. Just ignore me."

"If you're hungry, we can probably still come up with something down at the gas station."

He looked down that way, for a moment, as if not understanding what he were seeing, and he didn't for a fraction of a second. He shook his head. "I'm fine."

"You ever been on a stakeout before?"

"What? No. I guess not."

"Boring, aren't they?"

"It's fine. You...been on many?"

"Sometimes. Waiting for hunters at illegal feeding spots, mainly."

Nothing ever real exciting, if you could call it that. Sitting round at the popular holes to check fishing licenses."

"Doesn't sound like a bad job."

"For the most part. While it lasted."

"Lasted?"

"Well, there's no one left to pay me anymore, is there? So I guess the question is am I working for myself or just pretending this uniform and badge means anything?"

"Or both?"

"Or both."

They remained quiet. He broke the silence by saying, "About halfway through my masters, you know what I figured out?"

"What?"

"It's basically just a piece of paper that tells an employer you're capable of spending a little over six-percent of your life doing exactly as told."

"I always heard everyone went for the parties."

"I wish somebody'd told me about these parties."

"Maybe no one wanted to invite you."

"Maybe." He scratched the side of his nose.

"Next you'll say you never had time to go on dates, either."

"A few." They both looked straight out through the windshield as they talked. "Mostly I slept drooling over my lab book, then waking up to go teach an intro class and grade papers."

"I thought that was the professor's job."

"It gets farmed out to grad students. Sometimes they even pay you a stipend."

"You really think that because I work in the woods that I didn't go to college?"

He looked over to see her looking at him. "I..."

She smiled.

He turned and looked down into the floorboards, momentarily wondering how there'd been room enough where he sat for him to bend his leg up to be able to get that much of his average-sized foot in his mouth.

"Anyway," she said, "what would you've done with too much money, anyway, right?"

"I can tell you..."

"Well?"

"If I'd known the world was going to end, I'd've done a few things different."

"Such as?"

"Fucked more, probably. Excuse me."

She laughed. "I spent half my time around forest rangers and fire fighters who could swear the bark off a tree. And the other half being sworn at by whoever I was ticketing, usually getting called the c-word at least a couple times a day. So if you think you're going to faze me, you've got a long way to go." She added, "Besides, who wouldn't've ducked more if they'd had the chance?"

He didn't reply to that, as the obvious reply was too obvious.

She said, "You like automobile trivia?"

"What? I don't know."

"Did you know that Henry Ford designed the original automobile so that the back seat was too short for the average couple to lay down and have sex on it?"

"I...didn't."

"But the thing they overlooked was it was tall enough so's they could stand up in it."

He looked up at the ceiling.

She said, "Now we have to make do with reclining seats."

He looked over at her.

"The lever's on the right side of the seat."

He glanced at the side of the seat, then at her. "You..."

"Or we can always go get something else to eat, if you'd prefer."

After a very brief moment, and without turning his gaze away, his hand snaked into the tightness between the seat and the door, and he grasped the ribbed metal handle. The seat shifted; he leaned his weight against it, and it went back.

Hannah reached beneath hers, slid it back to get more room between her and the steering wheel so she could lean forward and unlace her boots. "Pull your shorts down." And once she'd kicked off her boots, she unbuttoned her pants and forced them down her legs and dumped them in the floorboard as well, underwear and everything all in one shot. She shifted across the space between the seats, straddled

him, reached between them both, and grasped his forming erection and aimed it.

“Don’t you...need to warm up...?”

“I’ve been warmed up for the last hour.” And she sank down onto him. And started to move against him.

A light appeared, sweeping over darkened restaurants in the distance, licking over each building in sequence as it neared, but Hannah ducked down against him as it lapped over the car wash. The problem was something about the change in angle was too much...and he went off right then. He breathed hard, their faces close. “... sorry...” She could feel his heated face in the darkness and shadow.

She lay there against him. She said, “You know what’s going to happen now?”

He still breathed hard. “... what?”

“You’re going to pop out of me and everything’s going to run out and make a mess in my Jeep.”

He lay there beneath her, chest rising and falling. “S...”

“You’d just better be glad I choose to take it as a compliment.” She said this close to his face, so her breath rolled over his cheek. “You’d just better be able to make up for it with other things.” She touched her thumb to his lip. “Otherwise I might just throw your ass outa here. And you don’t want that, do you?” He shook his head. “Good.” She kissed him. And she reached down and pulled the handle, and their weight leaned back the seat the rest of the way.

“Your water, Mister President.” August nodded and motioned for the secretary to leave it on the desk. It was in a plain white paper cup. He reached for it, even as the two men talked, downing the whole thing at once, and though the contents were tepid, sliding down his throat, comparatively, it felt like ice water. He sighed and rubbed his neck and set the empty cup on the desk.

“So the way we figure it,” the commissioner said, “is it falls under your purview now. So you’ll have to authorize the situation.”

“You got the paperwork?”

The commissioner removed it from his briefcase and handed it across the desk. August picked a pen from the mug nearby and scribbled his signature. What did a signature really prove, anyway? For that matter, why’d anyone ever want an autograph? He handed the pages back. “Anything else?” It was just part of the ritual. He depressed the intercom call button. “Miss, would you just go ahead and bring a pitcher of water in here?” He released it, depressed it again. “Just plain water.” He released the call button and looked up at the two men.

“You alright?” the commissioner said. “You look tired.”

“Fine,” August said. It was only lucky he didn’t look anywhere near as bad as he felt. It seemed as if he might start breathing out steam soon. He shook his head and swallowed, his throat hot, swollen. Could he’ve had a cold? “We’ve...” He ran his fingers back along the side of his head. “We’ve got to take pains to ensure an adequate fuel supply so we can continue running government buildings. I’m already dealing with alot, so I don’t know how much I can dedicate to this deal.”

“Ah, it won’t take much,” the commissioner said. “Shit, it’ll be over and done with before anybody knows what hit ’em.”

The other man, Terrence Picograff, who’d sat there quietly this

whole time, said, "I hope you understand that commerce and intellectual property will be the most vital aspects of the restoration of law and order in this county."

"Yes," August said, "I'm quite clear on that." He looked at the secretary as she entered carrying the plastic pitcher. "Thank you." And he rose as she left, lifting the pitcher and filling the paper cup. And he stood there drinking as the other two men watched from their seats. He cleared his throat when he'd finished, stood there still holding the cup. "Obviously, we have to protect from a war inside or outside the borders." He lifted the pitcher.

"We've also had a few more issues," the commissioner said. Issues were the unconsciously agreed upon term for the various disappearances and seeming desertions from public duty (also now a crime, just as with the military, which all really decent christian schools were modeled after, students marching in place beside their desks while singing Onward Christian Soldiers right after pledging allegiance to the flag under God, with their hands over their hearts) that'd so far plagued the courthouse and associated facilities, as mentioned, leaving everything woefully understaffed.

"God damn it." August almost threw the newly emptied paper cup against the desk. "What's going on?" He could've simply stated it as 'What's the problem?' or 'What now?', and some on the internet might've taken this particular phraseology to be indicative of something of a Freudian nature; however, other posters would've disagreed in that regard, and would've argued that in fact this merely indicated something completely different; however, still other posters would've argued, though not necessarily agreeing with the something completely different posters, that the Freudians were wrong, wrong simply via the mechanism of the transitive property as it was in fact Freud who was wrong through and through; however, yet others would've argued that this was too harsh and that there could be good, or at least accuracy, at least to some microscopic degree, found in all things.

"The safety technician's department's also apprehended another bunch for identity theft."

August poured himself another cup of water.

"And the commissioners've allocated some funds to expand a new facility to keep up with the demand."

August nodded as he drank. He wiped his lips with his wrist. "Good. We need to get people back to work."

"That was our thought. We've already posted the bid."

August nodded. He stood there holding the empty paper cup, not looking at anything in particular. He shook himself, put the paper cup to his lips, and tilted his head back, a single drop rolling down over his tongue. "Anything else?"

The commissioner rose. "No, not for the moment. We'll let you know, of course."

"Yeah."

Picograff rose as well. He offered his hand. "I want to thank you, Mister President, for your sound interest in economic policy. It's going to be just the thing we need to get everything back together."

August shook his hand, in comparison to his own, it felt like ice, but pleasant because of that. He nodded. After both men'd left, he lifted the pitcher and filled the paper cup again, stood there drinking it. And when he'd finished, he sighed. He closed his eyes, lids and eyeballs hot against each other. Maybe he *was* getting sick. What a horrible time for it. He pulled over his chair and sat. Someone knocked at the door. It opened just enough for the secretary to poke in her head. "Some people to see you, Mister President."

He nodded and motioned for her to let them in, as he shifted papers on his desk, getting on with the job of being president of what was left of these United States and thus the world.

It'd been Asheville, out to the east, that'd become the brewing mecca of a certain segment of the former American southeast in the previous decades, mostly, in part, thanks to President Carter, who'd signed into law the bill easing the restrictions on small and home brewers, he, himself, an avid home brewer. Some researchers, in the far, but not too far, as there was only so far anyone could go on what was left of the internet, but some researchers in the farther corners of the internet referred to that point as a watershed in the development of human civilization, a re-democratization of the essence of civilization. This argument, of course, rested on the foundational theory (and it was still debated on those same corners of what was left of the internet as to whether it was truly a theory or simply a hypothesis) but it rested upon the foundational theory that the combined outputs of wheat grain (beer and bread), as developed in the ancient Near and Middle East, were the impetus, one way or the other, for the majority of technological and social innovation, right down to modern times. It was, in general, considered that agriculture was, among those who considered these things, that agriculture was considered requisite for civilization, or at least, as was known to those who proposed these theories, that is, in looking at the civilization and its traditions that they inhabited, but they generally failed to amend this latter part. A notable, proposed, exception to this was a former Mesoamerican population. They, of course, being the exception that some argued proved the rule, in the more common, colloquial sense of the phrase, as they had no major agriculture. Apparently, or so it seemed, their civilization'd been made and rendered possible by an abundance of fishing stock. Though, this theory was highly contentious. Others who subscribed to it considered it the exception that proved the rule in terms of the original meaning of the word, and therefore bolstered

their own view, heretical as they were, that other modes of civilization, and therefore existence, might be possible, and if not possible, at least contained the possibility of conceptualization.

Harvey, however, was firmly within the bounds of the classic western tradition, a tradition extending over ten thousand years, if not more, all the way back to the same people from which the modern world had inherited the handshake as a form of greeting. And though someone from those ancient times wouldn't've recognized all the glass and steel and sophisticated equipment now brought to bear in implementing the contemporary descendants of those ancient procedures, they'd've, more or less, recognized their outputs merely by the smell. And Harvey stood looking at those stainless-steel tanks. The generator out back rumbled, audible through the building's barely insulated metal sides. But it kept the lights on. And everything else. At least for a little while. They'd only ever used kegs, so they didn't have to worry about powering a bottler. Really, all they needed to do was keep the vats going till they'd finished. Then getting it out was the easy part, comparatively.

Some theorists claimed that what'd made beer part of the basis for civilization was the fact that the water had to be boiled during the process, therefore purifying it, creating a source of hydration free-er from contamination than most water supplies. Though, other theorists claimed this was a bunch of shit and there were plenty of ways to obtain safe drinking water, and if they hadn't been able to do so, all the ancestors of those first inventors of beer'd've expired, their bloated carcasses lying by a poisoned water hole somewhere, before they'd've successfully passed on their genetics, though, to this some responded that it didn't matter if they did die, since everyone always seemed to end up that way anyway, just that they happened to pass on their genes *before* such an occurrence took place, because, after all, that was, as could be argued, reasonably, a, if not part of *the*, definition of life. Others argued that it was all about social preference and organization, that women'd gathered and gossiped round the well, and men'd gathered and gossiped round the beer barrel, if they'd had barrels back then, though they'd started with clay vessels, but barrels weren't far behind or ahead on the trail of technological innovation. Though, other theorists disagreed with this on the grounds that it

posited technological development as a continual upward process, kind of like falling dominoes that, implicit in the argument, if they were set up in the same way again, would fall in exactly the same sequence, something that yet other theorists argued was simply a palliative against the anxiety that the present was the result of a set of historic contingencies and variabilities and one-shot occurrences that were unlikely to be replicable, while still others latched onto this former postulation with the added postulation that if, then, things would repeat, as the one group said, and as pointed out by those arguing against them, those in favor liked to use the metaphor of a VHS tape, something that could only ever show the same thing over and over and over again, but so some argued, if this were the case, what then of free will? But the VHS theorists waved this away, one way or the other. And those that argued for historical contingency tended toward, in their own way, a certain anxiety in regards to the concept of free will, one way or the other, so they tended to tacitly go along with some of those previously mentioned theorists in some esoteric fashion or, alternatively, considered their own theories and hypothesis in purely speculative terms, mostly over a glass or two of some alcoholic beverage. Other theorists tended to wave away both positions, though for very different reasons, also over a glass of some alcoholic beverage, while some feminist authors argued over the notion of women gossiping around the well and how it might be maligned as a form of important social cohesion in societies where alcohol consumption were primarily a masculine-dominated profession and or activity; alcohol, also, was present at some point in these conversations, whether in a glass sitting on a writing slash computer desk during the composition of a manuscript (also, some others were currently arguing on part of what was left of the internet whether the word 'manuscript' constituted something somehow gender-biased, though a distinct derailment had started in this thread whereby it was being argued that manuscript was a bastardized word in modern vernacular causing too much confusion and that should, properly, only refer to handwritten documents, whereas typescript was most appropriate for texts fashioned on a typewriter, and compuscript was the correct term for those fashioned on a computing device)...in fact alcohol, with only one notable exception, was present near at hand

to everyone currently composing anything. But the one exception was so normatively exceptional in this regard it hardly would bear mentioning on anyone's part.

But in any regard, they should have enough to do. Of course, that depended, mostly, upon the rate of consumption vs the rate of the progress of the rest of the end of the world. However, it was just going to be one of those cases where what was was.

And while Johnathan and Matilda worked in the back, Harvey took the opportunity to go into the front office and see what had to be done there. In there, among everything else seemingly crammed into too small a space, a crocheted picture hung framed on the wall: a ground hog in a recliner, something his mother'd done a very long time ago, and the thing that'd lent its name to this establishment.

Unlike the east, the western counties, this one in particular, had remained mostly steadfast in their positions on temperance (the town limits of Kingsly being the exception in this regard), even in the face of economic potential, which was saying something at the time and place the world'd been before most of it'd gone out. Always, even in comparison to its neighboring counties, the Blue Laws here'd been toughest. And only after much legal finagling had the Lazy-Z Whistle Pig come into existence. Of course, at the time, and still every week after, and even now, there was a letter in the paper to the effect that drinking and other forms of intoxication were going to lead to the moral degradation and ruination of the world, and such and such and so on. Though, as the Whistle Pig proved, and the few restaurants within the Kingsly town limits that catered more to the tourist that'd become the county's lifeline, genies and bottles and all that. And in the end, they couldn't clamp the lid down on it forever and ever ahmen. At least, not when the broader state'd been round, not that the state didn't agree half the time, only that, fundamentally, an antagonism had to be kept between the two, in much the same way the state maintained an antagonism with the federal government (and the way the towns maintained such with the broader county), which, in essence, required one or the other to adopt the opposite position of the other, regardless of their actual and respective feelings on a given issue, if they had any, however, such a state had never stopped any such before. So the best they could do was restrict it as much

as possible. Though, in one sense, as stated, they couldn't afford to remove it entirely, not just because of any economic concern, many were quite willing to tighten the belt in that regard, or at least they were willing to tighten others' belts for them. No, the problem was if vice were gotten rid of then vice would, obviously, have been gotten rid of. And this was something, even if they didn't know they knew, that everyone knew, that without sin, there wasn't any such thing as salvation. So in that regard, there'd been quite a type of loving reaction to the Whistle Pig's announcement and construction and initial opening, which'd provided a fine opportunity for everyone to get out and get together and socialize while they marched and chanted and sung on such topics as man's degraded nature and the impossibility of being a Christian in America these days without being persecuted and how so and so needed to read their Bible. All of this, of course, sung and said by members of those churches who employed grape juice each Easter Sunday, rather than the fermented grapes the Bible *actually* and *explicitly* specified, as some nonbelievers and disbelievers and unbelievers often pointed out, non-practitioners, at least according to the results of one study, having a 67% higher statistical likelihood and chance of obsessing about and over religious practice or practices than the practitioners themselves of said practices, themselves. Interestingly enough, this change of circumstances was only made available in the latter half of the twentieth century, as it wasn't till then that a procedure was invented (by *the* big-name grape-juice company itself, no less) whereby grape juice could exist, being as how, if left on its own, plain old unadulterated grape juice (what some might term *real* grape juice, with a lowercase 'r', since it was supposed to be that the variant with the uppercase 'R' wasn't supposed to be ever get-at-able, which meant, even if it could ferment, there was no practicality in it doing so, and some charged such might merely be a restating or smuggling in of Plato's ideal forms, and as anyone who wants to get drunk, or even just a little tipsy, knows, perfection is pointless when there's good enough. Which, interestingly enough, though this wasn't discussed during any Sunday or Easter sermons in the county, was something of the exact complaint the father of the bride had against Jesus when he turned water into wine that time) but unadulterated grape juice will, pretty much, always

ferment. Certain formerly extant Christian scholars had argued that this indicated something about divinity and how creationism was the only explanation as to how this set of circumstances could've come about, as the semi-automatic conversion of watery grape juice into wine surely had to have some divine origin and couldn't've been produced merely through random processes. But as stated, the turn-out'd been fine.

Though, as could be expected, the sales were more lackluster. After all, restaurants could import cheaper and better-known names. They barely kept pace with expenses. But the doors of their little co-op were still open, so there wasn't too much to complain about. At least, not anymore.

Sitting at his desk, shifting papers, which it seemed as if that's all he ever did, he looked up as motor noise carried through the thinly insulated metal walls. And it wasn't from the generator. He'd tried to get a few trucks. Maybe they'd shown up early. And pushing back his chair, he rose and went out through the front of the building. And out along the road sat more heavy armor than they'd gone into Baghdad with. Most if it'd been newly painted black, all of it military surplus equipment. From the conning towers of two, a spotlight lit and settled on him, and he shielded his eyes.

"This's the safety technician's department." The PA system was military surplus too, all part of a program at the state and federal level (when they'd still existed) to funnel used and unneeded military equipment at cheap, cheap prices—the call of the economist's favorite bird, as a poster on a corner of what was left of the internet posted just before this—but all this surplus military equipment'd been migrated to local law enforcement agencies all across the former country. "Under Bill 11 dot 5...3, all fermented beverages, not limited to beer or wine, and containing any other appreciable amounts of alcohol and which are designed for consumption for the purposes of pleasure or intoxication or any non-medicinal or non-religious purpose is hereby and forthwith illegal under this statute. And all such facilities housing such and housing any equipment for the production of such and any paraphernalia associated with is to be hereby confiscated and impounded and considered under civil forfeiture." The voice on the PA paused, as if changing to a new script, or replacing a tape. "Anyone

in the building—” Johnathan and Matilda’d come to the front by then, stepping outside into the lights, momentarily blinded by them, their vests and hardhats lit harsh orange and yellow. “—come out side with your hands up and proceed forward slowly.”

However, being as that grape juice was now the de facto solely employed sacrament faux wine in the county, the religious aspect of the declaration existed only because an aid had copied and pasted the prior section from another legal document attached in an email from one think tank or the other, but he had disappeared before having the opportunity to edit it, all of that (legalese and names both) blurring together in his mind, but such a detail had been of no particular importance for him in the moment, so there had been no reason for him to particularly worry about it during, and even less so after, but TANK, in some fashion, technically, in one sense, still had extant members in the county, as it was one of those organization that never truly could have former members, even if the home itself had fallen into disrepair.

Two of the vehicles were troop carriers, which lowered their doors, and from which black-body-armored deputies disembarked. But it was almost impossible to discern them from behind the spotlights, and there was only a hint of the mass of them as they scrambled up the bank, most of them having a hard time in all that armor, one or two tangling in the cords that anchored the handful of trees that’d been planted on the edge of the parking lot just before the start of the end of the world. However, Harvey did just have time to yell, “What the hell’s going on?” before he was on the ground with his hands being pulled behind his back and his wrists were being ziptied together. Johnathon, a silent person, normally, hadn’t even managed that much. Matilda, however, had fared better, a by-no-means-small and rather butch lesbian, she knocked half a dozen on their asses—that only being mentioned because those guys would hear no end of remarks on those very subjects for most of what was left of the last of the last evening of the world, but at the moment, they lay there and half-rolled round, struggling to rise because of the shell-like confines of all that armor and padding—but soon enough she doubled over from a beanbag round in the stomach. All in all, it was a rather mild level of violence. But then again, to be fair, as some, both on what was

left of the internet and the real world, would put it, that just meant there was room for improvement.

They took them out and sat them on the asphalt against the other side of the building, beneath the sign painted directly on the corrugated metal siding: a groundhog in a recliner.

One of the reasons that'd been enumerated in one of the countless letters, way back when the Whistle Pig'd first opened, for the banning of alcohol, at least in the eyes of the writer, was that it increased the amount and likelihood of violence that did and could and would occur in society.

When Langdon returned, fewer (and sooner to be even fewer) places on campus still had power. Either generators'd already been let run dry, or as was the case with the dorms and offices, since no one, virtually, was supposed to be there, they'd never worried about restoring power in the first place. So, as mentioned, the main electrical hubs on campus'd become the network center, which, as also mentioned, was one of the main nodes of what was left of the internet, and the campus police station. Langdon'd pushed the tv cart, an old black CRT atop it, all the way up the hill, toward the guiding floodlights outside the campus police station. Still, there was only one person on post there, Mike, who'd helped out by repurposing a VCR from some of the surveillance equipment; Langdon'd pushed the cart halfway across campus without having found one, in a remarkable show of faith, and just because there'd been so little else to do at the time. Mike, of course, had been more than happy to help, and'd even run an extension cord out through the back door into the parking lot and'd donated a couple chairs from the so-called detention room, which was otherwise stuffed full of them. They used the back parking lot because there was minimal light back there, and because there was no room to get the tv cart into the station, what with all the military surplus equipment that'd been stuffed inside. Not that it was all weapons related. There was a general smattering of items, including more spotlights, but also boots, outdated MREs, a few boxes of survival manuals for terrains and environments that no longer existed, a couple inflatable rafts, a few unmentionables, and other odds and ends. Mike might've been tempted to think he'd stumbled into running a PX. And Hendrix'd teased him about it when she'd come by. He selected a couple helmets that didn't smell funny and removed the liners, splitting a bag of microwave popcorn between

them, and carried them both out the back door, which couldn't close properly because of the extension cord. "Popcorn?"

Langdon'd already fought with the cabling to get everything hooked up; such things'd never been his forte, and he stood looking down at the remote. "Thanks." He motioned for Mike to set it in the seat. He'd brought the car up and parked it back there, the back door open, so he had easy access to the tapes. He'd already popped one in. And apparently, it'd started playing on its own, which, apparently, this VCR did when a tape was freshly inserted, but the TV remained blank black. He mashed squishy, tacky, remote buttons with his thumb, but nothing happened, and finally, he took the two steps necessary to depress the small beady power button on the front of the TV. He picked up the other remote, the one they thought went to the VCR, as he stepped back toward the chair, lifted the bowl slash helmet of popcorn out, and sat.

"What's this supposed to be about?"

"I've no idea."

Mike lifted a handful of popcorn to his mouth, said, as he chewed, "... should probably turn it up a little."

Langdon rose and pressed another beady little button on front of the TV.

"No, the other one."

A hiss rose with the volume, unavoidable, contaminating everything else, as if the static sound of the universe's former background radiation were having its revenge.

The initial credits'd already passed while he'd been trying to use the remote to turn it on, and part of the first scenes'd passed by while the CRT'd been warming. So they were a little bit past the first attack, after they'd pulled the young woman from the dunking booth at the far end of the boardwalk, and the doctor was discussing with the safety technician how she was seemingly comatose, or at least, unresponsive, the movie wasn't too particular about which, the doctor having to explain in some perplexed and delicate way that this was because she'd been overstimulated to such a degree that her mind'd momentarily shutoff. Though, she was otherwise healthy.

Safety Technician: But what could do this, Doctor?

Doctor: It has me completely perplexed. I've never seen anything like it. At least...not this bad.

Mike popped another handful of popcorn into his mouth.

The tape moved on, blurry, grainy, color distorted here and there in places where someone'd rewind and watched again and rewind again and watched again and rewind again and watched again and rewind again and watched again and watched again and rewind again and watched again and rewind again and watched again and watched again and rewind again and watched...

And the parents, of course, having denied consent, the safety technician and the amateur gynecologist sneak into the hospital, into the ward housing the victims (now totaling three), all of whom lay silent under white sheets, staring up at white ceilings.

Amateur Gynecologist: If we can just get measurements of the vaginal radius as close to post stimulation as possible, we'll be able to guesstimate the size of the individual in question.

The following scene was quite distorted and borderline unwatchable at this point. And the clarity of picture and sound resumed with them hurrying down the empty hospital corridor.

Amateur Gynecologist: I knew they were full of shit. No expansion of the vaginal canal whatsoever. You know what this means.

Safety Technician: What?

Amateur Gynecologist: It was obviously external stimulation. We're obviously dealing with an entirely different class of phenomena here.

Of course, in a later scene, the boardwalk manager's having none of this, he just runs this place for the capitalist who rents it out to all these stands chock fulla family fun and games. A supposed penetration phenomena was bad enough, after all, this was a family venue. But women being stimulated without insertion? Unthinkable.

Manager: Jay, look around you, what do you see? Happy families. All of them all alike. They don't want to think this kind of stuff is out there. And it's not our job to tell them it is. And after all, this boardwalk's livelihood is in wholesome family entertainment. Do you really want to be responsible for ruining the fun of all these good people, and the profits of the owner, and your pay, mind you, on unfounded speculation by some...?

Amateur Gynecologist: I know how to operate a slide rule.

Manager: And if the doctors were to take measurements now?

Amateur Gynecologist: Of course, it's been too long. Any distentions of the cavity would have abated by this point, either way.

Manager: Of course. (*He motions to the safety technician.*) Do you have any solid proof? Any solid proof at all that this isn't just some unfortunate set of non-insurance-involved accidents?

But it's plain to see the manager's unsettled about the implications that in fact the victims' vaginal cavities had not, in fact, been expanded.

And of course there're the shots of the safety technician looking from the very end of the boardwalk as everyone runs to and fro, families all with children obviously eighteen and over. And of course, there's the eighteen-year-old young woman out riding in one of the water rides who, in the distance, appears to be moaning, all alone out there on the course, which causes something of a scene. But it all turns out to've been a joke. But also, of course, in this time, while everyone's been concentrating on the wrong thing, on those miniature water ride thingies, three more bodies lie between a corn dog stand and a shooting gallery, eyes rolled back in their heads, blank, blissful expressions on their faces.

Mike popped another handful of popcorn into his mouth.

There's a very nice scene from which the movie gets its title, where someone makes a joke that the phenomenon obviously doesn't suffer from TMJ.

And of course, they have to get someone crazy enough to go out and try to hunt down this phenomenon, which just happens to be a man who radiates so much manly virility that it's obvious he'd never be caught dead doing anything *but* penetrating something. And cue appropriate background story that shows why he's so at odds with lesbians, and it's here that a slight inconsistency emerges, because, up till this point, no mention's been made in regards to lesbianism, as such, by name, that is, but anyway, that's what he's convinced is somewhere out there: a lesbian phenomenon. The audience is supposed to tell he's brash that way, closer to reality, because he can say things like lesbian, while everyone else has to skirt round the truth with euphemism. So this just proves he's really the man for the job. Which's why they, the safety technician, the amateur gynecologist, and this fellow, have to take out a personal excursion device, what some would've called a golf cart, which rolls along the boardwalk. It's here that the crowds've gathered, safe back from and above the rolling waves of the ocean, which could be used to hide anything, manifesting the ultimate fears and the surface and surfaces onto which may be broadcast all those human projections of the unknown. But here, it's all those people that part round the hood of this personal excursion device that're the real ocean, the faceless nameless crowd through which innumerable deviants could be shifting, flitting, hidden in the enormity of it. It's this other fellow, the driver of this personal excursion device, who has the privilege of seeing this and pointing it out, he, himself, having been born and raised in a small, rural community in the heart of the country, in a small house amid endless fields of golden wheat, with only his father, far from the crowds which are fundamental to the urban landscape and which create this human ocean. Such was, of course, the opposite of Eden, to which's man's constant struggle to return. And out there, somewhere, in this mammalian sea, is the facilitator, the purveyor, the instigator of female sexual pleasures, lurking somewhere beneath the waves of human flesh.

There's some slight of hand here leading up to the crescendo. There's little, really no, explanation given as to why this fellow, this personal-excursion-device driver, suddenly realizes himself to be without a penis, and as to whether what everyone thought'd always

been there had never really been, or whether, by some means... well, how the phenomena itself is supposed to be responsible for this is never broached in an obvious way. So that, now, what everyone'd assumed to be a man, actually turns out to be a rather hard-faced woman who looks as though she's never had an orgasm in her life. And in any regard, it leaves this former fella, the driver, sliding out of the personal excursion device with a kind of peremptory blissful expression spreading over her slash his face as he slash she sinks in the waves of the crowd, leaving the amateur gynecologist and the safety technician alone in the personal excursion device.

Mike popped the last two kernels of popcorn into his mouth. "Want some more?"

Langdon, who'd been sitting there with his uneaten, passed his helmet without looking away from the screen. And Mike took it and popped a handful of cold popcorn into his mouth, which wasn't yet quite old enough to go stale, even in spite of the notorious half-life of microwave popcorn.

It's the amateur gynecologist's solution to this predicament to allow himself to be turned into a woman as well, which's revealed to've already happened, and lure the phenomena in close enough to insert a rather large dildo into it, thereby, somehow, nullifying the whole thing. And, however, though he manages to ward off the lure of female stimulation that'd left the driver sinking below the human throng streaming over the boardwalk in the bright afternoon sun, their eyes hidden behind large dark glasses, sweat glistening on their skin above and between swim trunks and bikini bottoms (though, throughout the film, any MILF character's been consistently portrayed wearing no less than a one-piece), he's been reduced to utter non-action by the sheer mental fortitude required to maintain such resistance against the temptation of female pleasure. But the dildo's gone now, rolling across the boardwalk, somewhere out there, submerged in the human wave, kicked who knows where, carried off by a dog. So the only one remaining with the possibility of penetrating anything is the safety technician, which, till this point in the film, seems to've been the very idea he's struggled with, and perhaps can even be seen as some form of psychic instigator for these phenomena as a whole, his marriage to a woman who already had a kid, and

that he'd allowed the kid to live, the gynecologist'd remarked earlier, signaled a reproductive issue, as, in most species, the displacement of one alpha male by another, generally, always was followed by the removal of his previous competition's contributions to the gene pool. And more than implied here was, as there's been through the whole film, that there's something wrong with his (the safety technician's) manhood, that he was, in fact, not a man. It's brought into question whether he, even, has had sex, at several points during the film, most notably in the hospital scene, when the amateur gynecologist was taking measurements, his averting of his eyes as he helps shift the plain white sheets down the young woman's body. So in all this, it's already tempting to read the film as an allegory of the consequences of a man failing to be a man, of being a man ostensibly, on the surface, but never putting the penetration into practice.

By this point, the little electric motor that keeps the personal excursion device going's failed, battery dead, so it just sits there as the waves of human flesh part round the hood, flowing past, the phenomena out there, submerged, waiting. At one point, he has to check himself to ensure that in fact he does indeed have a penis.

It's at this point that only one logical conclusion remains for the film: that is for the safety technician to climb out of the stalled personal excursion device and proceed, using his now erect penis, to initiate an orgy with all those streaming by on the boardwalk. Whether or not this project will be an ultimate success is left to question, the film ending at some indeterminate time after X number of nubile females've been penetrated, but in any regard, there seems to be a sense that even if the protagonist were eventually pulled beneath the waves, what's of prime importance is the gallantry of the effort expended.

Roll credits.

The VCR stopped with a thunk, churned, whirled as it automatically rewound the tape.

"Not too bad," Mike said. He finished off the last of the popcorn. He stood and stretched. "Well, if we're going to keep this up all night, I guess I'd better see about some more popcorn." He turned, carrying the two helmets into the station. "I got some cokes in the fridge, want one?" But he didn't stop to wait for a reply. Which was good, as Langdon didn't reply, and in fact, didn't seem to notice his

existence anymore, though he technically, at the minimalist levels of his brain, did, as he rose and extracted the tape after it'd been automatically ejected and set it on the bottom of the tv cart and walked over to the car and selected another from the back seat and returned and inserted this next tape into the vcr's oblong mouth, the peaceful, solid-blue pattern it outputted to the tv in the interregnum replaced by a momentarily staticky and color-distorted image at the first of the tape, an artifact from the manufacturing process that was much more colorful than the recorded static of the background radiation of the universe. In that way, the vhs represented a kind of mini version of the universe: order (the company logo) arising out of the staticky chaos, the unfolding of such processes and forces running, reaching their crescendo, fading to staticky chaos, the chaos increasing with each viewing, till the tape, after so many viewings, would be completely and wholly static, and eventually, far after that, the eventual demise of such total entropy, itself, then, finally black, and finally, nullity as the vcr took over for the lack of content, and projected its only solid blue pattern. What this meant for the analogy he didn't know, but he considered it cannon.

Mike pushed open the door with his foot, helmets of popcorn in each hand, cold canned drinks pinned against his chest with his forearms, a chocolate bar between his teeth. He set it all down on the asphalt between the chairs, except for the chocolate bar, which remained between his teeth as he sat, the initial credits still in process. He removed it (the chocolate bar) from his mouth. "Want it?" Eyes still fixed on the screen, Langdon shook his head. Mike shrugged, then unwrapped the chocolate bar, chewing as the title sequence faded in.

«Anyone out there eat cornflakes? Or some variety thereof? Come on, yuns can tell us, we won't tell. And in case yuns don't know, after all, we are the only radio station left in the whole universe, at least so far as anyone can tell. But, then again, if there's another'ne out there, we're too busy listenin' to ourselves—so there. This's EFKO, staying with yuns till, hopefully, the end of the end of the world. But cornflakes, there can't be anything more American, can there? Of course, America's a bit of a past tense these days, ain't it? Which raises the question, is all this trying to get back everyone's always screaming about really Americanism, or Neo-Americanism? Paleo-Americanism? Does it matter? Yuns decide. We've got a poll up on what was left of the internet. But back to cornflakes. They're okay if yuns eat em as soon as yuns put milk on em. But that stuff they turn into a couple minutes after sitting in it, ick, that stuff should be banned. It's like American gruel. Or how bout graham crackers? Anybody out there like graham crackers? We've got a friend out there—hope you're still out there—who makes pumpkin pies with a graham cracker crust. Apparently this's sorta heresy, because no one's ever heard of it, and when they do they're always trying to kill him over it, or just making funny faces. You decide. Our pet theory is this's somehow tied in with the end of the world. True or not? What, do we sound like we know what truth is? Anyway, yuns knows what's more all-American than cornflakes? That's right, sexual repression. Of course, yeah, it's not a new thing, we get that. But here in Neo-America, we do everything better than everybody else. Yuns ever notice how people claim America even had racism problems like nowhere else in the world? We even do slash did racism better than all the rest of yuns, if any of yuns're still out there to listen. This's probably why Americans were so obsessed with female genital mutilation. Yuns ever notice how it wasn't quite

in a way that would do anything about it. More like everyone was anxious that someone else was doing something better than they were. Probably that's why labiaplasties picked up so much around the same time as media coverage of Middle Eastern female genital mutilation took off, yuns think? But, but in former America, we figured out that if yuns throw round enough comments about throwing hot dogs down a hallway and beef flaps and meat curtains, not only will women run out and do it to themselves, but they pay to do it. Now, this's not to say, and we don't wanna come off that way, we have nothing against any surgery that improves people's lives. After all, some women out there really are cursed with an abundance of genital tissue to the point where it makes their lives nightmarish, and we here at EFKO say good to yuns for modifying yuns's body in a way that makes jun's life better. And to all those people who complain at women for getting breast reductions, well, we'd tell yuns to go not exist, but that's happening as we speak, so there. But, but not only will these women run out and do it themselves, but they'll pay to have it done. So yeah, we're number one. Take that Middle East, even though yuns don't exist no more. We're number one. We're number one. And... Oh, we have a comment. Well... Well, that's just boring. But, anyway, glad to hear the operation went well and noboby's nose got lit up. So yeah, we can out-gulag all yuns idiots. Which, and yuns know it had to, brings us back to cornflakes, and graham crackers, we don't wanna forget them. Did yuns know that, interestingly enough, or not so interestingly if yuns have one iota of knowledge about American history, but for those of yuns who don't and didn't, cornflakes and graham crackers were originally invented with the idea that eating bland foods would lead to a reduction in sexual appetites. We suspect there's a bit of racism couched in here, but, hey, that's just us, that is, a lot of yuns out there're always complaining about the Mexicans coming in and having anchor babies and out-breeding us, and well, yuns know that kind of spicy food that they eat down there. But anyway, this, in fact, was the impetus behind several different individuals going into the so-called dry-cereal business. Three of them were named Kellogg. Though, none bore any familial relation, beyond that of being part of the same species, the members of that species being descended from the same common apelike ancestor, those apelike common ancestors,

themselves, descending from that way way way back common ancestor of all life on what used to be the planet Earth, so they were no more related than that. But there must've been something in the water then—because everybody and his brother wanted to go into the cereal business to cure the world of sex. Of course, they didn't rely solely on this. For those of yuns out there who might still be around to listen, yuns might be interested in knowing this was about the time when circumcision started coming along in the American consciousness, in part because of these types of cereal manufacturers, who promoted it as a means of subconsciously associating the genitals with pain in the baby's mind, a state, in theory, he was then supposed to carry through life, making him unconsciously wary of both masturbation and sex. Course, as if that weren't enough, and there's gotta be options, after all, it's all about choice, so yuns can all have it some way, but the other option was to thread some silver wire through the little guy's foreskin. Ouch. We don't even have one between us, and this's painful. Of course, we couldn't leave out the girls. Or more accurately, the cereal people couldn't leave out the girls. Now, yuns might think they proposed some kind of circumcision for them, too, what's sauce for the goose's sauce for the gander after all, but oh no, no, no, no, no, one of them's bright idea is to drop acid on baby girl's clits. Yes, that's right, folks, eating cornflakes makes yuns think about dropping acid on baby girl's genitals. And not the good kind of acid—not that we do that stuff—oh, look at the purty colors. And that, for any of yuns out there who might still exist, is why, folks, cornflakes are banned from this station. However, we do accept graham crackers, as they're polluted, someone started putting sugar in them, so they lost their whole luster with the various temperance movements. So if anyone's out there near a camp fire, don't worry, yuns can make s'mores without fear of finding yuns'sself running round with a knife trying to cut people's crotch's up. And if yuns're thinking about it anyway, we hope yuns get shot, unless, that is, yuns's partner's consented to this, then have at it, but just don't ask us to join in or watch, please, we have a rule about going that far down into the basement.»

«So coming up next we've got several things. Right now, the background music you're listening to is from the soundtrack of the film The Moon and Sixpence A Triple-X Parody, which we've downloaded

off what's left of the internet. And for those who don't know, shortly before the world ended, the EU, that's European Union for those who don't know, passed a law that said copyright holders couldn't refuse payment for anything, that is, giving their own work away for free is slash was verboten, so we just feel we're doing our part to help the original composer break the law by not giving him a cent, which he's very happy about, apparently.»

«Though, we're not really sure this still applies, as, one, the EU doesn't exist anymore, and B, this, or the country that was, was never part of it to begin with, but it's the thought that counts. Have yuns ever made the connection between copyright laws and the anti-manumission laws of the antebellum South? Well maybe yuns should.»

«Or maybe not.»

«But one of our friends just keeps and keeps and keeps saying it and if we have to suffer, you do too, because we believe in sharing. Hi, if you're still out there.»

«Is she going to be—»

«Yeah, so if the rest of yuns don't wanna think about it, don't worry, we're probably gonna have a guest later who'll think about it for yuns.»

«So stay tuned if you want.»

«But first, before all that, we here've had a little too much coffee, and we wanna thank our friends out there, yuns know who yuns are, for your very generous anonymous delivery, but we know it was yuns. But, everything has its consequence, so if any of yuns're still out there listening, here's a short recording of a selection of a woman reading Georges Bataille's Story of the Eye while someone works on her with a Hitachi Magic Wand. Enjoy while we run to the bathroom. And if yuns're getting tired of our bathroom scorecard being broadcast, just wait till later when we have our special guest on who knows all about all the things yuns never ever ever wanted to know. But in deference to the consequences of physics and biological evolution, here's a piece of the mind of Georges Bataille, transported all the way forward through time, even though the rest of him's dead, listen carefully and yuns can hear a faint buzz in the background.»

Something about the buzzing sound on the radio reminded Mike of the former background radiation of the universe (which he often had used to watch as a child, his childhood predating the transition to digital broadcasting) except he wasn't awake to notice that it reminded him of that, though, it influenced the dream he was having, though only slightly, and Mike rolled over on the military surplus cot that he'd made enough room to deploy in the gear-packed station. Langdon heard it too, though he consciously registered as little of it as Mike had, as he (Langdon) walked down the hallway after having come from the restroom. He pushed open the still slightly propped open back door and stepped out into the parking lot, where the VCR transmitted a solid-blue pattern to the TV that, Langdon having stared so long at the screen, seemed to just float there unaided in the air, a bulged square of pure color. The whites of his eyes'd gone pink and'd started to water sometime before from a too-low blink rate influenced by the refresh rate of the cathode ray tube. Piles of spent tapes lay stacked on the bottom shelf at the base of the roll-around TV cart. Fuzzy static buzzed between his ears by then, leaving him unable to calculate the amount of consecutive hours he'd stared at the screen, consecutive hours broken only by pausing the VCR to go to the toilet, even that more and more rarely as he'd drunk less and less. What day was it? But it didn't matter, it was always the same last evening of the world. It seemed as if he were supposed to've done something; he got that sense, not that he remembered that he'd been supposed to pick up Anime again, specifically, just that there was something in general that he'd forgotten. Because of this, automatically, he pulled out his phone. The WiFi was good at the station. But there wasn't anything new. Automatically, he scrolled down through already read messages. He paused, thumb hovering over the screen, hovering

over a name he'd seen over and over and over again on too many credits to enumerate. He thumbed the representation of the message onscreen. He'd completely forgotten that he'd been invited to hear Clive Amerika speak at a private engagement at the East Savannah highschool building, which'd been one of the first highschools in the area, an old stone building that'd been auctioned off in the seventies and later turned into a museum for miniature Dutch windmills for a few years, before it'd gone under and been bought by a real estate investment company that sometimes rented the building out for special events, such as the Rotary Club. Langdon slipped his phone into his pocket. He walked toward the car, closed the rear door, all the tapes having been emptied out of the back seat. Mike, yawning, came to the back door, rubbing the side of his face, sipping from a freshly popped can. "Going?" But Langdon didn't reply as he rounded the car. "Well, thanks." Mike raised the can. "We should do this again sometime." He glanced at the piles of tapes. "Hey, you don't mind if I borrow a couple of these awhile, do yuh?" But Langdon climbed into the car in silence, started it, and reversed out of the parking lot. Mike watched him go, still sipping from the can. He shrugged, looked at the pile of tapes. He went over and picked through them, looking at them as if there were invisible markings on them only he could see that somehow allowed him to identify each one, a skill that meant very few people played poker with him more than once, and happened to be one of the reasons he had a permanent lifetime ban from all Merron-owned casino properties, which especially included the one down on the reservation. Still sipping from the can, which, incidentally, actually was an authentic Coke, and not just a coke in the small 'c' local colloquial sense of the word, but it didn't matter, as he had, almost, no sense of taste anyway. He carried a couple tapes inside and down the hall and set them on his desk.

And after standing there looking down at his paper-and-MRE-and-VHS-covered desk a few minutes, he glanced up at the loudly ticking clock on the wall, but it was impossible to tell if it meant AM or PM. Civilian appropriation of military time could've solved this longstanding issue, and as much rah-rah-rhea that goes up about the armed forces and people supposedly being all for anything to give them an excuse to wear digital camo...but change and all that, so

this's the situation as it was. He tilted back his head and finished the last of the can, or at least, the vast majority of it, as a little always remained in those beverage cans, no matter how many times shaken; some conspiracy-theory-minded people took note of that. But he just crushed the can and dropped it into the trash can beside the desk, not even a recycling can, just a normal trash can. And he picked up his hat and the belt that had a flashlight holder and went out into the parking lot, climbing into his patrol car, the university logo on both doors. He turned out of the parking lot on his usual course round campus, just the usual patrol. Idly, he reached over and turned-on the radio, the display lighting the interior a shade of orange. But all it emitted was a faint buzzing noise interspersed with faint words and mumbles and little gasps and faint squeaking sounds. But he listened to it anyway, as he made his way through campus.

There seemed to be a lot of light up near one of the faculty buildings. He leaned forward over the wheel to try and get a better look, then turned down along a road that'd eventually lead him in that direction. The radio emitted a combination of buzzing and hard breathing slash panting. He got a view of the parking lot from the distance, part of it illuminated by bright spotlights, black-painted vehicles parked round. He pulled into the lot. The radio emitted buzzing and guttural utterances as he killed the engine. He climbed out, resting his hand on the open door as he looked overtop the car. Gunfire carried from one of the floors above, followed by louder shock waves of a different character. Colored smoke leaked from one of the open windows, tear gas; he got a whiff of it on the night air. It rendered him slightly nostalgic. He reached into the car and pulled out his cap, closed the door, put the cap on as he started across the parking lot toward the men in black body armor standing over there. "What's going on?"

"Safety technician's department matter." They all walked round with their helmets down, since they were permanently fixed in that position (though not intentionally, originally; but later the manufacturer had elucidated how this had in fact been a feature, which some on what was left of the internet, and in what very few of those on what was left of the internet called the real world, held up as proof of the manufacturing process itself being an intelligent meta process, above true human conceptualization, existing up there on a level on which

time meant nothing, so if it was a mistake it was only so from humanity's limited point of view) so it was impossible to tell one deputy from the other. "We're here to serve a warrant on a Langdon Jones for violation of the Communications Decency Act as well as the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act and the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act. Please, do not interfere." The way he read it, it was tempting to think he'd had this speech, or some variant of it, taped to the inside of his helmet. However, this wouldn't've been a correct assumption. In fact, the van was equipped with sufficient military surplus communications equipment that, in an area the size of the county, they didn't need any communications network other than their own. And the heads-up displays in the helmets allowed dispatch to pop any text or video into their helmets at will. So he was actually reading it off a screen. The system was a software relative of what operators in call centers were programmed by (and there were still two people within the bounds of the county working at such positions on a freelance basis, one sitting inside their tent, the other sitting outside). "This is an official police matter. Please, step back." (This part of the script predated several more-or-less recent bits of legislation.) The Communications Decency angle can be reckoned with reasonable ease; however, as to FOSTA and SESTA, the logical progression'd gone something like this: by posting what he'd posted earlier, about not believing sex workers should be raped or murdered against their will, he'd been, in fact, explicitly promoting the performance and participation in sex work via removing any aspect that made it look bad, because people had to be hurt in order to show that people were hurt to show why it needed to be made illegal, so the that same would continue, ad nauseam, etc. So by posting that sex workers shouldn't be abused and slash murdered and slash mutilated without their consent, he'd been, and was, as those posts were still live for anyone with a device capable of connecting to what was left of the internet to access, promoting prostitution, among other acts, in an interactive electronic medium, it being that, because various links and menus were, by definition, clicked upon and actions resulted in such consequences as to change the state of the software which accessed these, they were, in fact, interactive, and therefore, fully within the scope of the aforementioned acts. However, none of this was displayed or in any way transmitted

to the screens inside the deputys' helmets, other than in the form of the aforementioned statement.

"I'm campus police. I should've been informed of any warrants being served here."

"This is an official safety technician's department matter. Please, step back." There was a pause as the next line scrolled up. "Or we will have to charge you with obstruction of justice."

A few more bangs and booms continued overhead as a team situated in the outer hall tried to force Langdon out of his office with various military-surplus shock wave devices, but were so far ineffective due, in part, to the fact he wasn't in there. Mike looked up. "You know—"

"This is an official police matter. Please, step back. Or we will have to charge you with obstruction of justice."

Mike looked over at him, or at least the one from whose shoulder speaker the voice seemed to emanate. It, of course, would've been impossible to hear whatever muffled voices might've made it through those helmets; it'd've been like listening to the bad guy's voice in *Star Wars: A xxx Parody*, in the behind the scenes footage, before the digital voice effects were overlaid.

"This is an official police matter. Please, step back." He paused as the screen scrolled upwards. "Or we will have to charge you with obstruction of justice."

Mike turned and started back toward the patrol car. He removed his cap as he closed the door, and tossed it (the cap, not the door) into the passenger seat as he climbed behind the wheel. He started the car, the radio emitting a louder buzzing and a guttural, unintelligible voice. And it continued like that as he reversed and started out of the parking lot. And it continued like that, with various changes in the intonation of the unintelligible voice and the transition of guttural intonations to whimperings, as he drove across campus. Finally, as he neared the campus police station, the buzzing'd ceased, replaced by a faint panting. And this continued till he'd pulled into the campus police parking lot. The sound of something that must've been paper rustling emerged out of the radio as he parked, the last few airy, huffy, panting fragments of some book he'd never read faintly making it out between the unseen speaker's lips as he (Mike) cut the ignition. Calmly, he reached for his hat and opened the car door and pulled

the keys from the ignition. Calmly, he crossed the parking lot and unlocked the station and went inside. Calmly, he walked down the hall and put the cap on his desk in his office. And calmly, he went back into the hall, down to the end, into the storage room, and rummaged through cardboard boxes. And calmly, he pulled out a new, still in the plastic helmet and goggles, builtin everything, very high tech. And calmly, he went back out into the hall, down the hall, out the front. And calmly, he locked the front door to the campus police station. And calmly, he walked across the parking lot. And calmly, he climbed up into one of the tracked military-surplus vehicles. And calmly, he slid into the seat and reached and turned on the interior light so he could sort through his key ring. And calmly, he fastened the harness and calmly put on the helmet before he calmly started it up, the engine rumbling nicely as he peered through the narrow slit that barely afforded the driver a view, as he calmly turned the vehicle, getting a feel for it as he slowly and calmly took it across the parking lot and turned onto the road. Calmly, he stopped at the stop sign. He didn't know if there was an FM slash AM radio in this thing; he hadn't seen anything about that in the manual, but he'd figured there had to be one somewhere, but he'd have to figure that out later. So calmly, well under the speed limit, he made his way down the hill. Then, still calmly, though that wasn't anything anyone would've noticed by just watching the vehicle, but calmly, he accelerated, and rather than taking the curve and going round to enter the parking lot through the route or manner indicated by the arrow painted on the asphalt, he jumped the curb and plowed through the bushes, breaking through, and dropping off the curb into the parking lot, which he continued full speed across, watching through the narrow window afforded the driver as black-body-armored deputies scattered. One of the military surplus vans, however, did not scatter, and its side crumpled inward upon impact. And calmly, Mike reversed, shifted into drive, rammed into the thing again. Shots pinged off the tracked vehicle's armored sides. But he didn't worry 'bout that at the moment, after all, that's what armor was for. Instead, he calmly rammed the black van till it looked like the crushed Coke cans in the garbage can by his desk. Then, and only then, after backing up and turning, did he begin to chase the black-body-armored deputies round the parking lot.

And while seemingly ridiculous, all of this would, nearer the end of the end, turn out to've been completely legal.

Here's the perennial question: how do you get a bunch of twenty-somethings to destroy the world?

Different answers, of course, are provided at different times and places, they, themselves, representative, and of, their respective times and places and the cultures that birth and nurture them. Of course, across all eras, the desire was to remove as much of the human component as possible (or at least, certain sub-components of that component). Not because this component was necessarily the weakest (depending on, of course, the employed definition). Though, it's true the human mind and body'd been outclassed in bits and pieces, electronic circuits that could add and multiply numbers faster, that could communicate numerically encoded data faster, etc. But so far, the equipment'd always lacked the flexibility that a few billion years of evolution'd bestowed on certain species; though, looking at just a select few members of certain species, or whole populations, for that matter, it'd be likely an observer might come to the opposite conclusion, depending, of course, on who, in particular, such a hypothetical observer were to be, and even more depending on the equipment employed, whether bequeathed secondhand by evolution or thirdhand by technology, some theories, of course, stating that humans could never truly know anything other than the surface appearances of what was usually called reality, or that, if they could, they wouldn't want to. But then, species such as *Homo sapiens*, and probably their immediate relatives, have long suffered with, been blessed by, at least, as one theorist slash hypothesizer on a corner of what was left of the internet stated at the time, they've been blessed and cursed to fall on the TRIANGLE, LittleRed3's metaphor to conceptualize the notion that there are three distinct, interplaying, and combative aspects of the total genetic and thochtic disposition of the

species *Homo sapiens*. To quote: “These three phases can be defined, roughly, as the ADAPTIVE PHASE, the ANTI-ADAPTIVE PHASE, and the SEMI-ADAPTIVE phase.” The ADAPTIVE PHASE, here, refers to those members of the species primed to be able to, at least somewhat, willingly accept new cultural, spiritual, or technological creations, or modifications upon old ones. The debate as to whether anything truly new can be created will remain for later, though that hadn’t, at the time, stopped some from going ahead with just that on certain corners of what was left of the internet, though they have not, as of yet, typed or transmitted anything that’s not been typed or transmitted on the subject before, however, this should not be taken as evidence for one hypothesis or the other. But in regards to the former hypothesis, that is to reiterate, using one of LittleRed3’s terms, ADAPTIVE PHASES are more likely to CONVERT. The term CONVERT, here, of course, is used to cover the whole spectrum of habit and thochtic shift, including that of ritual and mode and custom and technology, and not just in the spiritual sense which those learning of the posts in question secondhand would be likely to ascribe to them. In contrast to the ADAPTIVE PHASE, here, the ANTI-ADAPTIVE PHASE reacts and, as even someone learning of these terms secondhand might expect, refers to the opposite of the ADAPTIVE PHASE, that is, a predisposition to an unlikelihood of CONVERSION. Finally, here, the third phase, the SEMI-ADAPTIVE PHASE, is, as might be surmised, a halfway point between the two poles of the ADAPTIVE PHASE and the ANTI-ADAPTIVE PHASE. Those predisposed to this phase, so LittleRed3 wrote, or more accurately typed, those predisposed to this phase will tend towards a fundamental experience of ANXIETY, which pushes them to reconcile both the new MODE and the old, that is to state, they will be driven to SYNTHESIS, to derive some amalgamation, here, and attempt to obtain the SELECTIVE ADVANTAGE that both might provide, while attempting to minimize any ANTI-SELECTIVE PROPERTIES. That is not to state, of course, that the ADAPTIVE and ANTI-ADAPTIVE PHASES are free of ANXIETY. In fact, ANXIETY, here, is the chief driving MOTIVATOR at the core of all three. The distinction was, of course, to what end the MOTIVATOR drives. Whereas, here, in the ADAPTIVE PHASE, the MOTIVATOR impetus of those within such a group drives them to experience ANXIETY when a MODE hasn’t been

altered or replaced, thereby being subject to a constant flux and high degree of MODAL TURNOVER, and in the ANTI-ADAPTIVE PHASE, the MOTIVATOR impetus of those within the latter group drives them to experience anxiety related to the possibility or actuality of MODAL TURNOVER from the opposite end, thereby causing them to expend their energies in trying to avoid such. It is, to quote LittleRed3: “[T]he interplay of these three PHASES that seems to have been selected for, rather than any particular one. From this it might be possible to surmise that a given human group or society’s reliance on any one node of the TRIANGLE leads to technological or social or spiritual disaster, which itself most likely could be considered an ANTI-SELECTIVE CONDITION.” However, some counter posters argued that this was, in fact, wrong and that disaster was a basic phenomena of the system and that the interplay merely, here, provides a mechanism to overcome that which is inherent. The word *interplay* is more appropriate here than the word *balance*. Whereas balance implies an even distribution, which, in effect, would be the functional equivalent of any particular PHASE achieving a monoculture within a group or society, thereby, at least in LittleRed3’s estimations, leading to a structure adapted specifically to a given time and circumstance and incapable of adapting in the face of change, which would, sooner or later, likely be selected against, however, interplay, here, implies the possibility of temporary domination by one, or more, node over the remainder, though without the necessary destruction of any single node. Not that such multi-node survival is, of course, guaranteed. To quote LittleRed3: “In this view, perhaps, an event or events transpire that militate against previous ADAPTIVE STANCES, and which give the temporary rise to dominance of, say, a new MODE, which allows the members of one node of the TRIANGLE to survive, while the others do not.” Also, here, the reverse is logically true: new MODES might instantiate an ANTI-SELECTIVE CONDITION. And trying to balance new and old MODES, here, may result in the same, thereby ensuring the survival of the ANTI-ADAPTIVE PHASE over other PHASES. However, this leads to another speculation: how does the TRIANGLE maintain itself if only one PHASE may survive a set of ANTI-SELECTIVE CONDITIONS? According to LittleRed3: “[The] answer must lie in that any node of the TRIANGLE is capable of generating the whole.

That is to say, if only one node is left surviving due to the first two having succumbed to an ANTI-SELECTIVE CONDITION, a portion of the newly established MODE will eventually shift into being the MODE of the ANTI-ADAPTIVE PHASE, as the ADAPTIVE PHASE MOTIVATOR will quickly push the members of that PHASE to adopt a new MODE. And when these two MODES are established, those more predisposed to favor the SEMI-ADAPTIVE PHASE will be driven to reconcile the two when the second becomes available.” Though, this is only a handful of the number of total possibilities in regards to the patterns of node shift under such a system, depending on how many dimensions were employed.

However, as MoreCock7 points out, here, this should not be taken to assume that members of such groups exist solely within the confines of such simply human definitions. In fact, it’s more likely that any individual will exist in a multiplicity of such PHASES, depending on the thocht in question, holding a state on one firmly in the ADAPTIVE-PHASE, while just as firmly in the ANTI-ADAPTIVE PHASE on another. It’s the only way to explain the complexity of human interaction. Anything else would be laughable, the simple degeneration into yet more attempts to pigeonhole human beings into narrowly defined categories to satisfy a combination of innate human anxiety and to allow the modern algorithmic state to function.

In taking this up, LesMiserables9 pointed out that: “[T]he simplicity with which the modern state must define a set of criteria and phenomena, no matter how complex, is by definition not just a dangerous oversimplification of the nature of the universe and, more immediately, nature itself and human beings, but is, again, by definition wholly reductive as to be effectively useless, and will always lead to suffering and pain.”

To this CrustaceanPig12 adds: “But some form of reduction is necessary for anything to be conceptualized and dealt with. Otherwise no one could ever get off their asses from thinking about it because the thinking would never be completeable.”

ConsciousMilkToast adds: “[I]t’s unlikely that the universe experiences any internal categorization at all, perhaps even at the meta level of the universe itself.”

CrustaceanPig12: It's better to have a solution that somewhat works than nothing.

LesMiserables9: But the thing is it won't really work at all.

CrustaceanPig12: You can't say that humans haven't made the world better. Most humans now live better than kings from as early as even two-hundred years ago.

LesMiserables9: And what about the millions who aren't?

CrustaceanPig12: Capitalism is already raising millions out of poverty in previously third-world countries.

LesMiserables9: And what about after that? When there's no more cheap labor because they've all been raised out of poverty?

IdentityProxy1995: You guys realize none of that exists anymore, right?

CrustaceanPig12: Do you want people to stay in poverty?

LesMiserables9: That's not what I'm saying.

CrustaceanPig12: The fact of the matter is capitalism's done more to improve the world than any other single invention.

LesMiserables9: What about all those who were raised to a middle-class position and now are unemployed because of automation?

CrustaceanPig12: They'll get new jobs.

AltHisStory33: PROXY, don't assume we all have a penis.

LesMiserables9: But that means capitalism will have to continually generate new jobs not only for the expanding population base that it requires, but *also* all those of the existing population base that it's continually leaving unemployed.

CrustaceanPig12: You can't make time or progress stand still.

ConsciousMilkToast: Something like UBI will have to be established in the future.

CrustaceanPig12: And who's going to pay for it?

ConsciousMilkToast: A tax on wealth or automation would be more than enough to cover it.

LesMiserables9: Universal Basic Income is just a capitalistic patch to a problem capitalism's created.

CrustaceanPig12: So long as the market is left unfettered, there will be the freedom for a solution to arise.

ConsciousMilkToast: With capitalism providing the hardware, and a socialized health system providing the human aspect, we will achieve the greatest results for the greatest number. You can't just depend on something that's essentially walking a tightrope with no net.

CrustaceanPig12: If there were a net, no one would be incentivized to try hard enough.

IdentityProxy1995: Whatever.

LesMiserables9: The combination of socialism and capitalism is worse than capitalism on its own. Socialized systems are not a competitor to capitalism, they're what's always erected to save it. That's how we got Nazi Germany.

CrustaceanPig12: Anyone who brings up Hitler obviously proves they're losing. And isn't worth debating with.

LesMiserables9: So you get to just write off the effects of capitalism in the 20th century?

ConsciousMilkToast: National socialism is not socialism.

CosmoBandit: Hitler was against capitalism.

LesMiserables9: Only up until the point businesses gave him money to help break unions.

LesMiserables9: Then he started arguing free enterprise wasn't compatible with democracy.

CrustaceanPig12: REAL free enterprise beat the nazis.

IdentityProxy1995 HAS LOGGED OFF

CrustaceanPig12: Capitalism is the only reason you can type these inane arguments and have them broadcast right now.

ConsciousMilkToast: But the internet system only exists because of heavy investment by government agencies (and thus tax payer dollars). You can't divorce the government from any effect upon reality. It has to have its place.

But in discoursing upon Hitler and Nazi Germany, one of the economic stimulants available, at the time, was the construction of u-boats, and of course, everything associated with their construction, extending all the way out and down through society, right down to the shoes the workers wore while doing so. This was made possible due to the law being behind the rate of technological advancement, submarines being one of those classes of war technology Germany was not forbidden from manufacturing, as per the terms set forth by the victorious forces of the first World War, simply because, at the time, submarine technology was too crude, as was aircraft carrier technology, and considered by, nearly, everyone as worse than toys, as relevant to modern warfare as something that'd be found in a proto science fiction story in a Munsey magazine.

So as OxfordComa33 pointed out: "The Nazis essentially dragged the world kicking and screaming into the 20th century, not just in terms of mechanized warfare, but also in terms of politics."

To which SemioticImbiber4 adds: "The Nazis, like all modern

societies, are fundamentally and structurally descended from the Romans, but there is a cross pollination here, a kind of lateral meme transfer whereby all modern societies are also, fundamentally, descended from Nazi Germany.”

Though, in continuing this thesis, as LittleRed13 was currently doing but hadn't yet posted, the Third Reich was only able to get the ball rolling on certain things, the atom bomb being the most prime example, their jet and rocket programs fairing a bit better, even if only just getting off the ground, they did get off the ground. There were even plans to pair submarines with missile launch capabilities, though the first efforts were, as can be expected with any new *MODE*, weak on their newborn legs. It would be left to their various descendants to refine these sets of thochtic potential during the course of the vicissitudes of natural selection, should they not encounter an *ANTI-SELECTIVE CONDITION* that rendered them, and any (then) hypothetical subsequent progeny, nonexistent.

However, this, as of yet, was not the case, and so a group of twenty-somethings that could be defined as the resultant progeny, who had not passed through many, if any, to one degree or another, physically selective events, themselves, had instead the descendants of their ancestors thochts deposited in their heads, these thochts themselves having emerged through quite a few more selective turns than biology'd've ever been capable of in that interval, but these young men, that they were men was in itself an expression of an interacting set of those same thochts, but these young men sat strapped into their stations.

“Firing control ready”

They flipped switches in sequence.

“Yes, mam.”

The lieutenant, a narrow man with hard eyes, floated there, ahold of a handhold which'd been designed for a crew member to steady himself against when gravity had still been in play yet found to be just as useful in weightlessness.

“Prepare simulated fire on two.”

“Yes, mam. Preparing simulated fire on two.”

This's, of course, how you get a group of twenty-somethings to blow up the world.

“Fire on two ready, mam.”

The lieutenant reached for the comm. “Fire on two ready, Captain.”

The voice came over the comm: “Fire two.”

“Yes, mam. Fire on two.” He said to the young men, “Fire two.”

“Yes, mam.”

They depressed their buttons simultaneously.

“Fire on two complete, mam. Clear.”

The lieutenant said into the intercom: “Fire two complete. Clear.”

These drills were, of course, procedure and normative and regular. This’s how you get a group of twenty-something young men to blow up the world: you always make it a drill, even when it’s the real thing. There’s no need to refuse a lawful order when there’s no order. After all, this’s only a drill.

The voice came over the comm: “Prepare to fire three.”

“Yes, mam. Preparing to fire three.” He said to the young men, “Prepare to fire three.”

They turned their keys, flicked switches. “Three ready to fire, mam.”

Lookouts sometimes had these industrial-strength binocular-like things mounted on swivels and posts that park visitors could put a quarter into—they were built during a certain economic disposition and hadn't been retrofitted since—but for a quarter they allowed a viewer to momentarily zoom in on the various distant objects the height and location afforded. Eva'd long before run out of quarters. And she'd just been standing there a long time looking into the distance, out past where light streamed upwards from the edges of what remained of the world, her breath fogging against the plastic oxygen mask. If it'd been completely dark, she'd've been able to discern the tiny light that existed out there, floating. But it wasn't, so she couldn't.

The thin air up there was colder.

An SUV passed on the road going down, stopped, reversed, pulled into the overlook. Karen rolled down the driver side window, pulled her oxygen mask away from her face. "When was the last time you ate?" Eva looked at her, but didn't reply. Ruth, in the passenger seat, leaned forward to try and see round Karen. "It won't do anyone any good if you starve yourself to death," Karen said.

"You," Ruth said, "have absolutely no idea how to talk to a depressed teenage girl."

"I've been one before."

"And that means nothing." Ruth opened the passenger side door and stepped out, looked overtop the SUV. "If you come down and get a bite to eat, we can drive you up on Tsuwa. It might be a better view from there."

"It doesn't matter, anyway," Eva said, but she still walked toward the SUV. She climbed in. Only the one seat remained empty, and only that one because enough deliveries'd already been completed, leaving

just enough space for her to fit in with her backpack. The rest of the SUV remained stacked full of cappuccino cups in cardboard holders. The cups were unlabeled.

Karen glanced into the rearview mirror. "We'll go down to Joint Burger. It's supposed to still be open. Problem with that?"

After a moment, Eva shook her head. But otherwise, she just stared blankly through the window as they wound their way down the mountains.

The radio, which'd been on, but turned low, nothing but nothing, not even static, coming out, finally began to get reception again, the FM lock light first blinking, then holding steady, faint voices carrying through. Ruth bent forward and turned it up.

«... might wanna know. But that's just us. In other news, a contact tells us that the county commissioners've passed a new bill. So apparently, the world isn't ending, but so we're told, there's now a bounty program on any non-fish water life that might be out there, which sources tell us, though it's not official, because when's the real reason for a bill ever officially in it? but what we're hearing is somebody's come up with the idea that, in the event of an emergency, and the normal supply lines are cut, it would be a good idea for the county to utilize its resources to be as self-sufficient as possible now that a big buncha farm land's been flooded. But isn't this all just so convenient? So if any of yuns boneheads're out there and listenin to this, if yuns try to exercise yuns's newfound legal rights, we hope yuns's collective asses get collaterally damaged, and we don't mean that in a gay way, yuh homophobic pricks. No, let's rephrase that, we know yuns's collective bone heads are gonna get more than collaterally damaged. So if being stupid's what yuns wanna die of, go right ahead. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. Stuuuuupid. But, hey, if instant bloody annihilation's what gets yuns's rocks off, who're we to stop yuns?»

Karen glanced at Ruth. "You don't think they'd actually be stupid enough to get out here and try it, do you?"

"Hydrogen and stupidity," Ruth said. "But hydrogen's limited these days."

Karen glanced into the rearview mirror, but Eva still sat the same as before.

Ruth looked back between the seats. "Would you care for a cappuccino?"

Eva looked at all the stacked cups. She shook her head.

"I'm sure she's fine," Ruth said.

Eva looked at her, eyes pink from bad sleep and lack of it. "That's not the problem."

In silence, Ruth re-situated herself in her seat, looked through the windshield at the twisty road ahead.

"So much for knowing," Karen said.

"Oh, shut up," Ruth said.

«So, because we've only got so much pissed off to go round, let's get on with other news. The local, and now only remaining, Joint Burger's just passed along an announcement to us that, due to a whole set of reasons, not the least being, this's just our humble opinion, of course, that those ass-hat commissioners've even attempted to introduce maybe sorta kinda the possibility of other meat into the food chain. Oh, did we mention another bill they passed which does away with the labeling requirements on things? Or more specifically, it's now legally permissible to be more general, that is, if it's meat, yuns just gotta label it's meat. Except if yuns grind shiitakes and mix them in and adulterate it that way, that's illegal. Simple. Anyway, if yuns want one of the beef or chicken patties that's left, yuns'd better hurry up, because once they're gone, they're gone, folks. Joint Burger, and this's an official statement, finds itself in the position where it's necessary to rethink its menu strategy, and blah blah. The short of it's that Joint Burger's now gone completely whole-hog vegetarian. Which doesn't affect some of us, but it might affect yuns, if any of yuns out there still exist. So just to let yuns know, a little heads up.»

"Do those laws about pulling over for stopped state troopers," Karen said, "carry over to armored vehicles?" They'd passed several of them going the opposite way.

Ruth shook her head. "Don't know."

Luckily, they didn't encounter anything pulled over on the side of the road till they were on the four-lane, which allowed them to get over without stopping. With the electricity out, all intersections'd become (legally) stop signed, meaning a lot of stop-starting as they drove past the hospital and Food Lion and down the hill and past

McDonald's (which wasn't on restaurant row proper, and instead, at best kind of hung off the end of it at the top of the hill; so it kind of got status as King of the Hill, and though part of, if not one of the defining members of that classification of establishment and venue, it somehow seemed aloof from such, the pinnacle of the fast food chain of being; though, technically, a hole-in-the-wall burger joint—in this case, dispensing through a literal hole in the wall—existed just up the hill from them, so, technically-technically speaking, they could've been likened to King of the Hill, but some people – or at least those who knew of such – felt this was too Marcionite) but they passed down the hill, past the long-closed Greek-Irish restaurant and tax offices, and curved through the roundabout, and out through restaurant row and out the other side.

"Hey," Karen said. "Look, Walmart's open."

"Of course it'd be," Ruth said. And as they moved on, she leaned forward to get a better view up the hill through the windshield, at the chain-link and razor wire fence surrounding the highschool.

"Don't get any ideas," Karen said.

"What makes you think I'm getting ideas?"

"Everything'll be taken care of in due time."

"I didn't say anything." Ruth glanced into the back seat.

"I'm not going to do it again," Eva said.

Ruth faced front. Karen glanced at her as she turned to pull into the Joint Burger parking lot. She stopped and turned in her seat. "We've got one or two stops to make round here first. We'll come pick you up as soon as we're done, okay?"

Eva didn't say anything, just opened the door and climbed out, leaving her pack and the oxygen tank, which'd been nearly empty, anyway. Karen said through the rolled-down window, "We'll be back in just a bit." But Eva only looked at her. So there wasn't anything for Karen to do but shift gears and take her foot off the brake and turn out into the empty Anglers parking lot to go through it to get back on the road.

Eva stood there not feeling particularly anything, the same as she'd been for a long time. Automatically, she turned and walked toward the door. And while it'd been on the radio, the word hadn't truly gotten out yet about what was going on there, so there weren't that

many people yet. And the few who were were mostly her age, or approximately so, and most of them'd collected in the booths in the back corner, passing a brown paper bag amongst themselves.

"Oh, hey!"

Instinctually, Eva turned toward the exuberant sounds. Behind the counter, in her striped uniform and hat, Emmy waved at her, leaned forward, looked as though she might topple past the cash register. She waved both arms. "You're just in time." She called into the back. She turned toward Eva. "There's just one left." But when no one replied, she held up a finger, "Just a minute," and marched back there, returning with a tray and wrapped sandwich and fries. "Here you go. The absolutely last chicken sandwich. I told you you were just in time." And she grinned as she handed Eva the tray across the counter, which Eva took purely out of mechanical reaction-response, and just stood there holding it. "It's so great to see you again," Emmy said. Eva stood there as blank faced as she'd been since they'd found her up on the lookout. "Oh, and don't worry about paying a thing. After all, we could never charge *you*, now could we?" She still grinned, grinned to the point her eyes almost had to close. "Just sit wherever, you know. It—"

The general rumbling of vehicular traffic'd picked up before she'd gone into the back to get the very last chicken sandwich and fries. But the amount of it now'd caused her to lean over the counter and try and look out through the restaurant's fairly standard, large windows. But all she saw was a bunch of black, semi-armored vehicles.

"Oh, shit."

And black-body-armored deputies started filing out into the parking lot.

A PA system blared with static feedback (also independent from the former background radiation of the universe). "To those within. This establishment has been identified as a bastion of truancy and is suspected as a malicious wellspring from which propaganda encouraging the illicit and illegal consumption of controlled substances flows." Yes, they had someone new writing back at dispatch. "This establishment will now be boarded. All those within are advised to raise your hands above your head and place them together at the back of your head and interlace your fingers and lay face down on the floor

with your legs spread. Any other position will constitute a willful act of resisting arrest and the obstruction of justice, and you will be charged thus accordingly.” They’d, of course, surrounded the place, and began marching for both doors in two teams. Both columns breached the establishment at roughly the same time, but out of step, so by the time three deputies had entered through the one door, five’d entered the other. And they’d’ve continued in this irregular fashion had the deputy at the head of each column not frozen, and instead the deputies just behind the lead deputy of each column ran into the back of their respective lead deputy, the deputy behind those respective deputies running into the back of the respective deputy directly in front of them, and so on. But the deputies at the head of the two columns didn’t acknowledge or consider this. Instead, respectively, they concentrated on Eva, though no one could tell this because of their helmets. Sub-vocalization monitors picked up what they didn’t say, relaying it back to dispatch, which, after verifying the feed from the cameras mounted on the respective lead deputys’ shoulders, advised them to retreat from the general area, at least for the time being. Which they did as quickly, though not necessarily as orderly, as possible.

Emmy sighed. “Oh, thank Zeus you were here.” She leaned across the counter. “Please, tell me you can stay awhile.” She glanced out the windows. “Please...”

A consistent rumbling too'd been noticeable all the way within the depths of the library.

"Ignore it," Candi'd said.

But he'd gone over and looked out the window anyway, standing there naked. And she sighed and joined him in an identical state. The window was one of the larger front ones, looking down over Mainstreet. A whole traffic jam'd seemed to've formed below, going right up the road past the fountain, and from what he could see, leaning to look through the window at an angle, right up, eventually, toward the road leading to the library.

"Not more books," she said.

"I don't think so." He cocked his head. "Some of those are Humvees. It looks like they turned out the National Guard Armory."

"They probably didn't come to handle the logistics of getting that shit out of the road, did they?"

"Likely not."

She slid her fingers up his naked back. "Maybe they've come to nab us for obscene uses of public property. If so, we might as well let them catch us red handed and red assed, hm?"

He turned and walked back toward the chair over which his clothes'd been scattered.

She sighed. "Oh, shit." And she started to look round for her own, which were more scattered, for some reason. "Why do my clothes always end up all over the place?" She bent and picked up her pants. "And don't you dare think of taking advantage of me while I'm in this position." She walked over and bent at the waste and lifted her shirt, glanced over her shoulder at him as she straightened. He finished slipping on his shirt and sat to put on his shoes. She sighed and squatted and snatched up her panties. "It's completely not fair." She

tossed everything onto a table and sorted through it all, untangling things as she went. "This'd better be worth it." She fitted her bra. "Because I'm just going to have to take all this stuff off again."

Absolute stood. "You stay and I'll go deal with it."

"Not on your life." She stepped into her panties. "I wanna see em standing round trying to figure out what to do 'bout all this shit."

"So do you want me to go down or wait on you?"

She pulled up her pants. "And do you have a problem waiting for me?"

"No."

She pulled on her shirt. "Good." She leaned over and slipped on her shoes. She straightened. "Were you looking at my ass again?"

"Yes."

"Well, then you can just trade the favor and go down first." She shoved him.

They went down and out a back door, crossed the parking lot. As each successive truck'd come up, they'd had to unload farther and farther down the road, to the point where they'd had no space to turn, and the driver'd had to reverse halfway up the hill with the last couple loads. They'd watched all this from one of the upper library windows. The driver's swearing'd had a palpability in the glow of the tractor trailer's red brake lights. They made their way between the earliest-deposited pallets, towards those offloaded where the parking lot mated to the road. Below, actually, far below, headlights shown, unidentifiable figures milling among them, creating unpunctuated, unrhythmic strobing effects. He said, "Do y—"

But static burst from a PA system. "*This is Lieutenant Lewis Murphy of the 142nd North Carolina National Guard regiment. You are requested to stand down from any and all economic warfare against members of these United States immediately.*"

"He's got to be joking."

"*You're both to present yourself for arrest, under charges of espionage and treason, and practicing war against an economic entity of these United States.*"

Candi looked at Absolute. "Tell me he's fucking joking."

"*Otherwise, we will be forced to assault your position. In which case, it is my duty to inform you that you have been declared as enemy*

combatants, and as such waive any previous rights you may have had under any former government or any other entities you may have belonged to or had at any point prior been involved with, whether contractually or not."

Absolute stood there with his hands in his pockets. "I don't think they're joking."

Slightly open mouthed, Candi looked down the hill. Having somewhat adjusted to the glare of the headlights, it was somewhat possible to discern troops taking up positions behind the plastic-wrapped pallets nearer the bottom of the road.

"This is your last chance to surrender. Lay down any weapons or materials that you may have – and come slowly down the hill with your hands in the air. You have five minutes to comply."

Absolute yelled, "And under whose authority?"

"Under the authority of acting President August Ford."

"August...?" Candi shook her head. She yelled, "Since when is fucking August Ford President?"

"It's not my position to communicate that information. Please come down the hill with your hands in the air. You now have four minutes thirty seconds."

She yelled, "What a fucking joke."

"At three minutes we will fire a warning shot."

"Fire it right up your ass."

"Four minutes."

"I guess," Absolute said, he stood there with his hands in his pockets, "that we should listen to the radio more."

"Oh, so it's all my fault now?"

"No, I didn't say that."

"Three minutes thirty seconds."

"I don't know why I even let you look at my ass. It's a privilege, you know."

"Technically, it's out there for everyone to see."

"Hmph. And that's about the only way you'll be seeing it."

"I don't see what you're mad at me for."

A shot cut the air.

She yelled down the hill, "Will you fucking be quiet."

She turned to Absolute. "All I wanted to do was have a nice evening.

A clothing-optional end of the world. Was that too much to ask?
Hm? Was that too much to ask?"

"*Two minutes thirty seconds.*"

"The whole evening isn't ruined yet."

"Oh, and you're just going to make them go away? And don't even think about *that*. It isn't funny."

"I wasn't laughing."

"And don't say anything about just going inside. Not now. Must be some kind of man thing to want to try and have sex with a bunch of gunfire going off."

On some parts of the internet it'd been speculated that relativity might be, considering the circumstances, more relative than usual of late, and might only get worse as the end of the world went on.

"*One minute.*"

"What do you propose to do?"

"Why can't all of you just learn to—"

Shots cut the air.

They ducked behind two of the nearby pallets.

Shredded paper rained down over their heads and shoulders. "I'm not going to have my evening ruined because of a bunch of i—"

Cellophane flapped away, shredded, crinkly and ghost-like.

"Do you really think I'd rather be doing this than what we were doing?"

"Oh, just shut up and do something, so we *can* get back to what we were doing—but not that."

They'd rolled down the windows as they drove. Hannah wondered why it was always so much harder to get back into clothing in a car than it was to get out of them.

"Where're we going?"

"Special place," she said.

They both sat there with parts of their skin and clumps of hair glued to their underwear, tugging unpleasantly, at times, when they shifted in relation to the interplay between the Jeep's momentum and various curves.

The windows in the baptist church in Presbyterian were so bright it'd've been tempting to think there'd been a fire inside, burning white hot on who could know what within the stone building.

They passed by, passed by the old stone highschool building that'd been there since it'd been the second built in the area, a competitor to the first on East Savannah, the details of which nobody wanted to remember, long sold off, now an emporium for molded concrete fixtures, bird baths and bird stands and such, those things that people liked to put in their garden, which, because of the particular cement recipe utilized, eventually crumbled. They passed through Presbyterian and out the other side, down the hill, turning along the curved road, the black grid-iron framework of the bridge ahead, illuminated in some indefinable way by the minimal light streaming upwards over the edges of what remained of the world. She slowed and crossed it, the tires making that distinct rhythmic sound they always did when crossing, as if the bridge, like a gargoyle, which could only speak when water ran over its mouth, the bridge being only able to do so when something traversed it. She turned, pulling into the gravel picnic area on the far side, and parked.

"Come on." She opened the door, climbing out, leaving her hat

in the back seat. Part of her shirttail still flapped against the outside of her pants. She motioned again as he climbed out and looked overtop the Jeep. "Come on."

Alex momentarily looked over his shoulder, as if something'd called him, looked at the grassy spot on the far side of the road from the bridge, almost black in the darkness of the shadow of the pine trees just up the hill, at the white quartzite slab that lay there like something beached, on the underside of which, so it'd been said, were markings that predated the arrival of the pre-ancestors of the second wave of aboriginal Americans, even if there weren't any such thing.

Hannah looked back at him. "Come on."

He turned, finally, and walked out from behind the Jeep and followed her out onto the bridge. She stopped acenter it, leaning against the railing, watching him approach. She raised a finger to her lips, motioned with her other hand for him to come up beside her. And when he had, she put her fingers against her lips again and then pointed down. And he looked. Nothing but black water rushed below. He looked at it a few minutes, liquid darkness swirling as it flowed beneath their feet. He looked up at her, but she jabbed her fingers downward. He looked down, seeing nothing, till... A waterspout erupted upward, startling him, a fine spray hitting his face. Instinctively, he wiped his cheek, saw Hannah, out of the corner of his eye, motion, again, for him to look down. He did. A pearlescent white back floated there in the water. He leaned forward against the railing. After a moment, it nosed up out of the water, as if looking at them, black eyes two small, round points of shininess in the dark that seemed darker than the dark. A sound carried, thin, delicate, and...maybe feminine...it was the best label he could tag it with. It plopped, splashing water, rolling, momentarily on its side, as if to wave at them. But she wasn't an it, something Hannah corrected when she leaned in and whispered, "I think she likes you." But Alex couldn't look away. Other small waterspouts burst violently upward, white backs appearing out of the liquid blackness. They looked up, too, seemingly singing amongst themselves. Then, just as quickly, they all ducked beneath the black rolling water, disappearing into the inky depths, in such a way no one'd've ever known they'd been there.

But even after they'd gone, Alex stood there leaning against the railing, looking down at the rolling black water, the over-swollen Tuck.

"Do you have any plans?"

He looked up at her. After a moment, he shook his head. "No."

Hannah turned and leaned back against the railing, her untucked shirttail flapping against her pants. "I'm a terrible cook, just so you know. Except, maybe, over a camp fire. That's the only time people don't mind if something gets a little burnt. How 'bout you?"

"Never progressed past boiling ramen."

"I can do oatmeal fairly well. How do you feel about oatmeal?"

"I like it."

"As in like it once in a while, or like it enough to eat it every day, or whatever?"

"I don't have a problem with everyday. Or whatever."

She said, "What about space?"

"Space?"

"Well, they're always talking about how constraints lead to such great things, creativity and all that. Do you think your performance would suffer in a venue, say, larger than a car?"

He paused. "I... wouldn't wanna hear them play a symphony in a small space."

"Symphony, huh? Thinking big. Of course, a symphony requires more than one instrument. You have a problem with multiple types of instruments coexisting?"

"Nope."

"What about electrified instruments?"

"No."

"Good." She pulled away from the railing. "You can rest up on the way home." She passed him, got several steps away before she turned. "You coming?"

He pulled his forearms from the railing, the metal having left somewhat-painful impressions, only now noticeable as they began to fade, and he followed her.

They didn't say anything as she drove, just allowed the wind created by their movement to roll through the windows and over them, carrying away some of what'd already boiled off.

Out on the top of the hill that horseshoed round the substation,

she looked out over the pasture below, or what'd been left of it after the rising Tuck'd submerged the most of it, and she glanced out at it as she always, habitually did. Except, this time, she did a double take. "What the f—" She hit the brakes, making the both of them jerk forward against their seat belts. Alex, obviously shocked at the sudden and unexpected deceleration, looked over at her, then tried to look out the window at whatever she was looking at.

"What's wrong?"

She didn't reply, just took her foot off the brake and jammed the gas, pushing them both back into their seats, cutting the wheel hard round the curving road. As they neared the old slaughterhouses, he finally got a better look, a snatched fragment of the white masses out in the semi-flooded field, lying on their stomachs, splashing their tails in the shallow water, a sight lost when she turned off the road, turned down the drive that led down in among those buildings. She jerked off her seat belt, shoved open the door. "STEPHEN KOCH—" Instinctively, she tucked in her shirttail as she crossed the parking area. Light flashed between the old slaughterhouse buildings and the tobacco barn, the sound of a tractor. She marched off toward them, and between them, coming out behind them, looking out over the semi-flooded field, Alex scrambling out of the Jeep and running to keep pace with her. "STEPHEN KOCH—" The tractor, operating a quarter submerged, thick mud clinging to its worn, deep-treaded tires, halted; the driver turned in the seat and looked over his shoulder. "STEPHEN KOCH—GET OVER HERE RIGHT NOW."

He pulled off his cap and waved. "Evening, Hannah."

"DON'T GIVE ME THAT. GET OVER HERE RIGHT NOW."

"What's the problem?" His voice barely carried over the distance and the rumble of the tractor engine.

"JUST GET OVER HERE."

After a moment, he spun rightways in the seat, turned the tractor, slopping through the water and mud, the single working headlight illuminating her and Alex, who stood beside her, slightly open mouthed and staring, as it rumbled toward them. He turned the tractor alongside them and looked down. "What's the trouble?"

"WHAT THE FUCK'S THAT?" She pointed out over the semi-submerged field.

He spun in the seat, looked out over that way. He turned toward them. "Whales."

"I CAN FUCKING SEE THAT. WHAT'RE THEY DOING OUTA THE RIVER?"

"Young lady," he was that much older than her, enough to say things like that, anyway, "you're never going to get anywhere in life if you don't learn to talk reasonable to people. And smile more."

She looked up at him. "Why are they out of the river?"

"We caught em, of course."

"YOU CAUGHT EM? WHAT THE FUCK'S WRONG WITH YOU?"

"Watch your language, young lady."

"Get them back in the water right now."

"Those're my property."

"Property?"

"It's all legal."

"Legal?"

"We're allowed now to catch wild animals for stocking purposes. And—"

"GET THEM BACK IN THE WATER."

"Now, look here, young lady, if—"

She turned, went back along the muddy path between the buildings. The driver sat up there on the tractor watching this, and he pushed up his cap and scratched his thinning white hair. He looked at Alex. "Must be that time of the month, huh?" He looked up, and Alex turned when they heard her boots slopping through the mud on her return. He (the farmer) opened his mouth to say something, but didn't, as Hannah emerged from between the buildings with her rifle.

"Have you got straps round here?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Then start getting together a harness. You can lift them in it on the fork attachment on the tractor. I'm sure that's how you probably moved them around in the first place."

Out in the field, several of them splashed, emitting pitiful, high-pitched notes.

"Look, young lady—"

Hannah aimed the rifle. "Now."

“You don’t have any right to—”

“Now.”

“You’re not going to shoot me.”

She clicked-off the safety with her thumb. “I’ll shoot you in the leg and then let them eat you.”

He looked at her several moments, silent. The threat, of course, in one sense, was ridiculous: they didn’t eat things like that, but in another sense, it was almost absolutely effective, given that a whole family history of raising hogs contributed to the farmer’s knowledge and experience the fact of the number one death among farmers in what had once been these United States had been by such and similar, so in that way, it tickled just the right registers so that, nonsensical or not, it almost completely worked.

“You don’t have the authority to do this. This’s theft.”

“Put them back. Now.”

“This’s just the federal government appropriating private property again.” Which was technically wrong, as she was formerly part of the former state, not a fed (leaving aside the question of any office she could’ve technically inherited, depending on the schema applied), though the distinction’d’ve been minor and mostly pointless for anyone to’ve brought up at the moment.

She looked down the length of the barrel. “Now.”

He looked out over the semi-submerged field.

“Drop it.”

Hannah glanced right, Alex and the farmer turning to look, as well. And Darrell, the farmer’s son in law, stood there with his cheek against the stock of a thirty-aught-six (aught being the way, almost, everyone in the county pronounced it). This, of course, is the problem with everyone having firearms, everyone has them.

Hannah looked, again, at the one on the tractor. “Now.”

“Talk sense, young lady.”

Out in the semi-submerged field, high-pitched and plaintive cries rose, splashing.

Hannah looked down the length of the barrel. “Now.”

"Only by using language correctly can we use language correctly. There are rules for language, and without rules, it would be impossible to communicate. The purpose of language is to communicate. Therefore, to break the rules of language is not to communicate. The purpose of language is to communicate. We want to communicate. Therefore, we do not want to break the rules."

"We have already learned what a preposition is. However, it is a rule that we must never begin a sentence with a preposition. So we must never begin a sentence with a preposition. If we began a sentence with a preposition, that would be a violation of the rule that we cannot begin a sentence with a preposition. We want to communicate. Violating the rules of language means we are not communicating. So if we begin a sentence with a preposition, we are not communicating."

Mrs Fox continued on, even as the PA system crackled.

**ATTENTION. THERE WILL NOW BE AN
UNSCHEDULED INSPECTION OF CLASSROOM 23B.**

The door opened, black-body-armored deputies and dogs entering.

**PLEASE REMAIN CALM WHILE CLASSROOM 23B
UNDERGOES AN UNSCHEDULED INSPECTION.**

The GSDs went ahead of the black-body-armored men they were tethered to, pulling hard on the lines, sniffing at seat level as they moved down the rows, turning at the back of the class, starting their way up.

"There is a rule that we must not split infinitives. So we must never split infinitives. If we were to split an infinitive, that would be a violation of the rule that we cannot split an infinitive. We want to communicate. Violating the rules of language means we are not communicating. So if we split an infinitive, we are not communicating."

On its way down the next row, the GSD nuzzled its way into

Harmony's crotch, really digging in there, which continued for some time, the deputy just standing there watching, or at least seeming to watch, it being impossible to tell because of the opaque black faceplate, but the little CMOS camera mounted on his shoulder was transmitting the picture correctly, as the little light on it indicated. The one (the GSD nuzzling into her crotch) made Harmony, understandably, want to wriggle away, but the deputy standing there made her involuntarily freeze, and these two conflicting internal desires went to war inside her, the only apparent result or indication of this being a heated face. But static from the PA system dispelled the need to choose between one or the other, though she'd been de facto frozen during that indecisive time, anyway, so it didn't matter now that it was over.

ATTENTION. TO ALL STUDENTS OF CLASS 23B. THANK YOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION DURING THIS UNSCHEDULED INSPECTION. CLASS WILL NOW RESUME AS SCHEDULED.

And with that, the deputy tugged the leash and pulled the GSD's snout out of Harmony's crotch, and they turned and exited the classroom, the GSD tugging against the leash and going through the door first.

"There is a rule that we must never begin a sentence with a conjunction. So we must never begin a sentence with a conjunction. If we were to begin a sentence with a conjunction, that would be a violation of the rule that we cannot begin a sentence with a conjunction. We want to communicate. Violating the rules of language means we are not communicating. So if we begin a sentence with a conjunction, we are not communicating."

«Yuns know what a radio station is? It's a living metaphor for cruft, the accreted means of attempted communication, yuns know? We've got everything up here. Tape equipment all the way back to the fifties. Cassette players. VHS players. There's one of those old blueberry Macs sitting here in the corner. Everything yuns could ever want, a veritable museum of means of disseminating human nonsense. But just so none of yuns out there think we're speciest, here's a tape of some howler monkeys we found somewhere in the back. And after that, we got some whale song. And some elephants. Not that we can understand any of it, but just in case it's nonsense, too, we wanna give some of the rest of the members of this former planet slash universe the same opportunity to broadcast nonsense. So to all those feathered and non-bipeds out there, listen up, this's yuns's time. And starting a little closer on the family tree, here're some howler monkeys.»

The radio continued to blare noise Langdon didn't even unconsciously process as he turned off the four-lane, headlights washing over the old East Savannah school building's stone exterior as he pulled along the gravel drive and parked. Only two other cars sat there. And no lights on inside. Langdon climbed out. Slamming the car door seemed to make a lot of noise in the quiet night, now that it wasn't filled with the hoots of howler monkeys. A couple white activity buses sat over at the end of the building, which he thought nothing of. Gravel crunched underfoot as he made his way to the front double doors. Though, they were smaller than modern front double doors. One day, in a distant future, if such were to exist, it might've led archaeologists to speculate on the nature of the changes in horizontal dimensions between Homo sapien generations in certain geographical areas between their respective time frames, a fact that would be evinced with a series of meta studies about historical

door frames. Though there were no lights on inside, the door was unlocked. He went in, closing it behind him. But actually, there was a light on, at least there was some illumination shining around the door frames ahead. The hall branched left and right, dividing into so many classrooms and two restrooms. But straight ahead lay the gym. And he pushed through the double doors. A couple of utility lights'd been erected, extension cords running off into the darkness in the rear, out to a generator that couldn't be heard from inside the building. Two folding tables'd been deployed on the former basketball court, a folding chair behind each. A third chair sat between them and away, forming a triangle. Outside the bounds of this triangle, an old security camera sat atop a deployed tripod, a coax cable running from the camera and off into the darkness. Clive stood within the bounds of this triangle, hands in his pockets, back to Langdon, so he turned as the latter entered, both their shoes resounding against the polished surface of the former basketball court. Clive offered his hand. "Doctor Jones, I presume." But Langdon just paused there, looking down at it, then up at Clive, his (Langdon's) eyes pink-to-bloodshot. Clive withdrew his hand. "I'm familiar with your work. It's a pleasure to finally meet you."

"You..." Langdon paused.

"Good. Everyone's here."

They both turned.

A woman in a wine-dark business suit closed the door behind herself and set down a briefcase. And she turned, making a bunch of metal-on-metal noise at the door, fiddling with something neither Langdon nor Clive could see, which, incidentally, was a padlock and chain. She turned and bent her knees as best her dress skirt allowed and lifted the briefcase and carried it over to the table.

"I don't believe I know your name," Clive said.

"Fredricka. Fredricka Jones." She snapped open the locks on the briefcase. "Of course, no relation to Doctor Jones, here." Because of the position of the briefcase, neither Langdon nor Clive could see the Uzi sub-machine gun till she removed it. "Now that we're introduced, if you two will please take your places, we'll begin."

"I'm afraid," Clive said, "I'm a little unclear on both what the place is and what's supposed to begin." This was, in fact, not the first

time he'd dealt with a so-called 'gun situation' in his career, and that wasn't counting his four years in the army.

"I would have thought that very clear."

"Well," Clive said, "some people have claimed I am rather dense."

She looked at Langdon. "Surely you must understand."

Langdon shook his head.

She sighed. "Doctor Jones is here to confront you about your films, isn't that right, Doctor Jones?"

Langdon blinked, his lids and eyes hot against each other. "I suppose..."

"Good. I knew that if I persuaded your former colleague to deliver those tapes that they and the combination of the invitation I sent would inexorably lead you to this rendezvous." She motioned with the Uzi. "Now, if you will both take your seats. Mister Amerika, over there. And Doctor Jones, over there. And we will proceed."

"Proceed with what?"

"The trial."

"Trial?"

"Yes."

"Trial for what?"

"As the county's lead prosecutor, and therefore, now, the highest prosecutorial official in what is left of the world, I hereby charge you, Clive no-middle-name Amerika, with the production of obscenity having led to the ultimate facilitation of the end of the world."

"I don't really think that I can bear all of the blame."

"Well," she said, "what we think on the matter is of very little consequence, isn't it?" She glanced at Langdon. "And what is your opinion as to the position of Mister Amerika in the motion picture landscape?"

"I..." He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "In having worked primarily in spoofs and parodies, it could be argued that the entirety of the history of film in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries flows through..." He glanced at Clive. "...your work." That he said this mechanically should need to go unremarked.

"Thank you, Doctor Jones." She motioned with the Uzi. "Now, if you will please take your places, the trial will begin."

"Aren't we short a few things for a trial?"

"No," she said. "No, we're quite as many as we need to be." She looked at Clive. "We have the accused." She looked at Langdon. "And we have both the prosecutions."

"That seems a little unfair to me," Clive said.

"Can you come up with a realizable fair definition of fair, Mister America? After all, what is fair? Can anything ever be fair in a world where people are born fundamentally unequal in either biological or familial or financial or material circumstances? Even if everyone in the world were all the same person, would there not be *something* about each of them different, making such an inequality? Couldn't the sun shine on none the same at the same time? So therefore, wouldn't that be unfair? Even a man or woman arguing with his or herself might be seen as having some advantage over his or herself. So, Mister Amerika, how do you define fair? And how do you propose to achieve it?"

He'd've had to admit that he'd never figured his life would've seemingly come down to such a seemingly pointless philosophical question, not that he thought it was completely pointless, maybe something better considered over drinks, but not without merit, just that most other people would, likely, pass it off as such, but he'd've still never've thought that his life, seemingly, would've hung on the balance of such a question. "And the jury for this trial?"

"There will be no need of a jury. We will have a dual prosecution. You see, there is no way you can be exculpated. What matters, really, is *which* prosecution wins. Myself." She glanced at Langdon. "Or Doctor Jones."

Langdon raised his hand. "I don't really care to—"

"You will prosecute, Doctor Jones." She aimed the Uzi at his chest. "Or we can come to the conclusion of the trial right now." She looked into his pinked-bloodshot eyes. "And I know you want to. Oh, I don't mean you want anything bad to come of it. But I know you very well, Doctor Jones. I've calculated all this just because of you. You're the only one obsessed enough to even be tempted to watch so many hours of movies one after the other without break." She looked at Clive. "Just so that you know, we are both acquainted with almost the entirety of your oeuvre." She looked at Langdon. "Aren't we Doctor Jones?"

“How’d you...?”

“I told you, Doctor Jones, I know everything about you.”

Clive glanced at him. “You really marathoned *all* of those movies?”

“Of course he did. You don’t give yourself enough credit, Mister America. You really are the living nexus of the twentieth century. Isn’t that right, Doctor Jones?”

Langdon rubbed his eyes, shook his head. “You’re not the county prosecutor. That’s Fred Jones. And he’s—” The reason it took him this long to put that together also shouldn’t need to be remarked upon, except to point out that relativity only slightly factored into it.

“Exactly, Doctor Jones.” She motioned with the Uzi. “Now, if you will both take your places, we have to get started. There’s only so much time left. And we haven’t even gotten to opening remarks yet.”

August lay in bed, awake at—he reached over and lifted the sock that covered the clock display—four o'clock in the morning. He dropped the sock back into place and turned to lay there looking up at the ceiling. He lay there thinking about the same thing as he'd gone to bed thinking about—and then only after tossing and turning and repositioning the pillow several times and getting up once to piss—but he lay there thinking about the voice he'd heard on the radio earlier that day, out of sheer happenstance, having heard some of it when he'd walked into the gas station to pay for the tank of gas he'd gotten on his way home, the credit card terminals being, necessarily, out of order, seeing as how the distant places with which they had to communicate to do their respective jobs no longer existed. He'd even turned on the radio in the car on the way home, listening to the latter half of the interview as he sat there in the driveway. The content, of course, was... well, the content was the usual sort of thing those kinds of people came up with. But something about the... He lay there thinking about it, rolling the sound of it over and over in his mind, even though he'd tried to stop himself several times. But it'd just gone on, as if there'd been a reel of tape in his head, going round and round, looped on itself, so that it could never end. Why couldn't he get away from that voice? It rolled and rolled and rolled through his head. And not just the same things repeated over and over. He found he could construct phrases in that voice, phrases, even, that hadn't been on the radio; when he'd tried to read the paper, the articles'd come out in that voice.

The clock squawked, that horrible squawk it always did, and he reached over and turned it off, lifted the sock. Two hours'd passed. Somehow.

Time to stop thinking about this. He pulled aside the sheets and sat

up. Without turning on the lamp, he walked through the darkness, into the bathroom, where the small light in the fan fixture came on as usual. And automatically, as he'd always done, he made his way toward the toilet. And he released his bladder, only realizing, after a moment – partly because of the lack of sleep – that the sound was wrong, and instinctually, he reached to adjust himself, but missed. He missed because things weren't where they were supposed to be. And he felt round in the darkness, unable to see anything of himself because of where the fixture was positioned above and the shadow cast down his body in the minimal automatic lighting when he bent his head forward. And when he touched himself, everything felt all wrong. Confused, he consciously stopped the flow of urine, something painful, but also something, at one point, someone'd told him was a good way to strengthen the muscles in that area. But it still hurt, and in pain from this, he stepped toward the light switch and struck it with his piss-damp fingers, the fan coming on instead because he'd hit the wrong one (obviously) and making him have to fumble in the same way for the next in sequence. But the light blinded him. He squinted down, eyes barely open enough to see horrible brightness, let alone anything of himself. He moved toward the toilet, the pain not necessarily horrible, but quite something. He squeezed one eye closed, opening the other. But then opened the first, even as much as it hurt, as he looked down at himself. He had a certain amount of stomach fat, normal for his age, at least in the society within which he lived, and the associated diet he'd consumed for the whole of his life, but not enough to obscure anything. No, the problem was that his penis, or what remained of it, namely, the head, rested in the fatty area all the way at the base of his groin. And it wasn't that it'd somehow 'pulled in' in some way. No, the skin directly behind the head was quite firmly and continuously attached to his groin, as if the rest of his penis'd never existed at all. His scrotum was nearly in the same relative state, if not worse. In fact, they (his testicles themselves) seemed to've disappeared. At first, it'd've been reasonable to assume they'd've just slipped up into the recesses of his body, which, as mentioned, they'd sometimes had a tendency to do, but he felt and shifted, and at least unconsciously, he knew there was nothing there. Except that wasn't quite right, as they were just now too small

to readily detect, and nowhere near as sensitive as before. Technically, part of the scrotum itself remained, mostly, though, too, diminished, the wrinkled softer skin still somewhat separate from the rest of the skin in the general area, but greatly diminished from what it'd been.

Obviously, there's no need to describe the concern and panic, etc, that seized him, at least after he'd managed to reasonably process, as best he could in the literal and figurative heat of the moment, what'd seemingly gone on. But what *had* gone on?

Obviously, as decades of social training told him, he should go to the doctor. Perhaps, even, the emergency room. At minimum, an urgent care. Right? Of course, in another sense, it was impossible to know what to do. There were always jokes about men losing their balls, but when did it ever happen? short of cancer and stories about hookers in motel rooms. And it wasn't as if there were any surgical marks. But why was he even thinking about surgery? Who could've possibly snuck in and secretly operated while he'd been asleep? Even more ridiculous because *he hadn't even slept most of the night*.

He'd still been holding back his bladder this whole time, which, now, practically, but not literally, screamed. But he'd momentarily forgotten that. And only when it'd become too much and forced itself upon his conscious perception did he try to do anything about it. But he found himself completely unable to release. It felt like pushing a car uphill with the emergency brake on. He was literally clenching his teeth, making a noise as if he were extruding a steel beam from his groin, however, whether it was just a regular cold steel beam, or one red-hot and fresh out of production, wasn't immediately answerable. And when the stream did come, he found himself having to contort over the toilet bowl, repositioning his whole body to keep it from spraying everywhere. He breathed hard as he squeezed out the last few drops, habitually reaching to run his fingers over the area that'd been beneath his scrotum so as to force the last of it 'out of the pipe', as some say, but found his motions shortchanged, as a whole length of flappy tubing was no longer there. This, of course, it almost goes without stating, didn't help his mental state.

«Oh, we have a call. And from this county's big screw-up, no less. What's on your mind, Josh? And remember you're on the air, so don't say anything you wouldn't want them not to regret hearing.»

«Been enjoying your reading sessions.»

«Why thank you. Wait, how've you still got WiFi out there at the edge of what's left of the world?»

«Just the way it goes, I reckon.»

«So what're yuh doing for the end of the world?»

«Sitting naked on the back porch.»

«Sounds like fun.»

«It can be.»

«So you're not calling up to shoot the breeze, what's going on?»

«I just thought you might be interested in combining a couple of segments.»

«Oh?»

«Well, I've got a copy of *Sheamus* here.»

«You mean you still have anything left?»

«A few things. I'm a bit disappointed with yuns, though.»

«Oh?»

«Your electrified literature's been a bit female-sided.»

«And you propose to remedy that.»

«Well, if yuns wanna kill two birds with the same proverbial stone. Tarif's willing to do his part.»

«Oh, we bet.»

«So yuns interested?»

«How could we *not* be? He he. Yuns ready to go now?»

«Technically, I think we've already started. Or at least Tarif has started his part.»

«Well, we wouldn't wanna interrupt him.»

«No.»

«So yuh got a passage picked out?»

«Ready to go.»

«Well, alrighty then, listen up any of yuns that might still exist out there, because Joshua and Tarif Perkins-Assad are gonna give yuns a live performance. And since yuns're already in medias res, we'll let yuns have it.»

It hadn't been Harmony's fault in particular. Eventually, one way or the other, something'd've happened. And there'd've been someone who would've ended up assigned the duty of cleaning the bathrooms; it just happened to their class. But that was just the way collective punishment went.

A toilet flushed. A student from another class exited the stall. She stood at the sink washing her hands. "Why don't you just let your tits hang out, Stegner?" She snorted at this and dried her hands with a paper towel and plopped it into the overflowing trashcan on her way out the door.

But really, this'd've happened anyway, one way or the other, to someone. It just happened to be Harmony who'd been found not to be wearing a bra, which wouldn't've happened if she hadn't had to go through a metal detector in order to take a quiz. This was because the ballot initiative to upgrade to full-dimensional body scanners hadn't yet passed, so the older equipment still remained, which, considering the prevalence of certain plastic and silicone objects, continued to make many in the administration very nervous. Unconsciously, as she worked the mop, she shifted her chest uncomfortably, the tape over her nipples, which kept them from poking through the fabric, tugging at her skin in unpredictable ways.

And it wasn't that any of the rest of them were particularly aggravated at her, either. At least they didn't get a fine, so that was good. And as Crystal pointed out, if there were never these small infractions, who'd've ever cleaned the bathrooms? or the classrooms? or the halls? or worked in the cafeteria? At least they weren't cleaning out the grease trap in *there*.

Juliette pushed inwards the door of the freshly used stall. She pulled a face. She wondered if the boy's bathrooms could possibly be worse.

“Hurry up,” Crystal said. “Or we’ll be late.”

To make matters worse, due to recent crackdowns, vaping liquid prices’d gone through the roof on the black market.

Juliette grimaced as she carried a used tampon toward the trash, holding it by what’d’ve been it’s tail had it been a dead mouse; however, a dead mouse’d’ve been preferable.

“Hurry up,” Crystal said.

“Can,” Harmony said to Lily. “Can I borrow one from you?”

Lily looked up at her. “One what?”

Harmony said, “You know.”

“Oh,” Lily said, after a moment. “I don’t have any.”

“You’re out, too?”

“That’s what she said,” Crystal said. She jammed the mop into its associated wheely bucket and squeezer unit, having taken it over from Harmony.

The fact of the matter was Lily’d never had any. Even the box she carried her vape in was something she’d gotten from someone secondhand, already empty.

“Make sure you bury that thing,” Crystal said to Juliette. It wasn’t as if they needed it sitting on top of the can as they carried it down the hall to the garbage chute. *That* likely would get them a round of duty in the cafeteria. However, it wasn’t that tampons were in fact illegal, or even against any official policy. But then again, there’s always at least, depending on who one wanted to consult, two kinds of policy. There was, of course, no way to obtain them outside of the black market; the commissary didn’t sell them. One may’ve wondered how whoever it was who got them brought in did so, but so long as an outside exists, there’ll always be those with a specialty in arranging some measure of control over that which flows in and that which flows out, independent of the official channels which seek to define such comings and goings and their respective contents, though, often, as history demonstrates and as many posters remarked on what was left of the internet, they, too, often profit from such arrangements, one way or another. Though, as some posters would point out, such could not be wholly laid at the metaphorical, or literal, or literal-literal, feet of institutional corruption, anymore than home invasion could be blamed solely on the owner for allowing such to happen. Though,

some also disagreed with this and thus shared an opinion with nonexistent communists, even though they (the non-communists, rather than the nonexistent communists) would bristle at such an inclusiveness. And in addition, some scholars, and non, on what was left of the internet had argued earlier in the evening, in the parlance of that nebulous time of the last evening of the world, meaning, in effect, no one could know *when* exactly it'd been argued, outside of timestamps on individual posts, which themselves had started to become unraveled as two or three intercommunicated systems in the federated messaging system'd had their clocks thrown out of whack by the various kinds of things that threw such electronic counters out of whack (barely to mention various species of relativity), but as those people had argued long before in the evening, or perhaps, due to some pre-breakdown in time, hadn't yet argued but that the posts were already appearing, which currently other members of the message board, in part due to considering the nature of these time errors that were cropping up in the posting history, were already discussing, some of the answers showing up before the questions were posted, necessitating someone sit down and formulate such questions, but irregardless of *when* it would be argued, it had been, will be, or was, or is being argued that this phenomena of systems and that which was passing from within and without them could be likened to a kind of social Maxwell's Demon. However, in regards to such a construct, some preferred the distinction of the word Daemon, however, there was, in this regard, a schism as to the pronunciation of this variation, which was itself just a recapitulation of the same schism that had emerged when the archaic form of the word had been adopted into the Unix documentation and vernacular, though few dealing with the newer schism were aware of this. Though, and not necessarily just on what was left of the internet, but some Unix and Unix-like users did still debate whether it was riskier to wear a t-shirt with a red devil on it in the former state of Texas or what currently remained of Western North Carolina. And if such were to be taken literally, in the sense of the literal and not in the sense of the former word figurative, if such were taken literally, Crystal wouldn't've been that demon (or daemon), but she'd've been intimately enough involved with it. (There had been, or would be, if there wasn't already, going

to be a discussion about what gender such a demon should have or be possessed of or defined or not defined by, and subsequently certain meta discussions about these discussions, and meta-meta discussions of those discussions, and so on, depending.) However, sometimes in deference to the old superstition, which'd embedded itself reasonably deeply into the human thochtic landscape, that to inquire too closely about something meant that it'd possibly vanish, it was better to shut up and avoid things like asking Crystal things like how she could afford vaping fluid the way things were then.

"I heard this rumor," Juliette said, "that they're bringing in this new machine to use in the showers that'll allow them to tell one kind of steam from another."

"How the hell do you tell one kind of steam from another?"

The showers'd long been one of the best places to hide a vape trail.

"I don't know. It's just what I heard."

"Just hurry up," Crystal said. She pushed the wheely mop bucket across the floor. She looked back. "Come on."

"Why don't you take it back yourself," Lily said. But it wasn't a question. Even Crystal didn't go alone into the halls lightly. Lily and Harmony lifted either side of the trash bin, which seemed overly heavy to've just been a bunch of crumpled wet paper. Juliette collected up everything else.

The halls were empty at the moment, everyone else being in class, so it didn't take them as long as it could've to get the mop and cleaning supplies back to where they belonged and to dump the trash in the chute that led down to a truck to be hauled off (the truck would do the hauling) to the county transfer station and so they (the young women) could carry it (the can) back to the girls restroom. There'd always been something peculiar about the term slash name 'girls restroom' as if it cried out for an apostrophe; or perhaps the spelling'd been, on some level, intentional, though maybe no one knew it, referring to the fact that they, who ever *they* were, in this case (perhaps a whole gender?) didn't actually own anything. However, this term wasn't present, as the only indicator on the door was a pink sign bearing a white stick figure in an equally white dress that didn't seem separable from her (presumed) female body. But they paid no attention to this, at least on the conscious level, as they returned the emptied bin to its place.

Now, they'd have to go collect their bags from their lockers and get to—

Except a deputy with a GSD on a leash turned the corner. And they froze. The dog sniffed at them, the deputy stopping, too, to allow it time to do this. Whether they (the GSD or the deputy) were either one the same as from the pair from earlier was unknowable: they all looked alike. Even the fact that the GSD embedded its snout in Harmony's crotch didn't necessarily indicate anything in that regard. Handlers always had a certain level of repertoire, at least after a while, with their units, so that subtle exchanges could go on between them easily, leading dogs to indicate they'd found something regardless of what they actually smelled, in order to establish a basis of probable cause for a further search. Sometimes, however, this process was entirely on the subconscious level for both deputy and dog. So in this particular case, the situation continued awhile. That is, it continued till the bell rang, and other students began to exit their classes headed to other classes. At which point the deputy tugged on the leash, and the GSD came away, and they (the deputy and dog) continued up the hall.

"Come on," Crystal said. "We don't want to be late."

On the one hand, it still might seem to certain individuals, and or groups, odd that such events could be shrugged off, or at least seemed to be shrugged off, so easily. But when such events are commonplace, they become normalcy, as many posters on what was left of the internet would confirm, for what such confirmation was worth in the eyes (and braille writers, in the cases of certain posters) of some, that is to state nothing at all, that it would merely be anecdotal evidence, as individual experience, as had been remarked upon by a certain anonymous-anonymous poster, who'd somehow found a way to inject posts into one messaging system without registering a username, who'd been found to be quoting slash plagiarizing a book, but who had stated that success was about being one with numbers and that people weren't really real unless they were rendered into slash became numbers, so that was, in that way, by definition, all anecdotal experience was unreal, whereas to remark that there were one-hundred-thirty-three people in the county who owned blue pseudo-vagina sex toys was to state that these were, in fact, real people, real in a way whomever you might find yourself talking to couldn't

be. (However, there was some debate over the accuracy of the information presented in the post, as another poster claims there were, in fact, one-hundred-thirty-seven such products in the county and that multiple ownerships by single individuals vs couples should be weighted differently in such a statistic—and someone else further suggested divisions by single owner vs non.) And *Homo sapiens*, as a species, had long been thochtically primed to adjust to their respective definitions of normalcy, or at least, so BasicNovel44 claimed. AtrocityPhone01 went further, stating: “[T]he safety of the familiar overrides any negativity associated with the familiar. If you put it to a vote as to whether A) all humanity would instantaneously enter some kind of future where everything for everyone would be improved, but in which nothing would remain the same, no social position, esteem, no monetary situation—though none of this would get worse, only the nature of it change—but the core of it would be that everyone would be better off in some real way, or B) the Nazis and the Holocaust would be brought back for an encore, most people would vote for” but there the character limit ran out for the platform it was posted on, and no followup post would be forthcoming, for various reasons, some only partially related to the end of the end the world.

Tom woke on the floor, mouth open, drooling on the carpet. He looked around, vision fuzzy. The DUMMY PLUG lay on the carpet in front of him. A soft knock sounded against the door. However, it was only soft from the perspective of someone on the inside of the room, due to the ubiquity and effectiveness of the soundproofing, it being a rather normal level of knocking on the outside.

“Tom?”

His throat felt dry, scratchy. He couldn’t know how long he’d been talking about whatever he couldn’t remember saying. He tried to speak, but it emerged as a hoarse whisper, barely discernible, even to him.

“Are you alright?”

He tried to push himself up, partways succeeded. “...fine...” He cleared his throat, the sides of it contracting painfully. He said louder, “Fine.” He tried to swallow, his mouth devoid of spit, even though it seemed there’d been plenty enough of it to dampen the carpet. He tried to look at the clock. “I’ll...be out in a minute.” He waited till he thought he’d heard footsteps retreat down the hallway, even though he couldn’t because of the soundproofing. Reaching out, he pulled the DUMMY PLUG toward him. He grabbed the chair arm, used it to help pull himself up. Holding the DUMMY PLUG pinned against his stomach, the various lights and antennae and miniature satellite dishes prodding his flesh, he carried it across the room and placed it back into the gutted former 8-track player cabinet and closed it.

Unsteady on his feet, he unlocked the door and went out into the hall, touching the wainscoting as he made his way toward the kitchen. His daughter ran to him and wrapped her arms round his leg, looking up at him. “Can we eat now?”

He looked at the clock. "You should've..." His throat contracted. "... gone ahead without me."

His wife looked at him concerned.

He looked down at his daughter, bent, stiffly, and picked her up. "Ooh, you're getting too big." She giggled. He looked at his wife. "Could I get a glass of water, please." And while she reached into the cabinet and touched the faucet so the rushing water sounded behind him, making his throat contract again, he carried his daughter to the table. "What," he said, "do you eat fish fingers with?"

His daughter giggled. "Your fingers!"

His wife set a full glass of water on the table as he lowered their daughter into a seat. "What about fish toes?"

His daughter pulled a face and shook her head.

«In other news, part of what's left of the internet's still down. So if that includes yuns, well, yuns've got our sympathies. And in case yuns're thinking of trying, Angela's still not returning anybody's messages. In fact, no one's seen her in quite a while. We wonder what she's up to. Hmm.»

«And just in case you're just tuning in, you're listening to EFKO, the last radio station on what's left of the planet.»

«For our thought-provoking post of the hour, we turn to Frankenste-inFrankie, nice username there, Frankie, who asks does it feel lonelier now that there's no static on any of the dead channels on the TV or radio? Hm, we don't know. But if yuns do get lonely, yuns can always turn it back over to us. Of course, if yuns're lonely right now because yuns're listening to that, or not listening to it, or listening to nothing, whatever, then yuns're not listening to us tell you this, so it probably doesn't matter, anyway. Oh well.»

«Also, no one's still come up with that pink convertible yet.»

«And if any of yuns've got one yuh don't want, there's still two hot buyers online right now. So if yuns're in a place where what's left of the internet's still there, and yuns've got one of these yuh wanna get unloaded of before the end of the end of the world, yuns'd better get the move on.»

«Later, we're still going to be conversing with our bathroom specialist. So make sure you all stay tuned for that.»

«And if yuh can arrange to listen to it while in the bathroom, all the better. We believe they call that ambiance.»

«And not necessarily moving on, our new president of what's left of the world's apparently doing double duty now.»

«Yeah, we got that pun in there.»

«But so a little bird tells us, the judicial system's been so overrun

by personnel disappearances and so swamped with identity theft cases that our esteemed president's had to appoint himself a judge, as nobody else seems to want to come out and play. Apparently, even the county's chief prosecutor's gone missing. Also, the county commissioners are now taking bids on an expansion of the local prison facility.»

«Bet most of yuns out there, if any of yuns still exist, probably didn't even know the county had one, did yuns? We've gotta have someplace to store all these identity thieves and the like, don't we? We wonder how hard they work to hide these places. They always talk about how it couldn't possibly be that these little German towns didn't know there was a death camp just on the other side of that clump'a trees, but we don't know. People sure seem to be awful good at not knowing things, don't they? If yuns's neighborhood had a death camp, would yuns know? Hmm.»

«We should probably mention this.»

«Yeah, on a not so slightly different note, apparently the hot young thing among those few free-range teens that're left is sniffing paperbags-fulls of old paperbacks to get high. We hear it described as a very literary high. To be honest, though yuns wouldn't think it, we wouldn't know, since we've never had an illiterate high, either.»

«Yeah.»

«Honest. Oh well.»

«In other news... Is there any other news...?»

«Oh, to hell with the news, anyway. What'd yuns ever learn from it? And it's not like we're an ad company masquerading as a radio company here, so we're not trying to sell yuns all to somebody by keeping yuns's eyes and ears trained on us by treating yuns's amygdala as if we're giving it an auditory handjob. What's to worry about, anyway? Sit back, relax. Everybody always wants to know what the future holds. Well, now yuns know. Nuthin. Maybe everything. Who knows? Anyway, let's get to something interesting. Are yuns aware, if yuns're still in existence out there, that is, but are yuns aware that the world—when it existed, that is—but are yuns aware that the world was not in fact spherical. No it wasn't. Nope. Nope. Nope. Well, now yuns're gonna say we have been sniffing paperbacks. But it wasn't. For those of yuns who wanna know, the Earth was vaguely pear-shaped. Yes, vaguely pear-shaped. But of course, now that the

flat Earthers get the last laugh, it probably doesn't matter anyway. Oh well.»

«You'll all get a kick outa this. We got a call earlier. Guess what it was about? Wanting us to run a faux interview slash advertising piece for something called Still-Water Life, or something. Maybe we could call over to the library and—»

«Oh, we do have some news. For those of yuns who keep track of these things, there's a one-man one-woman war going on at the library at the moment. So if one of our friends, and we're thinking of one in particular's out there listening, maybe yuh'll wanna get the lead out. Just saying. Who's in charge of the guard these days...Lewis? Yuns'd think he'd have more sense. What'd nobody tell em who they were going up against? We mean, come on, but who's stupid enough to poke a hornets nest like that? Anyway, if maybe our very special friend out there, and we hope you're listening, could get over there and scale down the damage a little, it'd be appreciated. Really, guys, wouldn't yuns prefer to be shooting off yuns's guns right now, rather than a bunch'a rifles?»

Rifle fire continued to turn pages into confetti. Which was really going to be a mess to cleanup.

“Well?” Candi said, or rather, shouted over the noise (and that word, incidentally, in terms of the general English grammatical and pronunciation patterns of the county, matched almost exactly the way most people in the same area pronounced the family name of the author of *Sheamus*—a family name that, incidentally, only existed because of Napoleon’s need for tax revenue).

Absolute shifted enough to pull a miniature notebook from his back pocket, produced a pencil from his shirt pocket, though it needed sharpening.

“Really?”

He jotted a few lines and tore out a page and handed it to her as newborn confetti swirled over them. “Would you mind looking up these numbers?”

“*Really?*” She unconsciously ducked as something louder, a percussion round, went off.

He pulled out his knife, popped it open. He nodded his head towards the pallet he leaned against. “I guess I could just use these.”

“Don’t start that,” she said, and ducked. “This isn’t the war.”

“It sorta sounds like one.”

A mortar round went off. Though, they weren’t meant to harm anyone, just to give a certain impression. The question really was, as had been asked: what was Lewis thinking? Well, he was thinking that this was his job. And he was thinking that it actually was legal, what they were doing. After all, though he didn’t think this part, only felt it, unconsciously, and even then, only after a fashion, but really, the thing about being legal was that, if it was legal, it had to be legal, therefore, there really was no such thing as an illegal order, just a

conditionally illegal order, that is, an order that hadn't, through lack of foresight, possibly, not been made legal *yet*, so therefore, in the long run, he didn't really have to worry about what orders he accepted. In the past, of course, though he didn't know this, units like his, or more accurately, their earlier incarnations'd long been deployed by legislators and governors to quell disturbances, such as striking workers, on occasion rolling in machine guns on train cars, burning out tent cities, resulting in the deaths of women and children, so it's not like there wasn't precedent for any of this, and after all, precedent was one of the core features of British common law, which most of what'd been the former these United States of America'd inherited, with the exception of the Louisiana penal system, which, because it'd originally gotten its start under the French, had inherited, in most of its legal structure, what some not currently posting on what was left of the internet regarded as too many aspects from the Napoleonic Code, and in that regard, it may've been a good thing that only a few pebbles and a bit of sand, floating out there in the void, remained extant of that former state. But of course, there was another angle to be considered, even if he wasn't considering it, or at least not in the positive sense. Portions of his unconscious mind were, in fact, furiously concerned with the approaching scenario, which this was only the prelude to, and any potential resolutions to it, in general terms, as it'd been since the rudiments of his brain'd first been formed, indeed, in many ways, it was just the mental manifestation of the same drives that'd already existed in him at the cellular level when he'd been no more than a clump of cells engaged in an individual round of evolutionary warfare for survival when attempting to embed itself slash himself in his mother's endometrium, and if his cell clump could've managed it, consumed her whole body to provide itself sustenance, which's why her own'd been descended from all those women before her that'd managed to fight off such whole-consuming attacks from their progeny. Really, in all the history of evolution, this was one of the unique aspects of the human animal: the necessity of the mother to fight for her life against her own offspring in utero. In fact, as PussyRot13 pointed out: "scientific studies have shown that, of all the places that embryonic cells can be implanted in the body, the hardest place for them to live is in the endometrium." Or as Twice22

put it: "There is no greater field of death in the human evolutionary story than the lining of the uterus." Of course, the other side of the coin from fighting for survival was dying. And if this world's really ending, as part of him was beginning to suspect it was, he faces a choice between an unknown future and a known present. And at present, though he hasn't realized it yet, at least on any level that could be referred to as consciousness, he's slowly come to peace with the idea of and knowledge that dying now, in a way he can understand, in the way he's lived most of his life prepared for, is preferable, at least instinctually, to dying, or living, in some unknown fashion, though that isn't completely accurate, because it's not completely unknown, as he knows what he'll be living without, what he's been living without this long. So in that respect, he was very much aware of who he was going up against. And also very much aware of the likely outcome. It was just unfortunate, in some respects, that these other men were necessary to accomplish that. Though, when he did tacitly verge on a kind of conscious realization of something like this, he suspected that likely they'd come to the same conclusion as he in regards to the matters at hand, or at least, he considered, why'd've they stayed otherwise? They must've seen the writing as plainly on the wall as anyone else, though he hadn't yet seen it himself, but somewhere, deep down, he knew it to be there, or at least, believed it to be so, or in some way hoped it'd be there, because...if it wasn't, then they were already past the point of no return, extant in a disposition and situation and setting they'd never been prepared for, so ...the only thing to be done for it was rifle fire and mortar rounds, at least till they brought the heavier stuff up, that'd have to force something to happen.

He motioned for the comms officer, called over the rifle fire to tell them to bring up the tank. And the comms officer affirmed that and went about his job as he was expected to.

Up behind one of the pallets of books, Absolute said, "I'm getting a little tired of these potshots."

"Then do something."

"I did ask for your help."

"These?" She held up the list of Dewey-decimal figures. "What're these?"

"Various books on firearms and munitions."

"*What?*"

"I thought it'd be appropriate."

She ducked as a mortar shell exploded. "You picked a fine time to be funny."

"You keep saying I should learn to ignore things and let things go."

"*Not now.*"

"Well, I—"

The problem, however, with things like mortar fire, like most weapons, and some non-weapons, even if it isn't intended to do harm, it sometimes ends up that way. In this case, in time to the simultaneous flash and bang, Candi's torso whipped round, the light that curved up from the edges of what remained of the world reflecting iridescently in her teeth as she screamed. She clutched her arm, blood running between her fingers as she screamed and bent forward. Things like this, of course, weren't new to either of them, and even as bullets continued to impact and confetti the pallet-stacked books, he'd pulled off his shirt and produced his knife by the time he'd gotten to her, the blood running down her arm rendered black by dimness. She screamed as he tightened a strip of torn shirt. Knife clenched between his teeth, he tore another strip. "Damn it," she said. "That hurts." He didn't say anything. She grunted as he tied the next strap. She leaned forward, hand on her arm. "Shit."

Absolute pulled the knife from his mouth and slashed the plastic along the middle of the pallet.

"Don't get mad," she said.

"I'm not going to get mad." He reposition himself onto one knee. "CAN YOU HEAR ME DOWN THERE?" The rifle fire continued sporadically. "CAN YOU HEAR ME DOWN THERE?" It petered off.

"Don't get mad."

"I'm not going to get mad." He stood, looked over the pallet. "EVERYONE DOWN THERE LISTEN UP."

"You should know better than to try and talk with people while you're mad."

"YOU'VE GOT ONE MINUTE TO START MOVING OUT." He took the knife and sliced the cellophane.

"Don't be so pigheaded. I'm not the damsel in distress, you know."
She started to stand.

"You should stay down."

"It's only a scratch." She clutched her arm as she looked down the hill. "I hate to tell you, but they're not moving. You don't think they have a death wish, or something?"

"I'm guessing that's part of it." He finished with the cellophane and refolded his knife and slipped it into his pocket, pulled out a couple copies of *Still-Water Life As They Apply To A Slice of Lemon Pie*, and stacked them on top.

"And you're just going to give it to them."

He didn't reply.

"The. War. Is. *Over*."

"It doesn't feel very over at the moment."

"Well, it is. And we didn't fight the war to end all wars for you to go and start another one up again."

"I'm not starting anything."

She turned and looked down the road. "What's that sound?"

"Probably a tank."

"Oh, just great." She jerked, winced, still ahold of her arm. "I don't know who's stupider, you or them."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"*You're supposed to be with me.*"

By this time, he'd stacked half a dozen volumes on top of the plastic. But that was way too many. So the amount of overkill he was seemingly preparing indicated somewhat just how mad he really was. He paused and looked at her. "So what do you want me to do?"

"Gaaaaaaah." She turned, turned back. "Why don't you try walking away for once. Just for once, to see what it's like. Maybe you'll even *enjoy* it. Or's that what you're afraid of?"

"Why're you mad at me. They're the ones shooting."

"And you're the one getting ready to help a bunch of idiots commit suicide. Do you have any idea how much of a turnoff that is?"

Down the hill, the PA system blared. "Y—"

"OH, SHUT UP." Candi'd yelled the first part while still looking at Absolute. Now she turned to look down the road. "THIS'S ALL YUNS'S DAMN FAULT, ANYWAY. WHAT'S WRONG WITH

ALL 'A YUNS? DON'T YUNS HAVE SOMEONE YOU'D RATHER BE FUCKING INSTEAD?" She breathed hard, huffed. She turned to Absolute. "Well, if you're so all-fired ready to annihilate people, you can do it without me watching." She turned, started across the parking lot, towards the front of the library.

He followed. "What do you want me to do, then?"

"I just want you to at least act like you prefer seeing me naked to killing a bunch of people." She stepped up onto the curb and onto the cement walkway that ran round the front of the building, stopped, and turned. "But I'm not going to stay round and compete with a war zone."

"Where're you going?"

She whirled. "Well, if you must know, first I'm going to go find your sister and get *this* taken care of. Then we're going to sit round and have a drink and agree on how much of an asshole you are." She turned, turned back. "And while you're at it, you can forget about having anything to do with my asshole." She turned, looked over her shoulder. "Asshole." And she started round the front of the library on the walk.

He followed. "Can I at least do something about the tank?"

"*Tank!*" She stopped in front of the library, at the head of all those steps that ran down the hill and to the fountain and which aligned with Mainstreet. "There's so many damn books in the road, even a tank can't push them out the way. What the hell's a tank gonna do?"

"So I'm just supposed to do nothing?"

"Do whatever you want."

"You don't even know where she's at."

"I'll figure it out."

"And you can't walk all the way to the house from here."

"Who's walking?" She turned to go inside. "I'm getting my keys."

"You're aware the roads *are* blocked."

"I'm not an idiot. Of course I know that." She released her arm to grab the door handle, looked over her shoulder. "Asshole."

"*I'm just trying to—*"

"*You're just trying to be an asshole. Like all the other assholes.*"

A crunching and skidding sound carried from the distance, an engine having to rev.

"Do whatever you want," she said. She went inside, left him standing there, where he waited for her to come out again. She passed him on the walk. "Asshole."

He followed. "I'm starting to think I'm not the only one."

"Hmm." She jammed a rubber button with her thumb, and the car headlights blinked as she approached. "You..." She paused, looking at the car. "Oh, come the fuck on." Stray bullets, which'd struck the old courthouse façade, had ricocheted, a couple shattering the windshield, cracks rendering it, effectively, opaque. They'd also killed the microwave. And shattered a couple of windows (building windows). And put a hole in a gutter downspout. And ruined a couple pieces of molding dating from the building's original construction. In places, brick dust and white paint chips coated the parking lot asphalt, interspersed with chunks of larger brick pieces. She turned, keys still in hand, walking in a huff across the parking lot and toward the front of the library again.

"Where're you going now?"

The PA system blared. "Y—"

"OH, SHUT UP." She stepped on the curb and onto the grass, looking sideways down the hill. "I'LL JUST GET OUT OF ALL YUNS'S WAY AND LET HIM ANNIHILATE YUNS. HAPPY?" She turned, said to Absolute, "Enjoy yourselves. I hope you all have a real good time of it."

"I JU—"

She whirled. "OH'D YOU EVEN THINK THAT JUST BECAUSE YOU CAN KILL ANYTHING MAYBE THAT DOESN'T MEAN YOU SHOULD?"

"THAT'S NOT FAIR."

"IF YOU WANNA KILL EM ALL, GO AHEAD. I'M NOT STOPPIN YUH. DO WHATEVER YUH WANT."

"I JUST WANNA GO BACK TO FUCKING YOU."

"WELL WHY DON'T YOU YELL IT LOUD ENOUGH FOR THE OTHER HALF OF WHAT'S LEFT OF THE WORLD TO HEAR?"

"I JUST WANNA GO BACK TO FUCKING YOU." He paused, panting.

She stood there in silence, holding her arm. "Now," she said, "you see, was that..." She turned at the sound of a rifle. Except this rifle

fire wasn't coming at them, it rose from below, somewhere down on Mainstreet. "What the hell's going on now?"

Absolute stepped up beside her. Nearby, a pole-mounted viewer stood. He rooted in his pocket. "Got a nickle?" (That particular viewer had been installed at a different point in history, separate from the ones in the park, and'd thus been subject to different cost-calculation metrics.)

She sighed and reached into her pocket. "You owe me. Actually, in fact, you still owe me. So just add it to the bill."

He dropped the coin into the slot, and a satisfying metal-on-metal clunk carried from somewhere deep within the viewer's interior, and he bent forward and looked through the newly opened eyepieces. "It looks like a...circa second-world-war tank's coming up Mainstreet."

"World W—" She bowed her head. "It runs in the family, doesn't it? You're brother's as bad as you are."

"I'm not the one driving a tank."

"Gaaah." She threw back her head and closed her eyes and sighed. "Why did I ever get involved with this family?"

Below, the amount of rifle fire'd increased, the night lit by muzzle flashes and sparks as bullets winged off the front of the tank that was still coming straight down the middle of both lanes.

Candi lowered her head and looked down at this scene. "You think they'll at least run, or're they all that crazy?"

"Don't know."

She sighed.

«In other news, county commissioners have voted to ban the sale, transfer, and ownership of any device slash devices that produces an effect upon the body such that a state of incomprehension be entered into.»

«Shucks, whata mouthful. So what does all this legal hooprah mean? Well, that depends on when yuns ask the question, because, of course, there's a horse, that it might not mean tomorrow whatever it meant today.»

«Oh, there's an exception for the use of such devices by medical professionals.»

«We bet none of yuns out there know, or maybe yuns did, if yuns're still existing that is, but we bet at least some of yuns didn't know that the brain kind of shuts off during gettin' off—yeah, we can talk about that stuff—nah nah—at least momentarily, briefly, for just a little bit, no just before that point, as some people wanna claim—know what we mean? HannibalLecturer66 informs us that the French have slash had a term for this, or something close to it, and goes on to inform—yes, we're just being informed all over the place today...last day...evening ...whatever—but hereby inform yuns out there that we, us, ourselves, are informed that that this is why so many people in Shakespeare's plays talk about death, because apparently it means—and where the heck'd that cuckoo come from?»

«Slight note, the license on our sound effects software expired.»

«Never apologize!»

«So it's locked down the whole computer.»

«Then how'd the cuckoo get in there?»

«There wasn't a cuckoo.»

«Yes, there was. It was right there. Gaslighter!»

«However, they will have to deploy such devices strictly in accordance with the uses established on the manufacturer's packaging.»

«But yuns see, the commissioners're just trying to save us from ourselves, because when the brain goes out like that...sorry, we kinda went out a moment, but anyway, when the brain goes out like that, yuns see, it's kinda like being drunk. And we're not joking, a little bird tells us this's actually the argument one of them used. So obviously, if yuns're out of it, it's impossible to consent, so every orgasm's rape now. And apparently yuns can all rape yuns'selves now, too. Now we're in the uncomfortable position of having to say we might be pro-rape. Ooh-da-lolly. We kinda wish we were in a little different state of incomprehension at the moment.»

«Also, any medical professional that stocks these dangerous devices will have to have them registered and keep them locked up appropriately, subject to inspection.»

«So apparently dildos have serial numbers. Yuns might wanna start filing yuns's off. Unless they've already rubbed off from use, that is, if so, yuns're probably good.»

«Also, police are currently in pursuit of a white pickup with a generator in the back.»

«But if yuh're listening, yuh probably already know that. And if yuh need to retreat to a little less of an oxygen-rich environment, a little bird tells us yuh can pick up a spare tank at the old hanging tree in the swamp, we hope yuh know what that means. Just don't try any of the Dukes of Hazzard stuff while you're out there, will yuh, YouTube ain't round no more.»

«We also have a note here that says there's an abandoned sign in the middle of the road, down from the Freemason Lodge, halfway between there and the sandlot, with the words, *You Can't Revolutionize The World* written on it, and that we should probably remind everyone that there's a fine for any political sign still up more than seven days after the completion of the last election. Also, it's been requested that the teens who're putting pieces of junk on the tracks to see if it'll derail a train, to please stop that, and...disregard that last one. Apparently the truancy forces've already done their thing.»

«Anyone else notice how fucking depressing the news is this evening? FunctionalExistentialist23 writes to say, what a weird phrase, but anyway, we've got a message here about how there was a case in Britain prosecuting a group of men for engaging in bondage where

they prosecuted one of the guys for assisting in his own abuse slash victimization. And well, that's just great. Yuns know, we're almost glad the world's ending, at this point. Anyway...»

«Apparently, a rebellion's been subdued up on the university after a group of police managed to penetrate the station by entering a propped-open rear door.»

«He he.»

«And a little bird tells us they've also confiscated a bunch of VHS tapes, which, apparently, they're in the process of reviewing in order to know what additional charges to bring.»

«Let's see, what else've we got here? We hope it's not gonna be a very boring end of the world. And in response to earlier, GoldStarLesbian32's left a comment, and we say the same to you. Remember, the lines are as open as they're ever gonna be, and they might not be for long. So if yuns've got WiFi and wanna give us a call, what're yuns waiting for?»

"However, no amount of breeding will relieve it of its essential banananness. No amount of breeding will be able to produce from the banana a cucumber. However, boys and girls should be careful of both. Though, a banana looks as if it can be easily "unzipped", it's best to never do so. Always allow an adult to first peel it and cut it into bite-sized pieces, as good girls and boys do not want to get anything squirted in their faces. And good girls and boys will never place a cucumber near a member of the feline species. And remember that no matter how much cats have been shrunk by the enlightened efforts of all those generations of men who bred them so, no amount of breeding could have caused a cat to give birth to a cucumber. The banana and the cucumber, like all things that are made by man, they can be turned to both good and evil purposes. Let us notice the humble _____ can" a blank was intentionally left here to allow the dubbing of a given canned liquid product based on the public auction of such advertising spaces *"In many ways, the _____ can is much like the banana. It, too, has a convenient "pull" tab. However, rather than unzipping the _____ can, as that would be silly, it allows the spout to "pop" open. And see how the spout looks almost like a smiley face, doesn't it? as if it is smiling for us to bring our mouth to its mouth. However, good girls and boys will always pour their _____ into a cup first."*

ATTENTION. A MESSAGE FOR ALL STUDENTS. DUE TO RECENT REVELATIONS OF THE USE AND TRANSFERAL OF CERTAIN ILLEGAL AND CONTRABAND ITEMS, EACH STUDENT WILL PRESENT THEMSELVES FOR A COMPREHENSIVE AND THOROUGH PHYSICAL SEARCH. WHEN YOUR NAME IS CALLED, PLEASE PROCEED TO THE FRONT OFFICE.

Static.

ATTENTION. ANNABELLE ADDA ANTOINE. PLEASE, PROCEED TO THE FRONT OFFICE FOR INSPECTION.

"However, good girls and boys should never put their pens or pencils in their mouth. And they should especially never put anyone else's pens or pencils in their mouth. This would be a very bad thing to do."

Mr Possum continued on as they watched, his button nose looking as if it were perpetually about to flop off his face as the hand shoved up into him actuated his flapping mouth.

“This makes a lot of assumptions,” Ruth said.

“Everything makes assumptions.”

«Also in other news, it seems school administrators've got their panties in a twist because it's come to light during the review of these bills the county commissioners've newly passed that there exists certain classes of so-called stimulating devices that could be remotely activated by anyone with access to a network. Of course, the highschool's fire-walled from the rest of what's left of the internet, but it's still got its own internal one in order to function, and all that. But anyway, what everyone's got their panties in a twist about is that school resources could be used to send commands to one of these so-called stimulating devices. And we don't know bout yuns, but we're consuming a lot of aspirin over here. And here's our suggestion, school administrators, if yuns don't wear any panties, yuns can't get em all twisted up. So problem solved.»

“How do you even know anyone's reading comprehension is that good?”

“I don't.” She parked the SUV and opened the door, leaving the engine running. “Will you hand me a four pack.” Ruth unbuckled her seat belt and craned between the seats and handed her four cups of cappuccino in a cardboard carrier. “Thank you. Be back in just a minute.”

«In other other news, if yuns just heard an explosion, that was just us dynamiting the bridge that leads up here.»

«Also, Connie Johnson's also joined us in the studio. And after a short break while we find another extension cord, she's enthusiastically agreed to help us with another reading. So while we're doing that, here's a short selection of dialogue from the film All Quiet on the Western Front A Triple-X Parody.»

» There were some French women in a small rundown shack on the edge of the front. Some soldiers said they would do almost anything for bread or a can of whatever was around. You know what I love, my friend said, you take a girl out for a nice meal, have a nice time, pay for everything and then some, and then she says she had a nice time and closes the door. There ain't no better feeling in the world. And I nodded to that. Kraus really had been a swell guy while he'd been around.«

ATTENTION. LILY MUNSEY ANODINE. PLEASE
PROCEED TO THE FRONT OFFICE FOR INSPECTION.

Lily looked up. Mrs Fox continued as she (Lily) passed in front of the tv and out into the hall. It was empty as she walked along, her footsteps loud, echoing. Glimpses of other puppets on other CRTs flashed by through the bulletproof glass section of each door, the only bright images in otherwise darkened rooms. She had a bad feeling that manifested itself as a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach, which worsened as she turned the corner and continued down the hall and put her hand on a cold, elongated doorknob. Empty chairs sat inside, a sliding-glass partition and counter dividing one wall, the glass closed, no one behind it. A roll-around tv cart sat against the wall next to it, → on the screen. She opened a door into a narrow hallway. At the end, another tv cart with yet another CRT: ←. She turned the corner. A sign on the door at the end of the corridor said: INSPECTION OFFICE, and also contained a non-trivial set of pictograms based around the iconography of a white glove. She went in. The room was cold. Goosebumps prickled along her arms and legs. A roll-around tv cart sat in the corner, the screen atop it flashing from text to text, a raggedy, badly punctuated voice punching through the speakers.

ON THE TABLE
"ON THE TABLE"
PLEASE REMOVE
"PLEASE REMOVE"
ALL CLOTHES
"ALL CLOTHES"
AND LIE BACK
"AND LIE BACK"

ON THE TABLE
"ON THE TABLE"
PLEASE REMOVE
"PLEASE REMOVE"

She undressed and placed her clothes in the cardboard box on the roll-around cart. And she climbed onto the examination table. The only even remotely comfortable way to lie there was to go ahead and put her feet in the stirrups. So she was lying there like that when the black-body-armored figure entered. Except, rather than combat gloves, he had on tight-fitting purple nitrile exam gloves, which because of the bulkiness of the rest of the body armor, especially where it came down over his forearms, it made his hands look really small.

August removed his trench coat, dropping it over the desk chair. Sweat'd darkened the armpits of his white shirt, and every time he raised his arms, chilly wetness assaulted him anew. And with every movement, his shirt rubbed against his nipples, both of them already so sensitive it felt as if they were being scrubbed with 80-grit sandpaper. He readjusted his belt.

"Mister President," the secretary's electronically modulated voice emanated from the intercom, "would you like me to bring you some more water?" Immediately, he leaned down and depressed the button. "No." He swallowed, his throat dry, but the more he drank the more he had to piss, and so on and so on.

He reached for the robe, which someone'd hunted up out of one of the offices of the magistrates who'd disappeared. It was baggy, meant for thrice the corporeality he was, but that was of benefit, under the circumstances.

"Mister President, I'm supposed to remind you that you have a court date scheduled for four-thirty."

But of course, he knew that. After all, that's what he was getting ready for. He looked down at himself. At least with one of these... add something for the head, and no one'd be able to tell a person were inside. He rounded the desk, the robes billowing round and against him, and opened the door, the secretary looking at him momentarily bemusedly. "Is there anything you want me to get for you, Mister President?"

"No."

Things would've been better before mechanization and technological development'd allowed women to usurp the place of men in office environments. There'd've been none of this workplace sexual tension or harassment had that been left the case. But actually, women had to

be brought in. Eventually, men had to be replaced. Or so at least one theory went. As SuperCocaine88 had explained: “[F]undamentally, the male power structure, being one based on a hierarchy of penetration, whereby one male may penetrate his subordinates, and only in turn be penetrated by his superiors, exists in a state of perpetual anxiety, as by the nature of hierarchies, those within must experience a turnover, that is, at least a few at the bottom must rise upwards, the standard upwards mobility and trajectory classically attached to the notion of a business or financial or career path.” This, of course, avoided the idealized form of the argument whereby participants might continually rise forever, or alternatively, retire, retire, in this case, sometimes being employed as a euphemism, but in general, the preferred conceptualization was the one implying (among practitioners) eternal existence. Though, MommyHayPenny89 disagreed here with the use of the term ‘anxiety’, instead arguing that, in more correct Freudian terms, ‘fear’, the specific target of an anti-desire, was more appropriate here. Though, almost everyone on what was left of the internet and off it ignored this, and not just because some of them didn’t know about it. But as IdiotConsumer9 points out, “Such conveyor systems can never statistically have a uniform distribution, and eventually, sooner or later, it’s likely that someone above is going to get surpassed by someone who had previously been lower. So someone who was fucking, is going to get fucked.” (Obviously, this also happened to be a violation of the Communications Decency Act, compounded by the not-so-obvious fact of the poster having been in their underwear at the time of posting.) And as LittleRed13 states, “this leads to the formation of an ANXIETY DRIVE. The desire to be the penetrator, not the penetrated. So one is pushed into such a **MODE** as to minimize the likelihood of the occurrence of the latter, while increasing the likelihood of the former.” So the end result, as SuperCocaine88 goes on to explain: “[S]o the introduction of female competitors into the office environment of the late 19th century was likely inevitable.” A perfect storm (though, as some pointed out, not a literal one, as human beings were not able to control the weather, or so some posted, only to be buried beneath replies about what about nuclear warheads and global dimming, so much so that any thread regarding the distinction between the literal and the literal had been

lost and left unrecoverable, contributing yet further to a general decrease in available thermal headroom) but a situation had been created whereby, due to the increased availability and scalability of information technologies, such as the typewriter and the punch card collator, as was the case with most such advances, not only could the same job be done more cheaply, but it could be done more cheaply with fewer staff. But also, just as importantly, it could be done with a staff that posed no threat of disrupting the positions of those at the top. To put it more pointedly, or as SuperCocaine88 put it, by replacing as many subordinates as possible with females, they could, by the same proportion, reduce the overall risk vector of those likely to rise into a position to penetrate those already within the top power structures of any part of an organization.

GoldStarLesbian32: You should use women, rather than females. It's more humane.

SuperCocaine88: I think 'female' is more accurate, in that it espouses no set position on age or any gender-related biases inherent to the other word.

GoldStarLesbian32: You're reducing women to things.

SuperCocaine88: For the sake of this analysis, yes. But if you'll notice, I'm also reducing men to functional-like equivalents, too.

GoldStarLesbian32: I look forward to the day when people like you who go out in public and admit they hate women get tarred and feathered and thrown in front of a bus in response.

ContemporaryCumquat: The world doesn't need your brand of feminism.

GoldStarLesbian32: Women will eventually have the ability to reproduce without men. Where will you be then?

ContemporaryCumquat: You're assuming I'm a man.

GoldStarLesbian32: Then you're a traitor.

FantasticBeast44 HAS LOGGED ON

FantasticBeast44: Men and women can never be equal. They're fundamentally not. And trying to force it's brought nothing but misery on everyone. This's the reason the world's in the state it's in.

FantasticBeast44: Men are made to lead. And women are made to follow. Everyone will be happier when they figure out that was always the case.

GoldStarLesbian32: Classical pre-post-America thinking.

FantasticBeast44: Feminism is nothing but a funnel to contaminate society with Marxist ideas under a different name. But it won't work.

StevenObscura: Some of us actual Marxists are against modern incarnations of so-called feminism, you know.

GoldStarLesbian32: You'll all be tarred and feathered and thrown in front of buses.

Some of us, August's secretary typed this, just want to be feminine.

FantasticBeast44: There are a few of us who still hold out against the postmodern assault. And like the Vietcong, we will ultimately triumph.

ContemporaryCumquat: Do you really want to bring Vietnam into this?

FantasticBeast44: The culture war is a guerrilla war. And the survival of everything about what it means to be an American depends on our winning it.

MargoMango: You do realize only about twelve-hundred square miles of America still exists, right?

GoldStarLesbian32: What's left of America will disappear into the void, to be replace by UTOPIA.

FantasticBeast44: America will never die. It lives forever in our hearts. And in the mind of God.

Nietzsche_BOT77: God's dead.

ContemporaryCumquat: Good bot.

GoldStarLesbian32: UTOPIA will reign and be cleansed of all the unpure.

FantasticBeast44: Yes. You.

MargoMango: I don't get why all you can't wrap your heads around the idea that things can be different and equal.

GodsFistsOfFury316: There IS no DIFFERENCE when there is UNITY in the LORD.

ContemporaryCumquat: WhY Do pEOplE HavE tO rAnDOMlY CApItaLiZe THINgs?

GodsFistsOfFury316: Contemporary, in CHOOSING such a username, you PROVE yourself to be an unfortunate SOUL willing to DEBASE yourself through the USE of your own body. I will PRAY for you.

ContemporaryCumquat: WTF?

MargoMango: I think you're the one projecting, GodsFists.

FolioBlizzardWizard: The problem with this theory, SuperCocaine88, is that it completely ignores the gay men in such all-male office environments.

MargoMango: It's men penetrating men. How do you get more gay than that?

FolioBlizzardWizard: No, it's not the same thing.

SuperCocaine88: I'm not addressing the modern memetic construction of what it means to be gay.

SuperCocaine88: I'm simply analyzing 19th century and 20th century America in terms of power-maintenance structures which can be shown to go all the way back to the Roman Empire.

FolioBlizzardWizard: But that's **exactly** my point. You're ignoring the gay reading completely.

What, August's secretary typed this, is the difference?

GodsFistsOfFury316: There IS no DIFFERENCE. SIN is SIN.

GoldStarLesbian32: But the Bible never says women lying with each other is a sin. So even if god existed, she'd tell you you're all wrong.

FantasticBeast44: God is a **he**.

GoldStarLesbian32: Only because it was written in a patriarchal society. If it was written in a matriarchy, god would have been a woman.

FantasticBeast44: There's never been a matriarchy. Only fantasies. And if there had been, it would have wiped itself out. Just like America is trying to let happen to it.

GodsFistsOfFury316: GOD made ADAM first.

GoldStarLesbian32: God's a fairy story.

Nietzsche_BOT77: God is dead.

MargoMango: That's actually not what that statement means.

MargoMango: Whoops, sorry. Talking to a bot.

MargoMango: Bad bot.

GodsFistsOfFury316: GOD LIVES.

SuperCocaine88 HAS LOGGED OFF

GoldStarLesbian32: god lives in your pitiful little mind.

LittleRed13 HAS LOGGED OFF

GodsFistsOfFury316: There is YET time. Those who REPENT can STILL be SAVED.

GoldStarLesbian32: No man can be saved from the coming of UTOPIA.

FolioBlizzardWizard HAS LOGGED OFF

GodsFistsOfFury316: I will PRAY that YOU find FORGIVENESS in the LOVING embrace of THE LORD.

GoldStarLesbian32: You will all be tarred and feathered and thrown in front of buses.

ContemporaryCumquat HAS LOGGED OFF

«Here's a post we think we should share. From the casual encounters section. Quote. I'm a thirty-year old male whose never had sex, never been on a date, never held hands, and never kissed. The only three things I have done involving sexuality are masturbating, fantasizing, and looking at porn. And now I'm looking for someone to sleep with before the world ends. Status. Currently unemployed. Uninsured. Have approximately eleven-hundred dollars in checking and savings combined. Am approximately five-foot-ten to five-foot-eleven inches tall, without boots. Don't drink. Don't smoke. Don't do drugs. Hobbies are miniature Dutch windmill building. Penis, approximately six-point-five inches long, as measured from the side, without depressing the ruler into the fatty area at the base of the groin, girth, approximately, three inches. Groin area is mostly trimmed, but not completely barren. I am not a hairless person. However, I have no back hair so far as I can tell. However, my legs are quite hairy. As is my ass. As in, borderline-gorilla hairy. I am definitely proof that humans are descended from apes. Also, rather than a happy trail, I have a happy eight-lane highway with off ramps, merge lanes, and rest stop area. Have beard and mustache which is short and trimmed. Brown eyes with flecks of gold. No health issues. Approximate weight one-hundred-seventy to one-hundred-seventy-five pounds in boots. I am bisexual and looking for a man or woman. Anal sex, however, might be a problem, as I have a hemorrhoid issue. Couples are a possibility. However, the complications there multiply. I am not looking for a handout or for someone to feel sorry for me. I am only interested in sleeping with someone who wants to sleep with me. If that is not an option, I would rather wait and see the end of the world as a virgin. I am not interested in hiring a prostitute. While I fully respect sex workers rights and support the ability for them to do their job safely,

I personally cannot reconcile someone wanting to have sex with me because I pay them as the same thing as someone wanting to have sex with me. If interested, please use the private messaging feature of this forum to reply. Thank you very much. End quote. Alright, well, someone should jump on that. No, we really mean it. If there's any of yuns out there to still listen, or capable of listenin', and yuns've still got internet, and yuns're interested, search for 30YearOldWizard. Alright. This's radio EFKO, with yuns, hopefully, through the rest of end of the world. Right now it's...sometime. Somewhere past the beginning of the end, but not quite all the way to the end yet. But apparently, as LippencottMaster3 seems overly happy to message us—and by the way, how do yuh type that fast, we literally just said it, are yuh reading our minds?—but LippencottMaster3 informs us that it is in fact not settled as to whether the universe ever had a beginning. Well, whatever, which yuh probably already know we were gonna say, if yuh can read our minds, and if yuh can't, yuh know it now. But it's time now for the weather.»

«The temperature is a steady sixty-three degrees. Humidity is at sixty-three percent. The skies are clear because there are technically no skies. Light is still currently streaming up over the edges of what's left of the world. We think we might've seen a few crumbles of what's left of the moon, but that could just be part of California.»

«Now, having mentioned that, we are not required to read the following statement, but we're gonna anyway. Warning, if yuns should encounter a piece of the state formerly known as California, be advised that it could contain trace residue known in what's left of reality to possibly cause very strange things to happen. End of statement. Now, if we were a normal station, we'd probably go to a commercial break. But in case yuns're just tuning in, we don't do that sorta thing here. And people're getting very rude about it. It's amazing how many people miss commercials. Of course, then again, commercials've changed the face of human civilization. Anyone remember when they were complaining about President Obama being all hoity toity because he had Dijon mustard on a hamburger? That's all because of a commercial. They shot it out in California, back when California existed, couple of well dressed guys Americans've taken to be upper class because of European accents, who yuns can't see nothing of, except

for their suited arms reaching across from two fancy cars as one asks t'other to pass the Grey Poupon. Probably the most effective commercial in history. Completely American company, but everybody's convinced it's some fancy smancy European haute cuisine deal. And yet less than twenty years later it's completely changed the American landscape so much that it's the basis for attacking a president of the, excuse me, these United States. Commercials, folks, even the president can't run from em. So just because we're so nice and wouldn't want yuns out there to have to suffer cold turkey, here's a translation of a nineteen-forty-one advertisement for radium-infused Doramad Radioactive Toothpaste, as read by the laptop we've got here in the studio.»

»Load up your gum cells with new life energy, destroying those pesky germs that cause gingivitis and bad breath and tooth decay. Leave your teeth sparkling and white after being polished with Doramad Radioactive Toothpaste. Now with a new pleasing flavor. You're sure to love it.«

«Now for the sad part, as ConstipatedPorcupine21 lets us know, unfortunately this great product was only produced up till nineteen-forty-five, which apparently just goes to show that even the superior product can fall prey to the vicissitudes of market forces, though it might not've helped that it was produced in Berlin at the time. So if any of yuns out there're time travelers, and yuns're bummed out on that canceled party, maybe yuns can console yuns'sselves by jumping back and picking up a tube of Doramad Radioactive Toothpaste. After all, shopping duth sooth the savage breast. But as ConstipatedPorcupine21 lets us know, apparently, that just goes to show that the toothpaste manufacturers didn't have von Braun's political savvy. After all, ten or twenty years of this stuff and anyone'll've mutated enough to fly to the moon without the aid of contraptions like rockets. Now we know the secrets the Nazi regime was really trying to protect. So apparently by now there could've been a whole space-living mutant race descended from the human species. Well, thank yuh for that, ConstipatedPorcupine21, and we wish yuh good luck with your bathroom endeavors.»

«Which, speaking of, we haven't forgotten. And our guest speaker will be with us later to tell us much more about this stuff than we never knew we didn't want to know. So stay tuned.»

"The chair there, if you please, Mister Amerika." She motioned with the Uzi. "We're rapidly falling behind schedule."

"Well," he said, "I was scheduled to be here, anyway." Clive walked between the two tables and turned and sat in the chair. He crossed his ankle over his opposite knee, his pants cuff receding to reveal pink-pinstriped socks.

"Now you, Doctor Jones."

Langdon glanced over at the table and chair.

"I know that you want to. You've been waiting for this confrontation for...well, I was going to say days, but that isn't entirely correct, is it?"

He looked at her. She motioned with the Uzi. He turned and walked toward the table and chair, pulled the chair back, but didn't sit.

"We'll start with opening remarks. Do you have a coin, Doctor Jones?"

Langdon patted his pockets. He shook his head.

Clive shifted and rooted in his own. "I do." He flipped it, caught it, slapped it against the back of his hand, palm still covering it.

"Heads or tails, Doctor Jones?"

"You say you already know everything about me, so you might as well pick."

"You do have a tendency to prefer the top half, Doctor Jones. So that's what we'll give you."

Clive raised his hand. "Tails."

"Guess I get to start, then."

Langdon sat down.

"Good." She turned, the Uzi still in hand, but carried against her body in a very laissez-faire fashion. "It's my intention to prove that

you, Mister Amerika, as the only living representative of the film industry—”

“I object to that,” Clive said.

“You can’t object during opening remarks.”

“Well, whether I can or not, I am.”

“I agree,” Langdon said. “It’s easy to demonstrate that he’s not the only remaining director or former director.”

“Not so long as David exists, anyway. Has something happened to him?”

“I’m referring to something that could be likenable to mainstream film,” she said, “Which Mister Stoker certainly does not qualify for.”

“That I will agree with.”

“Now, may I continue?”

“By all means.”

“It’s my intention to prove that you, as the only living representative of the *mainstream* film industry, are ultimately culpable for the state of affairs as they exist now.”

“Could you be a little clearer on what you mean by state of affairs?”

“There is probably no definition that can exist without ambiguity, so there is probably no point in trying to provide a further one. Do you object?”

Clive shook his head.

She glanced at Langdon. “Doctor Jones?”

“I’ll...concur,” Langdon said. “Provisionally.”

“Good.” She sat, placing the Uzi on the table, but still keeping ahold of it. “Now, you, Doctor Jones.”

Langdon considered a minute, then rose, pushing back the chair. “I can’t see as how...”

“Come now, Doctor Jones.” She motioned with the Uzi.

“I...don’t know what I have to say.”

“Oh, Doctor Jones.” She shook her head. “After all, Doctor Jones, don’t you yourself say everything society produces is related to that society fundamentally?”

“Something like that, I guess.”

“Well then, how can this *not* be related? And since we so often seem to not be in control of ourselves, or society doesn’t seem to be in control of itself—which you do agree on?”

"Provisionally."

"Good. So anything he must've done in the broader media landscape must've contributed *some* way to the state of affairs we find ourselves in, correct?"

"It...could follow. But—"

"Good. That'll be perfectly acceptable, Doctor Jones. I'm sure the nuances will come out later." She motioned for him to sit, and as he did, she rose.

"Mister Amerika, how many films have you made in your career?"

"Two hundred and...five, I believe. Depending on how you want to count."

"You're nothing if not prodigious."

"I suppose."

"Do you find this situation rather farcical?"

"Not particularly."

"Oh?"

"Justice has always been, so far as I can tell, mostly a ritualistic endeavor."

Langdon raised his hand. "May I?"

"Of course. I cede the witness." She sat down.

Langdon pushed back his chair and rose. "In *The Sheriff An Ex-Ex Parody*, you've talked about this, haven't you? Where the sheriff must defend a prisoner, who's already been sentenced to hang, against a lynch mob, so that he can still be hung in the morning."

"I would guess so. Though, I have to admit I do not really find myself trying to give a message when I make a film."

"But that doesn't mean anything about whether or not a message's there."

"No. But then again, there's no narrative in the stars, yet human beings have been finding stories in the night sky probably as far back as there have been human beings. Now we just scry over computer-rendered scenery."

"In essence, you could say we devise better circuses and put more sugar in the bread, but that's about all that's changed. Which's exactly the incorrect ideological position to take, because—"

"Objection," she said. "We are the bread and circuses."

Langdon looked over at her.

She waved the Uzi. "He's still your witness."

"So..."

"So," she said to Clive, "you want to argue that no matter what the content of any of your films, or any film, everyone would find what they want?"

"Perhaps."

"I would prefer," she said, and motioned with the Uzi, "your answers to be more meaningful. If you prefer, you can pretend you're answering essay questions on a final exam."

"I must admit I hate tests."

"As does Doctor Jones. Isn't that right?"

"The pedagogy of the standard—"

"But we're getting off track." She waved the Uzi. "Mister Amerika, please answer the questions in a more substantial way. Starting with the previous one."

"I would have to say then, as best I can, that I wonder if we can divorce the human condition from the narrative form. So to answer, I have to say that I can't answer, only offer speculation."

"That will be sufficient for these proceedings. If that is okay with Doctor Jones."

"Um..."

"Good. Now, Doctor Jones, continue with your line of questioning."

Langdon stood there.

"How about," she said, after a protracted period of this, "we begin going through this film by film. Would that be preferable? And just to be fair, why don't we start with your first major film, Mister Amerika, *Jaws A Triple-X Parody*."

"You realize..." Langdon said, "this entire thematically interconnected span of filmology functions entirely as part of a project to save capitalism."

"Perhaps," Clive said. "I have to admit that personally I'm rather ambivalent towards it. I mean, it allows me to make my living, but it allows everyone to make their living, even the communists."

"But even if you buy into the fact that today the worker-capitalist divide's been tainted—"

"May I have the witness?"

Langdon glanced at her, she rose, but he didn't sit. "Mister Amerika, isn't it true that many sexual positions are created for porn just for the purpose of making the penetration more filmable?"

"Yes."

"Then wouldn't this be yet another case of the human body being modified to fit current technology? rather than the enhancement of the human being, which it's often claimed to be."

"I suppose. But then again, everything modifies the human body. Any sex act modifies the human body to the needs of another human body. I don't know what an unmodified human body would look like."

"You don't care to leave very much room for subtext in your films, do you?"

"I prefer the foregrounding of the subtext."

"But that," Langdon said, "only creates a space for a new form of subtext."

"Of course."

"Yet the same things always tend to develop as were there before."

"Fortunately or unfortunately."

"And this doesn't bother you?"

"The thing about parody is that it is relatively constrained to being a kind of re-creation. And by mirroring the form, it necessarily may mirror other aspects of the parodied work. That's just in the nature of the beast, as they say."

"Which's why all your superhero movies have them fighting for the status quo."

"That is what people want to preserve. I can't help that."

"But you don't even try to open up a space for alternative."

"The problem is the audience doesn't like such ambiguity, except when they do. I am, after all, primarily a commercial force. The forms I like to think of as merely ritualistic. And the ritualistic and the mythic always intersects economics. Or so David likes to tell me."

"That, of course, makes the assumption that the noncommercial is even possible."

"True. But how many people have seen my films vs David's?"

"So what we get is 50 Shades An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody parentheses No, Really – where women's orgasms are still the responsibility of the

man and people who aren't of a socially normative sexual disposition are *broken* and ultimately need to be fixed, allowing us to experience the thrill of the *naughty* thing in our own lives while packaging it up safely at the end as being bad and always having been bad, and those who indulge either die or're cured. So what appears permissive is in fact its opposite. A hedonistic society depends on oppression. So what we need is something beyond hedonism. But we don't get that. Everything gets presented with its opposite and banal antidote. In *The Searchers* An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody, the former Confederate, a Confederate because we could never truly accept his actions if he'd been one of the good guys, walks off, satisfying the twin problem of society being unable to confront the means necessary for its own continuation and perpetuation, and his own shame over failing to fulfill his duty, even though he has fulfilled his duty, but yet these things must be done, and at the same time fail to be done in order to foster this nonacceptance. Or in *Selma* An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody and *Defiance* An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody, where we get to see the glorious liberation of the oppressed class, except that it's tainted by being only achieved by that class solely, with no external help, completely erasing those facets from the real history in favor of a myth which at its heart is the very same segregation and racial oppression which these films ostensibly claim to detest. Or in *The Lone Ranger* An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody, where we palliate ourselves that in order for the functioning of the very same justice system we claim to depend on and value so highly, the actual function depends upon its negation, the going outside of it in order to function. We're always having to go outside of the thing, as in *Dances With Wolves* An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody, where the main character starts out being disillusioned with war and has to be rehabilitated in war, going outside of society to recreate it and gain the ability to sustain it, by proving that its motives and methods are correct by the salvation of another people who'd been previously ignorant of those methods, through those methods, just as it is that it'll be those same methods themselves that ultimately destroy *them*. But the rehabilitation of war's the second greatest project, isn't it? Not that it's not intrinsically connected with capital itself. But—*Warhorse* An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody, *Saving Private Ryan* An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody, they're all concerned with this at their core, whether it's essentially reassuring us

that life goes on after these horrible events in such a way as to tell us it won't be *us* who're the victims of it, so we don't *really* have to fear at all, the faux pathos, to providing the righteous fuel to propel us into such horrible situations through such faux pathos, as distinct from synthetic pathos, because it's the wrong question to ask if we think it's about these films making us think war's fun, isn't it? because war isn't fun, we all know that. But ask anyone after seeing movies like these, especially those young men in the audience, if they felt they *need* to be there in those places or *should* be there in those places and you'll get a very different answer than if you ask them if they think it looks like it'd be fun to be there, because only idiots go and do things for fun. And in order to do the very worst of it you have to believe in those young men, have to believe in their cause, and though this belief seemingly sustains itself, they have to be there because they believe it's the place for a politically conscious young man to be. But it doesn't stop there, does it? like in *The Hills Have Eyes An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody*, which's almost the same, the road to acceptance of a father in the ways of violence and death by showing him the consequences of his own lack of such through what happens to his family and wife, it's the rehabilitation of violence, the proof that you're wrong to reject it because without it society as we know it can't function. And any kind of society other than ours is always the mutant monsters. Even in *I Am Legend An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody*, the film isn't parodied by having the true ending, the accurate ending, the ending that fits the title, because that would be in opposition to the fundamental nature of this. Just like we do with modern cultures, the whole panoply of films about young Americans who go to some foreign country and get butchered by monstrous sexo-sadomasochistic murderers, and yet pass themselves off as *really* being a critique of some kind of xenophobia, in the same way that *Zero Dark Thirty An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody* claims to step back and be morally neutral on torture in order to critique it, which just goes right along with all the films that kept popping up with the aim of doing the same for the Holocaust from just such a standpoint. Except that we need torture and we want it and we want it justified to us because we know we really need it just like we need the protagonist in *Shooter An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody* to go outside the law and kill and maim and torture and destroy in order to keep

society functioning and existing as it is, to defend us against all those mutant them, not just out there, but inside as well, the cabal that's threatening to take over our lives, such as in *They Live An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody*, which, though what anyone wants to say, so does lend its central interpretive theme to the neo-Nazi bent that's recently appropriated it, because aren't they that same other that's always driven us? a horror, possibilities that're to be destroyed—whether it's in *The Time Machine: Yet Another (We Think) Ex-Ex-Ex parody*, or any of the other mutant post-apocalyptic wastelands that exist, all of them just showing that it's easier for the audience to imagine the end of the world than it is to conceive of the end of capitalism. Even when it's presented even seemingly with some kind of reflexivity, in an ironical mode, such as *The Planet of the Apes An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody*, all it does is reaffirm the very things about the society in which it exists, that it claims to critique, while simultaneously invoking ideas such as ancient aliens to indulge our desires that our ancestors both were primitive, so therefore we're better than them, and that the past is the same as the present, with the same technology and the same roughly social customs, the same human thinking, with no trace of the alien, where it's the actual aliens who provide the means for this equality, by supplying a nuclear and technological capability to peoples we must believe beneath ourselves but can't stomach the idea of a gulf separating us from them such that they may've achieved or attained or possessed something we can't or won't ever have, something our anxiety-driven brains've been primed by evolution to scream about, and attempt to appropriate any selective advantage we can, and hoard as many as we can to ourselves, so we keep walking the line between what's transferable and what's not, which's why things like *Star Wars An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody* works, because it posits something that manages to straddle that line, the *forces*, which is both attainable in some fashion yet not bestowable at the same time, except when it is, which's why everyone reacted so badly to the idea of it being related to Meatonclitions in the later sequels slash prequels, all of it part of the unconscious consciousness arms race that's been going on for who knows how many millennia of human evolution, ever since we developed any sort of meta-cognition, at least, and it's all about keeping us from admitting the stupidity of our existence, and

everything that underlies and sustains our existence, and even when for a moment we posit something different, we have to quickly posit its opposite to save ourselves, look at *Ghost in the Shell An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody of Something Worse Than A Parody, Because At Least We're Funny* vs its source's source material, whereas the latter ends with the affirmation of a yes and the creation of something new, a change in the world, even if it's left ambiguous to us as the audience what that change is, the possibility of change still remains as a concept, but the former, by answering no, by shunting into some normal mode of reproduction, all it does is reaffirm the traditional role of the female-coded body, the place of such bodies in modern or postmodern societies, and by extension, the place of all other and counter bodies, so all it does is scream at you *you can't escape, baby!* reaffirming to us as the audience that there is no alternative, just like all those tv shows that show about people living in Alaska and all those other places, painted, in effect, as freaks and weirdos, so that at the end we feel more comfortable about ourselves, we don't have to worry about any alternatives to the present system because there aren't any, or we get things like *The Passion of the Christ An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody* that at best just showcases how Christianity stepped in to take the pornography of violence out of the coliseum and into the home, or in *The Greatest Story Ever Told An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody*, where we see it almost laid bare that the Judeo-Christian mythopoetic framework basically just eliminates the hunter-gatherer phase of human evolution in order to jump to farming and agriculture as the basis of the species and thereby reinforcing the current mode of life as the right one because, rather than being a deviation from anything pre-existing, an alternative originally in itself, it's the only thing that there ever was and that's always the way it's gotta be, we always have to be returning to the one true way, the way it always really was and that maybe we got away from, nobody wants to join a religion that says it started yesterday, but so long as a leader can say this's the good old way, plenty'll turn out for it, all of this completely recognizable in *Triumph of the Will An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody*, all the way down to parodies of parodies, such as *Starship Troopers An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody of a Parody*, whereas as much as we claim and the film claims to be against the very notions it represents, yet they must've

existed for the enjoyment of the critique to become extant, or in Fight Club An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody of Pain Consumerism, where we get to bask in the contradictory notion of non-uniqueness by essentially asserting our uniqueness through asserting our un-uniqueness because everyone else refuses to see how un-unique they really are, the goddamn special snowflakes, but of course at the same time they and we need the special snowflakes, the others, because without them we lose the definition of ourselves, that's probably the real reason for the modern malaise following the whimper at the end of the Cold War we've finally got the power to destroy the other completely but to do so would leave us without ourselves which's why in The Walking Dead An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody and Zombieland An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody and ZombieShark: Not So Much of A Parody we're never left with societies without this vital antagonism which we must overcome and something and someones that are everywhere and all-powerful but beatable that must be destroyed but can never seemingly be destroyed totally because otherwise they wouldn't exist and it's of course the same with AI in The Terminator An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody and all its kith and ken it's just about us fearing the very same things done to those in the social strata below us to deliver unto us the goods and services that make our way of life possible will be visited upon us and it's sequel's even worse abrogating the entire notion of woman being ahead of the curve in destroying the very notion by saying we'll allow some women to become men and thus this isn't sexism even though we've kept all the same discriminations in place against the remaining feminine women because of course the phallus object is important and if you don't think so I refer you to recordings of the debates in the previous presidential elections and anyway the only reason we allow some women to move up in this hierarchy is because the men have ascended into the machine realm and transcended notions of maleness to become machineness through their own form of reproduction the uploading of those bits of their mind running on other platforms which could be used as a definition of programming and code but all of it like Jurassic Park An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody and Scorpion An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody Not That We Have To Try Hard are just there to assuage our anxiety that we do indeed have the power to change the world by telling us that in fact it won't change because

we can hand wave it away through the power of narrative and seeing it done in narrative's as good as seeing it done in real life because to the human mind it's the same thing because everything that's inside it's just models of models anyway so any information is as good as another so half the time we can't tell the difference between reality except when it comes to sex but especially then or maybe because we can't see the lack of reality that's the problem because we spend more time worrying and warning young actors about pretending to have sex on film than we ever spent in time in discussion about the numbers of stunt professionals killed or injured in the same movies and series and then only because there's women involved because if porn involved only men no one'd probably hardly ever care anything about it except for maybe the anti-gay religions but their bigger problem is that they need porn and gays because without sin they have no definition to subsist upon and they complain about teens using porn for sex education but they only do so because they work so much harder to remove any other alternative for education thereby ensuring the very thing they complain about happening actually happens to create the situation for them to continue to militate against any such education but the real problem is not the actual porn that might exist but just the knowledge of the *possibility* of some other sexuality is enough as most of them have supposedly never actually seen real porn and only heard about it secondhand unless they have but the constant anxiety about being enslaved to the sexual appetite is of course the anxiety of that very situation itself peeking through the acknowledgment that that is the definition of life but the other side isn't even the mirror it's just the same thing feminism doesn't arise out of a vacuum and so many branches of it're just replacing the control of the woman's body by the patriarchy with that of control by the pseudo-matriarchy as witnessed in the evolution of debates over the standards of TV coverage of the bad simulacra of ancient Grecian inter-city state sporting contests where at least the Middle East seeks to cover sexuality but leave it extant whereas the West wants to obliterate it from plain sight in order to make advertising more effective because a population actually having some sort of sexual release isn't so susceptible to sex-based advertising this's the problem when they complain we have or had a sex-obsessed culture no because

fewer people than ever before were having sex and there was only ever more and more of it on billboards and in commercials and in shows such as those Miss Whatever pageants which're only modern virginity cults were the participants must remain pure or the gods will be angry and if there're ever found to be pictures or any other proof because it's always about proof that's what makes porn so bad because everybody could be having sex right or could've been just before we met them or could be just after they leave us or while we're talking to them on the phone but that's just virtual and what makes that reality is recorded images on screens and if there's that proof modern women in these virginity cults will get the same social fate as they always have because that's a re-ascendant meme these days the cyclic nature of time and too horrible pessimism believing in nothing is for some reason for so many people suddenly so comforting and everyone keeps going on about how X and Y will happen again any day now very soon but maybe this is just the chance to get it right this time because there is a right way and that's how Quantum Leap An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody fixes a major conundrum at the heart of mainline Christian theology but at the worst end we get the reciprocity of atrocity in the mirroring of functional death with the likes of Raiders of the Lost Ark An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody all while we're watching these shows that just want to keep you round for the commercials or paying your subscription or buying tapes because they finally let you live out your fantasy of seeing some character naked and doing it with some other character all of it all about creating the new class of slave and just like in Roots An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody without slaves we all become slaves our data shadow becomes slaves coalescing in the realignment of society as a whole into the situation of the protagonist of A Beautiful Mind (And Other Things) An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody ridding herself of mental disorder through sheer force of will no longer the mind over matter but the mind over the mind the cogito mode of Cartesian dualism where in we will exist in the neo-Gnostic mode of the pure spirit forsaking our bodies which'd been the focus for so much of the history of the working world in the pre and post industrial revolutions culminating in the ultimate breakdown that must occur eventually for capitalism because even though it thrives and indeed can't exist without this perpetual anxiety of its own destruction Francis Fukayama being the

only one who ever came close to landing a mortal blow against it by saying that in fact it was the final form of human civilization and that the struggle was over that this was it and just like that somehow everyone had picked up the central Marxist assumption of the End of History and just accepted it so now capitalism's really consumed everything into itself except that it can't continue forever in that the universe can't continue forever unless we don't know something and it can but it keeps collapsing and going into crisis over and over again and it has to be saved from the reification of its own success and that's the ultimate project that's the ultimate project of modernity right down through the screen capitalism's continually dying and we must resuscitate it over and over again it goes right through *Jaws* An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody and all its twelve sequels, right through *The Color Purple* An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody where it's only capitalism and industrial capitalism that can lift the oppressed out of that which oppresses them liberating them through the shaping of their bodies to interface with mechanization so that manufacture and it shall set you free becomes us culminating in *Schindler's List* An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody the ultimate story of capitalism the man who comes to town with nothing and builds an empire and it's only through that empire's existence that he can save even those he saves from Hitler's and Nazism's true broader project which he is only a small part of the salvation of capitalism itself which only reaffirms the broader project itself the protagonist being a microcosm of that and only able to save because he exploits but we should be thankful for that because without that exploitation we would not have been saved so in this way this film—film—continues into the twenty-first century the very project which started with Adolph Hitler the continual project of saving and resuscitating capitalism till the end of time.”

Langdon stood there breathing hard, leaned slightly forward, as if he might have to put his hand down on the table any moment for support. His eyes felt like boiled eggs that'd been left in too long and'd started to smell slightly sulfurous. He could hear his own heart beat as that exact sound overlay they use in movies of shots of fetuses in utero.

It should also be mentioned that if there was a lack of footnotes involved to give due credit to the likes of Deirdre Francine Hall and Gordon Liste and Georgia Happi and Scott Bukatman and Millie

Walther and Mark Dery and Martha Anschutz and Thomas Aquinas and Slavoj Žižek, and all the rest, that was only because the effective use of the medium of orality didn't often lend itself to such acknowledgments, which some on was left of the internet argued may have been the reason that plagiarism and copyright weren't a thing for the majority of human history, whereas others countered this with quotes from one of Langdon's own books, stitching together an argument whereby the legal slash religious slash literary framework was all originally one in the same, etc, and that you'd get your head cut off, etc, for saying the wrong thing about the wrong demi-human, etc, so at one point the price to be paid for bad fan fiction had been higher.

Clive sat there clasping his sock-wrapped ankle. "As I said, the form of parody itself necessarily relies on the creation of something that resembles its source material to a recognizable degree, so if there's something that comes through about the basic structure or plot or the way the characters interact or even the iconic nature of the characters themselves, that can't be helped. It's just the nature of the beast."

"So," she said, "Mister Amerika, you'd still agree with your previous statements that porn is in fact not real at all, that is, that though the performers might really be having sex, it is, at the end of the day, just a performance, no different than an actor riding a horse or a bicycle."

"Probably. I think that there needs to be maintained a distinction between what's fantasy and reality."

She glanced at Langdon. "There's a cooler beside the table that's got some HyperPowers in it."

He looked at her.

"You look like your electrolytes are low. You know how you get when your potassium's low."

He continued to look at her

"I told you I know everything about you."

The particular state of his electrolytes would also have been the reason behind a series of arguments related to notions of unconscious plagiarism and the argued inability to integrate disparate knowledge systems into the general individual's individual conscious being as would have been possible from a modern viewpoint of those same days of yore in which copyright and cudgels could be argued as functionally

synonymous, categorization as an enforcing agent of policing one's own thoughts in perpetuity, filing schema as pre-self-censorship of the kind that a congressional panel once bemoaned the breakdown of in relation to the comic book industry.

"Go on. It's not as if some high-fructose corn syrup's gonna kill you before the end of the world." Langdon considered that a moment, then straightened, and stepped toward the end of the table and looked down. He bent and opened the cooler.

She said, "Would you care for anything, Mister Amerika?"

"No, thanks."

Langdon closed the cooler and cracked the seal on a punch-flavored HyperPower.

"And exactly," she said, "what *is* fantasy and reality?"

Langdon gulped and lowered his head from where he'd tilted it back to drink. "But there is the reality of the fantasy. And which is really realer, the scene where the main performer in *The Wizard of Oz*: (Yet Another) Ex-Ex-Ex parody is going through the scene as it's expected to be done, or the outtake where she breaks down sobbing in the middle of it?"

"Uh..." Clive paused. "I think you're confusing my film with the actual *Wizard of Oz*. Paprika never cried on set. In fact, she was quite enthusiastic about the whole thing. I always work to maintain a safe environment for my performers. If that were going on...no, I'd shut the whole production down."

"But," she said, "you call yourself a commercial man."

"And it's a commercial sensibility. People know me and my productions for the positive way we treat performers. If we backtracked on that, we'd risk losing the reputation we've worked decades to build. No," he looked toward Langdon, "you're definitely confusing my film with the original *Wizard of Oz*, that has the outtake of Judy Garland breaking down in tears while trying to sing *Over the Rainbow*. No, no one is going to be treated like that on one of my sets. Period."

Karen stopped in the intersection between the highschool and the credit union and Anglers and Joint Burger.

“Well,” Ruth said. “Any bright ideas?”

They looked through the windshield at all the black-painted military-surplus vehicles that sat parked in the Joint Burger parking lot.

Karen turned the SUV, went down the road toward Anglers, turned, passed into the Anglers parking lot, and parked. “I guess we’ll just have to wait.”

«So this goes out to all those of yuns who can't hear us, yuns might be the lucky ones. And if yuns can't hear us, yuns might be interested in knowing that most cellphones've gotta builtin FM radio, so all yuns gotta have is the right software and yuns could be listenin' to us now. Course, yuns'll have to be listening to this to know that, so... oh, poop.»

«We mentioned earlier how Jane Tippell was going to join us for a reading of Still-Water Life As They Apply To A Slice of Lemon Pie and give her own special commentary on it, but that's turned out to be a lie—»

«A lie 'bout a pie.»

«Anyway, she's completely dodged off on us, as it turns out that's such a completely boring idea that she doesn't know why she ever thought about it in the first place.»

«Which we suspect may be a cover for the fact it's a little mind boggling to figure out how to rebut a picture book over the radio. So as RandianLoveLife21 lets us know, maybe the medium really is the message. Our question is—what message? However, it seems as if AngelBelle19 can see the future, as he's been posting for the last hour all these rebuttals to what Jane was gonna say. Either that or they just keep coming up with the same line over and over again so they don't have to worry 'bout coming up with a new line of defenses. We'll let yuns out there decide which's the more likely. However, we'd like to point out one thing that SuperCocaine88 points out, is there a non-super cocaine? just regular cocaine? super-duper cocaine? we don't know, not really interested, don't know why we even bothered to ask that, really, but in response to AngelBelle19, SuperCocaine88 posts human beings are in fact not unique for lacking a penile bone. Several other species do as well. Certain whale and dolphin species among them.»

«And we'd just like to point out the obvious, isn't it funny how some people's definition of what makes the human species unique comes down to the construction of the penis?»

«And we'd just like to say to AngelBeller9 and anyone who's with him or her, EWWWWWWW. Now, since we've already depressed a big buncha yuns out there with a lack of Jane Tippell, we might as well push yuns a little farther into that hole, so how about some news. First off, a little bird tells us that the administration's kink these days is taping down nipples, and we'd just like to say *ouch*, and if we were interested in watching someone's breasts get taped up, we'd watch *Star Wars A Triple-X Parody*, thank yuns very much. Course, that's only the public school, not even to begin to get into the shit—please don't excuse our language, folks—but that's not even to begin to get into what we've heard's goin on in the privates of the private schools. Should we mention that?»

«We don't do snuff.»

«Oh, that's right.»

«Also, we're not going to read this press release from the Tuscanalon Priorative Reformed Baptist Church...correction, the Tuscanalon Pri-orative Reformed Reformed Baptist Church. There must be a new one. Not sure that counts as news though.»

«Yeah, sometimes we get the idea that a big buncha Christians only ever complained about the things what went on in the Middle East is because they were jealous they couldn't do them here yet. Remind us again what exactly's the difference between the two of yuns, yuns come outa the same place, pray to the same god, both believe Jesus is the Messiah and will return at the end of days, hate the gays, hate abortions, think women oughta cover up, think no fucky outa marriage, think the gubment oughta be run by God's law, is it just the dogs versus cats thing? is that where the big divide comes in? because, we gotta admit, sometimes we can find as much difference between the two of yuns as we can find between Republicans and Democrats, course, we guess yuns have to be that almost identical to hate each's guts so badly, we mean, and we may be crazy Perverts, but it just seems to us it's a little screwy. And...»

«Okay, MargoMango's responded that the reason for the level of hostility itself is because of the similarities between the two groups,

though we aren't sure which ones she's talking about, she's totally a little vague, but we think we can get the idea, but she says they have to be so hostile because otherwise they might realize they're almost identical. However, CloverField33 keeps posting this's just the usual crap that gets spouted. But SuperCocaine88 adds that like in science and orthodox Judaism, it allows for a seemingly vigorous debate, when in actuality the debate's constrained to a very narrow set of particulars and leaves the whole of the remainder of the underlying ideological superstructure unquestioned, so the point isn't even whether they're different or not, just the functionality of the inter-working bifurcated social superstructure.»

«Well, thank yuh for that SuperCocaine88, we're not sure we understood half of it, but we thought it sounded nice. Well, moving on, in other school news, apparently transparent backpacks aren't enough anymore. Now, some of yuns out there keep complaining we call highschool a prison, and we just wanna let yuns know that we do know there's a difference, prisons have blue jumpsuits, highschool has orange, or at least it used to. Now they've decided they need transparent clothes, as well, just to make sure all the kids're safe. Course, we figure they've probably got some real-life censor bands built into em, right? Hopefully they don't pixelate everything like they did in the country formerly known as Japan. Course, at least there wouldn't be too much worry about the genders, or lack thereof, if yuns're that way, but whatever, it's not likely anyone's probably gonna get mixed up. At least, we figure there'll probably be two privacy band slash real-life censor bars for girls —»

«But, hey, but once you're wearin' a bra, does anyone have any business calling you a girl?»

«Not to insult the ones of yuns out there who don't need it, or just like to free boob it—yeah, we said the b-word—but they'll probably get two of em, we reckon, one for each x-chromosome, maybe? Or do yuns think front and back count separate? so three? or's the lower one just go all the way round? But at least they won't be nude, right? cause then things'd be really bad. And it leads us to wonder how much tax-payer money have we spent at this point on keeping teens from getting naked and naughty? Way more than we've spent on giving them free breakfasts. Maybe we're just old fuddiduddies now,

but we miss the good old days when all the administration did was spend money to spy on kids undressing in their bedrooms through their webcams and punished them for the things they posted on the place that can't be mentioned. They were simpler times. Ah, the warm glow of nostalgia. Mmmmm... We can still remember when Peggy Olesan got her nose smashed into the linoleum when the police were hauling her out of her desk.»

«Of course, everyone out there might know her by her stage name, Aqualina.»

«And we bet most of yuns do.»

«Well, she's actually home in the county, and's temporarily coming out of retirement to put on a special show for the local retired police officers currently residing in the Butane rest home, in thanks for giving her the distinctive facial features which allowed her career to really take off.»

«Yuh mean take it off. And if this sounds like an advertisement, well, we're still trying to ween yuns off slowly. But she promises the show to be very tactile and stimulating, so we're sure the residents of Butane will love that. And... Oh, alright. Alright. For those of yuns who don't know, we've been being bombarded for the last two hours by legal notices for the publishers of Still-Water Life As They Apply To A Slice of Lemon Pie threatening to sue us into the middle of the next laser age if we disseminate any of their precious copyrighted material. Which they've informed us includes conveying to yuns out there any description of any of these...rather not so good illustrations. In fact, they're even trying to sue us for using the title.»

«Apparently we're engaging in economic warfare.»

«So we guess it's a good thing the air's too shallow to fly any of those military-surplus helicopters round. To bad they didn't buy a couple ICBMs at auction.»

«So how're we gonna deal with this? We refute it thusly. And if yuns can't hear it, imagine the sound of the delete key being hit over and over and over again. Alright, next up, since we don't have Jane Tippell with us, Josh's kindly sent us a reading of one of his essays on how the portrayal of evolution in science fiction is often worse than, and sometimes indistinguishable from its portrayal in creationist propaganda.»

«And after that, we've hopefully got some calls, so stay tuned.»
«And here's To Serve The Commonweal And The Enlightenment
Science Fiction As Western Soviet Social Realism.»

“You still sore?” Harmony said.

Lily shrugged as she brought a spoonful of cornflakes to her mouth. “A little.” She looked down toward the rhythmic drum of liquid on plastic, fluid running down the front of the crinkly, crumpled transparent material. But at least plastic didn’t absorb moisture and get stained, there was that benefit.

As if she’d had a sixth sense about these things, Crystal’d already started to rise when the bell rang, and shoveled one final spoonful of cornflakes into her mouth. She chewed as she lifted her backpack with one hand and the tray with her other. Juliette tipped back her head to drain the last of her white fluid and dropped the plain white cardboard bowl on her own tray and reached down for her backpack as she gulped it (the white fluid) down.

They worked their way out into the crowded halls, the new uniforms making squeaking sounds as they moved, making other sounds as they rubbed against other student’s uniforms in the throng. All them together made a staticky kind of noise that filled the hallway, a roaring like a bunch of half-deflated beach balls being thrown round and rubbed against each other without the aid of lubrication.

“These things’re so stiff,” Harmony said. But even as close as she was to everyone else, none of the rest could hear her over the noise. But stiff they were, which also made sitting aggravating, the way the plastic material bunched into sharp corners at their joints, which, because of the repeated strain, would also be the places where ragged holes would open up first, the edges sharp and toothy, soon to be sawing into skin with every movement.

The TV came on, the screen flashing as the CRT warmed. And Mrs Turtle slowly appeared behind the curved glass, already animate, though mute behind a layer of artifacts and distortion.

Lily shifted in her seat. They were also sweaty after being worn long enough. One of the crinkles poked her in the side. The way it fitted over her chest was horrible.

"...amazing things. Look at how everything fits together. The sun and the moon bringing the tides in and out, in and out. All the planets fly around the sun. The Earth goes round the sun in just the right place for all the beautiful life that flourishes on it to live. This is known as the Goldilocks Zone. It's called that because if the Earth were just a little farther away, it would be too cold, and if it were just a little bit closer, it would be too hot, but instead it's just right."

Of course, TVs throughout the school were on, as they always were during class time, however, there were more than just classroom TVs, as with the principal, they served greater administrative functions, as well.

The one in the principal's office still sat on the same roll-around cart. An old phone sat on the desk beside, the receiver off the hook, lying pointed toward the screen, just as it'd been when Lily and the others'd been in there, though none of them'd taken note of that because of the dimness, the only light supplied by the CRT, the phone, one of those old Bakelite models from before they came with dialers, covered in a thick layer of dust, relying on an operator to route every call, which, somewhere, a switching system did. And onscreen, also behind a layer of artifacts and distortion from the numerous times the tape'd run and been rewound, the principal continued, magnetic wells on the surface of the tape that had once been merely changes in air pressure before being converted to electrical impulses, those electrical impulses converted to said magnetic wells, now converted to electrical impulses transmitted through wires to the speaker system in the front of the TV case, sounds emerging from the speakers as changes in air pressure detected by the receiver and converted again to electric emanations to be sent over the wires, which would be reconverted to changes in air pressure.

"We are doing everything in our power to protect our most precious resource, our children, and we seek to humbly and faithfully fulfill the charge and responsibility placed into us by you the members of the community whose children we are tasked with overseeing on their journey to become productive members of society."

The line'd been connected with the number associated with Lily's parents.

"Faithfully fulfilling that charge and shouldering the responsibility placed on us is our highest priority. It is, of course, necessary at times to make difficult choices when tasked with such charges and responsibilities. Parents such as yourselves, however, can rest assured that everything is being done in the best interests of your child and all the children in your regional Highschool. Preparing students for life is never easy and never will be so, but we will endeavor as always to continue to do our best in ensuring the safety and proper transition of all our students into society when they are ready. We thank you for your cooperation in this great endeavor, and should you have any need to contact our offices, please visit our website where you can leave your email address and a comment for our messaging system. Thank you very much for your time, and thank you for helping us to endeavor to do the very best that we can for our children."

Any linguistic expression, however, whether print or oral, was capable of carrying multiple streams of informational content concurrently, or so PussyRot3 pointed out. And in the case of this message, the following, secondary, information stream was being presented:

"In the course of routine investigations, it was discovered that your daughter lacks the female organ known as the uterus, thus making it impossible for her to conceive and bear children. As you may realize, should she become aware of this, it would certainly allow her to feel that she could engage in sexual activity without any consequences and therefore makes it likely that she will engage in such. To remedy this, all knowledge about this situation and anything related to it will not be made available to her. The school curriculum itself has already been fashioned in accordance with such guidelines, so there is no need to worry in that regard. However, in order to discourage any discovery of this fact on her own part, it has been found to be best that she be drugged once a month in her sleep so that a sufficient quantity of a semi-blood substitute can be inserted into her vaginal cavity through the use of the proper tool in order to simulate the menstrual cycle."

This message, or at least ones like it, as SuperCocaine88 pointed out, though the poster wasn't referring to the aforementioned statement in either version, specifically, as SuperCocaine88 had no access to this specific message, and was posting only in the general sense, but SuperCocaine88 went on to post that this was, in part, made

(hypothetically) possible because of the co-evolution of the language facilities of the human brain with compression techniques of the same which'd been refined by multitudinous trials in and against nature all the way back through many, many stages of the ancestors of *Homo sapiens*. One theory holds that, in any given message, there was, in fact, an infinitude of messages comprising every possible combination of messages, meaning that, in theory, one only needs a single message to reconstruct all messages.

Down the line, the switching system clicked, that same click transmuted through the phone speaker, momentarily punctuating the principal's artifactual and distorted mouthy silences animated on the phosphorescent surface of that cathode ray tube.

“It was a big mistake to think you were the only one cool enough to have something like a tank.” Drive jammed the gas. “I’VE GOTTA TANK TOO.” The men firing scattered, the default flight response, all of them clear when Drive slammed into the Humvees, parting them like a mythological cammo sea, the circa-wwii vehicle tilting back and to one side as it rolled over the fountain, but not, due to a lack of electricity and water pressure, getting the undercarriage washed for free before it tractored off the other side and tilted back as it started up the steps, the tracks chewing concrete as he aimed for the Civil War veteran statue halfway up, hit it head on, the column beneath it breaking in two, the bronze soldier landing on the turret, cracking, falling off, and the pieces rolling down the steps onto Mainstreet as Drive continued up to the top, where he jammed the machine to a stop and locked everything down, leaving the motor still rumbling as he scrambled up out of the seat to open the hatch and stick his head through, switching his eye-patch from one eye to the other. “Am I late?”

“Your touched,” Candi said.

Drive smiled. Candi could only imagine the havoc that’d’ve been caused had his twin still been alive. But she instantly felt bad for thinking that. And admonished herself for it. No one else noticed the momentary change in her disposition.

“How’d you even know about it?” Absolute said.

“The radio.”

“Don’t,” Candi said to Absolute, “say a word.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“Need a ride?” Drive said.

“I can’t believe that thing still runs,” she said.

“Why not?” Drive said. “It was just a museum piece sitting down

there on the reservation. But other than that it's practically good as new. Only needed a few things."

"I'm not going to ask where you got those."

"Barrel's filled full'a cement, though." He leaned forward and patted the length. "But it makes an excellent battering ram."

"Of course it does," Candi said.

Drive leaned forward. "You hurt?"

"Just a scratch."

He looked back down the hill. "Should I go run some of em over?"

"No you don't." Candi huffed. "This whole family's nothing but the same model repeated over and over." But after all, that wasn't *quite* true, there were epigenetics to consider, after all, so it was a little unfair.

Drive shrugged. "So what's the deal?"

"Practicing economic warfare against a publishing company."

Drive snorted.

"Nobody's," Candi said, "gonna be practicing any kind of warfare while I'm around, got that?"

Drive saluted. "Mam, yes mam."

"Oh stuff it." She still stood there ahold of her arm. "You know where you're sister's at?"

"Which one?"

"Functional."

"Yeah, they're all up at the house."

"If they're all up there, why'd you ask me which one?"

"I like to be accurate."

She sighed. "So will this thing keep running?"

"Good as the day it was built."

"And you think it'll make it up there?"

"Pretty sure." In fact, they'd often been referred to as rolling death traps by the men who'd originally operated them during the aforementioned conflict.

She sighed. "Well, I guess it's better than nothing." She walked toward it, and Drive climbed out to help her up.

"Watch your step. You can take the gunner's seat." He helped Absolute up. "Sorry, but you'll just have to stow yourself in a corner." And he shifted his eye-patch to his other eye and climbed down

through the hatch, leaving Absolute to follow. Absolute looked over his shoulder, once, at the vehicles out on the road, then climbed in. He reached up and closed the hatch, turned on the lights on his glasses to see how to secure it.

"Cut the light, will yuh," Drive said. "I'm dark adjusted here." He'd squinted his unpatched eye closed, and opened it again after the faint light filtering through his eyelids'd disappeared. "Alright, hang on." He started reversing down the steps.

Candi said, "How're you watching where you're going?"

"You might not wanna ask that." The whole machine shuttered and shifted, Candi thrown forward in the seat and clutching her arm as they hit the middle landing, then again as they hit bottom, and again as they canted to one side and rolled backwards over the fountain, past which Drive stopped one track, chewing asphalt as the turning of the other swung the thing round. "And here we goooo." He slammed the other track forward as soon as they faced down Mainstreet, the machine booking along at almost top throttle.

"Don't speed," Candi said.

"Yes m—"

"Hey," Absolute said. "Hold up. Hold up."

Drive jammed on the brakes. "What's the problem?"

"Back up."

"What for?"

"Just back up a minute."

"Alright. Alright." He shifted the gears. "You try to do something nice and everybody gets—"

"What's that smell?" Candi said.

"Yeah, might not wanna ask that."

"Oh, gaawd."

Drive laughed as they slowly reversed up Mainstreet.

"Hold it."

They jammed to a stop. Absolute reached up and unfastened the hatch. Drive sat back in the driver seat and sighed, arms listless at his sides. Candi clutched her arm. "No wonder you never passed your driver's test."

Anime, who'd looked up from sorting in time to see the tank rumbling by the second time, having heard it long before it'd gotten

on Mainstreet, though she'd been in the back when it'd first gone up, had opened the door and stepped out onto the walk as it'd reversed and Absolute'd popped the hatch and gone up. "Working late," Absolute said.

"Yeah."

"You need a ride?"

"Well..." She glanced over her shoulder at the shop. "I was waiting for Langdon." She turned to look up at Absolute. "But I never know if he's going to show up or not."

Candi called up, "Tell'er we'd be happy to drop her off."

"We can give you a lift anywhere you need," Absolute said.

Anime glanced over her shoulder. "Well..." She turned, again, toward him. "I wouldn't wanna bother yuns."

Candi called up, "Tell're it isn't a bother at all."

"We'd be happy to."

Anime glanced over her shoulder. "I think I'd like to continue organizing, awhile." She turned and smiled. "But thank yuns for the offer."

Candi called up, "Ask her if she's sure."

"You're sure?"

Anime nodded. "Besides, it's not as if I've got anywhere else I'm supposed to be, at least until later."

"Alright," Absolute said. "We..." He looked over his shoulder, down Mainstreet, toward the fountain. "Maybe we'll see you later then." He knocked on the top of the tank. "Take us back to the fountain."

Drive grumbled, worked the levers, a burst of black smoke, invisible in the dimness, but smellable, belched out of the exhaust stack. "Go forward. Go back." They started in reverse, Anime watching them back down the street. Men who'd congregated down there at the broken fountain, near the crumple-sided and pushed-out-of-the-way Humvees, scattered as they neared. "Woah. Woah. Woah."

Candi clutched her arm. "Goddamn it."

"Sorry."

"Doesn't this thing have any shocks at all?"

"Nope. Sorry."

She sighed and groaned.

Absolute looked round at the uniformed men. By then Lewis'd come down the hill, and Absolute waved to him, and Lewis made his way forward. "I have a suspicion," Absolute said. "You tell me if it's correct."

Lewis, standing there defeated and dejected, and knowing it, didn't have any interest in arguing.

"I suspicion that your next orders were to take a trip down the street. Am I wrong?"

Lewis nodded. "We were ordered to put a stop to any economic warfare in the book market. And selling ... used editions was supposed to count under that."

"Yeah."

Candi called up, "Tell them if so much as one thing in Anime's shop gets reorganized without her say-so, I'm going to reorganize their limbs in the same fashion."

"I don't think that'd be a very good idea," Absolute said to Lewis.

"It doesn't matter," Lewis said. He paused. "There's no point anyway." He paused. "Sorry for the trouble."

The problem was there was too much time gone by for Absolute to offer his condolences in regards to the divorce. He said instead, "If you're free of any other obligations, we'd appreciate it if you checked in on her later and made sure nothing else bad happened."

Lewis nodded. "Alright."

"As for the rest of you," Absolute said, and his words commanded more than some weight after the almost sum total of everything that'd happened, "I'd suggest if you've got husbands or wives or kids or anything else, for you to go home. The only authority anymore that can keep you from doing it's yourself. And if none of you've got any of that, I suggest you figure out what you want outa the rest of life, because there's not much point in taking a shortcut this close to the end." And with that, he slipped down into the bowels of the tank and closed the hatch.

"Can we go now?"

"Yes."

"Frackin' fantastic." The tank lurched forward.

"Gawddammit. Watch it."

"Sorry." Drive peered out through the viewport, the dim light that

streamed up over the edges of what remained of the world drawing a box across his face and his respective patched and unpatched eyes.

Candi said, "You sneaky little matchmaking bastard."

Absolute didn't reply.

Behind, a few'd already started home on foot. Others extracted a Humvee and drove off in it. Lewis watched them go. He removed his cap, put it back on his head only because of its utilitarian properties, and with his hands in his pockets, he started down Mainstreet, stepping carefully over where the WWII tank'd churned up the asphalt. Behind him, two of the former national guard members took each other's hand.

«Yuns know who we feel sorry for, all yuh preppers out there, sitting on piles of food and ammo and who knows what other shit yuns've bought over the last who knows how long, and what's it all gonna go to? If yuns want our advice, yuns'll throw a party with it. That way yuns can all sit round and commiserate that had the world ended like yuns'd expected, yuns'd've been all set for it. After all, if yuns're gonna go out, wouldn't yuns like to do it while sharing a re-hydrated meal with like-minded people? But that's just, like, our opinion.»

«In other news, the poster everyone out there might know as 30YearOldWizard, a listener kindly tells us that he's been arrested on charges of sexually trafficking himself and is currently being detained in the sheriff's department's new makeshift facilities.»

«We are not amused by this. This's why people can't get laid. Bet yuns a quarter that if the world lasts long enough it eventually comes out that more than one of the people who voted for this thing're getting blowjobs from a male intern in the bathroom. Not that we have any problem with blowjobs, or male interns, or any combination of such, excepting giving them ourselves, of course, but if any of the rest of yuns out there wanna give them, fine by us, and we don't even care about May-December relationships, more power to yuns, okay, we might be a little put out by the employer-employee power imbalance in such a scenario, but let's ignore that a minute and say that we find nothing wrong with this scenario other than that the men and women, oh wait, they're all men now, so we can say that without being sexist, so the men who passed these related bills, well, we could say that they're a buncha doodoo heads, but that might be construed as saying that we think they actually believe what they actually say when they pass this kind of stuff. But we're even more afraid that they actually do.»

«But we're going to talk about some of this later when we get our

bathroom theory expert on here. And we're working on that. Maybe by then we will have cooled a bit under the collar.»

«But probably not.»

«A listener lets us know that the sheriff's department's still got the Joint Burger surrounded. However, with the change in menu, they're no longer being tortured by the scent of charred meat wafting from the smoke stacks.»

«But we can't say that we particularly care.»

«Also, a little bird tells us that it's been suggested to extend the graduating age for highschool to sometime in the twenties, however, it's unclear if they're looking at the early, mid, or late years in that span. There's also been no mention of whether the law'll be retroactively applied.»

«But we gotta say, if they bump it into the mid thirties, they won't have to drag us kicking and screaming back, because they'll've first had to've cracked open our heads with trudgeons to get that to happen.»

«Poster OverCoatNose33's dropped a message to let us know that David Foster Wallace was in fact wrong and that all of life's a continuation of highschool, it's just that the roles change round, and that's what confuses people, and that if you really look round, you'll find that people still act exactly the same way as they ever did, the only difference is they have mortgage debt.»

«Well, thank yuh for that OverCoatNose33, and we sincerely hope that it turns out both of yuns're wrong. Moving on. In more interesting news, we knew one of yuns out there had it, and here it is. Up for auction. A Nineteen-sixty-seven Ford Mustang convertible. Pink with white interior. Perfect working order. Complete with rocker stripes, fog lights, louvered hood, with aluminum dash and door inserts, and white-wall tires. Dual chrome exhaust. Manual transmission. Last one that buyer knows of that sold at auction went for fifty-K, that's fifty-thousand holy who the hells for some of yuns out there. Owner generously started the bidding at forty-five. But if yuns're interested, don't hold your breath, folks, because two bidders are locked in on this. And we're already up to one-twenty-five, and, yes, that's one-twenty-five-who-the-hell-has-that-much-money-for-a-pink-car-thousand dollars. High bidder, so far, GodsFistsOfFury316. Aaaaaand we spoke too soon. GoldStarLesbian32's just come back into the game. And

the bidding now stands at one-twenty-seven-and-a-half, with thirty minutes to go. We'll make sure to keep yuns updated on this one, so if there's anyone out there, yuns'll wanna stay tuned for this one. This's EFKO, staying with yuns through, probably, oh joy, the rest of the end of the world.»

“Do you think we lost anything in the transition from VHS tape to digital?”

“Low resolution?”

“That’s not much of an answer, Mister Amerika.” She motioned with the Uzi.

“It’s a technology. Technology’s always being outmoded. I can’t really say that I miss it. I’d rather have my portable hard drive full of films, it’s as likely to be destroyed, and takes up less space.”

“But the dominant memetic mode,” Langdon said, and he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, “remains the tape, like the steam engine and the computer, and now the internet, have been the analogs for the human conceptualization of the human mind, the tape’s still the foundational metaphor for the notion of time.” He tilted his head back for another gulp. “Even though the metaphor undermines the argument for the plurality those who invoke it seemingly often intend to make.” He wiped his mouth. “For example, Gould’s thought experiment in *Wonderful Life*. How does a tape run differently than it ever ran before when you start it from the beginning? It’s almost as if we want to undermine the idea of multiplicity, that there could’ve been and still could be alternative, even though we, on the surface,” he sipped, “seem to be arguing for it.”

“Mister Amerika, would you like to respond?”

“I can’t say I know anything about that. I’m more instinctual than a theorist.”

“Yet, Mister Amerika, the fact remains you’ve made fourteen films, alone, about predatory forces going unseen in the masses in the same way sharks go unseen in the vastness of the ocean.”

“Like I said, I never sat down and said to myself I wanted to say that. It was just I needed this, I needed that. There was this constraint,

and that one. And that's just how it comes out. If people want to see something in that, that's fine. But I didn't do it. Or at least I didn't know I was doing it at the time."

"And what do you think, Doctor Jones? Do you think any of us know what we're doing at the time? Or after, for that matter."

"I would say that the moment we evolved the meta-cognitive ability to do such, we'd either have to start evolving a meta-meta-cognitive ability to...patch over the meta-cognitive lower than it, or would, all things being equal, possibly go extinct as a species."

"But this's just your personal opinion."

Langdon nodded as he tilted back his head and drained the plastic bottle. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before he screwed on the lid and set the bottle on the table. "Just my opinion."

"Or an already evolved meta-meta-cognitive defense mechanism?"

Langdon considered. He scratched his unshaven cheeks. "Possibly."

"So, Mister Amerika..." She shifted round in her seat to look at him. "What's your opinion? Do you think you're guilty of causing the end of the world?"

"Not particularly."

"Well, I," she said, and spun the Uzi round on the tabletop, "have to admit I don't even know. To be completely honest, the question was merely a formal one. The conclusion, of course, was already forgone." She stopped spinning it – the barrel pointed toward him – and rested her palm on the grip, placed her finger straight across the trigger guard to avoid accidentally firing it before it was time. "But we haven't come to the interesting part, have we, Mister Amerika?"

"I don't know."

"Of course you do. Let's talk about your latest film. Or what might be your last film."

"If you insist. Of course, no one's ever told me I have a problem talking about myself."

"It's what we're relying on, Mister Amerika. After all, a person should be entitled to their own defense. It's part of the ritual, isn't it, Doctor Jones?" Langdon didn't reply. "Now, Mister Amerika, about your latest film. A rather straitlaced biography of a particular day in the life of George Washington, isn't that right?"

“That would about sum it up.”

“And no pornography in sight.”

“Well, it depends on what you call pornography. But there’s no sex, nudity, or physical violence, if that’s what you’re referring to.”

“But don’t you think there’s one small, tiny problem with it, Mister Amerika?”

“I have problems with all of my films. I don’t believe I’ve ever made a perfect one. But David once told me about a hypothesis he’d read or heard that perfect things aren’t conceptualizable, that it would be like trying to grab onto a frictionless object, it would just continually slip out of our grasp, so a piece of work then, as it goes, needs to be imperfect in order to be perfect, otherwise it would pass right through our perception. We need something to catch on. A kind of handhold to pull ourselves up by. So maybe I have made a perfect film, I just don’t remember it.”

“Yes,” Langdon said. And she looked over at him, but he must’ve said it to himself. She returned her attention to Clive.

“But you, yourself, of course, play the titular character.”

“Yes, I sometimes take parts in my films.”

“And don’t you find, no offense intended, Mister Amerika, but don’t you find something wrong with a six-and-a-half foot, three-hundred-something pound black man playing the role of George Washington?”

“No offense taken. But no, I don’t see a problem with it.”

“Christian white supremacists,” Langdon said, “refashion Jesus as Caucasian. Neocons and neoliberals refashion him as a proto-capitalist. The Romans presented him youthful and clean-shaven.” (This latter image’d returned in a set of shaving cream advertisements that’d premiered just before the world’d begun to end, and regardless of what certain posters on certain corners of what was left of the internet had submitted, the two were unrelated.) “Everyone’s always made their Gods in their own image. Everyone’s always put words in the founding fathers’ mouths so that they themselves could obtain a justified authority via that, so the next logical step was always to move from the linguistic and to modify physical characteristics in picto-relational-environments as well. A kind of...uroborosian situation where we repeat—”

"Let us avoid," she said, "falling back into Pre-Socratic philosophy."

"Calling them Pre-Socratics is a prejudicial term. It makes it seem as if there's something so all-consuming important about Socrates."

She chuckled. It had an odd effect in combination with the presence of the Uzi. Some may have found it not unsexy. However, at the moment, Langdon was conflicted. "Oh?" she said. "And you think there isn't? But then again, you wouldn't've exactly cried at his funeral, would you've, Doctor Jones?"

Langdon didn't reply.

"And how about you, Mister Amerika?"

"Well, I feel like that if he hated writing, he probably would've really hated film. So..."

"Though," Langdon said, "it depends, possibly, on how we want to take McLuhan's concept of the electronic village, so the mode of television functions as the return of the pre-inscription world."

"Well, I must admit I don't know about that," Clive said. "But I have always wondered if the size of the screen matters. As these days, everything is on progressively smaller ones. Not that I'm against it. I just don't know if I'm for it."

"It's totalizing in a different way than the vision-encompassing cinema screen that predated it."

"Yes, the distinction, I want to think, between the two worlds was firm."

"That's just the kind of myth everyone wants to tell themselves when faced with newly extant technology when looking back to its predecessor. Suddenly all the flaws of the previous administration are forgotten."

"Perhaps."

"Going backwards now, Mister Amerika?" She smiled, spun the Uzi, the muzzle of the Uzi canting off at an angle, pointed at nothing important. "What about your portable hard drive?"

"I never claimed to be pure. Things, I suppose, can never be merely black or white."

"It's interesting..." Langdon said, "how you've managed to avoid a, fade to black in all your films."

“Oh?”

“Yes, in film theory fade to black is almost always implicitly taken to mean death.”

“Well, of course, I’m sure he knows that, Doctor Jones. Isn’t that right, Mister Amerika?”

“Well, as I say, I’m more instinctual than a theorist.”

“Ah, yes.” She shook her head. “But...” She looked over at Langdon. “How very topical, Doctor Jones.” She sat back, her arm outstretched, her hand lightly resting on the Uzi’s grip. “Let’s talk about your funeral a moment, shall we?”

“I’d prefer not to have one.”

“Well, the world is ending, after all, Doctor Jones, what’s the point in not dying now?”

“I’d prefer to actually see it end. Since I’ve come this far.”

She spun the Uzi. “And what do you think of that, Mister Amerika?”

“I must admit in one sense it’s meaningless, at least from what I’ve gathered from what a lot of smart people have always told me, but I’d kind of like to see David finish editing his last film before I go. I do think, after this long of a friendship, I do owe him some support.”

“Living for others, Mister Amerika? Is that very commercial of you?”

“Perhaps it’s just the fulfilling of the final parts of our social contract.”

“But there is, of course, no enforcement mechanism. You don’t *have* to.”

“No. But I might as well. As the professor here says, I’ve been this far.”

“I’m beginning to suspect that you two are closer than you both let on. Do you find that idea aggravating, Doctor Jones?”

Langdon didn’t reply.

“Now, now. You have to reply. It’s part of the ritual. I argue, you rebut. You argue, I rebut.”

“I think I’ve run out of things to argue about.”

“So soon, Doctor Jones?” She spun the Uzi. “That does put us in a pickle, doesn’t it? Would you say that you’ve succeeded in your argument?”

Langdon paused. "I think the particular argument stands. But I don't think any particular person can be brought to blame for it."

"But isn't that always the defense? Blood's on everyone's hands, but no one's guilty? How very Catholic of you, Doctor Jones. Or have you just secularized original sin?"

"Assigning blame's never achieved anything either."

"But sacrifices must be made, Doctor Jones. Don't you think?"

"If somebody's going to go out, it might as well be me."

"Now, now, Doctor Jones. No falling on your sword. That would hurt quite alot. Let us not resurrect chivalry, after all. I have never cared for the zombie apocalypse." She rose. "You know how much I hate *The Walking Dead*."

Langdon looked at her, but not just because she'd risen or that she was still holding the Uzi.

"What is it you say about zombie movies? Besides not being able to imagine the end of capitalism, that is. That it...allows people the opportunity to suspend moral judgment and kill with impunity. The way people have always dehumanized each other. Whether it be Jews or blacks or gays or Catholics or Southerners or Northerners or Floridians or so on and so on, isn't that right? Sometimes we just wanna blow a whole bunch'a mother-fucking heads off, don't we?"

"There's also the economic component."

"Of course there is, Doctor Jones."

"And what is that?" Clive said. "As in beyond selling the media itself and commercial space? Or just that?"

"Most states," Langdon said, "have laws against targets shaped like people or with pictures of humans. But the living dead aren't people, they're fantasy creatures. So you can have a target of a zombie Osama Bin Laden."

"Merchandising's always been the way to the real money," Clive said. "It is too bad that no one ever had the cojones," he nodded to her, "excuse me."

"No offense taken," she said. And she glanced at him. "Though, that *is* very sexist of you to assume I'd be offended, Mister Amerika."

He bowed his head to her. "But, anyway, it's a shame that no one ever tried having a porn star be their product's representative in an advertising campaign."

"It's the necessity for non-admittance," Langdon said.

"I have to say I don't know about that," Clive said. "But it does seem to me that something is constraining them terribly from making real money."

"Maybe the total and tonal shift has happened, we just haven't noticed yet. Or perhaps it's a change it's impossible for us to note having occurred in some definable way, at some definable point, therefore it merely becomes an aspect of the all-consuming all that always was."

Clive nodded. "Possibly."

"But might you be contradicting yourself, Doctor Jones?"

Langdon looked over at her.

"People," Clive said, "do have a tendency to get a bone and not let it go."

"Psychologically and biologically speaking," Langdon said, "people are evolved to double down on what they already believe when evidence strongly indicates they might be wrong, or has already proved they are."

"I suspect," she said, "advertisers and economists are the only things worse than professors." Langdon looked over at her. "They get on a theory of the world and they can't let it go for nothing."

"I believe there has been a meta study on it," Langdon said.

"Oh, only one?"

"That I recall."

She laughed. "Oh, Doctor Jones..." She shook her head. "It seems we've got ourselves into a real pickle here." She motioned with the Uzi, from him to Clive. "I mean, neither prosecutor can prove their case. And the defendant can't defend himself. Not to mention that the two of you seem to've become so comparatively friendly."

"I believe that counts as mentioning it," Langdon said.

She laughed.

"And I believe such circumstances," Clive said, "usually resolve in favor of the accused."

"Oh, yes," she said. "Normally it would. But you see, this is a different kind of game."

"I thought it was a ritual," Langdon said.

"Can't it be both? After all, so many things are two things at the same time. You should know that, Doctor Jones. You've spent half

your career on that subject. It's the same thing that allows people to believe both that microwaves heat from the inside out, but that no matter how long you cook them, Hot Pockets will remain frozen in the center. Do you recall Shrödinger's cat? being both alive and dead at the same time?"

"That was a thought experiment designed to show how ludicrous he thought some notions of quantum mechanics were, not a literal experiment where something could be both alive and dead at the same time, and definitely not what it's been appropriated to be."

"But isn't that all a matter of perspective, Doctor Jones?"

"I prefer my own, at the moment."

"Yes, you've always been very much into yourself. I think that's what made you a rather selfish lover at times."

Langdon just looked at her in silence, slightly cocking his head to one side.

"Do you remember," she said, "when you once told me that the reason you went into academia was because you wanted to make things clearer?" She motioned with the Uzi. "Pillow talk, Doctor Jones."

Clive cleared his throat. "Excuse me, but if this is some sort of couple's argument, I would prefer to bow out. In my experience, there are only a couple of ways a threesome can work successfully, and I don't think this has the recipe for success."

"Oh," she said, "we're almost through, anyway. That's the nice thing about rituals and games, don't you think, Doctor Jones? you always know where they begin and end. And there's *always* a beginning and an ending." She glanced from him to Clive, but kept the Uzi in place. "So do you rest your case, Doctor Jones?" She turned, again, toward Langdon.

"I guess."

"Good. Is there anything you'd like to add, Mister Amerika, before we move onto closing arguments?"

He still sat there with his ankle crossed over his knee, though by then his leg'd gone a bit stiff. "Not that I am aware of."

She turned, again, to Langdon. "Now it's time for closing arguments." She smiled. "How about you go first, Doctor Jones."

«And I just wanna say you're going to be completely wrong—the real conspiracy was that nothing else was possible so they really couldn't try anything else because there was nothing else, so they had to do their best to make it look like something else—it's all because nothing different was possible, so they had to create the same thing and just call it something different—all based on a message from themselves in the past that was sent to the future.»

«Well, okay. So...hello? Heeeeello? You there? Oh, well.»

«Lost him?»

«Eh, well.»

«Don't worry about it.»

«Well, after all, what's one more failure to communicate?»

«Well, there's still time to get in a few more.»

«Yeah, so one thing we're glad of is the end of the world actually, finally made it here. We were beginning to get worried about it. Between us, we've probably gone through, what? about fifty?»

«People predict the end of the world more casually than they predict tomorrow's weather. Maybe we should just have it as a standard feature on the seven-day forecast.»

«Alright, in case of yuns out there who might be round to still listin're thinkin' 'bout goin' to bed, yuns might wanna listen to this first.»

«We've got Professor Richardson on the phone, who's apparently still stuck doing paperwork and's taking a break to talk with us now about a little bit of American history.»

«So, Professor, paperwork, really? It's the end of the world, yuh know.»

«It never ends, I'm afraid.»

«Well, we'll try to keep yuh away from it as long as we can.»

«It would be appreciated.»

«So we're going to talk about the history of sleep in the United States. Excuse us, these United States.»

«Yes.»

«Hasn't it always been the same? You kinda wonder in and blackout and wake up about noon the next day with a head that feels like its been wrung out by that woman who can crush a watermelon between her thighs?»

«Hah hah. Well, if you asked some of my students, then probably yes.»

«So we take it sleep's not always been the same.»

«No, in fact, even late in the middle part of the nineteenth-century, the normal concept was of first sleep and second sleep.»

«Is that like second breakfast?»

«Perhaps.»

«So what's first sleep and second sleep?»

«Well, most people went to bed at about, say nine-o'clock. They'd sleep for a few hours, then wake about midnight or one AM and stay up for an hour or two.»

«Doing what?»

«Let's just say lots of things.»

«We don't believe in lowest denominator family programming, Professor. So you can say whatever you need to.»

«Hah hah. Let's just say that prayer was as common as sex.»

«Or sex as prayer.»

«Hah hah. Maybe.»

«So then second sleep?»

«Yes, they'd go back to sleep and sleep for approximately the same number of hours again and wake about five or six AM.»

«And this was the norm?»

«Yes. Actually, it was the norm for quite a lot of human history, it seems. And science supports it, I think. Humans, in general, we're speaking in terms of the whole population here, it seems, have a tendency to follow a natural sleep cycle something close to this. Of course, there is some statistical variation in that as—»

«How come?»

«There is some about it being related to the sex part.»

«Why doesn't that surprise us?»

«Hah bah. Yes, well, there is some speculation that it might've led to a slight increase in availability and therefore likelihood of sex and therefore, connectedly, of course, conception. At present, there's kind of a tenuous connection, though.»

«And why'd all this change?»

«It changed about the middle of the nineteenth century. Mainly as part of a social movement akin to and on par with the temperance movement, this idea that it was immoral to waste time and that everyone should be sleeping all the way through the night, which resulted, in essence, in the elimination of what was referred to as first sleep.»

«So a bunch of moral busybodies.»

«It would be a bit uncharitable, but you could say that. But more so it was a factor of the right idea and the right time and place. The industrial revolution was beginning. And it was re-situating humanity's relationship to time and work. Efficiency was becoming very important.»

«So it's all about economics.»

«In a lot of ways, yes. Not to try to, um, be reductionist, however. Like most things, it's a very complex set of social interactions that're taking place and going on at the same time.»

«Now, correct us if we're wrong, Professor.»

«I'll try.»

«But as we've always heard it, highschool as we know it was invented in roughly this same period, also because of industrialization, in essence training people bodily and mentally to work in factories and on assembly lines.»

«There's some truth to that. Part of the structure was a takeaway from German schools at the time that had the notion of integrating this sort of, yes, you could call it training, with a, well, at the time, the system in Germany, at least, was supposed to, at least according to the design, inculcate the students with a fealty to the state, as well. But that's—»

«So what bout homeschooling?»

«Well...I guess you could argue something of the kind, it would dep—»

«Jawohl, mein Herr!»

«That was later. Now, Professor, again, correct us if we're wrong, but back then there were alotta large companies where they basically formed whole towns. The workers lived in houses owned by the companies, shopped at stores owned by the companies, etc, correct?»

«Yes.»

«But Ford took this one step farther, didn't he? and as we understand it, went down to South America to found what came to be called Fordlandia, which would've basically been Ford's and Taylorist ideas on a kind of self-contained scale, in which you could imagine the workers being born into and living their whole lives in and dying in.»

«That wasn't exactly the idea.»

«We're extrapolating.»

«Well, yes, he did establish what was later called Fordlandia, but I doubt the concept of it was that totalist from the start. Certainly you could say there were aspects of it, but I'm uncomfortable ascribing that much intention directly to Ford.»

«Maybe we could say unconscious intention.»

«That's not my field, I'm afraid.»

«Well, we apologize for that, Professor, we actually wanted to have you and Professor Jones on at the same time, but he's up and disappeared on us.»

«Well, Langdon does that sometimes.»

«Yeah, tell us about it. Or better, well, we do feel as if we're trying to take his place, and that's probably not a smart thing to do, and of course we wouldn't want you to think we're trying to make you take his place, but we have a speculative question and we're wondering if you wanna take a stab at answering it.»

«I'll give it a try.»

«Anything to stay away from the paperwork?»

«Hah hah.»

«Alright, this's our speculation, understand, and we don't claim to be experts, but it seems as if, if we were to take something like, say, Fordlandia, as we're gonna call it, as the natural conclusion of alotta ideas that'd floated round at the middle of the eighteen-hundreds to the early parts of the twentieth-century, that you could posit the natural end for something like a highschool, or maybe just school in general, would be to have everyone born in them go through

their lives in them, and finally die in them, in effect, staying in them forever.»

«From gynecology to mortuary, you might say.»

«Hah hah. Well, I don't think that'd be very practical. Society would have a very short life, unless it reoriented itself somehow entirely around this, and I don't know how that could work.»

«Well, it was just goofy speculation, anyway.»

«This's what happens when you have too much caffeine.»

«Hah hah.»

«Well, thank you very much, Professor, we're sorry to say we might have to let you get back to your paperwork.»

«Oh, well.»

«You could always give it up, you know.»

«I guess.»

«We feel as if we're leaving you to a slow and painful death.»

«Hah hah. Maybe I'll toss it out the window. You can never tell.»

«Well, goodbye, Professor. And thank you very much for indulging us. It's been a pleasure.»

«Thank you.»

«Alright, this's radio EFKO, with yuns, hopefully, through the rest of the end of the world. We're about to take a, hopefully, short trip to the bathroom, and while that's going on we've got this selection from the soundtrack of Far From the Madding Crowd A Triple-X Parody, which, for those of yuns who don't know, marks the first porn ever to have its own fully orchestral one-man-one-woman soundtrack originally composed and performed for it. So if there's still anyone out there, stay tuned, yuns won't wanna miss it.»

The sight of something out there in the distance tugged at her unconscious, pulling her eyes out towards where the road curved round the substation. And her eyesight was good enough, and her reasoning good enough, that Hannah, at a conscious level, finally realized who was standing out there. She looked away, down the length of the barrel, up at the old farmer sitting on the tractor. The whales, having sensed *her*, too, began to sing in unison, splashing the shallow water with their tails and fins. The old farmer shifted in the tractor seat and looked out over the semi-submerged field.

“Alright,” Hannah said. She lowered the rifle. “Have it your way.” She turned and motioned for Alex to go back between the buildings and toward the Jeep. “Don’t say I didn’t warn yuns though.” She slung the rifle over her shoulder, glanced at the son-in-law as he still trained his on her. She motioned to Alex. “Come on, let’s get outa here.” He followed her between the buildings. Mud caked her boots and his shoes. And she knocked them (her boots) against the tires after she’d laid the rifle in the back seat, mud splatting and piling off onto the old asphalt.

“What’s...”

She opened the driver side door and looked at him overtop it. “You coming or not?”

And still confused, he went around the other side and climbed into the passenger seat. She started the engine and reversed, eased forward, finally managed to get turned in the limited space afforded between old trucks that hadn’t moved in decades, and started back up the steep drive onto the road, and hooked back to continue the way they’d been going. But she stopped up there on the road, looking back toward the substation, a figure still visible out there on the road, the young whales’ cries plaintive and rising.

Alex bent to try and see out the window, squinted. "Who's that?" "Thursday." She turned and looked at him. "I suggest you look away."

He looked at her questioningly, about to ask *why?*, when the explosion went off, but because he'd been looking at her face, he wasn't completely blinded, only momentarily so, from the release of all that stored energy that'd still remained in various transformers, that whole section of ridges and hills and river momentarily lit by a harsh electric blue-white, shadows seemingly burnt into the landscape and what'd been built upon it.

Hannah took her foot off the break, let the Jeep roll forward, weaving along the curved road that led past the old slaughterhouse and tobacco barns below. Alex shifted in his seat to try and look back, but remnants of the flash still clouded his vision. And quickly, following the river, they turned a curve that blocked off all view of everything going on behind.

"I need a shower," Hannah said.

He looked over at her, his eyes still clearing, a kind of halo rendered over and round her and the immediate area in his perception. "Yeah, I could probably stand one."

"You do stink," she said.

"Thanks."

"But if we're going to get messy again anyway, we might as well do it before, while the water tank's heating."

Biologically speaking, pheromones played a critical role in the mating process, or so several posters had and were continuing to point out. "Seems logical."

And as SuperCocaine88 remarked on these remarks: "[I]t's been long speculated that the uses of certain kinds of deodorants, particularly ones designed to be used by women in intimate areas, have been a major contributor to sexual frustration among people in the developed world, leading to a dip in the amount of both sexual congress itself and satisfaction resulting from such."

"Of course, it takes a while for my old water tank to heat up."

"Really?"

"I hope you can keep yourself entertained."

"I've never had a problem with it before."

Hannah turned onto the four-lane as they came up and out by the gas station.

“So...” he said. “What about the trash? All that overly generic trash. We never figured out where it came from.”

Up the hill, she turned and stopped at the break in the median that allowed cars to u-turn into the opposite lanes. She glanced at him. “Do you really care?”

He paused. “Only as it connects to certain other things.”

She turned into the opposite lanes, heading back down the hill. “You’re up to cook first.”

“I can probably handle that.”

She glanced at him. “You’d better be able to.” And she faintly smiled.

«You're full'a shit. If clothes dictated whether or not a woman got raped, then no woman'd ever get raped—because everyone'd wear these magical rape-proof clothes. Second, can we please stop insulting men and blaming it on their inability to control themselves—because that's what shitheads like you're doing. It's the same reason women had to walk around in black tents in what used to be the Middle East. Newsflash, buckaroo, most men control themselves better than you seem to be able to control your mouth, then again, maybe you're one of the ones that can't control the rest of you, either. You know, how come when someone breaks into a rich person's house and steals shit, they never say, well, he couldn't help himself, you should've kept it locked up better. The entire notion of the justice system's based on this supposed free will we're all supposed to have, assholes. Course, we used to execute the mentally impaired, so maybe we should stop saying the justice system's about justice, or maybe we've gotten the definition of justice wrong this whole time, we don't know. And in case any yuns out there wonder why he's not responding, we cut him off five minutes ago. So have fun out there with yourself, asshole. Alright, next caller. Who've we got? Leo MacIntyre. What do yuh wanna say before the world ends, Leo?»

«I just wanna say that you both should ask forgiveness and repent of your sins before Jesus comes back, because after that it's going to be too late.»

«Well, he'd better hurry, then. Besides, it's not as if you didn't send at least a few of them to hell personally.»

«I never hurt anyone.»

«Don't give us that shit, Leo MacIntyre, we know you donated to that shit that got a law passed in Uganda giving gays the death penalty, don't pretend you wouldn't pass the same law here if you had a chance.»

«Well, the punishment may be a little harsher than I'd prefer, but the fact of the matter remains—»

«The fact of the fucking matter remains that you go to a church that quotes the Bible as killing gays, and you talk about what the Bible says about gays, and you pass the plate to help get laws passed that—»

«That's not—»

«And people were being killed because of it, and you don't get to turn round and pretend that isn't what you wanted when you've been saying that's the right thing and what you wanted from the start.»

«So goodbye. Gawd, we're beginning to think only the stupid people haven't disintegrated yet. Hello. You're on the air.»

«I'm just wondering why everyone thinks rape's so bad. You know, it wasn't even until recently that anyone even started thinking there was any trauma associated with it and—»

«And goodbye. Seriously, is there anyone out there with a brain? Let's see if we can get Josh on the line, at least we'd rather listen to someone ramble on about old science fiction than this shit. Next caller. Hello. Hello... Tarif? Um, we thought we were calling Josh's phone.»

«This's his phone.»

«Oh, okay, so we assume he's still there with you.»

«That would be correct.»

«We were just wondering if there was anything else he wanted to say on the air while we all still exist.»

«He's rather busy at the moment.»

«Oh. Well, we apologize for interrupting.»

«No apologies necessary.»

«So how're you doing?»

«Pretty good at the moment. I have the feeling it's going to get better. But I'll have to kind of cut you short, if you two don't mind.»

«Yikes, yes, we're sorry. Have a good evening. And it sounds like they're having a very good evening. So we've got another call, cross our fingers, and let's try this one more time. This's radio EFKO, you're on the air, what do you have to say before the end of the world?»

«I just wanted to say that I think our problem is that the last two generations, starting with the gen-xers, or whatever they call them, were the first generation not to get culled out, we had the world wars and Korea and Vietnam, and when they ended the draft that's when

everything went to shit, because you just can't have a society where some of the younger male generation isn't pruned out.»

«Okay. Well, all we can say is at least there's one woman out there who doesn't seem to go in for that mothers're-going-to-end-war crap. How'd you feel about the Equal Rights Amendment when it came up?»

«It was a terrible idea. Women shouldn't be drafted. That's men's responsibility.»

«Ah, so they're the disposable ones, got yuh.»

«No, it's just biology. Society can rebuild itself with a few men, because only a few men can impregnate many women. And if there's only a few men, they can afford to be more choosy about the women they sleep with. And the men that survive are likely to be better, anyway.»

«Okay. Ewwwww. Quite frankly...sorry, but we don't think we caught your name.»

«Pam.»

«Well, Pam, we're both women here too, as you can probably tell, and we bleed out of our bodies once a month—»

«Not that we really want to, but what're we gonna do about it, eh?»

«And you've managed to get too biological even for us. Thank you very much.»

«And is there anything else yuh feel yuh need to say?»

«I'll also say it doesn't matter what a woman's breast size is, small ones produce milk just as good as large ones, and that's what they're there for.»

«Well, thank yuh for going from bad to horrifying, Pam. And goodbye. And maybe it's time for us to officially reconsider our mission in what's left of life. What do yuns out there think? Hmm? Of course, maybe yuns don't exist anymore so yuns don't worry about it. Well, anyway, in slightly more confusing news, though it's really gonna be good news for somebody out there, that pink convertible we told yuns about, yeah, we're at two-hundred-and-one-K right now, and yes, that's almost a quarter of a million dollars, with GoldStarLesbian32 on top now. Which leaves us kind of wondering a whole lotta things.»

«Also, there might be something up with the time deal. This seems like a long thirty minutes, doesn't it?»

«Eh.»

«Well, we're not experts, or whatever, and, well, she's...gone apparently. So we'll just have to leave that where it's at.»

«But let's give this phone thing a try once more. Good last evening of the world, you're on the air, what do yuh wanna say before it all ends?»

«I'd like to talk about lesbian bears.»

«Okay then, you have our attention.»

“Nothing else to say, Doctor Jones?”

Langdon didn’t reply, which, in and of itself, was obviously a reply.

“Well, then we come to the verdict.” She still stood there with the Uzi pointed at him. “I pronounce you scatterbrained, manic, borderline obsessive compulsive, with borderline borderline-personality disorder, thoughtless, terrible at standardized tests, borderline conceited at times, a slovenly dresser, even among the standards of those who wear cargo shorts and sandals on a semi-regular basis, a terrible brother, a worse taxi service, an appalling cook, anal retentive, a male slut, and just an all round idiot most of the time. So in conclusion, Doctor Jones,” she pulled the trigger, “happy birthday,” and the Uzi emitted a rhythmic, motorized, grinding sound, the end of the barrel lighting up.

«Of course it's rewriting history. That's what history is. You're not a real historian till other historians are telling you you're wrong.»

«Well, there we go, UnknownUser009. But, Professor, why don't you tell us how you really feel? And don't feel you need to hold back.»

«Sorry. I kinda get carried away once in a while.»

«No problem. If you're gonna get carried away, this's the place to do it. We do it all the time. In fact, we're on one long carried-away session and we haven't stopped yet. So is there, like, a name for this phenomena where people think the past's devoid of gays and sex and anything they don't like?»

«Not an official one that I know of. I personally like to use the phrase *Wholly Discovered Country*. A place where there're no surprises.»

«Who doesn't like surprises? Anyway, if yuns're just happening to tune in, where've yuns been?»

«You're listening to EFKO, and we're talking with Professor Jane Martini about how, yes, there were gay people back then, and everything else a bunch of people don't like about now was going on back then too. So, Professor—»

«You can call me Jane.»

«Alright, Jane, who's the most famous unknown gay person that you can think of?»

«Um, well that'd depend. But if I were to pick someone, I'd pick King James, though he was actually bisexual.»

«As in King James Bible, that King James?»

«Quite.»

«Golly-gee-willikers, that must be fun to bring out in the right company. Any good stories?»

«Well, there's one story about his relationship with the Duke of Lennox, which was frowned upon because he was Catholic and he

was eventually sent back out of the country for it. And when he later died, as per his will, he had his mummified heart sent to King James.»

«You know, some people really take this giving-you-my-heart business a little too seriously.»

«Quite.»

«So we've also got Melville, Herman Melville, and he even tries to start a relationship with Hawthorne, right?»

«Yes.»

«This's like American literary history slash fiction.»

«Quite.»

«But nothing came of that.»

«No. Hawthorne was quite straight, from everything we know.»

«Too bad. But we guess that's what fan sites are for, right?»

«Perhaps.»

«Have you ever come across a literature professor that did literary-author-character slash fiction on the down low?»

«I will have to plead the fifth on that one.»

«Oh, no. We wanna hear. All that's left of the world that's out there listening wants to hear. Is any of it still on what's left of the internet?»

«Maybe.»

«There's at least one person out there tracking you down right now, you know, to get their William-Henry-James freak on. But we'll be nice for now.»

«Melville also, if I may interject—»

«Interject away.»

«Melville also wrote the story that, in fact, gave us the term *in the closet*, as it refers to homosexuality.»

«And when was this?»

«Um, I can't remember the date exactly. Written or first published?»

«It had to be in the mid eighteen hundreds.»

«Quite.»

«Does it ever seem to you like the mid-to-late eighteen hundreds is basically just now but with more cars and faster telegraphs?»

«I must admit I've never thought about it that way. I don't know.»

«Well, we guess, since the world's ending, we'll never have that gay president.»

«I'd say we'd already had one.»

«Really? Is this a joke? When? Who?»

«Probably, Buchanan. He follows the standard pattern most gay men did at the time. Had a lifelong roommate, things like that. Of course, we'll never know for sure since as soon as he died and his nieces got ahold of his personal correspondence they burnt everything and wiped every record they could related to his relationship with William King. So it's probably going to remain one of those probably was but never provable situations. Though, that fact in itself is very tantalizing.»

«Okay, let's rephrase that, so we'll never have an out gay president.»

«It looks unlikely.»

«Oh well, we guess we can't win em all. So where can we find this William-on-Henry-James stuff of yours, Jaaaaane? We're dying to know.»

«I never said I had done that.»

«So yuh admit it exists. We knew it. We knew it. So, Jane, maybe yuh could answer another question for us, why's everything better with incest?»

«I...don't know the answer to that one, I'm afraid.»

«How'd yuh get to be a professor without knowing these kinda things?»

«Maybe it's a laxness in the system.»

«Well, they're always complaining about teachers being under-qualified, aren't they? Not that we're saying that about you. But you should come out of your Melvillian closet, Jane. It's the end of the world. We mean, how much longer've you got to be embarrassed?»

BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM

«Jane? Hello. Are you there?»

«Ooooooooooh shit.»

ATTENTION. THIS IS AN
ANNOUNCEMENT. ATTENTION. ALL STUDENTS ARE
TO PROCEED TO THE AUDITORIUM. ATTENTION. ALL
STUDENTS ARE TO PROCEED TO THE AUDITORIUM.

Juliette said, "What do you think that's about?"

"I guess we'll find out," Lily said. Their clothes squeaked as they walked, same as everyone else's. And since students hadn't been in the auditorium since the clothes'd been newly issued, this was their first time wearing them in those seats, which was a whole unknown deal, and had everyone constantly adjusting, the squeaky, crackly noises of such filling the auditorium.

A tv sat on a roll-around cart onstage, already turned on and displaying a constant-blue background. But it was too far away for anyone but those at the very front to discern anything, even if there'd been anything onscreen yet.

ATTENTION. The PA system crackled. ATTENTION. Everyone faced front, settled down as quietly as they could, though still shifting now and again as the folded transparent plastic poked them, the melded individualized sounds of each shifting and uncontrolled utterance carrying through the auditorium. Onstage, the curtains parted, revealing a young woman in what amounted to a vertical stockade.

"Isn't that one of the truants?" Harmony whispered.

"Shhh."

It was.

The tv flickered, Mrs Turtle appearing on the screen, the generally green color of her body recognizable even to those in the far back. "... see children, this is the shape of the world." The human appendage inserted into her held her up beside a globe, which for those in the far

back amounted to little more than a vision of a blue-green marble. And she smashed her plucky face into it to keep it spinning. *"And it just keeps spinning round and round, really fast like that. But what's that?"*

"Bullshit," the young woman in the stockade called. "All you gotta do is go out—"

One of the deputies, standing on either side of the stage, activated the shock collar.

"How come everything does not go flying right off the surface? Well, children, that is because of gravity. And it is gravity that keeps you and me and everything else from flying off into outer space. And what is in outer space? Well, the sun is out there. That is the biggest thing in the daytime sky."

"There isn't a sun anymore! A—"

One of the deputies stepped across the stage, taking advantage of the gap between shocks to insert a rubberized bar into her mouth and buckle it at the base of her skull.

"But you should never look at it directly. If you do, you will hurt yourself. There is also the moon. However, it only comes out at night. And there are stars, too. They are all up there. What is that? If they are all flying around out there, why don't they run into each other? Well, children, that is because of gravity."

And as Mrs Turtle continued, the stockade lowered, shifting from the vertical to the horizontal position. Though, it's actual name wasn't a STOCKADE; it, in fact, had no official name, only an ID number from the company that manufactured them, however, that was the term it was referred to by on the displays inside the deputies' helmets, for convenience sake. Unlike the term RAPE RACK, which was an actual term in the scientific papers of Harry Harlow, along with such a contraption as the WELL OF DESPAIR. In the case of the RAPE RACK, female monkeys, having been raised in isolation in the WELL OF DESPAIR, and therefore being incapable of properly mating, were tied to this structure in the proper position to allow a male monkey to mount and then mate with them in order to produce offspring to see how these female monkeys raised in the WELL OF DESPAIR would interact with their offspring. The function of the horizontal position of the stockade, however, was not for anything analogous

to this purpose, but instead, repositioned the young woman so that the deputy could begin to employ a large wooden paddle in a spanking motion; however, as with the RAPE RACK, at least partial nudity was required, otherwise the transparent clothing would've made an unpleasant sound with each strike. There was a machine, or module, for this, and this function would be automated as soon as a ballot initiative had been passed to raise the sales tax by $\frac{3}{4}$ s of a penny.

"Gravity is what keeps the whole world together. Gravity is why the world is round. So if you want to think about the world, you can think about a ball, a nice big round ball."

And as ridiculous as this might seem, it was, in fact, based upon theory (however, in this case, as LittleRed13 pointed out, this might perhaps be a third use of the word 'theory' independent of either the typical scientific usage of the term, and additionally, the layman's use of the term—also 'laymen' was one of the words added to that formerly rapidly growing list of words that might be problematic from a gender perspective, the list being no longer as rapidly growing because most of the posters've become inebriated enough to be unable to exercise the finitude of dexterous movements necessary to interact with electronic equipment) but all of this had a sound linguistic basis, whether it be rooted in the obvious Biblical phraseology, or in the no-longer extant former words of former individuals formerly having been in the running for the former office of governor in the former state of Texas, so it wasn't just something that was just practiced for the sake of being practiced. The Southern states had long maintained the fundamental right of schools to administer such corporal punishment well into the twenty-first century, and now past the start of the end of the world; and the parents, having emerged from such an environment, implicitly agreed, in deference to the replicatory nature of thochts, and genetics, that it was only fundamentally right, and after all, it'd happened to them, and they'd turned out fine, the world hadn't ended yet, at least, not completely. So that it'd become more refined in terms of public consumption was simply natural, after all, at hangings and floggings of yore, one could purchase any number of pamphlets or snack goods or commemorative trinkets relating to the soon to be dismembered. Though, under the circumstances, it seems as it'd've been more fitting, given

the emphasis of Mrs Turtle on balls in laying out the structure of the planets, that a *ball gag*'d've been more appropriate than a bar one, but generalized systems can't be personalized slash customized easily, of course, by their very nature. It also remained to be seen if the county law enforcement union would follow in the footsteps of the labor forces of the nineteenth century and protest this machine appropriation of their labor when the 3/4s a penny ballot initiative were passed.

The PA system crackled, the sound intermixing with the smack of wood against flesh, among other things.

In addition, it's not as if there weren't other precedents for it: the κκκ'd already done it in North Carolina, when it'd been around more fully. It was just that they'd applied a less technocratic consciousness to the restraintment facilities, preferring to use traditional ropes and trees. However, they made up for this lack by shunting their mental energies into the construction of the whipping and flogging instruments themselves, which surpassed anything the deputy currently brought to bear, which was a rather commodity, off-the-shelf piece of equipment, actually a giant wooden pizza peel.

«—fulla shit, and this's just another way that Obama outsmarted the republicans.»

Or as MargoMango points out: "All you have to do is look back to Foucault's arguments about the necessity of the modern state to shunt the enforcement of its power structures into the background."

«They wanna think they're so strong with their bring-back-public-hangings shit.»

MargoMango: But there's a reason they went away. It can be shown that, once a society reaches a certain size and complexity, these sorts of activities have a retrograde effect, functioning to produce the opposite of order and stability, as those in power want to deploy them for.

BrightTrollop77: So then you could say republicans are like the old model.

MargoMango: Maybe. Some of them.

«We're not living in that kind of world anymore, folks. Of course Obama wanted to close down Guantanamo. It's a blight, it focuses everyone's attention right on all the bad things we were doing. But yuns notice he never wanted to close down any of those other CIA black sites. So we should probably thank the republicans, trying to keep this shit out in the open's the only reason anyone's fighting it.»

SuperCocaine88: However, it makes me wonder if we're fighting it because it's bad, or we just want to remove the visible portion and have the rest of it sink into the background so we can get on with our lives in the societies that are only made possible by those kinds of activities.

MargoMango: That's bullshit. Most people don't think other people should be hung up on meat hooks.

SuperCocaine88: Most people don't say so. But most people want their homes warm in the winter and cool in the summer and gas in their car and to turn on Netflix or Hulu at the end of the day and Prymal drones to show up on time and every other little thing that makes up life as they know it.

MargoMango: But if people know the cost, then we can figure out how to do the same thing in a more ethical way.

SuperCocaine88: But what if there isn't a more ethical way?

Akira2020_007: @SuperCocaine88 you sound like a hysteric

MargoMango: Of course there has to be.

SuperCocaine88: But what if there isn't?

BrightTrollop77: :^(

"—and all these balls go round the sun in circles. This is all because

of gravity. They go around and around in these great big circles. Then while the Earth is going around the sun, it's also spinning, as if it were on the finger of a basketball player. It spins round and round."

Wood smacked against flesh.

«We need to bring back corporal punishment in schools. Kids never did the kinds of things they do now back when we were in school. And it's all from taking the Bible and the belt out of schools. Spare the rod and spoil the child.»

«So let's see here, alright, stealing, violence, swearing, that sort of thing, right?»

«Exactly.»

«And if they tell their Baptist parents they're going to start going to a Methodist church?»

«If that's what the parents feel's appropriate for their children. There's—»

«Yeah, that's great. While we're at it, let's bring back boxing student's ears. Deafen em for life, that'll teach em. Hey, we gotta question for yuh? What's your address?»

«Why?»

«We got a friend we're going to send over to kick your ass. Since you think it's appropriate to beat minors for having ideas yuh don't like, we figured we might as well apply it to adults, too.»

«The whole millennial generation's nothing but—»

«Hey, yuh know what's the best thing about not having advertisers?»

«What?»

«Telling people like you to fuck off.»

Wood smacked against flesh.

MargoMango: If people are informed they will make informed decisions about what they consume.

SuperCocaine88: We've all seen the movies. We all know about sex trafficking and convicts being used as slave labor for corporations and

the sexual abuse of immigrants in custody and cops shooting people and children mining things for smartphones in Africa and blood diamonds and factory workers committing suicide in China.

SuperCocaine88: And when did it ever change the habits of a significant portion of the population?

MargoMango: You're forgetting about the creation of the FDA.

SuperCocaine88: You mean a whole book about exploited minorities and workers, where public outcry all comes from the fact there are ground-up fingers in their sausages?

MargoMango: It did spark change.

SuperCocaine88: But only because people were upset about fingers in **their** sausages. They couldn't have cared less about **whose** fingers were in there.

SuperCocaine88: Who cared about all the fingers that **didn't** end up in the sausages in the rest of the book?

MargoMango: Maybe it wasn't always for the right reasons, but it did still happen.

BrightTrollop77: Can I just say that you two have given me alot to think about. Thanks so much. :^)

BrightTrollop77 HAS LOGGED OFF

Wood smacked against flesh.

«In other news—yes, we're taking a break from the phones—but in other news, what's left of the ambulatory services've—»

«Apparently, someone had one in their garage—or found one in the junkyard or somethin'—but we don't know if this was the same person who had the convertible. Just so yuns know.»

«But they've been called out to the Butane rest home after a wave of residents reporting symptoms of cardiac arrest. Our condolences are with the families.»

Finally, it stopped.

ATTENTION. THIS IS AN ANNOUNCEMENT. ATTENTION. ALL STUDENTS MAY DISASSEMBLE TO THEIR ASSIGNED AREAS. ATTENTION. ALL STUDENTS MAY DISASSEMBLE TO THEIR ASSIGNED AREAS. END OF ANNOUNCEMENT.

Their clothes squeaked and crinkled as they rose, extra noisy where sweaty skin rubbed against the insides, droplets beading off and running down the insides of pants legs and dripping onto their shoes and the floor, making their shoes squeak too, as they walked down the hall. The lunch bell rang.

“Yes!” Juliette said. “Let’s hurry up.”

ATTENTION. THIS IS AN ANNOUNCEMENT. ATTENTION. A MESSAGE TO ALL STUDENTS. DUE TO RECENT REVELATIONS OF THE USE AND TRANSMISSION OF CERTAIN ILLEGAL AND CONTRABAND ITEMS, EACH STUDENT WILL PRESENT THEMSELVES FOR A COMPREHENSIVE AND THOROUGH PHYSICAL SEARCH. WHEN YOUR NAME IS CALLED, PLEASE PROCEED TO THE FRONT OFFICE.

Static.

ATTENTION. ALEXANDER MASTERSON ADAMS. PLEASE PROCEED TO THE FRONT OFFICE FOR INSPECTION.

The PA system crackedled.

«No, you're just one of those stupid yahoos like used to exist in some of the stupider parts of what used to exist of this world, where they thought they could tell who was gay by shoving things up their asses and seeing how loose it was. And it gives us great pleasure to cut you off.»

«Yuns see, this's what happens when yuh water down biology in schools to take out any mention of life.»

«And while we're at it, no, even if a woman had sex with five

hundred men with dicks the sizes of thoroughbred horses, it wouldn't make her vagina loose, that's not how it works either, ever notice that no one thinks that about having sex five-hundred times with one donkey that's hung? And if you find the horse and donkey references obscene, you should go pick up your Bible, because that's where the reference comes from.»

«Yeah, we're so pissed off we're getting all literary. And speaking of pissed off, we're gonna go do that before we piss our pants. So to all those out there who probably can't hear us, yuns're still probably the lucky ones, and yuns can enjoy not listening to this unlabeled tape we dug up somewhere, which we hope's interesting, if not, since yuns're not listening, anyway, we don't reckon yuns'll have a problem with it. And if yuns are listening to us, then yuns probably deserve whatever yuns get.»

» There comes a time in every young man's life when he wonders if he has done the right thing. This, of course, is natural. He asks himself what decisions have led to this point. This is also natural. He asks himself if everything that has happened is entirely his fault. This, too, is natural. What you want to do when you ask yourself these questions is to step back and clear your mind. The first step is to close your eyes. Let your mind relax. Imagine yourself as a moth in a glass-fronted display case hung on the wall of an empty elevator as it slowly descends. Imagine yourself going back in time. Imagine you are no longer a moth, but liquid, safe within your chrysalis. And as the elevator descends, imagine that you have, again, become a caterpillar. And as the elevator continues to descend, imagine yourself as a tiny egg that will one day hatch into a caterpillar. And as the elevator continues to descend, imagine yourself as that egg as it slips back up into the body of the moth that laid it. Imagine this will continue forever as the elevator descends into eternity. Don't you feel better?«

They stopped to allow a deputy and GSD out of the boy's restroom. A boy from two grades lower following them (the deputy and dog) out, zipping his fly, the faux-brass plastic a toothy line bisecting his crotch and the horizontal black band vertically acenter the transparent coveralls.

ATTENTION. THIS IS AN ANNOUNCEMENT.
ATTENTION. ALWAYS REMEMBER TO WASH YOUR
HANDS. ATTENTION. ALWAYS REMEMBER TO WASH
YOUR HANDS. END OF ANNOUNCEMENT.

He turned sheepishly and went inside. Of course, it always caught someone like that. That message always played most often just after classes got out, so there wasn't anything odd about it catching someone just coming out of the restroom. Some'd even been known to go back in and wash their hands a second time, just in case.

"Is there supposed to be a special today?" Juliette said.

"Blue stuff."

"I like blue stuff," Harmony said.

Crystal stifled a snicker when her mind'd flashed back to a couple pieces of contraband she'd seen the other day, not that she'd wanted that particular item, she'd always gotten along quite fine manually, thank you very much, so she didn't see why guys needed anything else either, but it was always good to keep up on what new things were coming in. She was so tightly wound into the scene as it was that it wouldn't've surprised anyone if she were to ascend to the upper echelons when Nick and Ernest graduated. Of course, if the commissioners' proposed extensions went through before then, that'd put a wrinkle in things. But she'd held onto her position this long, and she was confident enough in her abilities, or at least most of them. And even a rusty skill could be useful, especially if using it on someone who didn't know the difference.

"What's up with you?" Harmony said.

Crystal shook her head. "Nothing." She glanced up, sniffed. "Let's go the other way."

Harmony pinched her nose. Yeah, somebody'd gotten pepper sprayed.

«Phrew. Well, we're back. And yuns would not believe how good that feels. We'll leave yuns to figure out exactly what we're talking about. Sorry the tape ran out.»

«But to our credit that's the only five minutes of dead air we've had so far.»

«Can't win em all. We'll have to see what's on the other side of this one later. We did think about something while on the toilet though. Isn't that always the way it goes? as soon as the fight's over, yuns've got the perfect retort, yuns know what we mean? Yeah, yuns do. In this case, about taking care not to get eaten by bears in the woods, bears do what they do, so yeah, yuns should take care out there, but if yuns wanna treat rape like a bear attack, well, yuns're just an idiot. At least with the bear, it gets put down or relocated.»

«Alright, what's gone on since we've been gone? Obviously the world hasn't completely ended yet, or if it has, we're really behind. Let's see, what've we got here?»

«Oh, for those not keeping up with it, that pink convertible we told yuns about has hit three-hundred-one, with GodsFistsOfFury316 currently on top. If yuns're interested to get in on this, well, yuns'd better hurry, cause there's only a little over...well an amount of time, anyway, left to go. But yuns really have to ask yuns'sself, are yuns really crazy enough?»

«Also, as it is illegal to communicate their list of former clients who're most likely to beat and or rape and or murder a body on the internet without running afoul of all those laws against the facilitation and promotion of prostitution, a local collective of Native American enthusiasts and a HAM radio operator've gotten together to offer their services in distributing these lists in order to ensure that certain people who shouldn't get laid don't get laid before the end of the world.»

«If yuns would like to help, yuns can leave any combination of freshly cut branches and dry kindling behind the gas station across from the cardboard plant. Special mention, these donations are not tax deductible. We have to admit we don't know how well this's gonna work, but, hey, why not? Send us up some smoke, and we'll see what we can do to help.»

«Also, SexySimone19, who's part of this effort, has dropped us a message to let us know that while she's decided to go pro bono, considering it's the end of the world and everything, she just wanted to get the word out so anyone else who might be considering sleeping with one of these jerk-offs, our word there, but whoever might be considering sleeping with them knows the full facts first. And we couldn't agree more.»

«We thank yuh for spending the time to send us that, SexySimone19, and we hope everything works out. Remember, if there's anything we can do, just let us know.»

«We also have a small bit of news. You know those videos that show cats having hysterics when confronted with cucumbers?»

«Well, apparently yuns get the same category of reactions out of people when yuns leave a blue male sex toy aka a fake slash faux slash whatever-yuns-wanna-call-it vagina laying in the middle of the floor in the drugstore across from the FlapJack Barn. And apparently no one's yet worked up the courage to move it.»

«Apparently it still looks *damp*.»

«Ewwwww.»

«But, come on, don't they stock those reachy-grabby things over there? Oh, apparently the fire department's been called in on this, as well.»

«Well, we wish yuns luck on that one, guys.»

«And no, we're not being sexist. For those of yuns who don't happen to know, all our volunteer fire departments are one-hundred-percent sausage fest, and that's even before the commissioners got their own dimwitted ideas into their small, small minds. How they had room for any, we don't know.»

«He he.»

«MargoMango sends us a message hoping we stay safe, what with the sheriff's department running round after everything that moves. But we'd like to assure our listeners that we're perfectly safe.»

«In fact, we're like bugs in a rug up here on Lark Rise.»

«We have, however, run out of creamer and are currently having to use milk.»

«But we do thank yuns for asking. Though, we have to admit it would be funny to see them try to hike up here in all that body armor. We're lucky though, since all that military surplus shit's so new, otherwise, after a few months of wearing it day and night, and pissing, shitting, eating, and probably sleeping in it, and who the hell knows what else, they'd've been as prepared as the fucking Roman legions where when they were required to march round in their armor all the time. No, we didn't come up with that one, we stole it, MadameLee13. But that's what makes us brilliant is that we steal brilliant things.»

«We're still waiting for a callback from Jane. So if you're out there, Jane, please give us a call and let us know that those sounds weren't what we think they were, because we'd be really unhappy if they were. Or if anyone else up there on campus happens to know what's going on and can give us a call, that'd be nice.»

«We'd hate to know we fucked somebody over out there. And if yuns really, really do know anything at all, call us or message us. Send a smoke signal if yuns gotta. It'd be greatly appreciated. Thank yuns. So those of yuns who've just tuned in, yuns're listening to EFKO, the last radio station in the known and unknown universe and we're counting down the last of the end of the world. So we're gonna try this whole phone thing again and see where it gets us. Hello, yuns're on the air. What would yuns like to say before the world ends?»

«Hi, my name is Carl, and I'm an attorney.»

«Hello Carl the attorney. So is that all you wanted to tell what's left of the universe?»

«Um, no.»

«Oh, we thought you just might be looking to reaffirm your existence or something, sorry bout that.»

«Fine.... Um, yeah, what I just wanted to say is that your friend earlier, the prostitute—»

«We can give you her number if you want.»

«No. No, it's just that I wanted to make sure everyone knew that just because a prostitute does...their job, as it were, pro bono, doesn't mean it still isn't prostitution, and they can be detained for that.»

«So you're telling us that having adults having consensual sex in the privacy of their own homes for free isn't exactly legal?»

«Well...yes. It depends on the circumstances.»

«And we're confused. What're the circumstances?»

«Well...the fact that she is a prostitute and the working...pro bono angle means that, in fact, she's working as a prostitute, even though she's not taking monetary compensation, and that could still be construed to be illegal, depending on how—»

«So you're an attorney.»

«Yeah....»

«Just wanted to make sure. People say things all the time, yuh know, but, say, we wanna ask yuh a question then. Suppose a wife tells her husband if he takes out the trash or does the dishes she'll get freaky with him. Legal or illegal?»

«Well that...depends.»

«On how certain people felt?»

«Right....»

«Now, but Christian and Muslim traditionalist'd be immune from this, wouldn't they? considering they view their wives as property and that they have to put out on demand. So someone's property couldn't really proposition its owner, could it?»

«I guess...no....»

«So that kinda solves the whole problem, doesn't it? All you gotta do is buy the person instead of the sex and the sex comes along free. Prostitution solved.»

«That's...slavery isn't legal.»

«We're not talking about slavery. We're talking about someone selling themselves. People do it every day. It's called a job.»

«We mean, if yuh can sign some of the contracts some of these companies get away with about owning everything you produce in your spare time even five years after they fire you and firing you for disparaging the company image while your walking your dog in the park, or what appliances you can buy, or that everything that happens on a set is de facto consensual, isn't this just the natural extension of what goes on already?»

«So no, it wouldn't be slavery. It would just be one person owning another, or one corporate personhood owning a whole bunch more.»

«And besides, you're a lawyer, haven't yuh ever read the thirteenth amendment? So it's a completely different deal, yuh see?»

«I...don't think...I don't think that's how it works.»

«Well, is there any case law on it?»

«I...don't know.»

«Besides, even if it is illegal, the only thing it takes to make it legal is being decided by whoever makes those sorts of decisions that it's legal, right?»

«I...»

«So what is your area of law?»

«I...mostly deal with custody of pets following divorces.»

«Fascinating. And we really mean that, we're not making fun, that's fascinating. Did yuh always wanna be that?»

«Well...I've always liked animals.»

«Well, we do too. So're you sure you don't want us to pass along that number?»

«Well...»

«We mean, how can you go wrong with somebody named Simone?»

«Well...if it's not too much trouble.»

«Not at all. And we recommend yuh hang onto your seat, Carl the attorney, because we're sending it right now.»

«Thanks....»

«Oh, don't mention it. We like doing whatever we can to help fellow animal lovers out there.»

Angela'd been lying on the couch awhile, while Gabriel'd gone out tinkering on something on the back porch, just because it wasn't as if everything could be kept up all the time. The house remained dark, except for what light streaming upwards from the edges of what remained of the world filtered through the windows, which was preferable, though maybe even that was too much as she lay there with her forearm over her eyes, letting everything air out. She called, "Why do men always have such useless hobbies?"

He called from the porch, "Because we can't sit round all afternoon and watch Oprah."

She called, "I'll remember that."

"That's what women do is nurse grudges."

Sometime while lying there in the semidarkness with her forearm over her eyes came a knock at the door. "Shit." They knocked again.

"You're closer," he called.

"Shit." She sat up and reached for a pair of lounge pants and t-shirt in the semidarkness, stood, and near fell over getting her legs into the one, and managed to get her arms and breasts tangled in the other. She went and opened the door, Gordon in mid-knock. "What do you want?"

His eyes were too excited. "We think we've figured something out."

She looked over his shoulder to see someone sitting in a truck cab, the engine idling, the sound of which'd been masked by the running generator.

"I don't wanna traipse through the country right now," she said.

"That's just it," Gordon said. "We don't have to." He looked over his own shoulder. "I found someone who worked on installing the translators."

She paused. "So you think..."

"We've triangulated it."

She turned, paused, turned, again, toward him. "I'll get my clothes." She pushed the door, but it didn't close. She called as she went through the living room, "I'm going out." And by the time she'd gotten dressed and come into the dining room to pull out a chair and slip on her boots, Gabriel stood in the living room wiping his hands on a rag.

"You're always going out without telling me."

She finished knotting her bootlaces and stood, took the few steps necessary to kiss him. "I'm telling you now." On the way in earlier, she'd dropped her backpack by the door, everything still yet to be unpacked, except she had to unzip it and fill the water bottle. Luckily, since the house's water source came from a spring that came out above on the ridge, the weight of the water in the tank up there, even if the pressure was diminished from lack of a pump since the generator wasn't powering it at the moment, the faucet, and by extension toilets, still worked. She re-capped the water bottle and dropped it into the backpack. "I won't be gone long."

"What am I going to do if I starve to death in the meantime?"

She kissed him again. "Guess you'll just have to starve." She lifted the pack and pulled a strap over her shoulder.

"There's a party, remember."

"Nag. Nag. Nag. That's the problem with you househusbands." She kissed him. "Keep everything warm for me."

A portable radio'd been duct-taped to the inside of the vehicle near the driver station, the sound of it bouncing round the inside of the tank like a ball bearing.

«He he. If you move these sliders and knobs like this, it makes everybody's talking sound like salamanders. He he. Oh well. Enough of that. Where were we? Oh, yes. Oh, boy. Here it is. Well, it's gone, folks. Yuns had yuns's chance. And for more than seven-hundred-thousand-twenty-two-dollars and seventeen cents, one of yuns, too, could've been the owner of a fine pink nineteen-sixty-seven Ford Mustang convertible. However, because yuns didn't, the honor now goes to GodsFistsOfFury316. We hope you enjoy your new car. If the bridge wasn't out, we'd invite yuh to bring it by the station, just to see what a three-quarters of a million dollar car looks like. That's an awful lot of wind in yuns's hair. World's most expensive blow-dryer? Yuns decide.»

«But in other news—»

«As if any of yuns out there care.»

«The publisher of Still-Water Life As They Apply To A Slice of Lemon Pie, which we only mention because every time they shoot us a message it gets printed in bold, no less, no less than two dozen times.»

«Though, we gotta admit we don't even know what the fucking thing's about.»

«Except that it's too boring to talk about, which's apparently one of the things that they're mad at us for saying, because they're in court right now getting a warrant out against us, so good luck with that, guys, we've already got a stack this high to begin with.»

«So yuns'll just have to wait yuns's turn.»

"Hey," Drive yelled over the sound of the engine. "Should we make a little detour?"

They both yelled *no*.

And sulking, Drive hit the gas, and they continued on, tearing up asphalt on their way to the Northern part of the county.

«Now, what yuns've all been waiting for. We'd planned Hope'd join us in the studio today, but, well, unless she's gonna sprout wings and fly, or get help from certain persons, that's not gonna happen. Instead, she's very kindly joining us by phone, which for any of yuns still listening out there, amounts to the same functional thing. So hi, Hope, and thanks for joining us.»

«Thanks for having me.»

«So now that you're the number one bathroom theorist in what's left of the world, how's that make you feel?»

«Well, I guess I always wanted to be best at something.»

«Yeah, it's kinda like being the last radio station in existence, right? So special. Not. Anyway, why bathroom theory?»

«Well, it's just one of those things that everyone's involved with—»

«You mean everyone has to do.»

«If you wanna put it that way.»

«Oh, we do do.»

«Ha, well, I'm used to those kinds of jokes.»

«But seriously, why bathrooms as your life's work?»

«Well, it's just that part of life that everyone experiences but that no one wants to talk about, but the way the technology around it's constructed is vital to human civilization existing at all. So there's the fascination, I guess, with that duopoly between it being unavoidable and everyone trying their best to ignore it.»

«But is there really that much different about it? We mean, once you've studied one bathroom, haven't you studied them all?»

«Actually, no. There's quite a plurality of designs in bathrooms.»

«And we bet you're not just talking about wallpaper.»

«Hah, no. Fundamental things like the design of the toilets themselves tend to reflect an interesting perspective of a given society's values.»

«We're probably going to regret asking this, but like what?»

«Well, the go-to example would be French versus American versus German toilets, where how supposedly the French toilet has the hole in the front to carry away the waste as soon as possible, unseen, and the

traditional German toilets, on the other hand, the material lays there on a dry...shelf, if you will, to be, for lack of a better word, inspected.»

«Yuck.»

«And the American toilet typically is said to set somewhere in the middle between these two, as it goes. But, really, all that's just in itself a myth. The consummate ideology, you might say. In actuality, the shelf, if you will, is just there to prevent splashing, of course, that might be just another story, and German toilet design has slightly changed in the last four decades or so, so there's that, but that's probably too detailed to get into here.»

«We've only got to the end of the end of the world, yuh know.»

«Right. And actually, squat toilets are more common than not in a lot of France, but the real problem is you always tend to have to pay some nominal fee for public toilets, and this combined with a ban on plastic bags can be seen to be tied directly to the extreme rise of defecation directly on the streets by the homeless. So the interesting part's more the replication of the story than it is, you could say, the actuality of what it's supposed to be describing.»

«Speaking of French toilets, do you think the bidet'd've continued to grow in popularity in these United States, had these United States continued to exist?»

«Perhaps. It's difficult to say. Bathroom technology is one of those areas that proves that technological advancement isn't linear, which's my personal theory about why it gets overlooked. You—»

«Oh, crap.»

«Sorry?»

«Sorry, ignore us.»

«Well, as I was saying, you can look back at history and clearly chart, I think, how societal adoptions of certain technologies, such as toilets, in general, was actually de-emphasized, as in, for example, late sixteenth-century France, where, during when there was a flowering of bathroom-related technology in England, the Palace of Versailles was being constructed without a single flowing-water toilet at all.»

«No toilets?»

«No, none.»

«Well—»

«Or—Sorry. What were you going to say?»

«Oh, no, go ahead, don't mind us.»

«I was just going to say that, technically, when it was built in the seventeenth century, it started with no toilets. By the middle of the eighteenth century it had them for just the king and the queen, and of course, the king's mistress.»

«Of course.»

«Yes. So—»

«Sorry, don't let us interrupt.»

«Well so, the servants had chamber pots. Which, of course, got emptied outside.»

«And everybody else?»

«Well, most of the time, during the rather large parties they had, and we're talking about a lot of people at some of these parties, we should keep that in mind, but the guests would go on the stairs. Or in the halls. Or sometimes on the lawn.»

«We're imagining at this point France smelling very bad.»

«Well, there was an increase in the consumption of perfume at about the same time.»

«So the smell of roses and shit everywhere. Great.»

«Also we can look back to periods such as the earliest settlements of the Indus valley, which, really, the most we know about them is that they'd created an amazingly advanced sewage system that allowed their civilization to grow quite large by the standards of the time, and even outpaced many cultures in the areas we're more familiar with, in that same period. However, after that, they disappear from the archaeological record.»

«So everything we know about them comes from the way that they went to the toilet.»

«Yes, in essence.»

«So everybody poops, as they say, but how culturally different is it?»

«Vastly. For example, in many Middle-Eastern cultures, the traditional punishment for theft is often to have the right hand amputated. The reason for this is that, traditionally, the left hand is used for cleaning after defecation, and the right for eating.»

«So no one wants a lefty dipping their hand into the pot or passing the bowl.»

«Yes, in essence.»

«So what about Japan?. We were always hearing weird things about toilets over there, among other things.»

«Well, the traditional toilet is a squat toilet, which few people care about in the West, though there's some interesting bio-mechanical-related properties, in comparison to western toilets, relating to the better alignment of the colon that one gets from squatting vs sitting, which's related to a decreased likelihood of developing hemorrhoids.»

«Wait, so hemorrhoids're related to toilet design?»

«In a fashion. You could argue that they're primarily westernized issues stemming from a particular technological trend. However, when most people think of Japanese toilets, they think of the basic western variety with what you might call a bunch of enhancements, heated seats and bidet-like water spouts and blow dryers and control panels and such like that.»

«Unfortunately, you say blow dryers and we're imagining people with very hairy ass cracks.»

«Well...»

«Ah, don't worry 'bout it though. Anyway, you'd mentioned when we were talking earlier that you'd almost had another book published before the world started to end.»

«That had been the plan.»

«What was that going to be about?»

«It was going to delve into some of the bathroom-related legislation issues of the state.»

«We seem to've been the bathroom state there for a while, if anybody knew us, they knew us because of bathrooms—»

«So thank yuns state legislators.»

«It's a very complicated issue.»

«Apparently so. Or at least, from what we gather from you, more so than we'd thought. But everybody knows about all that shit that went down.»

«He he.»

«Sorry.»

«It's alright.»

«But your take on the whole thing's different, isn't it? You actually don't think it had much at all to do with discrimination against transsexuals and such, right? Why don't you tell us some about that.»

«Well, I was going to make the case that it was not *all* about that. I mean, sure, there was some posturing for the benefit of certain religious segments of the voter base by doing something that at the time didn't seem as if it would otherwise have that great of an effect, and also it was a chance for the state legislature to reaffirm its dominance over the municipalities, but I think in order to truly understand the legislation that came down and the reasons behind it, you have to look back about six months prior to all of that, to a bill that, to a bill that most people inside of the state weren't aware of, let alone anyone outside the state. And that bill related to chairs in small gas stations where you might sell coffee or donuts or something like that.»

«Alright, we can follow alotta things, but you're gonna have to explain this one to us.»

«Well, the debate and the bill centered around the fact that it was illegal for these establishments to have seating. And the main argument was that we have all these old guys who are coming in in the morning and conversing and socializing and it's unfair to make them stand all the time. Now, the law itself existed, or said, rather, an establishment that provided seating would have to have a certain sewage capacity. The idea being that if people are sitting around, there is going to be an increased likelihood of more people using the facilities, therefore putting a greater load on the sewage hookup. So the law was designed, essentially, to make sure that business's sewage systems were rated for the likely number of people that would be using them.»

«Alright, we got that, but how exactly does this *hook up* to whether the little figure on the door has a skirt or not?»

«Well, my argument, in essence, was that there's a fundamental anxiety about defecation and urination, obviously, but in particular it was expressed, was evident in the debate around this older bill, which, incidentally did pass, and I argued that it did so mainly because they wanted to ignore the fact that people did in fact use these restrooms, therefore they didn't have to worry because, if waste doesn't exist, then the sewage hookup can't be overloaded. It's a kind of virtualization process. When you virtualize what I called the **RESTROOM FUNCTION**, you end up in a situation where you don't actually have to think about things like sewage capacity, because no one really believes it's being used, or wants to. To try and put it another way, the legislators

didn't want to think about people using bathrooms, so they just kind of shortcutted the whole process to say it doesn't actually matter.»

«Alright, but how does this connect with the bathroom gender bill?»

«It connects because, psychologically speaking, it was a chance to mollify some of this anxiety related to the RESTROOM FUNCTION. And it itself functions as a kind of shortcut option, whereby you get a kind of partial ban. Or what I'm trying to say is, what the legislators would have liked to have done was ban everyone from using, or utilizing, or actually, or actually entering restrooms period, but that's biologically impossible.»

«And you can only buck biology so long.»

«Right. So this ban functions as a kind of symbolic function. Technically, whether the legislators want to claim so or not, is that you've got someone who for all intents and purposes looks like what they would call a biological female, but who has what they define as male genitalia. Now, literally, under this law, she would have to use the men's restroom. But symbolically, under this law, because she exists, conceivably in this in-between state, having something legally defined as male genitalia, being encompassed in a male legal definition, but occupying an otherwise feminine-defined space, a female ontology if you will, a non-male, it places such a person in a deadlock, that is to say, they can choose neither option. So you have at one level a simple ban that purports to align with some kind of community standard and normatization about gender, but on the other, its symbolic function is to in effect make it illegal to use the restroom period.»

«So when you're talking about virtualization here we assume you don't mean something to do with computers.»

«No. No, what I mean is a kind of mental meta-layer where we abstract these concepts away. We attempt to operate wholly in the cogito.»

«We'll take your word for it.»

«For example, we all are sweating, we defecate usually once or more a day, we urinate multiple times a day, and these processes are ongoing, I'm swallowing spit constantly right now, food is being processed through my intestines and being combined with other waste to become fecal material, urine is collecting in my bladder, but we

abstract all this away, so the people we interact with daily are in fact virtualized people. And I claim this has a profound impact on urban planning, especially in the state.»

«And how's that?»

«Well, take, for example, Mainstreet here in Kingsly. Imagine you're standing on Mainstreet and suddenly you realize you're about to have a bout of diarrhea.»

«Do we have to? Just kiddin'. Please go on.»

«Well, imagine you're standing in the street, and we've lived here forever.»

«Unfortunately.»

«And we roughly know the business geography of this immediate area. Now, where do you go to the bathroom?»

«Well... Huh. You might've gotten us there.»

«That's exactly my point. There are no public restrooms. The few restaurants, of course, have restrooms for their customers, with signage in the window to indicate that. The only thing close to a public restroom is if you go all the way down to Backstreet, cross, go across the parking lot, cross the bridge, and go into the rec park.»

«We wouldn't recommend that.»

«That's my point exactly. Those facilities are in terrible condition and horribly maintained. The last time I took my son in there, and he closed the stall door, and it fell down off its hinges.»

«He he. We apologize for laughing, but that's funny.»

«But the other thing's they're so dim, they make you feel like somebody's going to jump out and knife you. It's like a horror house. You couldn't get scarier if you tried.»

«And that's exactly my point. It's as if they are designed, in one sense, to scare people away. So what we have is a Mainstreet that is designed for these virtualized human beings that don't actually have bodily functions. And of course, when you put real human beings in this environment who actually do have all these normal biological entanglements, you create a situation in which a lot of people will be put into some very bad situations.»

«Now you've got us curious, do you think it's partly an economic thing? That is, since there's nowhere else to go, you might go in and buy a coffee or donut to use some place's restroom?»

«Maybe somewhat. But I think it's mostly, as I said, a side effect of a solution to a broader underlying anxiety.»

«So you're the expert, why is it that American restrooms have such huge gaps in the stalls? so you feel like you're trying to take a leak in public half the time.»

«That I would say is entirely economic. Though, maybe not. It might be that that's also partly driven by the disgust factor, as well. It makes you want to not go in there in a different way than being scary does. Or it is horror driven, in that you're afraid to be exposed, thereby, in some way, possibly de-virtualizing yourself, and seeing others exposed, thereby de-virtualizing, to a degree, them.»

«So how is this connected to why people round here sometimes put toilets in the front yard and plant flowers in them? Or're we just crazy?»

«Yuh sure yuh really want the answer to that?»

«Actually, it almost makes me think there's a kind of totemistic quality to that. It's sort of like taking the thing that we fear, like a bear or lion, and killing it and skinning it and mounting it for display, or carving a wooden or stone approximation of it for some sort of veneration. So I'd almost be tempted to say it's a kind of instinctive human drive to gain power over a force of nature, or in this case, over a function of the human body.»

«And this would also explain why people who piss in public get put on the same list as someone who rapes a five year old.»

«Yes, actually, it would.»

«It's just too bad you didn't have a chance to write this book.»

«Well, actually, it was written, it just didn't get published.»

«Well, then slap that shit up online, and people can read it on their phone while their sitting on the john. Speaking of, do yuh happen to know where that name came from?»

«I'm afraid I have no idea.»

«So, didn't someone out there making toilets have the name Crapper? Yuh know, like how in Britain raincoats are called Macintoshes because of the guy that sold or invented them or whatever?»

«No, that's kind of a myth.»

«Oh, foo, and here we were all set up for a joke about how we thought having the last names Dick and Hancock were bad. Actually,

that sounds like a bad late seventies early eighties duo-detective show. And now we really wanna watch a show called that.»

«But in all seriousness, upload that book.»

«I'll see what I can do.»

«Alright, for all those out there left to listen, this's EFKO, with yuns, probably, through the latter half of the end of the world. And to all yuns out there logging off because GoldStarLesbian32's spamming hellfire, well, we're sorry, and we don't know what to do 'bout it. And apparently another couple'a chunks of what's left of the internet've gone down, so maybe we'll get lucky and which ever one she's on'll get taken out next. We can only hope. This's a reminder, death threats aren't cool, kids.»

“Gawd,” Candi said. “Listening to all this, I've gotta piss.”

Drive called over the sound of the engine, “Want me to stop?”

“Hell no.” She repositioned herself as best she could in the seat. “The faster we get there, the faster I can get out of this rumbling tin can.”

«So since we're feeling particularly masochistic, let's take a caller. Hello, you're on the air. What do yuh wanna get off your chest before the world ends?»

«I just wanna know why we have to hear about this gay stuff all the time. It's not like it's the only thing going on in the world. Why can't we move onto something more important?»

«Well...we didn't get the name.»

«John.»

«Well, John, first, what's your opinion on the gay situation?»

«I think it's part of the state constitution now and that we should follow the law. And it's not like it's that important anyway.»

«Alright, we'll just ignore for the moment that the state don't exist no more, but here's the deal, if it's so unimportant, why don't you just roll over on the subject? Make marriage between consenting adults legal. Fix the adoption mess. And all the other little niggles. And we'll move on.»

«Because it's not important.»

«Well, it's important to us. But if it's actually not important to yuh, then yuh should be willing to go with it and move on. We'd like to talk about other things too. Yuns're the one holding it up. So yuh say it's

not important, but yuns're not willing to act like it's not important. So we think yuns're just pulling bullshit.»

«The fact is—»

«The fact is that yuh say you wanna do something and everyone's giving yuh room to do it, but yuh don't do it. And we think that says preeeetty clearly what yuh really want.»

«We live in a democracy and if that's what the majority of the people want—»

«So if the majority of the people wanted to go back to slavery that'd be okay?»

«That's completely different.»

«Now, yuh see we're getting down to the fact that it's more about what yuh want in particular than anything about what's legal or all that.»

«Most people are just never gonna find it natural to accept a man putting the organ that brings life into the world into a hole where death comes out.»

«Okay, whoa. First, ewww. You know, since there're more straight people in the world than gays, as we're sure yuh probably point out, just statistically, there's probably alot more straight people having anal sex than if every gay man in existence did. Or, okay, only half at a time could be batting, but that's beside the point. And what is the deal? Every Time this comes up, this sorta shit comes up. Is it your personal fetish? If so, fine. But otherwise, well, we can tell yuh where to shove it. And if yuh wanna talk about death coming outa something, sorry to break it to yuh pal, but the female hole yuh probably wanna make it illegal for anyone not to shove things in, well that's a red death highway, complete with decomposing blood and mucus membrane and auto-aborted zygotes and dead fetuses and just a whole panoply of death.»

«And considering everything you eat, or at least everything we hope you eat's dead, unless you're one of those people who picks up live scorpions by their tails with chopsticks and bites their heads off, everything that goes in your mouth's dead, or ends up that way after a few chews, and if it has the misfortune to come up, hopefully, it's going to be dead. About the only holes anyone's got that don't have to do with death are the ears and nostrils—we hope—and we're not

an ENT so we can't even say for sure about that, if there's someone out there who wants to correct us call in and let us know.»

«But we wouldn't recommend yuh try and shove it up your wife's nose. Unless that's her fetish, that is, and everything's been talked over in advance. If so, go for it. There's no reason to be ashamed of your kink.»

«Unless non-consensual's your kink, then you need to be in a group that caters to consensual non-consensuality, or something.»

«People have a right to free speech in this country.»

«Yeeeeeah. Yuh mean what's left of this country. But, yeah. What's your point?»

«Everything you do's one-sided. The other side should get to have its time.»

«And how many times have you let pro-gay activists come and talk at your church?»

«That's completely different.»

«And how's that?»

«The airwaves are a public resource. And you can't force a religion to do something it doesn't believe in—that's against the Constitution.»

«So what you're saying is it's unfair that we get to use technology to spread our message so much farther so much faster.»

«There should be some fairness.»

«Uh huh. Well, you know what, we figure this station spent almost four decades broadcasting what it was broadcasting before we took over, and that's fair enough. Now it's time for the other side to get a chance. And we're so glad you agree with us. So you like to talk about the Constitution, John. We assume you're partial to the amendments?»

«I believe in the First Amendment.»

«Excellent. So what we're gonna do now is this—we're gonna exercise this god-like power given us by technology to press this whittle button and cut yuh off, because, and as people like yuns're so fond of pointing out, the first amendment only protects yuh from censorship from congress, and doesn't apply to private spaces whatsoever. So goodbye. So is this really all that's left out there at the end of the world? We're getting depressed. And who wants to be depressed at the end of the world? Oh, let's try this again. Wello, you're on the air. What do yuh have to say?»

«We need to get back to the basics of this country, things like simple, traditional marriage.»

«John, how're you...how'd you get a new IP address so fast?»

«It was at the point that we turned away from those principles that this country got off track.»

«Well, yuh know, John, from what the smart people keep telling us, the end of the world was coming one way or the other, it's a simple matter of physics, so we might've taken the shorter road, but like with death, we always come to the same eventual end.»

«At least, that's what we're told.»

«If we just get back to tradit—»

«Yeah, yeah. You know what, we'll just read you what Golden-Ratio1987's posted, so here you go, [G]iven that among the Cherokee, though it's impossible to assign exactly the same sort of gay-straight relationship that we would map onto a modern sensibility, there was a set of social structures that look remarkably like what we would define as gay marriage and in general the social structure was much more accepting of such sexual alternatives than European societies at the same point in history, though we can't say that all aboriginal peoples of the pre-colonial Americas map this way, though admittedly that's a bit more flowery than the way we'd put it, we'd probably just say maybe we're actually finally getting back to some real traditional American values. And we mean, if we wanna go back to tradition, do you wanna do away with all these pesky recent laws that make it illegal for a husband to access his property rights in relation to his wife's body any time he feels like it?»

«That's a gross mischaracterization meant only to play on emotion.»

«No, John, it's a fact of legal history. Hold on. Someone's just dropped us a message about a conference call. So if you can just hold on a minute, John. Let's see... Oh, we hope we have the bandwidth for this... Are we speaking to Melissa Renquist?»

«Hello. Yes.»

«Fantastic. And who're you?»

«I'm a grad student at Eagleton University.»

«And why aren't you on a disintegrated beach somewhere?»

«Paperwork.»

«Oh, yeah, yuns get to be slave labor. See, we're bringing slavery back. It's not as rhymy or catchy as sexy, but, hey.»

«Yeah.»

«But what'd yuh wanna talk to us about?»

«I just wanted to mention that, in relation to the whole traditional family values thing—»

«Uh huh.»

«Well, I just wanted to bring up the idea that some of us think that it was actually the introduction of the so-called nuclear family, what everyone wants to call the traditional family, is actually what led to everything now.»

«There's no point in this.»

«Now, John, let the lady speak. Go on, Melissa.»

«Well, right, it's just that, so the hypothesis goes, the psychological and economic stress put on the family unit being concentrated in so small an area created basically a perfect storm, if you will. And it's probably not a coincidence that immediately following the widespread adoption of this structure, the so-called basic family unit, we have one of the most fracturous times in U.S. history, with the children raised in this environment going on to invest themselves in quite intense psychological extremes and instigating situations the fallout of which we're still living with.»

«So basically the baby boomers got driven crazy and we're living in the asylum.»

«Well, that's a little—»

«What do you think of that, John?»

«Academic obfuscation and postmodernism.»

«Well, there you have it, everyone.»

Absolute, who'd been ahold of a handlebar the whole trip, to keep from being thrown round through the interior, leaned down and said into Candi's ear, which was the only way to be heard intelligibly, "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being pro peace and quiet."

She'd've laughed if it wouldn't've caused a wiry pain to shoot through her arm.

"Say somethin' tuh me?" Drive called back.

"How close're we?"

"Going up the driveway now." They lurched to a stop.

Candi winced. "What the hell?"

"Waitin' for the gate," Drive said over the rumble of the engine. The machine lurched forward. The tone changed as the tracks tore gravel instead of asphalt. They turned and stopped "Here yuns go."

Absolute moved to unfasten the hatch and went up, offering a hand down to help Candi up. Drive'd parked right in front of the main entrance, as if the tank'd been some real car with visitors pulled up to the door. And Analogical emerged from behind all the wrought iron figures that formed the outer gate on the front doors, a kind of overly expensive and ornate screen door that did nothing against anything smaller than a emu. "You're tearing up the driveway with that damn thing."

Drive poked his head up through the hatch. "Won't matter, the world's ending."

"Well, let's try and keep it presentable till then." She looked up at Absolute as he helped Candi off the tank. "What happened to you?" She went over to help, eyed the blood-drenched strips of shirt.

"Oh, just some stupidity," Candi said. Analogical walked her to the door. They stopped and looked back.

"Well," Analogical said, "you comin'?"

"No," Candi said. "He's not." She eyed Absolute. "But you'd better promise not to get mad."

"I promise."

"And not to take too long."

"All I wanna do is have a conversation."

"Well, make sure that's all it is." Analogical helped her inside, though she really didn't need it.

Absolute turned. "You wanna play taxi a little more?"

Drive said, "Where're we going?"

"Courthouse."

Drive grinned, readjusted his eye-patch, dropped inside the tank. And Absolute followed him, closing the hatch, but didn't have time to get in the old gunner seat before the machine lurched forward.

"Oh," drive called over the sound of the fully revved engine, "oh uh huntin' we will go, uh huntin' we will goooooooo." And jamming

the accelerator, he aimed the machine between the still closing gates.
“Uh huntin’ we will goooooooooo.”

«In case yuns're wondering what those clicky sounds were, they're just one of our walkie talkies. But if yuns're out there and close enough and got one that works, we're on channels six, three, and eight. But, anyway. Let's see if it works to put one of these right up by the mic. You're on the air. What do yuh wanna say before the world ends?»

«Good evening.»

«Oh, good evening, Reverend Pope. We didn't know if we'd be hearing from you or not. We hope you've got something good for us.»

«I just wanted to make a quick call before the batteries ran out to say we've been enjoying your program this evening and to congratulate yuns.»

«Well, thank yuh, coming from yuh that means alot. Yuh got time to talk awhile?»

«I'm afraid not.»

"Russell."

«As you can hear. But in case we don't get the chance to say it later, we wish yuns well.»

«Yuns too.»

"Russell."

"Coming." He turned the walkie talkie off and set it in the basket on the table in the hall with the cellphones. Marietta was already in the dining room, placing the basket of rolls between two lit candles, the firelight flickering over their freshly buttered tops, Rupert coming in from the kitchen with a bowl of mashed potatoes, which he set down, then took his place beside Hunter. It was amazing what could be done on a charcoal grill when need be. Russell pulled back a chair for his wife and pushed it in for her.

"Thank you."

And he went round the table and pulled out his own.

"You should say a quick word first," Marietta said.

"Alright." Russell paused a moment. "Let's thank my brother for listening to our mother too much and stocking too much food. And let's thank Rupert for preparing it. And my wonderful wife for her excellent supervision. And me for keeping this short. Ahmen."

"Ahmen."

But before they started to pass anything, Rupert cleared his throat. "I've got something to say real quick if nobody minds." But that was just pro forma, who'd've minded? Hunter'd rested his hand on the table, and Rupert put his atop it. "There's been a lot of things go on, obviously. And we realize it doesn't really mean much, and we're sorry it's short notice, but we were wondering, if later on this evening, you'd mind officiating one last marriage."

Russell grinned as if he were gonna burst into laughter. "Finally."

Marietta looked at him. "Now..." And she shook her head and looked across the table and smiled. "He would be glad to."

"Like we say," Rupert said, "we know there's not much point in it, considering the circumstances."

"If you wanna do it," Marietta said, "there's a point in it." She looked over as her husband rose. "Where're you going?"

"To get something."

They all looked up as he entered the room again. He set the bottle of wine on the table, unfolded the cork remover. "We were saving this for a special occasion." He inserted the screw.

"And you were keeping it chilled just in case?" his brother said.

Russell pushed down the cork remover's happy little arms, the cork popping out with an appropriate accompanying sound.

August'd taken to wearing his robes all the time. It'd seemed the safest thing to do. The bailiff'd disappeared; the court reporter'd done so long before; and who knew where the prosecutor or any of the assistant prosecutors were? Well, Langdon and Clive kinda knew, of course, but that didn't help August. So by that point, it was him, mano a accused, with just a couple of black-body-armored deputies to keep order as he defined and dispensed justice. "Next case." He tried to concentrate on the papers shifting in front of him. They only had flashlights and camping lanterns, as the courthouse generator'd failed earlier. He reached for the water pitcher, but as soon as he lifted it, he knew it was empty. "Martin Ronald Grant." He glanced up as the two deputies brought the man forward, his wrists ziptied in front of him. "You're accused of threatening bodily harm to one...the name here's listed as...GoldStarLesbian32?" He looked up. "None of this makes sense." He held the paper closer to the LED camping light. "No, someone by the username GoldStarLesbian32 is accused of communicating threats to the username GodsFistsOfFury316. Okay." He looked up. "I take it you're this GodsFistsOfFury316, or whatever."

Setting the sheet aside, he squinted in the lantern light a moment, and finally leaned forward over the bench. "Where's this woman?"

"Right here, Your Honor."

August paused. "No. No. Deputies, bring forward the person with the username..." He leaned back and reached for the sheet of paper. "Gold...GoldStarLesbian."

"That's me."

August paused, looking straight over the bench at Martin Grant. "Alright then. Bring forward the person with the username Gods... FistsOfFury."

“I’m here, Your Honor.”

August paused. “Is this a joke?”

“No, Your Honor.”

“Explain.”

“I just bought a car, Your Honor. Everything fair and legal. And she won’t stop harassing me.”

“Because you’re a bigoted pig.”

“You see, Your Honor.”

August paused.

“You’re a bigoted pig. You’re all bigoted pigs, and you’re all going to be tarred and feathered and thrown under a bus.”

“Wherever I go, she’s always following me round. You have to do something, Your Honor. I want a restraining order.”

“Fuck you, Judge, you’re just another sexist pig. And you can all take god and shove him up your asses.”

“You see, she’ll never stop until all of them are cleansed from the face of the Earth. They refuse to bathe in the blood of the Lord and accept his forgiveness. The only thing we can do, Your Honor, is kill them all.”

“I’ll kill you first you mother-fucking bigot. I’ll throw you under a bus.”

“The Lord shall be my protection and salvation.”

August sat there looking over the bench, watching the man legally named Martin Grant argue with himself. He banged the gavel. “Order.”

“Order yourself, Judge. You’ll be thrown under a fleet of buses, too. Sexist pigs, all yuns.”

August banged the gavel. “Deputies, take this person or persons back to jail. He’s guilty of something, impersonating something, I don’t know. Take him away.”

Those seated in the audience remained silent as he continued to bang the gavel for order. “You’ll see, God will wash the Earth clean of all filth and bring the perfect and glorious kingdom. And all you sexist pigs’ll be tarred and feathered and thrown under a bus.” And the deputies hauled Martin Grant out into the hall.

“Next case.” August reached for the empty water pitcher. “Is there anyone out there who can get me some water?” No one moved.

He set down the pitcher and sifted through the papers piled before him, as the deputies returned, someone new between them, a woman. August squinted and sorted through the pages. "What's your name?"

"My client," Carl stepped out from behind the deputies, "is usually addressed as Sexy Simone."

"I'm not interested in what she goes by. What's her real name?"

"If you will consult the documentation, Your Honor, you'll find that is her legal name."

August rummaged through the papers, found nothing. "Fine. Miss Simone, just from your name alone it's probable you were charged with some sort of sex crime—"

"If I may, Your Honor, my client denies any and all charges of prostitution. And if you check this witness statement, you will find that the man whom she was arrested with attested to the fact there was no exchange of any money between the two of them. And in fact, police, after searching, found no money whatsoever in either party's possession."

"Miss Simone, or whatever your name is, what is your current financial situation?"

"Considering the present circumstances, Your Honor, my client has eschewed the need for money."

"You can tell your client," August said, "that we're putting people back to work in this county. So for being unemployed, I'm fining her two-hundred dollars."

"Your Honor, as I've just said, my client can't afford two-hundred dollars."

"Then that'll be an additional fine of one-hundred dollars. And if she refuses to find employment, she can earn it working for the county."

"I object, Your Honor."

"On what grounds?"

"On the grounds that the fine is excessive and class and racially motivated. If Miss Simone had been a white woman, the fine would have been half that. This is all a ploy to continue suppressing the sexuality of non-white women."

August stopped short of asking him if he were some kind of communist, and instead banged his gavel. "Council is hereby fined

one-thousand dollars and is to be held in contempt of court.” August banged the gavel. “Deputies, take both these prisoners out and remand them to the proper custody to be transferred to the county detention and work facilities.”

“You can call it whatever you want,” Carl said, as the deputies took hold of him and led him down the aisle, “but the effect’s the same, no matter what reason you give for it.”

However, it should be noted that in fact none of this could necessarily be considered extreme. And in some ways it was more reasonable than the outcomes of the same and similar situations and scenarios during the time before the world’d actually started to end.

August sifted through papers. “Next.” He looked up. The deputies hadn’t returned with anyone yet. Near broiling beneath the black robes, not just from his own body heat, but from the collected body heat of all those packed into that un-air-conditioned room, sweat routed down the new contours of August’s body, hidden beneath all that black billowance and folds, into already saturated underwear, which, like all wet cotton, felt awful.

«So what's your opinion on that, Dan?»

«I think if Chomsky didn't exist, capitalism'd have to create him.»

«Well, that's interesting. Thank you both for that.»

«If yuns're listening, yuns're listening to radio EFKO, staying with yuns, hopefully, till the end of what's left the world. Coming up shortly we've got more news for all yuns that might exist out there, and, yes, even though the end's probably almost already here, news's still going on. But first let's see if we can fit in another caller. Hello. You're on the air. What do yuh wanna say before the world ends?»

«I just wanted to let everyone know that regardless of what they might've been hearing all day, heaven is out there waiting.»

«Oh, hi, Reverend.»

«And there's still time for anyone who wants to get right with the Lord and accept him as their personal savior. And so long as you believe in him and trust in him that you will rise up to paradise to be with him, you will be saved.»

«A quick question if you don't mind, Reverend.»

«I have no problem having my faith challenged. All trials simply strengthen the will of those who truly believe in Christ.»

«Okay. But what we wanted to ask you about was the recent law the county commissioners just passed in regards to no more freely dispensed magical healing.»

«First of all, only the Lord can work such miracles. And in the second place, without proper regulation, who can be sure these things are what they claim to be?»

«Yeah, we heard yuh were one of the ones who got up at the meeting and advocated for it.»

«We have a responsibility to protect the public.»

«But didn't Jesus go round freely dispensing magical healing? And the apostles, too?»

«That's completely different.»

«Well, Reverend, a little bird tells us that the whole reason you claimed it was necessary for medical regulation was really just a dog whistle. The same one you use when trying to figure out a legal way to restrict abortions.»

«I don't know from what beasts you might get your information, but if anything, that's a lie of the devil.»

«Are you calling us witches, Reverend?»

«The devil can turn many to his advantage, even if they don't know it.»

«Putting it that way, you could be just as easily turned to his advantage and not know it, couldn't you, Reverend?»

«I'm not about to engage with your word games.»

«Oh well. We guess it's just lucky yuh can't get up here with a stake and some kindling wood.»

«Whatever some Christians did in the past cannot sully the name of Christianity in the present.»

«How close to the present're we talking 'bout? Cause it wasn't that long ago they basically convicted those two boys for murder only because everyone got into such a hoopla 'bout Satanism and all that.»

«Just because some people do something doesn't mean that reflects on Christianity.»

«We've heard your sermons, Reverend, remember? Shouldn't you take your own advice and stop holding the Catholic Church responsible for whatever it did way back then? After all, why should that be held against the church now?»

«I said I wasn't going to engage in these word games. I'm merely here to let people know there's salvation and heaven waiting for them.»

«You still carry a gun when you give sermons, Reverend?»

«Yes. I proudly endorse the second amendment.»

«After all, Jesus did tell Peter to buy a sword.»

«Anyone can turn scripture to whatever they want, that doesn't make it the intent of God.»

«Well, we're just trying to agree with you, Reverend, but take it whatever way you want. But, anyway, what we wanted to ask is—is

it still true you claim to be carrying a gun to protect the children in the church in case there's a shooting? Like the one that happened in what used to be South Carolina.»

«I hold that to be one of my responsibilities, yes.»

«But here's our question—why?»

«I don't follow.»

«Well, if you believe in heaven, and if a kid under the age of twelve goes to heaven automatically, wouldn't it be better for them to just die and go to paradise right now?»

«You kind of people just become more and more perverted, don't you?»

«You kind of people... Well, we'll just have to save that one for later. But we're being serious, Reverend. If yuh really believe in heaven, why're yuh so afraid to get there?»

«I'm not afraid to go to heaven.»

«But heaven's better than here, right?»

«Of course.»

«So why wouldn't it be better for children just to go on to heaven?»

«Because that's not what God wants.»

«If he lets them get killed it must be what God wants, according to you. Otherwise you have to say things can happen that God doesn't want.»

«Things can go in ways God wouldn't prefer.»

«But they have to be all part of the plan.»

«We can't explain God.»

«You're explaining him right now.»

«I'm merely pointing out the truth.»

«Why do people grieve, Reverend?»

«What?»

«Why do people grieve when their parents or, forbid, their child dies?»

«Because it's sad.»

«Why is it sad? Or why is it that sad? If you really believe they've just gone to heaven. We mean, people get sad because their kids go off to college, but they usually don't contemplate killing themselves over it, do they?»

«Of course not, those're different things.»

«But why are they? If you really believed in heaven, going there shouldn't be any worse than someone moving away. Sure, it's sad, but you know nothing bad's happened to them.»

«You're failing to make any sense.»

«Okay, would you jump in front of a bullet if it were required to save your daughter's life?»

«Of course.»

«And would you die to keep her from going down to Bob Jones University? If it still existed, that is.»

«Of course not.»

«So what's the difference? You claim in one case she'd go to paradise, and in the other she'd go to Bob Jones University. Yet you'd die to stop the one and not the other. So what do you really believe, Reverend?»

«There's a term for this, but what is it...?»

«Let's see if we can get someone on the line to help with this. We're still trying to get ahold of Jane, to anyone that's out there.»

«If yuh have any clue, you can drop us a message online if yuh have access, or alternatively by smoke signal.»

«Oh, and that reminds us, we've been informed by a reservation official that the Native American Enthusiasts group we spoke of earlier has no connection whatsoever to the reservation or any of its activities, and that smoke signals were never historically used in this area, but that since most of what everybody knows about Indians was made up by the invading hordes, it's probably more their culture than anyone else's, and the reservation wouldn't want to fall into the same trap of telling other people about their own culture.»

«Also a Science Fiction Theatre 3000-style viewing of Apache has been canceled. One of those lovely films where you can tie up a woman and leave her for dead and she'll fall in love with you forever.»

«But we've got Margo on the line. Hey, Margo. You're kind of one of our lifelines right now. We were just talking about belief and were trying to remember a term or phrase that would apply to people who don't really believe something themselves but, if we remember right, require others to believe it, can you help us out on that one?»

«Um... Well, there's belief in belief.»

«And that's when people depend on other people showing the signs of belief, rather than believing themselves, right?»

«Pretty much.»

«We're sorry, Reverend. Are yuh still there? Reverend? Hello? Oh, shucks, apparently we've lost him. Yuh don't think he hung up, do yuh? Naw, probably just a technical snafu. But while we've got yuh on the line, Margo, anything yuh wanna say?»

«Well, I was kinda busy.»

«Oh, we're sorry. Can we be nosy and ask busy with what?»

«Um...»

«Uh, oh. We see, well, sorry to bother yuh. Hope yuh have fun. Bye. Gollygee, no one wants to talk to us right now. And here we are just sitting—oh, we've got a call.»

«This is radio EFKO. You're on the air. What do you want to say before the world ends?»

«Hi, my name's Lucy.»

«Really? What a coincidence, that's one of our names, too. Yuh sure you're not one of us?»

«I hope not.»

«That'd be smart.»

«Hee hee. I just wanted to say that you're talking about these things, well, it got me thinking of something I brought up during one of my undergraduate classes that my professor shot down, but I really like the idea.»

«And what's that, not-one-of-us Lucy. We're all ears.»

«Well, I always thought that the Superbowl was a great example of what you were talking about, belief in belief. It's because that, I think, and maybe this's just me, but it seems to be like the real reason everybody was angry over the whole kneeling thing is that it showed people not participating in the BELIEF FUNCTION, and unlike personal belief, when you have that belief in belief kind of thing, what other people do is the most important. So I think it was actually a signal that no one actually believed the things they were professing to believe about America at the time, when it existed, that is.»

«Cool, Lucy—that's-not-one-of-us. We don't know if we understand it, but we like the sound of it. Got any more stuff that your professors didn't like?»

«Not really. Well, I mean. plenty. But you know.»

«So yuh wanna hang round with us a little while?»

«I...can't. I've got to get ready to go to a party.»

«Oh, yeah. We've got something about that here. Too bad we can't go. Can we just send our good wishes with yuh then?»

«I guess.»

«Alright then, Lucy-who's-not-one-of-us, have fun, it'll almost be like we're there ourselves.»

«Coming up, we have more news—»

«Yes, there is actually some news going on out there in what's left of the world—»

«We don't seem to've reached the end of history quite yet.»

«So stay tuned for that.»

«Also, we'll be talking to JRogerMaximus about how you can simulate a universe with enough rocks and a little basic math.»

«So maybe yuns really can make yuns's favorite movie-star-porn fantasy true after all.»

«And after that we might be talking to CultureTraining99 about whether people process news and other non-fictional media from foreign countries and other such places as fiction.»

«So stay tuned for that, too. Yuns're listening to radio EFKO, staying with yuns, hopefully, through the rest of the end of the world.»

“How long you think they’re gonna hang round?” Ruth said. “I’ve gotta piss so bad it’s threatening to come outa my eyes.”

Karen looked through the binoculars, across the Anglers parking lot. “I guess we could get Eva to come out and say boo at them.”

“Well, get her to do it before my bladder explodes.”

“Or that may not be necessary.”

“Why?”

Karen set the binoculars between the seats. “Come on.” She opened the door.

“You gone crazy?”

“You gotta go or not?”

Ruth opened the passenger door, climbed out, her bladder actually really feeling like it might explode. Stiffly, she followed Karen across the barren parking lot. If she hadn’t had to go so bad, she might’ve put up more a fight than she’d done, or might’ve at least considered some of the possible danger, but it was to the point of peeing her pants or not, and wet cotton might be worse than having the crap beaten out of her by a bunch of black-body-armored-up deputies, at least then if she pissed herself it’d look like it’d been more their fault. But none of that happened, so it was good she’d saved herself the trouble of worrying about it too much. Instead she managed to say, “what the hell’s going...” But she only had a little time to look round at all the black-body-armor-clad forms slumped on the asphalt, against the trucks, in the vehicle seats, sitting in the backs of the only slightly repurposed troop carriers, as she and Karen made their way inside and she (Ruth) cut straight for the restrooms.

Eva and Emmy still sat at the booth, and Emmy looked round, and Eva looked up. She still hadn’t unwrapped her chicken sandwich.

"Sorry we're late," Karen said. She glanced over her shoulder. "Fine time to ask, but do the restrooms still work?"

"Oh yeah." Emmy nodded. "The owner's real..." (She was going to say anal, but thought better of it.) "Well, he's always worried about those kinds of things, so we have an independent water supply on the roof that works because of gravity and pressure, or something like that." It was something like that. "So we're still good for a little while. Though, we were afraid they might shut us down because the city water doesn't work anymore, even though ours still does."

Karen looked through the windows. "I don't think you have to worry about that."

Emmy followed her gaze. "Yeah, I was wondering 'bout that. Thought they might be playing possum, or something, you know, trying to fool us into coming out."

"No," Karen said. "It's..." She looked over her shoulder as Ruth emerged from the restroom, still sighing.

"Well're yuns ready to go?"

"In a hurry?" Karen said.

"There's the thing, remember?"

"Oh, yeah." Karen looked at Eva. "We can still take you up and drop you off if you want."

Eva, whose expression still hadn't changed, said, "It's not like it matters, anyway."

"Well, I'm going to take a trip to the restroom," Karen said. "You can decide what you want to do." And she turned and walked that way.

"You got any french fries still round here?" Ruth said.

"Sorry," Emmy said. "We sold the last of them. And they have animal byproduct in the oils, so they don't fit on the new menu. We have strips of baked sweet potato though."

"Do they come in a cardboard container?"

"Yep."

"Alright."

Emmy looked at Eva as if to say sorry she had to go back to work and scooped across the booth and went up front and behind the counter. Ruth looked at Eva.

«Alright all yuns that might still be out there to listen, listen up,

cause we've got something real important to tell yuns. It seems the latest thing on the conspiracy theory corners of what's left of the internet is a group of alien hybrids are gonna invade what's left of the Earth. Where they're gonna invade what's left of the Earth from's left to speculation at this point. Apparently there's a fringe contingent working on some sort of defense mechanism for this, while a splinter group claims there's been a longstanding government plot to deal with just such a situation ever since certain technologies were uncovered in post-double-u-double-u-two Germany, and this's actually what all those nuclear-laden planes and subs that've been circling the world since the start of the Cold War've really been about, sure it was passed off as a war between two superpowers that threatened to annihilate the world as everyone knew it and maybe more, but in fact, so these posters claim, it was all a ruse to cover up the fact the Soviet and American governments were working together in order to thwart this exterior threat to their respective hegemonies of course, but of course, what this theory hinges on, at least according to TotallyNotALizardOverlord004, is the fact that Soviet Russia was actually required to stay in existence in order to keep capitalism goin', that was the actual major reason for the creation of the Soviet state, but of course that caused a hyper-immuno-response in the next-door neighbor Germany, which then just went ape-shit and someone eventually figured out from this that once they'd killed all the Jews and gays and Polish and unionists and Jesuits and what have you, there'd've been no more crisis for capitalism to overcome and it would've died from utopia, whether anyone involved in the creation of the Soviet Union at the time knew that that's what they really were or not, and that if they really wanted to get at capitalism, all they'd've had to've done was dissolve themselves, so the capitalists had to try and make sure it went on forever, even as they fought it tooth and nail, further evidence for this, or so the poster claims, can be found in the fact that capitalism encountered a near fatal death blow just after the fall of the Soviet Union, and in particular this poster points to the wealth of material posited by right-wing think tankers in the early and mid-nineties about capitalism being the be all end all of political and financial and moral systems, and that the only thing left to do was fix some of the warts here and there and touch up a few parts, but other than that it was the best we

were ever gonna get and nothing could come after it, we'd reached the final form, which to us sounds alot like economics considered as a Dragon Ball Z episode, but hey, what can yuns say, anyway, this poster claims that it was all this love for capitalism, coupled with the end of the Soviet Union, that near killed the whole thing, so here comes nine-eleven riding in on a white horse to save the day, and we haven't even gotten started on where this theory actually goes yet—hint, yuns won't believe it in the least.»

Ruth glanced at the grated speaker in the corner of the ceiling. “I think we might’ve made a mistake in gifting them that espresso machine.” She looked down at Eva again.

«But this poster claims that's exactly what makes it most likely to be the truth, because it's always the things that you can believe the least that turn out to be really really true.»

Ruth shook her head. Karen came up behind her. “So what’s the plan?”

Ruth glanced at her. “I’m waiting for an order of fries.” Then she said, “You think they’ll have popcorn?”

“No idea. You know how David is about it.”

“Yeah, but he’s not going to force his prejudices on everyone else.”

“I don’t know what to tell yuh.”

Ruth shook her head. “How long’re we staying at the party?”

“Why?”

“I just figure we should be on the same page.”

“You just wanna go up to the estate?”

“No, I just wanna know what we’re doing.”

Emmy came round carrying a tray with a cardboard container of baked sweet potato slices in the middle of it. “Here yuh go. Consider it on the Joint for happening to bring Eva down here when you did.”

Ruth took the fries, sniffed them. “I guess that depends on if we just happened along or not.” She glanced at Karen as she fished one out and bit into the end, steam rising out of the silky, pulpy center. She chewed. “Right?”

“You’ve been listening to too many conspiracy theories,” Karen said. She watched Eva. “So what’ve you decided?” She reached over and snatched a wedge.

“Hey, get your own complementary sweet potato fries.”

Eva scooted outa the booth and stood. "I'm gonna go up to the other lookout." She glanced over her shoulder, out the windows. "But yuns don't have to go."

"It's fine," Karen said. She swallowed, passed the sweet potato wedge to Ruth. "Here, if you want it so much, you can have it back." Ruth shrugged and ate it. Karen wiped her fingers on her jeans. "Besides, it might do some of us some good to breathe a little thinned oxygen for a while."

Ruth chewed a sweet potato wedge. "Is that a crack?"

"Of course," Karen said, "we've also gotta go by Culverton later. If you have an interest in seeing anyone up there, you could ride along with us."

Eva said, "They can't help. All the pressure suits were lost. And it's ...too far away."

"You never know," Karen said. "They still might find'm."

"*He's not coming back!*" Eva glared at them, then deflated, almost breaking down into tears, everyone in the place looking at her.

"What're yuns looking at?" Emmy said to the ones in the corner loading paperbacks into a paper bag. "Mind your own business." She put her arm round Eva's shoulders.

"What was the point?" Eva said. She sniffed, her sinuses filling. "Everything was going to end anyway. And all that happened was everyone went away because of me."

"It wasn't your fault," Emmy said.

"*I'm the one that did it. I'm the one that went off!*"

Karen stepped over and put a hand on her shoulder. "We'll give you a ride wherever you wanna go." She removed her hand. "If you're ready."

After a bit, Eva nodded.

Karen turned to walk out. Emmy hugged Eva one last time. "Come back anytime. It's always on the joint for yuns." And Emmy pulled away, still smiling a kind of smile that wasn't the status quo across counters.

Eva didn't reply as she moved toward the door, but that didn't impact Emmy's smile as she watched them head out.

Ruth offered her the cardboard container. "Fry?"

Eva shook her head, and the three of them walked out through the

parking lot, between the military surplus vehicles and the deputies sitting propped against them listless and idle on the asphalt.

After all that, all Angela and Gordon and the other guy'd had to do was take a fifteen minute drive off the four-lane, along a dirt-grass road where small trees and bushes crowded in from the sides and rubbed against the truck. Leaning forward in the cab, looking high through the windshield, they could just discern the tower above the treeline on a ridge top, outlined against the void. They came into a small clearing and parked. The translator tower right there.

"Well?" Gordon said.

Angela looked down at the signal-direction-finder in her lap. "This's gotta be it." She opened the door and climbed down, looking up at the tower, then down at the signal-direction-finder.

Gordon climbed out and threw back his head to look up at the tower, almost getting dizzy. "I hope it's not near the top."

Angela stepped toward the open door and laid the signal-direction-finder on the seat. She dug her flashlight from her pocket. "Let's start looking."

The guy who'd brought them out here climbed down from the truck and looked at them from behind the open door, but didn't follow them. The only thing he knew about it was he'd been contracted once to trim the brush on the roads leading up to the towers like these. And even not that for a while. (Gordon had gotten it all confused about the man's job when talking to Angela, but since the man with the former job in question never overheard it, and they never spoke of it in the truck on the way out there, the discrepancy remained unnoticed and unremarked upon, so in that way, functionally nonexistent.)

Angela shone the light round the base of the tower as she circled it, pausing to look at the covered diesel backup generator. It gently rumbled. She followed wires upwards from it, stopping as the light fell on a metal box mounted to the tower above. "Would you mind getting

my tools from the truck?” Gordon went back and pulled out the carpenter’s belt packed with clippers, cutters, crimpers, and electrical and network test gear. Angela transferred the light to her mouth, and she wrapped the belt round her waist, still looking up the pole. She clicked-off the flashlight and slipped it into the tool bag and unhooked a headlamp and strapped it on, clicked it on. “You coming?”

Gordon looked up the pole. “Why does it always have to be heights?”

“It’s not even that high.” She mounted the ladder, pulled herself up, climbed till she could hang off it and examine the box. She glanced down at Gordon. Holding the ladder with one hand and hooking one of her boots against a rung, she pulled out a battery-powered rotary cutter and flicked it on, sparks flying as the wheel cut into the padlock. Gordon didn’t make a comment about vandalism. All she’d’ve said’ve been *yep*, anyway. She clicked-off the rotary cutter and slipped it back into a pouch on the belt, pulled out a pair of pliers and used them to remove the still hot metal, and hooked the broken lock on the belt’s hammer loop. She popped open the casing. She whistled.

“What is it?”

“Believe it or not, it’s a magnetic tape system.” She cocked her head to change how the light fell into it. “It’s running right now.” The gears and wheel spun slowly, spooling tape from one side to the other. “It looks like it’s set up so the tape’s spliced end-to-end so it’ll loop indefinitely.” She glanced down at him, shining the light on the top of his balding head. “You wanna come up here and do the honors?”

“I’m fine.” But even at just a few feet above the ground, he clearly wasn’t.

She reached into the tool belt and unsheathed a pair of shears. “You know, if we do this, we’ll be at the end of our grant.” She sighed. “Oh, well.” And she reached in and snipped the tape.

. . .

And on the other side of the county, Tom came to in the darkness of the DUMMY PLUG, words half-formed in his mouth. He paused, for several moments barely realizing that nothing was happening and that, in fact, he was *really* there. And after those few moments’d

passed, hands shaking, he lifted the DUMMY PLUG off his head. He looked down at it. Something about it suddenly seemed dead, lifeless, that now it was just so much mostly inert organic and inorganic matter. Water dripped against the opaque faceplate. After another few moments, he realized he was crying. He dropped the thing on the carpet. One of the antennas and a small satellite dish broke. It didn't matter. He wiped his face, still crying. He stepped over it and unlocked the door, went out and down the hall. The scent of dinner wafted out of the kitchen. Ceramic dully clinked against wood; his wife bent over the table setting the plates. And at the sound of footsteps, she looked over her shoulder, straightened, turned, looking at him quizzically, then concerned. He crossed the room and hugged her tight. "Dear...?" But she didn't say anything more, just sighed in relief, even if she wasn't consciously aware of why she was so. Their daughter, who'd been looking into the oven, her face aglow from the light within, turned, ran over, wrapped her arms round his leg. And he looked down as she looked up, smiling. "Hi, daddy." And he released his wife and bent and lifted her, still crying. She, too, looked puzzled at his face. "Why're you sad, daddy?" He shook his head, partially smiled in a sloppy, still tearful way. And he hugged her.

• • •

The basketball court'd doubled as an auditorium by having a stage along one side, and chairs'd've been dispersed from the large rear closet on the occasions that'd called for such a conversion. Now, the curtain over the stage parted and a bunch of people turned from the tv they'd been watching, Anime among them, and they shouted, "SURPRISE!"

The real problem was the blood that'd exploded over it. Sure, the bullet'd missed tearing the sleeve, but who wanted to have to worry about stains so near the end of the end of the world? "What an evening to pick a white shirt," Candi said, as she came down the stairs.

Still leaned back on her elbows, Reciprocal looked up at her. "You'd better put some peroxide on that to soak."

"Ah." Candi sat down beside her. "It's not like it really matters." Reciprocal turned, once again, to look up at the ceiling.

"And what's wrong with you?" Candi said.

"They canceled Betrayal."

"Okay."

"It's a manga."

"Ooooooh."

Reciprocal sighed.

"Well, it is the end of the world, you know."

Reciprocal sighed. "Of course I know *that*." She rolled her eyes.

Strange and Successive emerged from one of the rooms off the main hallway, carrying an umbrella stand between them. Candi watched them enter another room farther down the hallway, Strange freeing one of his hands to open the door, Successive doing the same to close it after them.

"They canceled it before the end of the world," Reciprocal said. "I mean, I'm not saying that the problem's it's never gonna be complete. It's just that if they'd left it a little while, it'dn't technically ever've ended."

"Well..."

Reciprocal sighed. "Now it's just definitively incomplete."

"Yeah," Candi said. "I know what you mean." Reciprocal looked over at her. Candi said, "Absolute gave me this book to read and, you

know, it doesn't have no middle, or even a beginning, and the end just cuts right off, swoop." She sliced down with her hand. "Just like that. And I tell him this isn't even a whole book, you know."

Reciprocal rolled her eyes and looked at the ceiling.

"Hey," Candi said. "I'm agreeing with you."

Reciprocal sighed.

"Oh, come on." Candi shook her head, looked down at herself. "Since we're the same size now, can I borrow that pink shirt of yours? The one with the little flowers around the collar."

"Fine."

"Thanks."

"It's not like you're gonna keep it on long, anyway."

"Hey, watch it."

Classical, who'd emerged from somewhere farther down the hall, walked toward them and stopped. "Primary wants some more eggs. So you wanna go round and get em?"

"Sure," Candi said. She pushed herself up. "Just let me change my shirt."

"Why don't you do it?" Reciprocal said.

"I'm supposed to go up in the attic and look for something." He mounted the stairs, paused on the landing. "You wanna help?"

"No."

Classical shook his head and continued up, passing Candi on her way down as she finished pulling on a fresh shirt, though it wasn't the one she'd asked to borrow.

Strange and Successive emerged from another room, carrying a wood and cast-iron treadle sewing machine between them. Reciprocal glanced up as they passed. She leaned her head back against one of the steps and listened to doors open and close throughout the house. She sighed.

«... what I think God was sad about when he was still around? Clothes. I mean, he goes through all the trouble to create people one way. And I'm not saying there isn't a certain utilitarian aspect to it, depending on the climate and all that. But God goes through all this trouble to create things one way, and people demand to cover it up. I mean, God didn't demand clothes. It's Adam and Eve that wanted them. God just gave them better versions because the climate outside the garden probably wasn't as nice. So I figure it's like when they hang a picture behind a curtain or put a drape over one of those statues, like they sometimes do.»

«We do have to admit, we don't understand people who're so afraid of getting rock hard over the shape of a piece of marble. Well, thanks for that thought, Julia.»

«Thanks for having me.»

«You're very welcome. Alright, for any of yuns out there left to listen, give us a call if yuns're interested in shouting into the void. This's radio EFKO. Hello, you're on the air. What do yuh wanna say before the world ends?»

«I'd just like to mention. My name's Joel, by the way, And I'd just like to mention, if you don't mind, that I think you might be a little wrong.»

«Well, since yuh said it so nice, we'll let yuh continue.»

«I mean... Well, what I mean is, when you had the piece on Zeno's Paradox earlier.»

«You've been tuned in that long?»

«Yeah.»

«Like, continuous?»

«Yeah.»

«Well, we've just gotta ask, like, what's wrong with yuh? But, seriously, go on.»

«Well, I just wanted to say that, it seems to me, it may be possible that nothing'll end at all. That is, if there's no time, then, maybe, it just seems to me, that is, that things kinda might, then, I don't know exactly how to say it, but things might go on forever, or something like that. A kind of frozen last moment? I don't know, I'm not making very much sense.»

«Well, that's never stopped us.»

«Well...I mean, I've just been thinking, it might kinda be like a version of, you know, how Calvinistic predestination works and all that.»

«Not really.»

«So I was thinking, what if everyone who went into this kind of...end of time, all the ones that went in happy, stayed that way forever, because there wouldn't be no time no more, and all the ones that didn't stayed that way forever, like I said, I don't know if this makes much sense, but I just wonder if maybe, well I don't know, exactly how evolution'd fit into it, I'm not an academic or anything like that.»

«Well, if it's any consolation, you're making more sense than some of em we've known.»

«Really?»

«Well, let's not get too ahead of ourselves. But if you're right, those of us who're saved're saved and those of us who're screwed're screwed, right? Something like that? Nothing we can do about it?»

«I know, it doesn't sound very nice when put like that. I just wanted to say, well, I thought it might be an interesting idea.»

«Hold on, just a minute, Joel, we've got a message and another call that wants to hook up with yuh. Hello, You're on the air.»

«Hi. My name's Mindy—»

«Hi, Mindy. Whatcha wanna tell Joel?»

«Well, I just wanted to ask him, Joel, that is, something.»

«Shoot.»

«Well, to Joel, that is, did you like thinking about this?»

«I guess.»

«Think you could stand to do it for eternity?»

«I guess it wouldn't be so bad. I guess it depends.»

«So maybe even if you're right, you won't have it so bad, yourself. And if nothing can change, and somebody isn't worrying about the

state of everyone else when time does end, they won't have to ever worry about worrying about it again because things'll always be the same after that, maybe?»

«Well, we'll tell yuns what, we'll give each of yuns the other's number and it sounds like yuns two might wanna have a long discussion, and who knows maybe yuns can have it for the rest of eternity. Thanks Joel and Mindy. Though, we have to say that's a rather terrifying concept, and yuns know what's worse, if we think it's a terrifying concept at the time whenever this whole what-yuh-ma-call-it happens, we'll be stuck worrying for the rest of eternity. So let's move onto somethin' else real quick.»

«In other news, the black market for—»

«Chartreuse!»

«Anyway, used Sesamum Row DVDs and VHS tapes are going insane, seriously, everyone, we've just had two millionaires created in the last twelve hours, or however many hours it's been, no joke.»

«And of course they promise that if the world doesn't end before whenever April fifteenth'd've been, they'll be sure to pay all the taxes on their contraband obscene material, so if the IRS still existed, they wouldn't be able to get 'em on that charge.»

«Maybe they can go into bidding on that pink convertible, which apparently the sheriff's department's seized under civil forfeiture laws, or so a little bird tells us, since that'll probably be going to come up to auction—»

«Yeah, we can't see the lot of them disgracing their manhood by being seen in it. Or we should say it'd've come up to auction if any of them could move. But more on that later.»

«In other news, any of you who've still got an uneaten Joint Burger, well—»

«Hold onto yuns's buns and asses—»

«There's an auction for two going on right now, and both are looking like they'll be worth approximately one-half a pink convertible, at minimum. So keep that in mind. Also, what claims to be the world's last Joint Burger chicken sandwich, still wrapped and everything, but without the fries, has just gone up for auction, aswell.»

«So it's chicken or beef, folks, and yuns better hurry if one of those's on yuns's list for a last meal.»

«Also, well, a lot of beer was stolen out of the sheriff's department impound, apparently, what with everything that's going on.»

«But it's not like any of them mind.»

«Apparently, or so a little bird tells us, all those heads-up displays're apparently capable of video as well as text, and they've got about, oh, another five-or-ten-hundred-something hours of VHS tapes to go through and, oh, we stand corrected, one poster here notes that another cache of them was uncovered in the back room of the drugstore across from the FlapJack Barn, so they'll have to go through those, too.»

«Oh, boy.»

«So apparently this falls under the category of a dirty job that someone has to do and, well, we salute the local sheriff's department for being so thorough in its duties.»

«Now that might not be such a bad way to spend eternity.»

«And coming up next we're going to talk with James Eller, otherwise a nobody, no credentials or anything like that, who's going to talk to us about why it is the Japanese played more violent video games than anyone else, but had almost no mass shootings, so stay tuned for that. Also, if there's still anyone out there to listen, there's going to be a small showing of David Stoker's latest and probably last film up on the Culverton Estate, starting this evening, or it may've already started, but don't worry about that, it says just show up whenever, the movie will be on loop till the world ends or the equipment breaks down, whichever comes first.»

«And if yuns know these types of films, yuns probably know that the viewing order isn't too important, so if yuns're interested, take a little drive or pilgrimage up that way. We do not, however, know if popcorn will be served. So yuns might wanna play it safe and bring yuns's own, if there's still any left out there in what's left of the world.»

«Also, we have a message here from DemonicEpisodeGuide, leader of some band which's letting us know they're adopting the name Red Death Highway for their performance tonight.»

«Well, thank yuns for that, DemonicEpisodeGuide. So if any of yuns're still out there, stay tuned, cause we've got alot more coming up, but if yuns've stayed tuned this long, yuns might've heard it all before, so if yuns leave, yuns probably don't have to worry 'bout missing nothin. But if yuns do hang round, well, first we've gotta ask what's

wrong with yuns? second, we just wanna remind yuns that yuns're listening to radio EFKO, staying with yuns, maybe, till the end of the end of the world.»

"Gravity is what keeps the whole world together. Gravity is why the world is round. So if you want to think about the world, you can think about a ball, a nice big round ball."

The class sat there in silence. Part of the advantage of the TVs had been they allowed for the lights to be off the most of the time, allowing the generators to function longer, so no unintended blackouts'd started within the school yet.

"The world has always been round. And it goes around and around the sun. The sun is also round. However, the sun is much larger than the Earth. In fact, you could fit thousands and thousands of Earths in the sun and still have room leftover for the other planets. So the solar system is like a whole bunch of different sizes of balls. You have basketballs and baseballs and tennis balls and ping-pong balls and some as small as marbles and some as big and airy as beach balls."

THE DEPUTIES HAVE GONE The runner ran across the bottom of the screen. **THE DOORS ARE UNLOCKED**

Cutting off the wrist that stuck out from the bottom of Mrs Turtle. **THE DEPUTIES HAVE GONE** Everyone remained in silence. **THE DOORS ARE UNLOCKED**

"Just remember, children, what shape is the world? That is right. It is round."

The TV flickered off. The lights flickered on. Squeaking in her transparent plastic uniform, just like everyone else, sweat running down the inside of it, making it slippery to sit in, Lily pulled her matching backpack from under her desk and stood, filtering out into the hallway with the other students, their coveralls wet and foggy on the insides, too.

"Did you notice that different kind of distortion running along the bottom of the tape?" Harmony said.

To save power, alternating sets of overhead hall lights'd been turned off, rendering the halls as uni-dimensional checker boards.

Juliette said, "Wonder why that happens?"

"Shit gets old," Crystal said. "Things start to break down." It was like the way paint peeled from the walls in some parts of the school.

"Have yuns noticed something?" Lily said.

"What?"

"There haven't been any resource officers round."

Harmony thought on this. "You're right."

"Probably just hiding waiting to jump out of a closet," Crystal said. "Mace somebody in th—"

"FREEDOM!"

Everyone filtering into the cafeteria, which included Lily and Harmony and Juliette and Crystal, stopped. Someone'd climbed up on a table, torn off his school uniform. "EVERYBODY," he couldn't seem to keep from yelling, breathless, partly from having been so hot and sweaty in his uniform, "FOLLOW US. THIS'S THE WAY OUT. THEY'RE NOT WATCHING ANYMORE." And he jumped down from the table. "WHAT'RE YUNS WAITING FOR?" He looked over his shoulder as he made it to the door. "COME ON."

"God," Crystal said, "this's gonna be a mess."

"They'll tackle him for sure," Harmony said.

Someone said, "Let's go watch."

"He's gonna get maced fur'sure."

"Let's stay out of it."

But several followed.

"Come on," Crystal said.

"But they might get after us too," Harmony said.

"Not if they can get him." Crystal motioned her head toward the cafeteria doors "Come on."

And the others had almost no choice but to follow her down the hall, a small procession marching a safe distance behind him as he stomped down the hallway, looking over his shoulder at them occasionally, motioning. "COME ON." They followed him all the way to the front of the school, where the metal detectors lay on the other side of a set of chain-link gateways, which he pushed through, the deputy slumped there, having slid down against the wall. Electrically

speaking, the gates having been installed so much later in the lifetime of the building, they were, because of the contractor who'd installed them going the cheaper and quicker route, tied into the same circuits as the lights in the classroom next door, meaning, the most of the time, whenever those lights were off to allow the CRT prominence, or when they were off when students weren't in class, that is, anytime other than the few minutes when everyone filtered in and filtered out when class was starting or was over, the locks weren't active, which no one had ever noticed, because the deputies had only ever tried to open the doors when buzzed in, and therefore'd always expected them to open, and no one'd ever tried to open them when they hadn't expected them to open. So the guy pushed through to the outer doors. He stopped and looked over his shoulder, everyone else having stopped halfway down the hall. He pushed open the outside door, held it. "COME ON!" He stood there. "WHAT'RE YUNS WAITING FOR?"

After a while, a couple pushed out of the crowd, carefully made their way through the gates, cringed as they looked at the collapsed deputy as they stepped through the metal detectors, which were as dead as proverbial hammers because going in and out with all that body armor had been too much of a pain in the metaphorical ass, and the intense beeping'd been very annoying, almost as bad as the sound some alarm clocks could make, so they'd just left them off until necessary.

The guy motioned. "COME ON!"

"What do yuns think?" Lily said.

"I...don't know." Harmony shook her head.

"Hey," Lily said. "Maybe we could go look at the sun."

Crystal didn't say anything.

"I thought you weren't supposed to look directly at it," Juliette said.

"They show pictures of it," Harmony said. "So you have to be able to look at it somehow. Besides, it doesn't hurt when you see it on the television."

"COME ON!"

"You're such a baby. Besides, you saw it."

"Well...yeah." She paused. "But that was a while ago. Maybe it looks different now." Given that all she'd ever perceived through

her visual faculties had been images, by the nature of her species' visual perception, oftentimes any given set of images of images (such as those on a screen or a page or conceptualized in her faculties of imagination) had a tendency not so much to bleed into what some on what was left of what was left of the internet referred to as the real world so much as they were usually never categorized as distinct in the first place, and, combined with the decay of memory that tends to occur when such related structures in such biological systems are not referenced and refreshed often enough over time, that was what gave her pause.

"COME ON!"

"But," Juliette said, "what about the truancy squads?"

"Well, they'll just bring us back," Lily said.

"But we haven't had lunch yet," Harmony said. "And what if there's a fine. I don't get any more money in my account till Thursday."

"ARE YUNS ALL JUST GONNA STAY HERE FOREVER?"

"I think... I think I'm going to go outside," Lily said.

One or two more'd broken from the crowd and made their way forward through the gates. The deputy, lying there, didn't visibly stir. Though, he had no need to, since, though Hope didn't know it, but would've been very interested to know, since all that body armor was so much trouble, like certain deep-sea diving suits, and as director commentary pointed out in the extra features of *Sphere An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody*, though talking about diving suits, but either the body armor or the diving suits required a minimum of one other person for any given person to get in or out of one, and this led to the necessity of a builtin waste-management system akin to what astronauts had used (the word 'former' not applicable here because there was still one astronaut still extant in the county).

"Well..." Harmony looked through the chain-link gates and through the metal detectors, at the double doors in the distance. "I'd kinda like to see what the sun really looks like, again." She added, "And maybe if we're out long enough, the moon."

"You can't both go," Juliette said. "What about..."

"Why don't you come, too?" Lily said?

"COME ON! WHAT'S WRONG WITH ALL OF YUNS?"

"Well..." Juliette nodded. "Okay." She looked at Crystal. "Come on."

Crystal shook her head.

"But you gotta come."

"No, thanks."

"But..."

Lily and Harmony turned to look at her, as well. "But we always do everything together," Harmony said. "We always have."

"And it's not," Juliette said, "like they won't bring us back after a while."

Crystal shook her head. "Yuns go if yuns want." Someone stepped near her, and she accepted a piece of paper into her hand without looking; later, when she was free of security cameras, she'd decode the symbols and find out who wanted what and figure out how much to charge in trade for it.

"COME ON!"

Lily turned to look out through the gates and metal detectors at the double doors. "I'm going to go outside," she said. And taking ahold of her backpack straps over her shoulders, she started forward. After a moment, Harmony started after her. Juliette watched them, then looked at Crystal.

"But..."

"Go on if you're going," Crystal said. "You might not get another chance." She added, "Besides, yuns'll probably be brought back in for class by tomorrow."

Juliette turned to look as Lily and Harmony pushed open the first gate. She bit her lip. She took two steps forward. She turned and looked back.

"Go on if you're going," Crystal said.

Juliette looked at her a moment.

"WHAT'S WRONG WITH ALL YUNS?"

Then she turned and followed Lily and Harmony, tentatively reaching out and pushing open the first gate, biting her lip as she stepped by the prostrate deputy. Lily and Harmony waited for her just this side of the double doors. And when she'd reached them, Juliette turned and looked back through the metal detectors and the chain links, at Crystal, who was still standing there.

“COME ON!”

“Come on,” Lily said. She turned, her clothes squeaking, and she and Harmony pushed open the other double door, which didn’t move easily, as it hadn’t opened in a long time. Finally, Juliette turned away and followed them out into the parking lot. They stood there looking up.

“It must be night,” Harmony said.

“It’s not like a darkened room,” Lily said, “that’s for sure.”

Out there, a couple of body-armor-clad deputies lay slumped against their patrol cars.

“Where do we go now?” Harmony said.

Lily looked round at the chain-link-and-razor-wire-enclosed perimeter. “Look.” She pointed. Someone’d stuck a stick in the ground outside the fence, a cardboard sign stapled to it, written on it in permanent marker: Exit this way → “What do you think that means?”

“Well, it’s got an arrow,” Juliette said. “Maybe it means to go the way it’s pointing. That’s usually what they mean. You think they mean the same thing outside?”

“I guess we’ll just have to find out,” Lily said. They approached and started walking along the fence in the direction the arrow’d indicated, till they’d come to a gate. The padlock’d been cut and dropped there on the ground. “I guess we go through here,” Lily said. She pushed it open.

Juliette looked back, the last through. “Are we supposed to close it?”

“Better,” Harmony said. And Juliette pulled it to again. They walked down the road and onto the four-lane and stood there in the intersection, looking round. “Where do we go now?”

“You smell that?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m still hungry. We didn’t get anything in the cafeteria, remember?”

“How am I supposed to forget?”

“The lights are on up there,” Lily said.

Juliette sniffed the air. “And that seems to be where the smell’s coming from.”

“Well,” Lily said, “I guess that’s as good a place as any to try, right?” She started that way, her clothes squeaking with her movements. Juliette’s and Harmony’s squeaked, too, as they caught up. The armored vehicles and troop carriers were still arrayed in horseshoe fashion in the parking lot, and they moved between them, looking at the slumped, body-armor-clad deputies lying there as if that body-armor were empty and’d just been cast aside. Lily reached for the door, a PULL sign on the other side of the glass, but she pushed, nothing happening.

“It’s locked?” Juliette said.

They looked through the extra-large glass windows, at those inside. And having seen them standing there several minutes while she was wiping tables, Emmy came over and pushed open the doors. She smiled. “Hi.” She glanced down at their uniforms. “Oh, is there a costume party somewhere?” She rolled her eyes. “I never get invited to these things.” She held open the door. “Well, come on in. Have a seat. Everything’s just been cleaned.” She stood at the end of the table as they shifted into the booth, their uniforms frictionous against the material. “So what can I get yuns?”

“Is there any orange stuff today?” Juliette said.

“Well...” Emmy scratched her head. “We’ve got sweet potato wedges. They’re kinda orange-ish. Anything else?”

“Blue,” Harmony said.

“One blue-berry almond-milk shake.” She looked at Lily. “And you?”

“I’ll have orange, too.”

“Alright,” Emmy said, “be back in just a minute.”

“When does the moon and the sun come out?” Juliette said.

“Well, they got blowed up a long time ago.” Emmy shrugged. “You know how it goes. But I’ll go get yuns’s order, so just hang tight. And if there’s anything else yuns want, just let me know, we aim to be the last and best fast food place in existence come the end of the world.” She turned. “Now, that’ll be a record to be proud of.”

«Well, you're on what's left of the air. So whatta yuh wanna say before the world ends?»

«I just wanted to say that Professor Richardson is completely wrong about the evolution of sleep in humans.»

«Okay. That all?»

«Yes.»

«Well then, thank yuh very much. We're not sure she'd appreciate it, but whatta yuh gonna do? Oh well. So, wait, we didn't get your name. All out of order. Stupid stupid. So what's your name?»

«Wanda Holmes. I'm also a professor at the university.»

«Well, fantastic. So, Professor Holmes, how're we supposed to sleep?»

«We'll have to wait for the science to be settled on the subject.»

«So how long're we gonna have to wait, here?»

«That's indeterminable. You can't know that in advance.»

«Well, we weren't planning on sleeping, anyway. Who wants to sleep through the last of the end of the world? Thanks for that, Professor Holmes. So—»

«Let me have the phone.»

«Um, hello?»

«This's Professor Vandyke.»

«Okay.»

«And I just want to say that Professor McCarthy is completely without base in regards to her theory of regression in toilet technology, completely without base.»

«Okay.»

«Her thesis is completely wrong. It is completely wrong in every respect. It's ridiculous. If anything, the invention of the flush toilet in fifteen-ninety-two proves the continuity of technological progress,

the Harrington design would not be made popular until Cummings invented the s-trap in seventy-seventy-five, thereby providing a means to stop sewer gases from rising through the toilet and thereby improving the technology to the point where it was actually palatable enough to become widely deployed.»

«Well, okay.»

«Why don't you put it on speaker instead?»

«Well, how do you do that?»

«Well, okay. So—»

«So if any of yuns're out there asleep, give us a call from your dreams, just don't make it collect. Anyone know what a collect call is anymore? Course, we only know it from the movies, so... And if yuns're on the toilet, well, same deal. And if yuns're on the toilet in your dreams... Aaaaanyway, anybody who's out there who wants to give us a call, even if yuh just wanna say how wrong everything that came before was, we're radio EFKO, and we're gonna be here, maybe, kinda, sorta till there ain't nothing. Who knows? If you do, call in.»

The courtrooms themselves were all on the second floor of the courthouse, so there was no way they were going to get to them with the tank, not that Absolute had figured on anything like that, but Drive still gunned the engine as he crested the hill and turned to head into the parking lot, aiming for the side with the administrative offices. “Choo. Choo. I’m the Cool-Aid Sex-Non-Specific Entity.” And the cement-filled barrel punched through the brick wall, followed by the whole front of the machine, riding up over the small pile of bricks created there from the collapse. “Oh, yeah.” Drive jammed the machine to a stop.

“You better not’ve hit anybody,” Absolute said. “If you did, you’ll be the one who has to deal with Candi. And you’ll have to take them up so Retroactive can bring them back.”

“Blah blah blah.”

Absolute climbed out of the gunners seat and unlocked the hatch, brick fragments tumbling off as he shoved it up. He poked his head out, scanning the darkened, now dust-filled, interior. “Anyone here?” A flame flickered in the corner, a lighter, as someone relit a candle. The flame glinted in a pair of dusty glasses as the woman picked herself up from the floor. “Sorry ’bout that,” Absolute said. “We’re looking for some information.”

“About?”

“A court case that’s ongoing.”

“Do you have the number?”

“No. Just that it involves a publishing company that puts out something titled Still-Water Life As They Apply To A Slice of Lemon Pie, if that’s any help.” The woman set the candle on the bench and went over to a shelf, pulled off a book, and laid it down. She opened it, shifting through the pages. He’d heard enough on the radio to know

someone had to be representing them locally, of course, the state of what was left of the world also would've told him that, but it was nice to cross-check.

"We don't have computerized systems right now. So this'll take a minute."

"That's fine."

She ran her finger down the page, stepped away, walking down the aisle, and selecting a book from the far end, and bringing it back, she laid it open over the first. "I don't see anything listed about Lemon Pies or Still-Water Life." She turned the page. "Do you have any other names?"

"Might've started with something like...pico...pico-something."

"There's a listing for a PicoGraff."

"That's it."

"Um..." She adjusted her glasses. "The defendants didn't show and the judge issued an order against them for their arrest. But that's closed." She leaned and glanced at the clipboard hung on the wall. "And that was the last one. There's nothing on the schedule now but identity-theft cases."

"Alright. Thanks, Carol."

She closed the book and walked it back down the way and returned.

"You wouldn't happen to have any idea where the publisher's attorney's are?"

"Oh, they disappeared a while ago. He's been having to represent himself."

"The publisher?"

"Well, the guy who owns it. But his name's PicoGraff, too." She closed the larger volume, turned, and reinserted it on the shelf.

"And any idea where he's at?"

"No. Sorry, that's not public information."

"Well, sorry to've bothered you. And... Sorry 'bout the mess."

"Oh, don't worry about it." She reached back and pulled the scrunchy that held her hair in place, letting it fall onto her shoulders. "I'm walking out right now, anyway."

"Well...do you need a ride?"

"No, I'm fine." She went down and came out from behind the counter. "Where's Candi?"

"Oh, she's with my sister, visiting awhile."

"I suppose that's Drive in there."

"Yap."

She looked at the length of the barrel.

"Does it shoot?"

"Nope."

"Figures." She stepped across scattered bricks. She shoved some of them out of the way with her foot in order to open the door. "Tell Candi hi for me."

"Will do."

"If you want, I can ask Ellen if she knows anything."

"I don't wanna put you out."

"Oh, it's no trouble. We're walking out together." She stepped into the doorway. "Meet you out front in five minutes."

"Alright."

She closed the door.

Absolute ducked down into the tank, closed the hatch. "Go round front."

Drive whistled as he threw the machine into reverse and they lurched down off the pile of bricks as they shifted under-tread. And he turned it, took it round the front of the building, and stopped at the front doors so Absolute could open the hatch and climb out. He sat there on the tank waiting, the vibrations of the motor carrying up through his hips, Drive humming to himself and shifting side to side in his seat, the engine idling. Finally, the pair emerged, Ellen carrying a flashlight. "Evening, Absolute."

"Evenin'."

Under pretense of seeing him better without trying to blind him, she let the flashlight beam rest on his shirtless torso. "You're looking good tonight." She looked at the tank, casting the flashlight beam out over the length of the barrel.

"Sorry to bother you," Absolute said, "but I was wondering if you'd happen to know anything about the whereabouts of a man named PicoGraff?"

"Oh, yes." She let the light settle on him again. And she paused there, till Carol jogged her arm. "Hm? Oh. Yes, the president signed an order for him earlier."

"An order? What kind of order?"

"Well, technically that's a state secret," Ellen said.

"Oh."

"Oh, pooh," Carol said, and took the flashlight. "He was given some kind of order to make it legal for him to raise a militia to go after anyone found assaulting the economic interests of businesses in the county." Carol flicked the light out along the length of the barrel. "You'll probably find him over at the New Harbor Church, you know, the one up from the Exxon, out by the storage units up there, that started last week, in that old warehouse building. I heard they were going to have some sort of recruitment drive over there."

"Thanks."

"You don't have to run off," Ellen said.

"Yes, he does," Carol said. She shook her head. "Are yuns going to the movie later?"

"Hadn't thought about it."

"Well, we are," Carol said.

Ellen said, "Maybe we'll see you there."

"Maybe we'll see *Candi* there," Carol said.

"Maybe." Absolute rose and moved toward the hatch, climbed in. "Thanks, again."

"Oh, it's no trouble."

He waved and closed the hatch. Drive revved the engine, black smoke belching from the stack, the machine turning, churning asphalt with opposite-going tracks, the whole thing lurching forward as Drive jammed the other track into the advancing position, the tank off and gone across the parking lot.

"You ever ridden in a tank?" Ellen said.

"No."

"I think I'd like to try it sometime."

"Uh huh." They walked toward Carol's car. "I doubt it's the smoothest ride there is."

"Rough's not so bad once in a while." Ellen opened the car door. "Let's go by the store on the way and see if it's still open. I'd like some popcorn."

. . .

Meanwhile, out on the highway, Drive locked it into full speed in the straightaway beyond Mainstreet, blowing past and between the Lazy Whistle Pig and the gravel and sand loading area, the tracks churning to bits a cardboard sign that'd been left in the road, letters scattering into the grass on either side.

"Speed limit," Absolute said, as they entered the Helena town limits. And Drive grumbled and slowed, the tank going along at fifteen miles per hour for a tenth of a mile, till they hit the intersection across from the Huddle House, and he turned to go out over the bridge. On the point of the ridge high above and past that, the light streaming upwards over the edges of what remained of the world illuminated the raw side of the hill, the gaping maw of the gravel quarry, none of it visible through the narrow view slit afforded the driver. The engine roared as Drive jammed the gas and they took out over the bridge and started up the hill on the other side, passing storage centers and churches as they made their way along the three-quarters-of-a-mile stretch up to the top, past the motel and storage units. And Drive jammed to a stop the track on one side, making as hard a turn as the machine could, rumbling off the asphalt, tearing up the grass along the side of the road, tearing through a chain-link fence, and spitting parking-lot gravel in their wake. "Just knock," Absolute called over the engine noise.

"If I'm gonna be hamstrung like this," Drive called over the sound of the engine, "I don't see why I bothered to come." But he slowed, easing the tank forward till the end of the barrel touched the front double doors and knocked them both open. He stopped and reversed a few feet. "Happy?"

"That'll do." Absolute climbed up and unfastened the hatch, climbed out on top of the tank, and dropped off the front. Light from inside the generator-driven church spilled through the open doorway and over him as he passed through and started up the aisle. He stopped halfway. A few faces, attached to nowhere near enough bodies to fill the corrugated metal building with its plastic steeple, turned toward him. "I'm looking for a man named Picograff. Anyone seen him?" He looked at the man standing beside the podium with a wireless stem mic in his hand. "Wouldn't happen to be you, would it?" He walked toward the front of the church, noted a sizable

stack of copies of Still-Water Life As They Apply To A Slice of Lemon Pie. "I'm betting you are."

"And you would be?"

"Not particularly important." He turned and walked over to the stack of books and picked up one, opened it at random, flipped through it. "Mind if I ask you a few quick questions?"

"The question and answer session isn't until the end."

"Oh." Absolute turned, book still in hand, looking down at it. "Well, we're probably pretty close to the end already." He idly turned a page. "You believe in what you print, Picograff?"

Picograff looked out over the crowd. "Of course," he said into the microphone.

Absolute didn't look up, but idly turned a page, closed the book, looked at the back cover. "One-fifty-two-ninety-nine. Steep price." He opened it again, leafed through. "Course, that's the way textbooks are. When you've got a captive market, you can charge whatever you want." He closed the book again and turned it over. "Just with the number of copies that I happen to know're in existence," that is, the ones sitting half-pulped from gunfire, "a book this size, this number of pages..." He flipped it open. "This kind of paper, color printing. Perfect binding..." He closed it. "In these quantities, I'd say it cost about...a dollar and a half to two dollars per, counting shipping." He still hadn't looked up. "That's a pretty good margin."

"That might be a little overstated."

Absolute looked up at him. "Perhaps." He returned the book to the pile. "I was figuring a little high in order to be conservative. It could be as much as half that."

Picograff didn't reply.

"Now, not that I'm against you making money in the least. No. It's just that, well, if you believed it that much, I'd think you'd be a little more interested in spreading the word. But then again, you can't do it at cost. No. I suppose you're against communism, right?"

"Of course," Picograff said into the microphone.

Absolute nodded. "So you can't give it away because that's, what, communism, or something like it. But if you sell it for this price, well, we've all gotta wonder if your believin' more in what's in it, or the price on the cover." Absolute turned. He started down the

aisle. He paused, turned. "Creates a real bind, don't it? In order to spread God, as if he were jam on toast," (he'd once read this phrase in a book and liked it, even though it meant nothing), "you have to make lots of money, because that proves God loves you and wants you to keep doing what you're doing, but you've always also gotta prove you're doing it for the one reason and not the other." Absolute turned and scratched the back of his neck. "Hm. Glad I don't have to deal with it." And he continued down the aisle, toward the still rumbling tank, the sound of which'd reverberated through the inside of the metal building that whole time. And he stepped through the double doors and climbed up onto it, dropped through the hatch. In that time, none of the people seated inside'd moved, except to turn, again, toward the man at the front of the church, who stood still beside the podium with a wireless stem mic in his hand.

"Is that it?" Drive called over the rumble of the motor. Of course, he'd been watching through the view slit, obviously, unable to hear anything but the intermix of the idling motor and *«so, Doctor Frasier, exactly how many calories is it that the brain has to burn when dealing with a real head-scratcher of a problem?»*

«Not as many as you might think. In fact, the brain's quite developed for quickly and efficiently dealing with these kinds of situations and problems. Evolution's primed a lotta shortcuts into the human psyche.»

«That fast?»

«Not really. My research's shown that many of the features go far back in the genetic line to the earliest species of proto-apes.»

Absolute closed the hatch.

«So you're tellin' us that essentially the world ain't that different.»

«Well, just because the mental structures and techniques, the hardware-firmware interface, if you will, may've originally evolved quite a while ago, that doesn't necessarily mean it's still being used for exactly the same purposes. It's much like any other aspect of the body in that regard.»

«Well, now we're confused.»

«Yes, I'm afraid that happens sometimes, maybe especially to those of us who claim to study this stuff.»

"Let's go home."

«So we take it you're saying, like, some people just won't change their minds no matter what.»

«No, it actually applies to pretty much e—»

«Well, basically everybody.»

Drive sighed, dropping his chin against his chest. "I don't know why I bother." He jammed the machine into reverse. "Go somewhere." He jammed a track into the forward position after they bounded through a ditch and hit the highway. "Have a tank." He jammed the other track into the forward position when they'd come about. "And don't do nothin'." He floored it. "I'VE GOTTA TANK," he called over the noise. He adjusted his eye-patch. "I OUGHTA BE ALLOWED TO DO SOMETHING WITH IT."

«I just wanna interject, if I may.»

«Oh, go right ahead. We won't mind.»

«It's just that we don't wanna get the idea there's some real world out there that all of our senses are somehow misrepresenting. I think that misses the picture.»

«I never claimed anything like that.»

«No, but I mean it could be easily interpreted that way.»

«No, you have to assume there's a basic truth out there, regardless of how the senses interpret it and convey that.»

«That's complete bullshit, you can only start with the model that developed from it, the nature of the sensory data itself can never be defined as originating from the same, let alone a structured source, so the only thing that you can work from is the nature of the models themselves. And maybe not even that.»

«You wanna throw away the entire history of the scientific method.»

«Science's concern isn't reality. It's merely the focus on the gathering of a dataset.»

«But that dataset has no point if there's not a self-consistent universe beyond the senses.»

«But the necessity for it doesn't mean there is. So we can only do the best we can. And if it turns out not to be—»

«Then there'd be no point to anything. And—»

«And we just have to do our best and assume that it is till proven otherwise, at least then there's a possibility of using the collected data for predictive purposes, whereas there's none if we do nothing. And—»

«Okaaaay. We think we're gonna let this one go back into the forums. No offense, Doctors, but it feels like we're clogging up the airwaves here. Nice to have yuns on.»

«Alright. So the world hasn't ended yet. We think.»

«And if it hasn't ended for yuh yet, give us a call if yuns want.»

«However, we do wanna give everyone a warning, we're experiencing a heavy amount of interference for some reason.»

«And if yuns just want the whole truth, we're beginning to suspect we're being jammed.»

«And right now we're boosting power as much as we can, but the tanks are almost empty.»

«And we're gettin' what we can out'a the trucks, but, well, as yuns can probably figure, even if yuns suck as badly at math as us, is that that ain't gonna last forever, neither. So, well, we'll do what we can. But if any of yuns out there're still existin' and yuns've still got internet and yuns wanna give us a call, well, yuns'd better hurry up about it. And as we've been for, well, a long time now, this's radio EFKO, staying with yuns, probably, hopefully, maybe, through the rest of what's left of the end of the world.»

“Can you turn that off?” Absolute said.

“What? I can'a hear yuh?”

Absolute shook his head and settled into the gunner position. “Let's just get home.”

“You never were any fun,” Drive called, as he peered through the view slit, “you know that? Always too frackin' stodgy.” They passed over the Helena bridge, shooting through the intersection, up the hill, up through where the road ran through blasted-out solid rock, bypassing the township, headed for the interstate.

“Where're you going?”

“SHORT CUT,” Drive yelled over the motor, which vibrated his teeth the same way it was doing Absolute's. “IT'S A TANK, AFTER ALL. MIGHT AS WELL TAKE ADVANTAGE OF IT. WHO WANTS TUH WASTE A PERFECTLY GOOD TANK?”

Of course, in the courtroom, they'd heard all the noise created from the tank crashing through one of the walls below, at least they'd registered it in some way, but what with all the shouting, there were more immediate concerns.

"I TELL YOU I *AM* JUSTIN FREEMONT."

August banged the gavel. The woman in handcuffs continued to yell and gesticulate. And August continued to bang the gavel. "SINCE YOU'RE NOT GOING TO EVEN TRY AND CLAIM ANY DEFENSE," and August's only choice was to try and yell over her, "I'M GONNA TAKE IT YOU'RE PLEADING GUILTY." August banged the gavel. "AND I SENTENCE YOU TO FIVE YEARS IN PRISON FOR IDENTITY THEFT. DEPUTIES." August banged the gavel. "DEPUTIES, REMOVE THIS PERSON." August banged the gavel. But no one came. Which, in more than just the ways it wouldn't have been thought so, wasn't a good thing, as August, besides pouring of sweat under his robes, his throat dry, eyes strained from trying to see by the dim illumination the lamp afforded, and having lost that case to that goddamn university attorney who'd successfully argued that the university consisted of its own socio-spatial identity and as such any use of non-military personnel for law enforcement without the express consent of the authorities of the socio-spatial identity in question, working in tandem with the law enforcement personnel of that socio-spatial identity, constituted an illegal act, and in effect, was the invasion of a separate and, therefore, by certain particularly circumscribed interpretations of certain definitions, a sovereign body which, legally speaking, the authorities of that body had a right to repel with any means that should be deemed necessary by those same authorities of said body, meaning that Mike'd walked out of court a free man. August continued to bang the gavel. "DEPUTIES." And

continued to bang the gavel. "DEPUTIES." And continued to bang the gavel. "DEPUTIES!"

And the audience, of course, just watched.

Finally, August pushed up out of the seat and came down from behind the bench as the woman continued to yell. "I AM JUSTIN FREEMONT. I JUST HAPPENED TO WAKE UP LOOKING LIKE THIS." But August ignored her and passed her and pushed open the double doors to go out into the hall. The other cases waited out there, sitting along the floor, their wrists ziptied together. Between them, the black-body-armored deputies lay slumped against the walls. "GET UP!" But of course, none of them did. And August turned and stormed back into the courtroom, passed the woman, turned, faced her. "I HEREBY ORDER YOU TO PRESENT YOURSELF FOR DETENTION."

"FUCK OFF."

"THAT'S AN ORDER. THIS IS THE LAW TALKING!"

Of course, anyone, or at least, a statistically higher proportion of those gathered in the courtroom, and that proportion itself wasn't necessarily a reflection on the broader statistical proportions of what remained of the broader population, but that was only by degree, but the most of those who'd noted the change in tone and pitch of his voice over the past several hours, or days, or whatever time meant, had one part of their brain tell the interested slash anxious part that it was merely because he'd spoken so long his voice was getting strained, because things like that happened when a person spoke too long.

"I'M JUSTIN FREEMONT."

"JUSTIN FREEMONT'S A MAN!"

"NOT ANYMORE!"

And it's likely this exchange'd've continued in much the same fashion for quite sometime had someone not come running into the courtroom, shoving through the double doors, carrying a passenger side car door from a very reputable American company, yelling, "IT'S IN THE CARS!", and then proceeding to raise the dissected car door over his head. He'd just come from the county's reasonably new, temporary detainment facility, where they'd already put the inmates to work, which's how they'd found what'd left him breathless and trying to yell as he hoisted the passenger side car door over his head

in the center aisle in the courtroom. “They...” And he struggled for breath. “...got this Muslim writing on the inside.” And sure enough, there was Arabic script on the inside of the frame, uncovered after all the bits and bobs and panels and fabric-covered pieces’d been removed. “And it’s on alot more of em too.” Which almost everyone in the courtroom took to mean, therefore, that it must be in slash on all of them. This information connected with a, at the time, a small misunderstanding that’d circulated much earlier that, somehow, Muslim prayers were in some fashion like Buddhist prayers, that is, placed on physical objects, in the case of Buddhist prayers, or more specifically, Tibetan Buddhism, on scrolls that were design to be either turned by hand, or alternatively, by the wind or some other, non-human motivating force—and that the motivating force needed be non-human was another error in and of itself—but they needed to revolve, each revolution being equivalent to a single pronouncement of the prayer, indeed, at one point, when he’d existed, the Dalai Lama’d claimed that mechanical computer hard drives, the rotating platter kind, counted in this fashion, sending up prayers at a rate of 5600 to 7200, or in the case of some really high-end models, 12000, RPMs, however, there was no major revision of this statement following the widespread introduction of solid state disks, so this statement erroneously got applied to hard drives in general (the word ‘hard drive’ already having been generalized to cover all non-removable storage devices inside a computer), however, the error remained that somehow this method of prayer was somehow related to Islam, even though Buddhism and Islam’d spent so much history fighting each other, which might’ve given pause to anyone that knew that, when they also heard about the former, but for most that’d heard it, anything that wasn’t their particular religion tended to be lumped together anyway, so it all came out the same, which was, of course, the root (or primal) error. However, there was a particular modification to this idea that’d happened during its transmittance, as was usual in the course of the extended game of telephone through the human thochtosphere which such thochts had to traverse and which was their naturally evolved environment (though, they really didn’t evolve in the sense that genes did, that was just yet another derived thocht for the conceptualization of a phenomena

of framework and a framework of phenomena, which in itself...etc) this particular alteration, or thochtic derivative being that, instead of just turning round in circles, Muslim prayers, for whatever reason, were just supposed to move, the details of the movement being unspecified, except for the fact that they weren't restricted to, specifically, going in circles. And if at some point in the future, if this portion of what remained of reality could've formalized itself into something self-sustaining (though, given the broader which it had formerly constituted a part of had been incapable of such, by definition, such was, of course, impossible), it wouldn't've been surprising if some future historians, in looking back, surmised that Islam and Buddhism'd been two branches of the same religion, having splintered over the point of which direction, in particular, a prayer had to travel. But in any regard, the reasoning of those in the audience went, more or less, and heavily generalizing, like this: Buddhist prayers get prayed by moving in circles, Muslim prayers get prayed by moving in straight lines (However, NASCAR might've been an exception to this), therefore, by being in all the cars, they were all really praying Muslim prayers whenever they went somewhere. And as they didn't pray their prayers all the time, they were being out-represented purely due to a type of mechanical automation. This, of course, had a profound series of consequences (depending on whose opinion was queried) for the psyches of almost all present. The first signs of this, however, were relatively mild, a slight uptick in blink rate, followed by an increased rate of respiration and light twitches. In a way, it was like the jerk of falling into the abyss that both signaled sleep and tried to stop it, thinking the body'd been falling when it really hadn't, though with the way gravity was, and the lack of a planet anymore, or the rest of a universe, who could even be sure *that* wasn't *actually* happening? After all, with no reference points, how would they've even known the patch of what remained extant of reality wasn't moving in...any direction...or stationary? And before that...had then been...some kind of controlled fall? Not? But of course, even if it were absolutely stationary, that might present its own problems. Who could know?

August's respiration of course'd been long exasperated before any of this, and little of it directly had any impact on him, other than the general growing sense that something would have to be done

to keep order. Not that anything was unorderedly yet, other than the man hoisting a passenger side car door over his head and the woman screaming in August's ear. But instinctively, there was the sense that this was a horse of a different color. The audience, which'd so far sat passively, satisfied enough to have something to replace the spectacle of the TV sets that no longer had anything to receive, whether it be signal or power, most of them (the people) being of an older generation, or two, and therefore the prime consumers of said medium in its stationary box form, they the ones being the generators (through the work of various presses of remote buttons) of aggregate consumptive data sets presented to product and service companies by the companies operating a select group of channels supported by and made profitable by rents paid on advertising slots that tended to showcase, in regards to this aggregate data set, back braces and copper-infused joint-pain-relieving clothing and performance-enhancing pills of one stripe or the other and electric stair-lift chairs and heated-seat walk-in tubs and electric scooters that folded in the trunks of cars, as well as advertisements for class-action lawsuits about bladder mesh and hip-and-knee replacement failures and drug addiction and Medicare assistance hotlines and catheters, all of which Medicare or their insurance, or so they were informed, would've probably paid for most if not all of, all of these people (who some posters would argue were more accurately defined as POSTMODERN INDIVIDUALS, if only because everyone by this point was, and that the meaning of what, and if anyone, was human at this point had even long before the beginning of the end of the world come into question. Though, some argued that it was the very end that pushed everything past the postmodern condition and that, in the state of the end itself, was the only place true humanity could arise, as it had hitherto not existed. Though, most other posters, though there were fewer left, and many of them were technically former posters who interacted with these posts by remembering them, rather than actively looking at them, and thus engaging with them on screens, these posters and former posters regarded such a position as merely someone's inability to distinguish fantasy from reality. But for the ones who did still have access to a network-attached screen or braille device and were interacting actively with these thochtic constructs in *this* way, the reply came that,

by definition, that when one reaches the end of the world, fantasy and reality become one in the same and null and void simultaneously. One man, who didn't post, being as he was too old to care, when a younger relative had transmitted orally the equivalent breakdown of these posts, replied that the answer, of course, was always, and had always been, transubstantiation) but these POST-OR-POST-POST-OR-META-OR-VIRTUAL MODERN INDIVIDUALS began rising from their seats, rising, as it were, into the ever-present moment that some argued had finally arrived, for once, preparing to surge in a way that, had news cameras still existed, someone'd've been sent down to record, some reporter standing at a safe distance to comment on the ongoings, maybe daring to get close enough to stretch out a mic for a tacit comment. Or, at the very least, a drone. Then, really, in some way, by entering such a state, many of them'd become part of potential life, and therefore potential Beings, for the first time, that is to state, they'd become invested with the potential to be interfaced with the media and the medium and therefore the lives they'd always viewed through this medium and which'd been more real than their own, since their own had never been on the object round which their lives'd centered from childhood. Now they could truly go out as equals to the next generation, who'd so long selfified themselves into the medium of their own lives among the billion-billion-billion ever-growing peta and yottabytes that'd been housed in data centers that no longer existed. Because, surely, they would send the cameras.

And of course, August, being of that same generation, realized this general mood, but being one of those in that small group who had themselves been actualized in that medium which'd formed the basis of the collective lives of those in their generation and time and place, that is to state, he'd been on tv once, when originally elected to the county commission, and a few other times after that, over the years, the bulk of it totaling just over thirty-seven seconds in runtime, and therefore, being somewhat desensitized to the heady influences of its initial realization, there was a moment for August to recognize that the audience'd evaporated in some sense, though not literally, yet. But everything was close enough. And along with the man hoisting the passenger side car door, they flowed out of the courtroom and into the halls. They went out in search of the cameras

that must've been nearby, the things that'd recorded and broadcast the world for the whole of their lives, which, it seemed, must've always've been everywhere. They sensed their general presence as finally on the verge of possibility in the world, to be broadcast to these objects of actualization, and hobbling on as-seen-on-TV canes and riding as-seen-on-TV electric scooters, they made their way down and out into the parking lot, finding themselves impeded by a bunch of ground-up asphalt which was too unstable underfoot and which the scooters' small tires couldn't overcome.

August, of course, followed them out into the hall, trying to arrest their attention. After all, what was the point of the law if no one was watching? The black-body-armored deputies remained slumped against the walls, though everyone that'd sat between them with their ziptie-bound wrists in front or behind them'd gone. And as August stood there, the defendant in the current case pushed through the double doors, her own wrists still ziptied in front of her, and passed him and went down the hallway, leaving August standing there in the semidarkness, the only light that which came through the windows at the end of the hall, the light streaming upwards along the edges of what remained of the world. And after a moment or two, he walked along the hall, between the listless black-body-armor-clad deputies, and came to the window, looking down at the parking lot, down at where those below'd found themselves trapped in the fragmentary remnants of a world that'd been built for the automobile, but in which they could no longer operate such instruments without fear they were pissing off God. Now, slowly, under the realization of this, beneath the lack of on-looking cameras, their sense of themselves collapsed, they being so welded to an identity that was itself welded to the notion of the automobile, and cut off from that, to paraphrase, *I drive, therefore I am*, they found themselves not. Or that is to state, everything being as unstable as it was, and having found themselves ever presently devoid of so much as a single TV news camera, separated from their automobiles due to the previous ways in which they'd implicitly factored into their own sense of their religion, even if it'd never been expressly articulated, in conflict with, now, as it'd been revealed, by the very fact of their operation, seemingly, supposedly, apparently, actually undermining the whole of the cosmology into

which they'd been integrated, these owners and operators, now, effectively and actually became nonexistent. Though, a few, however, still remained, those who happened also to define themselves, essentially, to paraphrase, in terms of *I conceal carry, therefore I am*, who stood there touching the firearms they were licensed to keep in holsters clipped into the inside of their jeans and beneath their shirts and around their ankles, and therefore managed to anchor their own existence with, at least temporarily. So in one respect, it was only luck that one of the county commissioners owned a gun shop and had argued conclusively that the Second Amendment (even though the Constitution—new or old—didn't technically exist anymore, except as a poster in the library and in the two copies of a collection of American founding documents housed there) but that the second amendment had to be applicable in the courtroom or that it, fundamentally, couldn't be applicable anywhere else, because, after all, wasn't this the very seat of the government's use of force that that same amendment was supposed to protect against? On such matters, SuperCocaine88 had put it: "[Everything] must exist by some NON-POSITIVE DEFINITION." The term POSITIVE DEFINITION, however, as with terms such as POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT, had long been subjected to alternate modes of interpretation that invoked a moralist air. However, the deployment of such a term was not meant to indicate that the poster felt, believed, or reasoned (to the extent the poster was aware of such, but this itself was left unconceptualized, as tended to be necessitated by the various evolved anti-infinite-recursive protection systems of the brain) that there was anything egregious in the way in which those who no longer existed had anchored their existence, nor was it, necessarily, to state anything in regards to those who still existed and the way in which they anchored their existence. (Though, the poster wouldn't've known and couldn't've known and didn't know about these specific cases and was posting such conceptualizations from the vantage point of the general and the hypothetical.) However, the poster didn't go on to further clarify this statement before logging off. However, if the poster had completed such a definition, it'd've gone like this: nothing can exist defined solely by a POSITIVE DEFINITION. This, then, would've required further definition. But the problem was such heaping of POSITIVE and NON-POSITIVE DEFINITIONS could've

gone on, effectively, forever, had there been that much time left for what remained of the universe, and SuperCocaine88 preferred, instead, to employ his new equipment, after all, the only reason he'd posted so profusely lately was because she'd (when she'd been so) spent so much time in bed with a fever, typing between vomiting sessions, only recently able to appreciate the interestingness of the circumstances that allowed the new him to finally figure out why men were so obsessed with their penises, now that he had one of his own. So what remained of the internet, which wasn't much, by this point, even by its own standards, recorded only the aforementioned statement. But it can be reasoned that anything lacking a NON-POSITIVE DEFINITION, in accordance with the aforementioned premise, that such a thing must cease to exist when such a definition were removed. However, whether something could truly exist without such from the beginning (whatever that might mean) was another matter and required further extrapolation, but, already, the limits of available thermal headroom had almost been reached. It might be thought or suggested that a POSITIVE DEFINITION would be enough to sustain it. As such, in the case of those recently nonexistent, while not having physical access to any TV cameras, were not physically deprived of their motor vehicles in the sense of such's physical existence or lack thereof, and thereby seemingly had no reason not to still provide themselves with a definition much the same as those currently caressing their firearms. However, and the phrase *I drive, therefore I am* can be misunderstood here, being deprived of their vehicles, though they appeared to remain in physical existence, the psychological distancing, the impossibility of operating them without violating the basic way in which they intersected their owners own religiosity, effectively rendered them so, or so SuperCocaine88 would've pointed out had he been online. What he'd've gone on to post, had he known anything about this situation, was that a phrase such as *I drive, therefore I am* had to be considered in terms of what it was hiding, that is to state, the alternate content of the message, which, in this case, was *I don't walk, therefore I am*. Viewed in this way, the implications should be obvious, that is, those now nonexistent had been deprived of their final NON-POSITIVE DEFINITION. And it wasn't, as SuperCocaine88 would've pointed out, necessarily that

the term NON-POSITIVE DEFINITION should've been taken to mean something negative, but merely as a definition that defined by its absence, in the sense of the clarifying phrase *I don't walk, therefore I am*. This was one reason many of those who sat on as-seen-TV scooters still remained extant. However, none of these explanations'd've meant anything to those already having become nonexistent. And to the extent that those in the parking lot remained extant, these explanations, rather than having a palliative use, would've caused many of them to lose hold of what few NON-POSITIVE DEFINITIONS of themselves remained. So in that respect, it was a good thing, at least from a certain perspective of those struggling to remain extant, that the courthouse's power'd failed, thereby rendering the WiFi access point inoperable, and cutting them off from any communications that might've contained any information related to this topic, even though there was scant little of it in regards to these topics, but sometimes a little goes a long way. And while they depended on phones to no lesser a degree than those subsequent generations whom they decried for excessive use of such, the important point was that almost nothing about them related to their owners' OWN NON-POSITIVE DEFINITIONS of themselves, for the most part, that is to state, here, memories of phones that had had cords and which plugged into walls provided contrast even for that which no longer existed, a contrast that could not exist when the entirety of one's experience was in effect a thochtic monoculture, and which could supply the fundamental NON-POSITIVE DEFINITION which could off handedly and colloquially be referred to as *look what those stupid kids don't know these days*, and in some ways the loss even spurred and rejuvenated such a NON-POSITIVE DEFINITION through the arising of yet another perceived situation in which such colloquial phrasings could be off handedly employed or deployed, so the loss of such devices for any greater communication had nowhere near the evaporative effects that'd occurred in certain other segments of the county following the slow, and in some cases not so slow, degradation and collapse of what remained of the internet, that is excepting the News watchers, who had, for the most part, long before de-instantiated.

So all in all, it was a better thing for everyone that SuperCocaine88, he included, had become un-sick enough to be interested enough in

finding out what, exactly, the male orgasm felt like. Though, at the time, this caused some trepidation and worry on his part as to how it would compare to his prior female orgasms, which impeded performance, somewhat, at the beginning. But such was to be expected.

Finally, August, still in possession of a personal set of NON-POSITIVE DEFINITIONS, turned away and went back down the darkened hallway, anchored, at least in part, by the presence of the newness of his own body, August's own unfamiliarity with it, the way it operated against the expectations August'd accumulated over a lifetime in another. August'd thought at least that it'd've come to a head differently, more ironically, the robe somehow ripped off in the midst of the courtroom, revealing everything beneath and not, the hypocrisy of the whole situation. August walked down the hall, still in that robe, the thing billowing over everything it covered as sweat-damp underwear continued to bunch in new and perplexing ways. In short, it could be stated August was because August wasn't what August had been.

“It’s all your fault for having a birthday so near the end of the world,” Fredricka said. She sipped her punch. “All the parties get rolled into one.”

“That,” Clive said, then sipped some beer from a plastic cup before continuing, “is what my mother told me about Christmas.” He laughed. “For years I used to think children were supposed to get clowns on their birthdays, and I got a clown in a big red suit and a beard on mine.” He sipped his beer and shook his head. “Terrifying things.”

“Santa Claus or clowns?”

“All of the above.” Clive sipped his beer. “And all the other things that constitute the world.”

Langdon said, “I still have to disagree on that part.”

“Of course you do,” Fredricka said. She sipped her punch. “But I’m going to say you’re both wrong.” She sipped her punch as they both looked at her. “There is neither no such thing as fantasy and reality,” she sipped her punch, “nor is everything real a fantasy,” she sipped her punch. “It’s fantasy that’s reality.” Neither replied to this. She laughed.

Onstage, Red Death Highway played something called Lucy on the Air with Eliza while everyone milled round conversing and drinking and eating fish fingers with their own fingers (which isn’t to state they were also eating their own fingers, though that was true in some small sense, in the sense that they were at any given time ingesting various cellular particles of themselves whenever they ate anything).

“I’ll tell you,” Clive said, “I always wanted to do one taking off from The Sandpiper.”

Langdon sipped his punch. “Starting off from the question about angel genitalia?”

Clive pointed with the index finger on the hand he held his cup with as he sipped. "Exactly."

"I know Elizabeth Taylor's in that one," Fredricka said, "but that's about it."

"I never particularly liked Elizabeth Taylor movies," Clive said. He sipped his beer. "But that one..."

Langdon said, "It has interesting problems."

Clive pointed with the index finger on the hand that he held his cup with. "Exactly."

Langdon sipped his punch. "I have to admit, I've only ever been able to really love movies that have at least one egregious flaw."

Clive nodded.

"And what," Fredricka said, between sips, "is the egregious flaw in *The Sandpiper*?"

Langdon and Clive looked at each other, judging through eye contact which would start. Clive said, "There's a scene partway through, where the main characters are at a kind of restaurant slash club," he sipped his beer, "and one of the other characters—"

"One of the main characters is a reverend slowly approaching having an affair with Elizabeth Taylor's character."

"Right." Clive nodded as he sipped. "And one of the other characters, played by..."

"Charles Bronson."

"Right."

"From *The Great Escape*?"

"Yes."

Clive nodded as he sipped his beer. "Anyway, Bronson's character, in this very flippant fashion, uses these two women he's sitting with his arms around, saying that one says angels have genitalia, while the other says they don't, so he asks the reverend, who I can't remember who played."

"Richard Burton."

"Yeah, I never can remember his name. But," Clive motioned with one hand as he raised the plastic cup to his mouth with the other, "but, the reverend basically comes back with this statement literally and metaphorically calling him an ass."

"It sounds funny."

“Well, it kind of is.”

“But it’s avoiding the more interesting thing,” Langdon said.

Clive nodded. “It’s a cheap shot.”

Fredricka sipped her punch. “How so?”

Clive sipped his beer. “Because this is one of the few questions that the Bible is quite explicit on.”

“Oh?”

“Genesis six four,” Langdon said. He sipped his punch. “A group of angels come down, see a bunch of gorgeous women, can’t resist having sex with them, and they end up having children.”

“Charming.”

“Then,” Clive said, “God wipes them all from the face of the Earth.”

“As I said,” she sipped her punch, “charming.”

Clive smiled and laughed. “I could have made a whole four-hour movie from that scene.”

“Do they last that long?” she said, “the people that watch them, that is.”

Clive laughed. “After the fifteen minute mark, you can put whatever you want and it doesn’t matter. Especially since the invention of fast forward and rewind.” He sipped his beer. “I always tried to tell David that. But he just instinctively wants to open by slapping people in the face with a dead fish. But then again, he is the artist of the two of us.”

“I think,” Fredricka said, “you’re being just a little ingenuous.”

Clive shrugged, but smiled. “You know the other thing I’ve wanted to do the last couple of years?” He sipped his beer. “Something, maybe a takeoff on that Hollywood blacklist film that came out a few years back, but set it in the porn industry, so I could make the San Fernando Valley both the hero and the villain of the same movie.”

Langdon shook his head as he sipped his punch. Which was spiked. “It wouldn’t work.”

Clive sipped his beer. “That’s what David says, too.” He shook his head. “But I just think he tells me that because he knows it’ll make me want to do it even more.” He smiled. “So why do *you* think it won’t work?”

“Because,” Langdon sipped his punch, “the porn industry’s never

really been mythologized as the hero of anything,” he sipped his punch, “not like Hollywood. The porn industry’s always been Hollywood’s dark double, the thing we can be disgusted about for doing the same things Hollywood’s always doing, forcing female actors to have sex to advance their career, making money off people’s bodies, purveying obvious fantasy, and so on.”

“As opposed to non-obvious fantasy,” Fredricka said.

Langdon sipped his punch.

“I still think it might be possible,” Clive said. He sipped his beer. “Even if it might be impossible.”

“Too bad you won’t get time to make it.”

Clive shrugged. “You never know.” He sipped his beer. “Maybe I’ll throw something together like a Greek play,” he sipped his beer, “have everything important happen offstage.”

Langdon laughed.

“Or maybe something about a guy filming the idea of filming the making of the filming of the filming of the making of a porno.”

“Mister Amerika?”

Clive turned. A sheepish young woman smiled. “I’m sorry to interrupt.” She cleared her throat, extended a DVD case and a pen. “But could I get your autograph?” He took the silver Sharpie in his free hand and offered her the beer cup, took the DVD case when she’d accepted it (the beer, that is) and he (Clive) jotted across it (the DVD case).

“There you go.” He offered both in return and took back his cup.

“Thank you.” She cleared her throat. “Would you mind if I asked you a question?”

“Shoot.”

“Well...I was just wondering, in your version of *Lifeforce*, did you particularly set up the woman-on-woman shots to comment on how the British censorship issues of the time of the original didn’t allow them to show that kind of thing, but could show heterosexual sexuality? that is, the way the heterosexual shots’re abbreviated in comparison to the lesbian ones.”

“That’s not a bad idea. It sounds like you could be on the right track.”

The young woman smiled and turned away and crossed the basketball court to talk excitedly with someone near the stage.

"I always feel mean," Clive said, when he turned, again, toward Langdon and Fredricka, "when I say things like that. But I've never figured out what else to say when people ask me things like that." He sipped his beer. "And everyone always looks like they're either angry or disappointed if I say I don't know."

"So you didn't construct the shot to make some statement on historic British media censorship?" Fredricka said, and she produced a slight smile.

"More like I wanted to do something based on that movie, Lexi Starr was available and looked a hell of a lot like Mathilda May, but she's a lesbian, so I worked around it."

"You know," Langdon said, "I once coauthored a paper on the history of culturally definitive vampire cinema and how the high-est points happen to coincide, Lugosi and May, and such, with actors that couldn't actually speak English at the time they took their career-defining roles, so they had to perform their roles phonetically."

"Mister Amerika."

Clive turned.

A young woman smiled. "Would it be alright if we got a picture of you?"

"Fine."

She smiled more. "Great. We just wanted to get everybody right over there." She pointed over to where they'd rolled the TV cart down off the stage and set the old coax security camera atop it and people where laughing and making faces and laughing at themselves as they appeared on the screen.

Clive nodded, looked over his shoulder. "If you'll excuse me. Duty calls." And he followed the young woman across the room.

"You wrote a paper," Fredricka said into her punch.

"I did."

"Happy birthday." Anime smiled as she stepped toward them, her arm wrapped round Lewis's

"You already said that," Langdon said, but he smiled too.

"Oh. Well, it doesn't hurt to get a few extra." And she must've noted his just-a-little-too-long glance at Lewis, because she said, "I let him borrow some of your clothes. He needed to change." She

glanced over and looked him (Lewis) up and down. "It's not like he can wear that uniform all the time."

"Have you had any of the punch yet?" Fredricka said.

"No, I haven't." She glanced over her shoulder. And she tugged Lewis's arm, and they walked off that way.

Langdon sipped his punch, looked idly across the room. "Gah."

"What's the matter?"

"Now, I remember what I was going to say. I was going to compliment him on his implicit critique of the sixties version of *Twenty-Thousand Leagues Under The Sea* and how after that everyone thought Verne was some kind of oracle that foresaw nuclear-powered submarines."

"Well, I'm sure you'll get the chance." She, too, looked idly across the former basketball court as she sipped her punch.

"Oh, and foregrounding the blatant incest subtext in *Armageddon An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody*."

"How can you have blatant subtext?"

"Or making it actually've been a game at the end of *Life Is Beautiful An Ex-Ex-Ex Parody*."

"Sometimes I scare myself with the degree to which I can predict your obsessiveness." She sipped her punch. "That's why I was selective about which tapes I made him give you. Otherwise we'd've found your desiccated corpse sitting staring wide eyed at a TV."

"And using—" Someone bumped into him from behind

"Sorry..." She went on by.

"... as a metaphor for lesbians." He looked down to see if any of his punch'd spilled on the floor.

"Remind me, again," Fredricka said, "why it is men have such an interest in what they're by definition excluded from?"

"I think it's a purity thing. That's the common thing you always hear from straight people who construct same-sex fantasies, whether it's straight men via lesbians or straight women via gay men. Technically, women do produce and consume more gay-ish associative non-homosexually consumptive iconography, might be the better term, porn than any other group."

"No, I did not know that. I haven't gotten round to personally having any of those experiences yet."

"If you don't mind me asking, are things...that different?"

"I don't know." She sipped her punch and looked down at herself. "Breasts are weird. They're like balls, you don't notice them unless something really good or something really uncomfortable's happening to them." She tilted back her head and drained the last of her punch. "The rest I've only preliminarily tried out. I figured you'd help with that."

"So...not to be intrusive..."

"Oh, you're going to be anyway."

"So is there anything else about it you might define as weird? Taking into account the linguistic—"

"Not really." She looked down at herself. "I was always rather ambivalent about my body, anyway." She looked at him. "Something wrong?"

"No."

"You've got that look."

"What look?"

"That asking-yourself-a-question-and-trying-to-get-an-answer-yourself-when-the-person-you-should-be-asking-is-right-there look that you always get."

"Well, I was just thinking, since I've heard Fred used in the gender neutral sense before, and it could be short for either Frederick or Fredricka, I was wondering if it'd be alright if I just kept calling you that."

"That'll be acceptable." She offered him her cup. "Since we're trying out new roles and all, why don't you get me a glass of punch."

He accepted her cup. "Have I ever mentioned my hypothesis about the nature of negative stereotypes?"

"Yap."

"Oh." He stood there holding the plastic cup.

"Since it's never come up before..."

Langdon glanced at her.

"I might as well ask." She looked at him. "Are you any better in bed with women than men?"

"I never asked."

"That figures." She looked over the crowd, toward the stage. The band'd started to play something lower key. "Let's dance."

“What?”

She turned and took the cups from him and set them on a folding chair. “Let’s dance.” She grasped his hand.

“You know I’m not very good at this sorta thing.”

“You don’t have to be very good.” She stepped close to him. “Just don’t grab my ass.” She put her arm round him.

They moved slowly. And in the background, the band played on.

“Typical woman,” he said, after he’d pulled his mouth from hers, “never care if you’re late.”

Angela grabbed the back of his head. “Nope.” She still had her boots on. “In fact...” She kissed him, pulled away. “Why don’t we just skip that part altogether?”

They stood there breathing in each other’s faces.

He swallowed. “Alright.”

She glanced down. “You know,” she said, and glanced up, “I think I consider this shirt expendable.”

“Sure?”

“Yap.”

He pushed her back, back so she tripped and fell backwards over the arm of the couch. And he pulled the tail of her t-shirt from her pants and ripped it, ripped it in a jagged line up the middle so the ragged edges flapped against either side of her chest and stomach. “Bra, too?”

“Why’re you even asking?”

«Well, some more of what's left of the internet must've gone down, because we haven't heard anything back from FolioBlizzardWizard, and the forums're looking kind of dead, so since it doesn't look like there's gonna be an answer in a reasonable amount of time, we'll just leave you with the question—how else do you explain that people can fall in love with and lust after cartoon characters? How do you, indeed?»

«Well, if any of yuns're still out there to listen, yuh can give us a—and thank yuh very much. You're on the air. What do you wanna say before the world ends?»

«Hi. I'm Tyler.»

«Well, happy end of the world to yuh, Tyler.»

«Okay. Well, I just wanted to say that I think those toys that come with those fast food meals, the characters, I think they're designed to inculcate children in a certain form of libertarian ideology.»

«Ooookay. And how's that?»

«Well, they got that one character, you know, the green one, the Cheeseburgler, that's always running round trying to steal people's cheeseburgers.»

«Ooookay.»

«And it's like the joke, you know, a capitalist sits down at a table with a unionist and a worker, and there's a box of a dozen donuts on the table, and the capitalist reaches over and takes eleven, and he leans toward the worker and whispers, you'd better watch that guy, I think he's trying to take your doughnut.»

«Ooookay. Sorry, Tyler, but we don't follow.»

«It's exactly like that, except the cartoon character and toy inculcate children with the idea that someone out there's going to take away their cheeseburger and that they need to rely on a strong neoconservative libertarian policy in order to thwart it.»

«Ooooookay. Well, thanks for that, Tyler.»

“Fun ahead,” Drive called over the sound of the motor.

“What?”

“Few more of em’s congregated.” He peered through the viewport.

“Slow down.”

“Oh, come on.”

“Otherwise I’ll tell Candi.”

Drive grumbled, but cut the speed, finally coming to a stop. And Absolute climbed out of the gunner seat and opened the hatch. “This thing got headlights?” It seemed an awful long while to’ve gone without asking that.

“Course.”

“Well, turn’m on.”

Drive flicked a switch, a single light illuminating those gathered outside the gate. Absolute climbed out of the tank and stood alongside the turret. It wasn’t hard to recognize what they’d wanted. The problem was they might get it. “I’d suggest you all go home,” Absolute called. But they didn’t respond. “Look,” he said, “you’ve got two choices, maybe more, but those’re the only ones I know of. You can find someone to blame for the world ending, but that means you’ll have to admit it’s ending. So which do you wanna do?” This time, after a few prolonged moments, the crowd, silent, parted round the tank, walking down the road to where their cars’d been left parked in the grass. (Since so few’d remained after the events at the courthouse, and with what was left of the internet being in the state it was, word hadn’t gotten completely round yet.)

“Can I chase em?” Drive yelled up.

“No.”

“I didn’t say I’d do anything more than that.”

“No.”

The gate’d slowly started to open, by then.

“Well, if yuh don’t need me no more,” Drive yelled, “I’m gonna bugger out.”

“Where to?”

“Somewhere interesting.”

Absolute climbed off the tank.

And while Drive reversed the tank, turned it, churning sod, another

vehicle eased up the road, carefully passed. Carol rolled down the window. "It looks like we got here just in time."

Ellen looked through the windows on her side, at the tank as it started off across a field. "Where's he going?" She turned and looked across Carol and through the rolled-down window at Absolute. "Isn't he going to stay for the movie?"

"More interesting things to do, I reckon." He stepped aside to allow them to drive through the finally open gate. And he followed them in afoot, gravel crunching with each step, the gate closing slowly, but silently, behind him. Even when it'd been first laid, the driveway'd been what most might've called over-long, even considering the size of the house, though the drive was longer in every dimension than the one that ran up to the Biltmore House, so it had that going for it. But he didn't notice the distance. And by the time he'd reached the house, partly due to the relative increase in relativity, Carol and Ellen were only then just climbing out of the car, anyway. They carried large clear-plastic bags of popcorn half the size of their respective bodies, the one pinning it against her stomach, the other carrying it over her shoulder as if it'd been a sack of very light potatoes. "All ready, I see."

"Well," Ellen said, "we didn't know how long it was going to be. So we thought we'd better be prepared." She looked over her shoulder. "So we just go through there?"

"I reckon." He mounted the steps and vaguely pointed. "I think there should be some signs, or something."

"Well," Ellen said, "if we get lost, I guess someone'll just have to come find us."

Ellen smiled, Carol ahold of her arm and pulling her along as much as guiding her, as they passed him up the steps, "You're looking good." She carried her bag of popcorn through the wrought-iron doors as Candi held them open. And when they'd passed through, she (Candi) started down the steps.

She said, "*You're looking good.*" Of course, she was used to looking at him, so the effect was different, not less, just different. "Here. Hold out your hand." He did. "The rest of your shirt. I figured you'd want it back."

"Yeah." He looked down at the bloodstained scraps, then glanced at her arm. "I guess I'd better go get something on."

"Why bother?" She intertwined her arm with his. "Besides, you're looking so good." She laughed.

"Where's Amirah?"

"Oh, they went off. Down to the river, I think."

He glanced across the lawn and toward the gate far in the distance.

"What's wrong?"

"I just sent a potentially angry mob back that way."

"Oh, them." She shook her head. "Don't worry about it."

"But what if something happens?"

"What's gonna happen?" She turned, pulling him round with her, starting up the steps. "I'll tell you what's gonna happen, the same thing that always happens, they're gonna be standing there worrying about if they should be more afraid of the one with long hair in jeans and army boots, or the one with short hair in the pink gown and army boots, instead of being terrified of the mother, which they should righteously be, that's what's probably gonna happen, because that's always what happens. So why worry? Because I'll tell you why," she pushed open the wrought-iron door, "because it's what you're built for...among other things," and she pushed open the oak paneled doors that led to the inner hall. Displaced traffic signs'd been propped in chairs lining the hallway, especially at the end, to guide visitors. "And you're just going to go on that way, so there's no reason for me to try and tell you otherwise."

"I guess." He looked round as they walked. "Where's Ego?"

"She's gone up to help Interference."

"And Primary?"

"I don't know. She's round. Why?"

"You said it yourself, I worry."

"Don't ask bout me," Reciprocal said. She still sat there at the foot of the main stairs, same as when Candi'd come in still bleeding.

"How are you doing?" Absolute said.

Reciprocal shrugged.

"Do—"

"Just get upstairs."

"Yeah," Candi said. Still ahold of his arm, she turned up the main stairs and took him with her.

"Where're we going?"

“Now, you should know enough to know that.”

Below, Reciprocal leaned back, resting her elbows and the back of her head on the steps.

«Gawd, we hope this isn't another robo-caller, can yuns out there, if any of yuns still exist, that is, can any of yuns out there that still exist believe that robo-callers're still a thing, even at the freakin' end of the world? Really, what's the end of the world coming to? Nobody can't not get away from em. Hello. This's what's left of radio EFKO, and you're on the air. What do yuh wanna say before the world finishes ending?»

«Hi, my name's Carmine, that's with an e on the end, not Carmin without an e.»

«And what do yuh wanna say, Carmine with an e?»

«I just wanted to mention that I'm over at the roads for that third overpass, you know, out at Bancy Gap.»

«Well, alright.»

«And I've currently commandeered one of the cranes they've been using out here to set the steel in place.»

«Ooookay.»

«And I'm currently standing under a hoisted piano.»

«Uuuuuuuh huuuuuh. And why's that?»

«I'm out here to protest and illustrate not only the futility but the harmful effects of trying to scare children in regards to things such as sexting, among other types of sexual expression.»

«Aaaaaaand this's connected with a piano how? You'll have to forgive us, our brains don't work half the time.»

«It's a metaphor for the stupidity and idiocy of the whole thing.»

«Ooookay. And how's this supposed to help?»

«By calling attention to the fact that by doing this kind of thing, parents and broader society actually perpetuate the very behavior they say they're against by continuing to create a society where people have to fear proof getting out that they have had sex, which allows things like sex cults to continue to abuse their members by demanding that

they provide them with explicit images which they can then threaten to release should those members attempt to leave or expose the cult. If society didn't create the conditions under which this information was shameful and damaging, especially to women, then these kinds of things wouldn't happen.»

«Well, it's not as if we're going to try and argue with you, it's just ...a piano? Sorry, no, we still can't wrap our heads round it. But we wish you good luck anyway. Hello. You still there, Carmine? ... We apparently lost her. You don't think...»

«Didn't hear nothin.»

«Well...»

«What's a fallin piano sound like, yuh think?»

«Don't know.»

«Shucks, we should've asked what kind of piano. Grand piano? That'd probably be the most appropriate, at least, the most aesthetically pleasing. Maybe a bit too cartoonish, though, we don't know. But thanks for that Carmine with an e. Anyway, you're on the air. Whatcha yuh wanna say before the end of the world?»

«Uh, yeah, hi. My name's...Steven.»

«Hello, Steven.»

«And I...just wanted to say...what's everybody's problem?»

«Yuh got us there.»

«I mean, why's everyone wanna make such a big deal about the last couple presidents, former presidents, whatever, why do they wanna make such a big deal about them having slept with porn stars? Ain't everybody got at least one porn star they'd like to sleep with?»

«And who's yours?»

«Well...»

«Oh, there's no need to be shy. Heck, there probably ain't anyone out there to even listen. Well, probably not, anyway. Maybe. Who knows?»

«I guess...Veronica Lace.»

«Not a bad choice. Yuns know... Hello? Heeeeello? Well, folks, either he hung up, or he's just stopped existing, or something else we completely don't know about's happened. Well, in any regard, thank yuh for that, Steven. Though, now that we think about it, we're getting some mental images we'd've rather not had in our brains.

Luckily, we have a print of an industrial-grade drum of concentrated mind bleach taped here on the wall. Hey, yuh have to invest in these kinds of things when yuns're in this racket. Now, we knows what's left of the internet ain't completely gone, because a few of yuns out there're still posting, and... Our bad, that was just a bot. Never mind. So's there anybody left out there? You know we—Yes, hello. You're on the air. What do yuh wanna say before the end of the world?»

»Have you ever wondered what it would mean for your loved ones if you died with insufficient money to pay for an acceptable funeral?«

«No.»

»Wouldn't you feel bad that your loved ones had to attend a funeral where everything wasn't as absolutely as nice as it could be?«

«No.»

»Do you really wanna be eaten by worms and your memories scattered who knows where? Of course you don't. And that's why now is the time to buy your very own emergency-death life insurance policy from United of Tapioca.«

«Tapioca don't exist no more.»

»With this policy, you pay just tens of dollars a day, but the peace of mind you will have knowing your memories are safely confined in a concrete-lined, stainless-steel sarcophagus is priceless. Give yourself the funeral that your loved ones can be proud of. If you would like the first part of this message to repeat, please press one. If you are an existing customer and would like to purchase an additional policy for yourself or a loved one, or anyone at all, even a stranger, press two. Remember, these policies build cash value that you can borrow against later. Certain terms and conditions apply, however. So to speak to our system about more detailed options, please press three now.«

«Make it stop.»

»Congratulations, you have been selected for our excellent, all expenses, extra-deluxe plan. And because—«

«And now we witness the miraculous power of a single finger to sever the word from being transmitted into the void, and—»

»We urge you not to hang up your phone now. This service works in concert with your credit rating, and it is our duty to inform you that not protecting yourself and your loved ones with one of these plans will very likely impact your future credit potential.«

«Say wah?»

»Yes, what lending institution could do business without trust? And how can anyone who doesn't take the embarrassment of the ones they love seriously be trusted? In addition, you are solely responsible for keeping your personal information secret. Only you are responsible for preventing your identity from being stolen. But how can you do that if thousands or even millions of worms are carrying parts of your social security and credit card numbers around the world? Not to mention any other personal and private information they might divulge. And by having been selected for our excellent, all expenses, extra-deluxe plan, you have shown yourself to be a value to any creditor, not to mention earning the love and appreciation of your family and friends. Because we knew you would want this, our firm, of which your bank is one of our subsidiaries, has already invested in this policy for you and has automatically posted a debit to your account, as per the terms of service on your account. So there is no need to worry about keeping up with recurring payments. That will all be handled for you. Thank you for your purchase. We know that you care about your loved ones. And with this plan, you can ensure that you cause them no undue embarrassment in the event of your untimely death. And we here at United of Tapioca say, thank you, and you're welcome.»

«Well... we guess we don't know that there's much we can say to that. Though, that was only for one policy, wasn't it? That's what we heard. So we guess we can flip for it? We could share. Probably'd be roomier than an apartment in New York or London when they'd existed. Maybe we could sublet. What do yuns think? Oh, gawd, they're calling back. Maybe this's for the second one. Hello. Beep if you're a robot.»

«Uhm... Beep.»

«Fantastic. Or maybe we should say, beep beep, what do yuh wanna say before the end of the world, beep beep?»

«I'm just curious, I finished watching this movie I found kinda laying out on the side of the road.»

«And do yuh often find movies laying out on the side of the road?»

«No.... But it was just this thing called...Contact A Triple-X Parody, and I'm...and well, there's just something I've gotta ask someone about.»

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Ego didn't have the radio on as she drove, plowing the jeep through water that came up nearly to the headlights, the engine only kept going by the fact a snorkel'd been attached and bolted up along the door frame, thus allowing her to take the river road without too much concern, other than being swept out into the river proper, that is, but... Water arced away from either side of the Jeep as she powered through shallower water and onto a section of dry road. Ghost-white backs appeared, momentarily flashed above the waterline out there in the deeper river, blowholes spouting upwards in fine iridescent mists twinkling with the light that curved upwards from the edges of what remained of the world. She breathed hard, pressed the gas pedal hard, took the corners hard. Technically, she'd never been licensed to drive. Mud-caked headlights, runny from the water that'd splashed on them, emitted what they could over the road ahead, which rapidly disappeared under the tires and behind her, so it didn't quite matter if she saw it anyway. Mud too'd splattered the windshield, semi-conical areas streaky but basically clean where the wipers'd tried to do their job. She slammed both feet and all her weight on the brakes as the headlights illuminated a gown, tires squealing and leaving black squiggles darker than the asphalt they marked.

The whale pups sang with their youthful voices, sometimes spouting water into the air, showing off. And Amirah, standing on the shoulder of the road, at the edge of where the running water submerged part of the grass and lapped and swayed the weeds near her feet, looked over her shoulder.

Ego, breathless, panted. "We found something."

The whale pups rolled as Amirah turned and stepped onto the asphalt, seeming to wave their flippers, calling mournfully. And they followed as long as they could, white backs rising from the black

water, till the road pulled away from the river and wound uphill, and they smeared into white specks among the general blur of everything else.

They didn't say anything. After such a long time, there wasn't a need to say anything. Amirah's hair blew in the wind as Ego floored the gas, the world blurring around them. Nothing happens instantly, most of the time, depending on the position of the particular observer or observers in question, except, depending on the observer or observers, when it does. And it took another twenty minutes, relative to them, even, before they'd gotten onto the old logging roads that criss-crossed part of the northern Culverton Estate, roads going all the way back to the first timber cuttings in the area; somewhere, out there under the foliage, lay the remnants of the railway tracks that'd carried them away. On these roads she couldn't drive fast, or at least, not *that* fast, as fast as she'd driven on the asphalt; roots and rain routes made sure of that. But they were already within the two-hundred square acres on the upper north of the estate that bordered the Qualia Boundary. It'd only be a matter of what time'd remained.

An older forest, the original to've regrown from the first cutting by those of more immediate European descent, gave way to newer stock, thin trees in thin soil, out there on the periphery of the impact. This gave way to mere saplings interspersed within high grass. And beyond that, in the maximum radius of those long ago resultant forces, lay only the crater. For a moment, they looked down from the edge of it, before the Jeep plunged down the worn tire routes that descended in a straight line along the gentle slope of the bowl-shaped depression, into the flat interior, where everything that'd gone up'd eventually sifted down again, creating something that eventually'd been hell to excavate. The well-worn tire routs led between white bones that bidirectionally pierced the ground, thrusting both into and out of the earth, coming to point overhead, as if they were the remnants of a once massive cathedral, the rest of it having gone where they couldn't biologically've known. Partially excavated vertebrae lay in a jagged line stretching into the distance, white as if they'd been washed that way. The equipment sat parked ahead, tractors and trackhoes and bulldozers sitting there appearing as lifeless as the bone fragments scattered round them in the earth. Not far beyond,

the top of the skull rose over them, a creature peeking from beneath the earth only to find those mechanical instrumentations to be too minute to be worth consuming. Ego pulled in beside a trackhoe. The eye sockets and nostril sockets and other voids of the distant skull regarded them with the same indifference with which it regarded and didn't regard almost everything else, save for the partially uncovered canine skeleton there in the ground just past its nose, as if the two just planned to lie there in silence together for the rest of what remained of eternity.

Amirah climbed out of the Jeep without ceremony, stood there in silence only long enough to push her hair behind her ear as she regarded the edge of the trench.

"Where's she at?" Ego climbed out. "INTERFERENCE?"

After a moment, a head appeared above the rim of the trench, Interference climbing up and dismounting the ladder, walking toward them in coveralls and muck-about-boots caked with sticky red clay. She breathed hard too, though, like Ego, not completely from exertion. She stopped. "We breached two-hundred feet," she said. "I think we've found it." She extended a mud-caked glove. "We cut this." She offered the rusted lock. "But we didn't open anything."

Amirah looked at it. "Thank you." She looked up and over Interference's shoulder. "I'd like to go alone."

Interference nodded. And after a moment, Amirah stepped past her, walking across the well trodden ground. On the edge of the trench, she looked across the expanse of it, the gridded-off sections criss-crossing so much space, all the reality they'd so far torn up. She mounted the ladder, careful because of her gown, and climbed down onto the first platform. Platforms ringed the trench, spiraling down the red-mud walls. The casing that lay below'd rusted to that same color, and as such, remained camouflaged till she'd come down to the second-to-last level, where she stood there looking over the edge, before mounting the last ladder, then pausing before she walked out on the planks that'd been laid down against the mud. She paused, too, standing there before it. And after a moment, she reached out and put her hand on the damp, rusted shell. Then, after a pause, feeling the coldness of it seeping through her flesh, another moment in which her heart did certain things, she turned and walked back

along the planks, took up one of the crowbars from the tools that'd been propped there, and walked out the length of the planks, her steps hollow against them, the hem of her gown trailing off and dragging in the mud. Standing there before the casing, she paused again, holding the crowbar. Then, carefully, she fitted the end into the seems and eased it apart, the leverage itself supplying the force and moving a part of the world, if not necessarily the whole of it. And she dropped the crowbar on the planks and gripped the damp, rusted, mud-smearred casing with her bare hands and shoved it open, though it did so slowly, almost the whole thing rusted into a single piece, but she pushed it open till her hands stretched above her head. And she looked down at him, not at her hands, as she released the casing, rust and stiffness holding the thing open. And she looked down at him. Gripping the edge of the casing, she leaned forward, mud and rust impressing a line across the front of her gown. She hovered her face over his. Holding her breath, she kissed him. And he woke. She didn't have to pull back to know this. But she did and looked down at him.

He reached up, lightly touching her hair with just the tips of his fingers. "You've gone grey." He looked faintly bemused. "Has mine gone grey, too?"

She'd've wiped proto tears from her eyes if she hadn't known that it'd've smeared mud and rust everywhere. "You're still the same."

His fingers still lightly caressed her hair. "I think I was having a dream."

"And now?"

He smiled.

She straightened so he could sit up. He looked round at the mud and scaffolding and ladders, then up at the void that'd replaced the sky. "Where're the kids?"

"Grown."

He looked away from the void, and at her. "I'm getting the sense that I missed alot." He looked down at himself, at the inside of the casing.

"Are you ready to go?"

He looked at her. "Absolutely." He pulled himself up. And he stood there a moment in silence, regaining a sense of physical being.

He stepped over the side. Then he looked at her. "Hello, pretty soldier." He kissed her. And he put his arm round her waist. She put her hand against his shoulder, staining his shirt with rust and mud.

When the kiss ended, their faces remained close. "We should go find the girls," she said.

"Yes."

They walked back along the planks, and he helped her mount the ladder, watched her ascend, then followed, and it went like that all the way along all the scaffolding, all the way up to ground level. And on the edge, he stood there looking up at the cathedral-arch bones that curved overhead, ultimate-white and iridescent. He turned, looking back over the trench works. "It looks like I put someone to a whole lotta trouble."

"You did," Amirah said.

He turned toward her, catching sight of Ego and Interference approaching from the distance. He smiled. "Well, it looks as if I've finally caught up to yuns." He shook his head. "Or've yuns caught up to me?"

"A little bit of both," Interference said. "Alotta things've happened since you were gone."

He looked up at the void. "Yeah, I've gathered that."

Amirah took hold of his hand. "Are you ready?"

He looked at her. "Always."

"How do you want to go?"

He smiled. "You choose."

"There's something you should see."

"Okay."

Amirah said to Interference, "We'll be on the grid work. Will you tell them?"

"Yap." She nodded.

"Thank you."

"Not a problem."

Amirah turned her head to look at him; she held his hand tight.

. . .

Shepard leaned forward, looking over the side of the bridge, at the dark waters below. He rested one hand on the railing, his other still

intertwined with hers. “Wait,” she said into his ear. And after a while, white backs surfaced from beneath the black water rushing below, mist and spray shooting upwards.

“So these’re Levi’s children.”

They held themselves there against the current, looking up at the two of them with their black-lacquer eyes. Shepard removed his hand from the railing and waved. “Hi,” he said. “You don’t know me. But I knew your mother.”

They started to sing. Shepard smiled. He squeezed his wife’s hand. He cocked his head to whisper to her, “I think she’d be happy there’s a choir.” He looked down at the water. “Don’t you?” They sang and looked up at them with their dark round eyes. “From one to many.”

He looked up as motor noise carried down the hill, headlights emerging out of Presbyterian and winding down the road. The choir ceased. And Ego pulled to a stop.

Amirah said, “Where are the girls?”

“Well...there’s a little bit of an incident.” She said this almost as if she were embarrassed to.

Shepard said, “An incident? I’d’ve thought we were past time for those to be a problem.”

“They...found the detention center.”

Amirah sighed.

“What’m I missing?” Shepard said.

Amirah said, “Where?”

“Well, they didn’t wanna bother yuns bout it so they said to—”

Amirah said, “Where are they?”

The sound of a very distant explosion carried over the ridges. Amirah sighed.

“Well,” Shepard said, “sounds like things haven’t changed as much as I thought.”

“It was completely hidden from the air,” Ego said. “They got a big bunch of that military surplus mesh and stuff and made it look like someone’d converted an old lumber yard and saw mill into a place for growing shiitake mushrooms.” Another explosion. Ego looked over her shoulder. “We only figured it out because they had to march people across the road to work at sorting garbage in the transfer station.”

"Well, since they're busy," Shepard said, "I guess we'll have to go to them."

Amirah squeezed his hand. He looked at her and smiled.

. . .

Starting from another bridge, the one right past the railroad crossing, past the school for hard cases, headed for the transfer station, they walked down the road hand in hand. Parts of the former lumber yard closest to the river'd been set ablaze, the scent of burning gasoline tainting the air. "Holy hell, they've gotten big," he said. Amirah squeezed his hand. Both the girls (though, as Shepard was finding, not so much girls anymore) were looking out over the blaze. Smoke, too, rose from somewhere behind the transfer station, though no flame'd yet become visible. "I know it's the end of the world," Shepard said, "but we could do with a less apocalyptic atmosphere."

Friday turned. "Dad!" She flung her arms round him.

"Ooooooh." He put his free arm round her, Amirah still ahold of his hand. "How'd you get this strong?" He looked over her shoulder at Thursday, who stood there holding the hand of a twelve-year-old girl. Friday didn't seem as if she'd ever let go. When she finally did, he looked at both of them and said, "It's not fair. Now everybody's technically older than I am."

Friday giggled and smiled. And he reached out and mussed her hair, same as he'd always done. "But I'd recognize that grin anywhere."

Thursday came close, put her free arm round him. But she didn't say anything. After all, she'd always been the silent one. "You know," he said, as she pulled away. But he just shook his head and couldn't find anything more to add. He looked down at the twelve-year-old girl whose hand Thursday still held. "And if I may ask, who're you?" But her only response was to partially step behind Thursday.

Friday squatted beside her (the girl), her (that is, Friday's) gown flowing over the asphalt as if it'd been liquid pink). "Don't worry," she said. And she glanced up at Shepard, then down to the girl. "This's our dad." She took the girl's other hand. She stood and said to her parents, "They had her locked up for prostitution."

"Uh huh." Shepard shook his head, glanced at Amirah. "I'm really beginning to think very little's changed." He looked out over

the rudimentary fences and tarp coverings that'd been erected across the former lumber yard. "Detention camp, huh?" He shook his head. "And where's everybody at?"

"They walked out a while ago, apparently," Thursday said. She looked over her shoulder at the former camp. "Since the guards were no use, the prisoners that were already loose unlocked everything else."

Shepard nodded to himself.

Friday looked over her shoulder as well. "We were going to destroy it," she said, "but Mister Wellington won't leave."

"Why not?"

"He says he's going to wait for his trial," Friday said. She looked at Shepard. "He says it's all going to be like a version of Inherit the Wind A Triple-X Parody, or something."

"What'd they get him for?"

"Using one of the *R* words."

"*R* words?"

"Reproduction."

"Oh."

"We told him the courts don't exist anymore. But he wouldn't listen to us. And he's been beat up pretty bad, and we said we could take him up to Functional, but he refuses to go. He says he wants to confront them with the true consequences of their actions in stark living technicolor, whatever that means."

"Uh huh." Shepard leaned to look round them, farther down the road. "And what's that?"

Friday looked over her shoulder. "Oh, that's just the deputies. We dragged them out so they wouldn't lay there and whatever."

"Hm." He glanced at Amirah, then at the two of them. "Would you excuse us just a minute?" Friday hugged him again. "Well, I'm just going a few feet that way." She pulled away. "Be back in just a minute." And still holding hands, he and Amirah stepped round them and walked down the middle of the road till they'd come to the pile of deputies that, with all that equipment and padding, looked like something outa a football game, a dogpile, maybe, which, interestingly enough, had been originally invented in the next county over. And without letting go of her hand, or she his, Shepard squatted

and unvelcroed a helmet strap and pulled it (the helmet) off a deputy's head. He (the deputy) blinked after a moment, his eyes refocusing, and blinking at them, he tried to scramble up.

"What's going on?" He looked round.

"I just have one question."

The deputy turned to look at Shepard.

Shepard motioned down the road with the helmet. "How do you lock up a twelve-year-old girl for prostitution?"

"Who the hell're you?"

"He's my husband."

The deputy looked at her a moment, his eyes semi-watery, almost squinting, having some trouble relearning to focus on things at variable distances again. But when he recognized her, he glanced from her to Shepard, then started to faintly tremble.

"Is this what's left?" Shepard said.

"The rest quit," Amirah said. "The bad apples eventually spoiled the whole barrel."

Shepard sighed, turned the helmet upside down, glanced inside, the lenses for the HUD just two bulged, round, inset pieces of transparent plastic alive with pulsing light that had no possibility of meaning but at the prescribed distance. A cord still ran from it back to the deputy's body armor. A light on the display inside indicated low-battery. "Hm." He shook his head. "I have to say I don't like you very much." He offered him the helmet. The deputy glanced down at it, glanced up at Shepard. "I suggest you take this back and wear it," Shepard said. "You seem to be more at peace that way." And after a moment, the deputy took the helmet in his trembling hands; sweat dripped from the end of his nose and beaded on the helmet's already saturated foam lining. Shepard turned, still ahold of Amirah's hand, and they walked down the center line of the road. "I think..." They'd stopped there in front of Thursday and Friday and the twelve-year-old girl. But he looked out over the former lumber yard; and they followed his gaze. "I don't like this place." The burning lumber vanished and so did the smoke and whatever it came from behind the transfer station. Piece by piece, tarp by tarp, section of garden-store chain-link fence by section of garden-store chain-link fence, the detention center unexisted, till only one man was visible across the

mud, in the distance. And South stood there in the middle of the enclosure, the door wide open. Shepard looked at his wife. "Should I just leave that much of it, or what?"

"Maybe I could go try and talk to him again," Friday said.

Amirah said, "You cannot make him choose what to do."

Shepard nodded. "You're right," he said. "As usual." He looked at Thursday and Friday, down at the twelve-year-old girl.

"She doesn't have any other place to go," Thursday said.

"We're gonna take her home," Friday said.

"Sounds like a plan." Shepard glanced at Amirah. "Why don't yuns go on and start. We'll be there in a minute."

"Dad?"

He turned, again, toward them and smiled. "Don't worry. We'll be right behind yuns."

Thursday turned, still holding the girl's hand, as was Friday, so Friday was forced to follow as they started down the road, though she turned her head to look over her shoulder several moments, almost tripping, and having to turn to keep up.

Shepard shook his head. Watching them go, he cocked his head toward Amirah. "Maybe it's too bad we were both only children." He glanced at her. She looked away from the distance and at him. She squeezed his hand. He squeezed hers.

“Well, if there’s still anybody out there listenin, yuns can’t hear us no more.” Elisa pulled off her headphones and laid them on the bench. And she scooched her ass forward in the seat and leaned her head far back with her neck supported on the back of the chair. She spun the chair as she heard Lucy coming down the hall. “Well, we’re officially, completely, absolutely, probably, irrevocably, substantially, appallingly, hilariously, ginormously, egregiously, undeniably, unforgivably, unintelligibly, courageously, inexcusably, absolutely, completely off the air.”

Lucy held two mugs of espresso. “You know, I don’t know if I should let you have this or not.”

Elisa reached out. “Gi’me gi’me gi’me.” And she took the mug in both hands and leaned her head forward and sipped, leaned her head back. “Aaaaaaaaah.”

She glanced up at the ceiling.

“Never!” Elisa said. She looked down. “Besides, they’re blue.” She sighed, spinning round in the chair and looking at the laptop screen. She sipped some espresso, spun round again. “Oh, well.”

“Who in the world—”

“Yuh mean what’s left of the world,” Elisa said into her mug, glancing up, her eyes rising over the rim.

“Who has the power and equipment to jam us like this?”

“Ah, who cares?” Elisa spun round in the chair. “It’s all just noise, anyway. One kind’s as good as ’nother.” She spun round and turned up the speaker, a gentle hiss suffusing the room, the transmission that was overpowering their own, as if someone’d tried to compensate for the loss of all that primordial noise by forcing a recording of the static background radiation of the universe out into the void, hoping it would prime or restart something. She sipped her espresso while

she looked at the speaker, as if it were a visual device, tapping her feet against the floor.

“We’re almost outa milk,” Lucy said.

Elisa spun round. “And covfefe?”

“Enough.” She sipped her espresso. “But the generator’s low. So we might as well turn off some of this equipment.” She looked down into the cup she held wrapped in both hands. “Since it isn’t doing anything.”

Elisa spun round again, looking at the static-emitting speaker.

Lucy went out into the hall, so when Elisa spun round again, she wasn’t there, but she just tapped her shoes against the floor and spun round again, looking at the speaker while she sipped her espresso. Footsteps carried down the hall behind her, barely audible over the staticky hiss, and she spun round. “We...”

The first thing she saw was the bulbous cylindrical end of the suppressor, the second, the Walther it’d been threaded onto, the third, the black-gloved hand gripping it, the fourth, the black-tracksuit-covered arm attached to that, fifth, the black ski mask tucked into the popped collar of that, and sixth, the big black goggles over the eye holes of that.

Elisa sipped her espresso.

“The Noyse estate sent me.”

Elisa sipped her espresso.

“Don’t move.”

The agent turned his head just enough to see the end of a shotgun about at his eye level.

“I could’ve pumped this thing for effect,” Lucy said.

“A friend of ours loaned it to us,” Elisa said. She sipped her coffee. “Along with the espresso machine.” She sipped hers. “Would you prefer something out of the end of it?”

“Please, lower the pistol very slowly,” Lucy said. “I’ve had a lotta caffeine, and I’m very twitchy.”

“She does get very twitchy,” Elisa said. She tapped her feet against the floor.

Slowly, he lowered the pistol.

Elisa sipped her espresso.

Lucy said, “So where’d you park your time machine?”

“What’re you talking about?”

“There’s no use playing dumb,” Elisa said. She sipped her espresso. “Logically, since they would literally do anything in their power to protect their copyright, if time travel’s possible, they’d be the ones to develop it.” She sipped her espresso. “So yuh see it’s completely reasonable.”

And it was, as in one sense time travel (or at minimum such an aesthetic) was by definition what everything extant in their systems of physics was required to do by the definition of their existence. So, in that regard, any machine could’ve been labeled a time machine.

“So we kinda figured,” Lucy said, “the best way to find out’d be to infringe someplace where it’d otherwise be impossible for them to try and enforce anything. Like the end of the world.”

“Yuh see,” Elisa said. She sipped her espresso. “It’s completely logical.”

He didn’t reply.

“Well, it must be nearby.” Lucy glanced down at his shoes. “Nobody’s walking far in the woods with them.”

“No mud, either,” Elisa said. She sipped her espresso.

“So very carefully drop the pistol,” Lucy said, “and we’ll walk outside.”

After a moment, that’s what he did. And Lucy walked behind him down the hallway, the shotgun still aimed at his head, Elisa following them, cup of espresso still in hand. They walked out into the parking lot, the generator rumbling off to one side, cords running through a half-open window.

“Neat,” Elisa said. She sipped her espresso. “It’s like a big clear glass Christmas tree ornament with legs.” She sipped her espresso. “Don’t it kinda remind you of the moon lander?” She sipped her espresso. “If the moon lander’d looked more like a Christmas tree ornament with legs.”

“Coraline,” Lucy called. “Hey, Coraline.” A couple moments later, Coraline stuck her head out the back door.

“What?”

Elisa called, “We’ve got one for yuh.”

Coraline blinked, as if she momentarily hadn’t noticed the figure in that black tracksuit, which’d’ve been understandable.

“Oh. Great.” She turned and ran down the hall, emerging through the doorway moments later with a tripod-mounted camera, which she deployed.

“This’s doctor Coraline Hupert from Eagleton University,” Lucy said.

“She does physics,” Elisa said. She sipped her espresso.

Coraline turned on the camera, pulled the viewfinder out and rotated it. “Okay.”

“Alright,” Lucy said. She motioned with the shotgun. “Now you’re going to get back in your machine and go back to when you came from.”

“There’ll be others,” he said.

“Unlikely,” Elisa said. She sipped her espresso.

“Get goin’,” Lucy said.

He turned his black-goggled eyes over his shoulder, looked down the barrel of the shotgun. Then he turned and walked across the parking lot, crawled under the machine.

“Oh,” Elisa said. “So yuh get in it from the bottom.” She sipped her espresso. They watched him climb into the transparent shell.

“You good?” Lucy said, still keeping the shotgun trained in the general direction of the time machine and occupant.

“Fantastic,” Coraline said. She divided her time between looking at the camcorder’s LCD and the scene in front of her.

And they stood there awhile watching the black-tracksuit-clad figure stand inside what amounted to a large clear-glass Christmas ornament mounted on a quadrapod, liquid white pooling at his feet, Elisa sipping her espresso, Lucy vaguely aiming the shotgun, Coraline glancing from the viewfinder to the scene in front of her till, finally, the black-tracksuit-clad figure opened the hatch, and liquid white splashed across the asphalt, and he climbed down out of the machine and crawled out from under it and slowly moved toward them, his shoes wet and squishy as he walked.

“It... won’t work.”

“I knew it!” Coraline said. And her fist shot into the air.

Lucy’d kept the shotgun trained on the figure the whole time. “Got everything you need?”

“More than enough,” Coraline said. And she unbolted the camera

from the tripod and carried it toward the machine. "You see," she said, breathless as she walked round it, "you can't travel through time after time's already started to break down." She watched the world through the viewfinder as she went round. "You must've arrived just before it began to break into sort of small...islands. Or pools, if you will." She'd only had a few espressos. "I'd say it's the preliminary stages before the eventual decay of the system altogether." She spun round, training the camera on him. "You came through just in time." She spun round again. "Of course, that's just a hypothesis. It fits the facts. But the whole problem is there's only the one multiverse, so you can't really test the whole thing, you know. That kinda makes it tough." Her voice faded as she went round to the far side of the machine.

"When'd you come from?" Elisa sipped her espresso.

He turned to look at them. "Um... Nineteen-Ninety-Nine."

"Was that a very interesting year?" Elisa said. "I don't remember it being an interesting year."

"Hey, Coraline," Lucy called.

Coraline poked her head round from the far side of the vehicle. "Yeah?"

"Would you mind going inside and collecting the nice assassin's gun."

"Oh." Coraline came out from behind the machine and crossed the parking lot. "Okay. If you think I should." She paused. "What do you want me to do with it?"

"Lock it in the filing cabinet. The key's in the saucer on top."

"Okay." She passed them to go inside.

"Not that we don't trust you, you understand," Lucy said.

Elisa sipped her espresso. "We just don't want yuh to shoot yourself." She sipped her espresso. "We're against suicide."

"Yeah," Lucy said. "Not that we think you necessarily will. It's just, when you find out who's been elected president since then, well, people tend to have a strong reaction to at least *one* person on that list."

"Apocalyptic reactions," Elisa said. She sipped her espresso. "Or apoplectic." She glanced at Lucy. "Eucalptic?"

"So we just wanna be on the safe side," Lucy said.

"Yeah." Elisa sipped her espresso. She looked down into the mug.

"Oh, all gone." She pulled a long face, turned. "Anybody else want some?"

"You can freshen up mine," Lucy said.

Coraline emerged still holding the camcorder. "I wanna set up so I can record as everything starts disintegrating. I'm curious about how the process'll affect the time machine itself." She went over to the tripod and tinkered with refastening the camcorder to it.

Elisa called through the doorway, "Ask the time-traveling assassin man if he wants some coffee."

"Do you want some coffee?"

He shook his head.

Lucy called, "He doesn't want any."

"Of course," Coraline said, "the problem may be that the camera'll become nonexistent before then. But...well, what can you do about it? Oh!" She turned. "I know. Is there another camera round?"

"There's an old VHS tape one in the back," Lucy said. "Why?"

"I wanna put something inside the machine in case it lasts longer, then it'll still be recording." She passed Lucy to go inside.

"Ask Elisa where it's at," Lucy called after her. She sighed. "You know, I'm getting awful tired of pointing this thing at you." She sighed. "So is, like, assassination and stuff in the nature of your being, or can you do something else and still exist?"

"What do you mean...still exist?"

"If you stop being an assassin, will you still exist?"

"I'm existing now."

"Yeah, but now you're in a state of probably potentially could still assassinate someone, so you still have a reasonable definition of yourself, so of course you still exist."

He didn't reply.

Elisa came out carrying a couple cups of coffee.

"What," Lucy said, "do you think we should do with him?"

"How the hell am I supposed to know?" Elisa sipped her espresso. "Oh, and by the way, we're totally outta white liquid now."

Coraline emerged carrying a bulky old camera and cables piled in her arms and started across the parking lot. "I borrowed an extension cord," she called. "The battery in the camera's exploded."

"Then how're you gonna keep filming if the generator goes first?"

Coraline stopped and turned. "Well... Hmm..." She piled the cords and camera gear in the parking lot, started back inside. "I guess I'll have to figure out something different."

"Do yuh want your coffee or not?" Elisa said.

"Well, if you'd tell me what we're going to do with him."

"Do we have to do anything with him?"

"He was sent forward in time to kill us."

Elisa sipped her espresso. "Well, he's not very good at it, is he?"

"He doesn't have to be good at it for it to be his job."

"We could make him promise not to assassinate anyone."

"I'm not gonna trust him just because he pinkie swears."

Coraline called, "Which of these powerstrips can I plug into?"

"The one under the desk," Lucy called, "that's got the red light on."

"We could feed'm to the bears," Elisa said.

"Oh, be serious."

Elisa sipped her espresso. "Well, the one thing's for sure, he can't go round assassinating anymore."

"I know that."

"So Mister Former-Assassin Man," Elisa sipped her espresso, "what're yuh going to do now?"

"I've still got my job."

"Noooooo." Elisa shook her head. "I just said we can't let yuh do that anymore. Didn't yuh hear me? Do yuh have hearing problems? Maybe yuh should have that looked at?" She sipped her espresso. "Maybe we should go take a look at what's posted on what was left of the internet. Maybe we can find a job that's good for deaf people." She looked at Lucy. "What'cha think?"

"The internet's down."

"Well..." Elisa sipped her espresso.

Lucy sighed and lowered the shotgun. "What'd you have to do that for?"

"What? What?" Elisa looked round the empty parking lot.

Lucy sighed. "You don't take away one job before you give em another one." She reached for the coffee, sniffed it. "Otherwise you run the risk of them going nonexistent in the gap between the two." She blew into the cup, sipped. "He was a man, remember?"

"Well, I was just telling the truth." Elisa sipped her espresso.

Coraline emerged from inside, unrolling an extension cord across the parking lot, moving toward the time machine. "I've got a laptop charging, so I figure if I hook it up, and the power goes out, it'll run on battery for five or six hours with the webcam on. What do you think?"

Lucy sipped her coffee. "Sounds like it'll work."

"Does it matter, though?" Elisa said.

Lucy shrugged, sipped her coffee. "Who cares so long as she's happy." She turned to go inside, and Elisa followed her. "You're sure all the milk's gone?"

"Well I didn't see any."

"Did you look in the back?"

"Yes, I looked in the back." Elisa sipped her espresso. "But you're not supposed to put it in there, anyway. You're supposed to put it in the door."

"It doesn't get cold enough in the door."

"That's all in your head."

"Of course it's in my head, that's where everything that processes the input from my nerves is."

"Well maybe your nerves're broken."

"Okay, twitchy." Lucy set the shotgun on the table.

"Don't call me twitchy." Elisa sipped her espresso. "You're the one who had to unload the gun cause yuh thought yuh'd shoot it accidentally."

Lucy opened the fridge, leaned over to look inside.

"See," Elisa said. "I told yuh." She sipped her espresso.

Lucy sighed and straightened.

"Maybe they keep some white liquid in the time machine," Elisa said.

"Why would they keep milk in a time machine?"

"Maybe he just rented it, so it could have things left from previous renters." She sipped her espresso. "Maybe the rental place cuts a few corners and doesn't clean between loanings."

Lucy shook her head and closed the fridge.

Elisa sipped her espresso. She turned.

"Where're you going?"

Elisa stopped in the doorway, looked over her shoulder. “Yuh said you wanted to turn some things off round here.”

Lucy sighed. “Okay.”

They met Coraline coming up the hall. “What’re yuns doing?”

Elisa sipped her espresso. “Getting ready to transfer all remaining backup power to the Hitachis.”

“Don’t forget I need some for the laptop, too.”

“Yuh’ll have to split it outa your own ration,” Elisa said, as she dodged into the control room.

“Ignore her,” Lucy said. “After a couple hours, her nerves’ll be so fried you can have as much power as you want.”

“What’re yuns saying ’bout me? I can hear yuns talking ’bout me.”

Looking through the doorway, Lucy sipped her coffee. “I’m definitely cutting you off.”

“Hah! I’ve got access to a time machine now. So the supply’s *infinite!*”

“I...don’t think it works that way.” She glanced at Coraline. “Right?”

“Well...I don’t know.” She shook her head, momentarily lost in thought. “Oh, but what I wanted to tell you is, the machine’s got some kinda containers on it, and it looks like they’re filled with some kind of white liquid substance.”

“What?”

“Well, I don’t know. I’m not a chemist. I don’t run around randomly licking things.”

“Yuh know,” Elisa said, and she spun round in the chair from where she’d been listening to the static, kicking her feet in the air. “There’s a theory that goes that none of the hormone stuff they inject cows with is actually effective in producing more white liquid, but what it does’s put in some temporal marker so time travelers can find them and inject their utters when they get empty, so it just *looks* like they’re producing more white liquid.”

Lucy sipped her coffee. “Definitely cutting you off.”

Elisa kicked her feet in the air and spun round in the chair. “Weeeeeeee.” She slowly rotated to a stop. “Oooh, I think I’m gonna be sick.”

Lucy shook her head. “Definitely cutting you off.”

Elisa sat up and rested her neck against the back of the chair. “False alarm.”

“Definitely still cutting you off.”

The kitchen was from an era that'd never existed, a hodgepodge of things and designs from disparate slices of history, someone's idea of trying to construct a kitchen that looked as if it'd been in continuous use for two or three hundred years before, even, the European settlement of the section of the world on which it'd been constructed. But nevertheless, it had its usefulness.

"That smells good." Shepard deeply inhaled through his nose.

Primary drew a cloth from over her shoulder and wrapped it round a cast-iron handle, pulled the pan from the grate in the fireplace. "Well, if you want one, you'll have to wait." She picked the spatula off the mantel and worked it into the pan as she turned and stepped toward the nearby bench, which the twelve-year-old girl from earlier sat on, a plate beside her, and Primary plopped onto said plate a pancake diameterous enough to droop over the plate's edges. "There." And she turned and stepped, again, toward the fireplace and placed the pan on the grate and reached up for the dented tin milk container she'd been dispensing batter from and poured a fresh dollop into the hot pan. "It'll be hot," she said, and she straitened and tossed the cloth over her shoulder. And she looked back, but the girl'd already started tearing into it without complaint, though, also, her mouth was too full to complain. "Don't get choked." Primary stepped toward the fridge, a stainless-steel box as in keeping with the eclectic temporal nature of the space as anything else, and pulled out a carton of almond milk and rummaged in a cabinet for a glass. And she came over and offered it to the girl, who took it in both hands and brought it to her mouth before she'd even finished chewing. "There's no need to hurry." Primary pulled the cloth from her shoulder and walked toward the fireplace. "No one's going to steal it." She wrapped the cloth round the cast-iron handle. The pancake bubbled nicely. "And

if they do, I'll cut their hand off." She reached up for the spatula. And she looked up when she heard the sound of footsteps receding. "You're not going to eat?"

Shepard stopped before ducking through the narrow doorway that led to a set of recessed spiral stairs. He glanced over at the bench. "I think that you've got more than your hands full at the moment." Primary looked over her shoulder. The girl, having finished the pancake, sat there with her head tilted back, glass in both hands, draining it. "I'll see you later," he said, and when she looked at him, he smiled and lightly saluted her. She shook her head, turned toward the pan as she noticed a charring smell.

He wound upward and along the stairs and the passageways they interconnected with, leaving behind the scents of the kitchen.

Of course there was a way to walk out on the roof, what place like the Culverton House would come without secret passages that let one out onto the roof? That, and how else were things going to get serviced? Something about the type of slate and stone and ironwork used made everything appear perpetually cold and damp, and walking along, anyone'd've instinctually checked themselves against slipping.

Luckily, the designer of the place'd never seen fit to outfit it with ghouls or gargoyles. Already, as with the interior, the mishmash of epochs and styles could, at times, produce something akin to vertigo, and depending on the person, perhaps, nausea. Though, it'd had no such effect on him.

He stopped not far from the edge, along the walkway, a span of slate roof rising to a point on one extreme, glass panes and their iron framework visible on the far side, forming the roof over the 'Planttorium', as the guidebooks once available'd listed it, the name coming down from the original architect, the prime Culverton himself, the edge of the house ending in a wrought-iron railing on the other side. And he stood there a moment with his hands in his pockets.

"Mind if I take a look?"

Eva stood there beside the telescope, a not exactly cheap model that'd been bought long ago for some eclipse of the moon or the sun, or something like that, parts of it still thick with dust, gray against the otherwise black-painted metal, where it'd been dug from storage. She didn't say anything. So Shepard stepped toward it and bent and

closed an eye to peer through the eyepiece. It worked better than the things on the lookout; he could actually discern something that looked like a human figure wondering round on that distant chunk of reality, a few trees, a small fire, and if he looked just right, the spark of a fractional piece of gravity still tethered beneath it.

He looked up from the eyepiece and straightened, squinting into the distance. "That's a long way away."

Eva didn't reply.

"Empty space is something I can reasonably conceptualize, and since it's not nothingness..." he said. "I guess I could annihilate it."

She looked at him.

He looked at her. "But I think you're more than capable of taking care of the problem yourself."

Eva turned away, crossed her arms over her chest as if she were cold, looking out into the other infinite distance. "I can't."

"I think you can. I figure...with everything so close to the end, things might just be in flux enough. And I'd be willing to bet there's at least one version of you that ended up over there with her. Or maybe one where you ended up over there, and she ended up over here. It'd be easy to find out."

"And...if it happens again...?"

"I'm here. And I'm not exactly busy this time."

Eva looked over her shoulder at him.

"I think you should give it a try."

Eva turned and looked out toward what remained of infinity.

"I think you should become Evangeline one more time."

Eva stood there in silence, her arms crossed.

"*STOP. IN THE NAME OF THE LAW.*"

Shepard stepped toward the wrought-iron railing, looked down at the ground. A lone, small figure stood down there holding a bullhorn.

"*AS ACCORDING TO NORTH CAROLINA STATE LAW, I BEING FORMERLY EMPOWERED BY A DULY APPOINTED LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICER TO DO SO, HEREBY MAKE A CITIZENS ARREST.*"

Shepard looked over his shoulder at Eva. "You know anything about this?"

She shook her head.

"I HAVE IT ON RELIABLE AUTHORITY THAT YOU ARE CURRENTLY OR WILL ATTEMPT THE FACILITATION OF A SEXUAL LIAISON AND OR RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TWO FIFTEEN YEAR OLD GIRLS, AND FOR THAT REASON I HEREBY PLACE YOU UNDER ARREST."

Shepard scratched his head. "Seriously?"

"PLEASE REMOVE YOURSELF FROM THE PREMISES IMMEDIATELY. DO NOT ATTEMPT TO HIDE OR RUNAWAY OR BY SOME OTHER MEANS SEEK TO EVADE THIS LAWFUL ORDER. IF YOU—" But he was interrupted, that is, had to begin running across the lawn when several moviegoers emerged from a side passage, chasing him for having interrupted the film.

Shepard scratched his head. "Oh well." He turned toward her. "So do you wanna give it a try?"

Eva lowered her eyes. After a moment, she looked up. "You'll stop anything bad?"

"I'll be right here."

She took a breath. "I don't know if I can remember how."

"It's like riding a bicycle," he said. "You get on one and figure out you never forgot, or so they say."

Eva paused a moment. She nodded. She let her hands fall to her sides, and took a deep, ragged breath. She closed her eyes.

"There's no need to be so serious."

She opened one eye and looked at him.

He put up his hands. "Okay. Okay."

She closed her eye. She let out a breath. Breathed in. Held it.

And he'd been right, even with the infinite variants of the multi-verse thinning to oblivion, enough still remained, ghost forms, other Evas flashing in and out of existence across the rooftop, on the ground below, out in the air, numerous, cycling more and more rapidly as her feet came umoored from the rooftop, and she extended her arms, tilted back her head. And then she was gone, along with all the other versions of herself.

He stood there in silence, listening to a door close below as the moviegoers once again filtered inside. He turned at the sound of footsteps. He held out his hand, and Amirah took it. "How's everything going?" she said.

“I don’t know.”

He bent toward the eyepiece. Framed in it, two figures, small and otherwise indistinct, appeared to wave, standing there with their hands clasped, backlit by a campfire.

He straightened. “Pretty fair.” He looked at her. “And I’m not just talking about you.”

“I think,” she said, “you might talk a little too much.”

“Really?”

“No.”

He smiled. “I’m insensitive, I know.” He stroked her hair. “I don’t feel like it’s even been a day. And here’re the girls all grown up. And off with Hope and... what’s his name?”

“Don’t be that way.”

He still smiled. “I’m very happy.” He shook his head. “I’m sure that she hasn’t killed him yet says something about him.”

She looked at him with faux anger mixed with a bit of amusement. And he laughed. He looked out toward the edge of what remained of the world. “It’s made me think, though.” He paused. “About what I owe Levi.” He looked at her. “After all, we are the godparents, aren’t we?”

“The river,” she said, “is not going to contain them forever.”

“And it shouldn’t.” He looked, again, out toward the edge of what remained of the world. “So maybe it’s time.” He looked at her.

She nodded.

He looked back out toward the edge of what remained of the world.

“Who cares if the suuuuuuuuuunnn smiiiiiles? It ain’t rooooooound no moooore.” Drive whistled and hummed in between lines, humming along with the engine as he continued on across the countryside, the last evening of the world dark but for what light still streamed upwards over the edges of what remained of the world and illuminated the distant ridges with a gentle halo that was only barely discernible through the narrow view slit. *“Whaaaaaat do our liiiiiiives maaaaatteeeeeer at the eeeeeend of the woooooooorld?”* The song wasn’t anything like a version of Panzerlied that Weird Al’d’ve done had he still been extant. *“Death can’t fiiiiind meeeee. It don’t have my addreeeeeeessssss. Beeeeeeebecause it’s aaaaaah tank. And taaaaaanks don’t haaa—”* His head snapped back and forward, his body almost thrown from the driver seat as the vehicle lurched. He jammed to a stop. He looked back through the darkened interior, his unpatched eye dark adjusted and able to discern everything, even with the minimal light streaming up over the edges of what remained of the world that’d been allowed through the view slit by whatever version slash variant of Maxwell’s Demon or its kith or kin was in charge of those things. He looked back as if there were a viewport or a window back there like there’d be in a car. “That was definitely a metallic sound.” He reversed, the machine jumping over something in the opposite direction it’d done so before, though he was better prepared this time, and managed not to almost get unseated. He jammed to a stop. “Definitely a metallic sound.” He reached up and unfastened the hatch over the driver seat, shifted his eye-patch from one eye to the other as he pushed the hatch open and stood, looking out over the landscape. “What the hell’s metal doing out here?” Nothing but old cow pastures remained over the low rolling hills, treeline in the distance. He looked at the dark, torn-up spot

in the ground ahead. “What the hell’s that?” He climbed up out of the machine and dropped onto the ground, the motor still rumbling behind him, his ass feeling like it was still vibrating as he walked. He kicked loose sod away with his boot toe. “Oh, frackin hell.” He kicked what amount of the metal tube extended above the earth. “Oh, frackin hell.” He turned and went back to the tank, climbed up, dropped inside. A gentle roar remained in his ears even after he’d cut off the engine. “Frackin goddamn work.” He climbed out of the tank, again, this time carrying an old military-surplus entrenching tool. “Frackin goddamn work.” He unfolded the spade part and started to clear away the rest of the sod. “Frackin goddamn work—hey—” —he banged against the hatch—“ —hey, open this goddamn thing up.” He banged it again, the flimsy metal of the entrenching tool sounding like a cheap spoon against it. “Oh, frackin hell.” He turned and started back toward the tank, threw away the entrenching tool as he walked. “This’s where yuh need a frackin tank.” He climbed on it, unstrapped the chain that’d been looped on back of the turret, and dropped it off, and climbed down to find the end and drag it across the open ground toward the hatch. “This’s where yuh need a frackin tank.” He attached it and hooked it back on itself, walking down and stretching out the length of it toward the tank, hooking the other end there on the front before he climbed up into it and started the engine. He yelled over the engine, “KNOCK KNOCK,” and reversed, pulling the chain taut with a multitude of metallic snaps, arrested motion jerking him back into the seat. “COME ON.” He revved the engine. All it did was tear up the sod. “FRACKIN HELL.” He moved forward enough to put some slack in the chain, stopped, climbed out with the motor idling. “Frackin hell.” And he disconnected the chain. “I’LL FRACKIN SHOW YUH.” He climbed into the driver seat, jammed the tracks opposite directions, spinning the machine round, jammed the one to match the other, and flung the machine into reverse, jammed to a stop. But when he’d climbed out and tugged the heavy chain, he found he’d ended up a couple feet too far away. “OH, FRACKIN HELL!” He dropped the chain and, spitting, climbed into the tank and jammed it into reverse, climbed out, found he’d backed over the chain, “FRACKIN HEEEE-EEELL,” and climbed in again and pulled forward. He panted as he

climbed in from re-hooking the chain. “ALRIGHT—FRACKIN WATCH THIS—” He powered forward, full throttle, jerking in the seat, but the machine continued on after that. “FRACKIN YEAH!” He stopped and reversed. “THIS’S WHAT A TANK’S GOOD FOR!” But when he stopped and climbed out, went over to look at the hatch, he found the hatch still in place and the chain missing, and when he backtracked, he found the end lying in the grass from where it’d come unhooked. “GAH!” He jerked it and drug it back into place, luckily, he’d backed over the length down the center of the tank. He huffed and climbed back in. “ONE MORE TIME.” He revved the engine. “ONE MORE FRACKIN TIME—” And he floored it, almost flying out of the seat when it jerked round him, almost smashing his face into the controls. He jammed to a stop, standing and climbing out through the driver hatch, swapping his eye-patch, looking back over the dark stretch of heavy chain lying in the grass, the hatch connected to the end of it, lying lopsided there. “FRACKIN YEAH!” He dropped down into the machine and cut off the engine. He climbed out again, dropped off the side. “This’s what yuh have a frackin tank for.” He whistled a few bars of that sendup of Panzerlied as he strolled toward the pile of up-churned earth that lay around the newly uncovered tube. He knelt and looked down into it, switched his eye-patch, but even then still couldn’t discern anything in the blackness below. He whistled as he turned and walked back to the tank, climbed up on it, and knelt and stuck his head inside and stretched and reached for a headlamp, whistled as he carried it back swinging on his fingers. He stretched the band around his head, reached up, couldn’t find the button, took it off and turned it over, refitted it round his head. He clicked it on. The LEDs illuminated the immediate first few rungs of a metal ladder, but nothing more. He whistled as he mounted it, starting down into the darkness. After a while, he couldn’t discern any light above, but looking down, there still wasn’t anything, so it almost seemed as if they’d invented a ladder version of the treadmill. His whistling, eventually turning to humming, echoed against the round metal walls. Finally, he looked down and saw something other than blackness below, the LED lights faintly reflecting off concrete. And he dropped off the ladder, landing in a squat, looking round. “HEEEEEEEEEELLLLLLLLLLOOOOOOOOO.” His voice echoed

to and fro through the corridor and those corridors that lay beyond. He walked into the darkness, finding a branch ahead, the floor the only apparently flat surface throughout the tubular metal tunnels. He paused and looked at a wall, humming. Rust'd corrupted several of the advertisements painted there, like some kind of pox. But that's what they got when they went lowest bidder. Ahead, overhead, an LCD TV hung anchored to the wall on a short arm, the screen blank black. They most often occurred at junctions. Fortunately, without power, whatever ads'd run on them were permanently stuck as decaying cells in a collection of distant NAND arrays, somewhere. It'd been supposed that one day, had the human race gone extinct before the end of the world slash universe slash multiverse, or whatever they were in, had they gone extinct before that, aliens, or something like them'd've found these devices, and eventually, through some means, though the details of such was never exactly specified, but eventually aliens would find these artifacts and decrypt the information contained there on and there within. Though, this was only the expression of the genetic-born desire to propagate the thochtosphere, even if it'd by then become divorced from the human genetic genetisphere that'd spawned it. However, with no aliens in sight, and the end of the universe very much so, this hope for a lateral thocht transference'd been, in the consideration of those who considered these things, most likely aborted. However, those who'd invested money in the possibility of expanding the market for their respective products to alien markets still held out hope, at least the couple who still existed still did so. He hummed as he continued down the passage.

"Who're you?"

Drive stopped, looked down, his headlamp illuminating the little girl just ahead.

"Drive."

"That's not a name."

"It's my name."

She bit her lip and considered this. "Are you a new teacher?" She wore an oversized pink-white-striped shirt, the fabric somewhat stained and dirty, torn in a few places.

"Hell no."

She glared at him. "That's a bad word."

“Yeah.”

“You’re not s’posed to say bad words.”

“Don’t care.”

She was at a loss for a reply to this. So she said, “Do you wanna see my egg?”

“Sure.”

She moved toward him, and squatting and setting her flashlight on the concrete, rose to remove something from the front pocket of her striped shirt, cradling it in both hands, holding up the painted Easter egg.

“Nice.”

She appreciated his appreciation and lowered her hands, looking at it and appreciating it herself. “Everybody wants tuh play lord of the flies,” she said. She shook her head, still looking down at the egg in her hands. “I don’t like that game.” She looked up. “What game are you playing?”

“Life.”

“Is it a fun game?”

“Sometimes.”

She looked down at her egg again, carefully slipped it into the front pocket of her shirt. And she squatted and picked up her flashlight and straightened and looked up at him. “Are you here to finish the tunnel so we can graduate?”

“No.”

She looked down. “Oh.” She looked up. “Do you wanna see the tunnel?”

“Okay.”

She took his hand, guiding him along the corridors. “We’re s’posed to show new students round,” she said. “But we never get any new students.” They walked through the passages, her guiding the way. “Can I have one of those flashlights like goes on your head like that?” She looked up at him as they walked.

“Don’t have another one with me.”

“Oh.” She looked ahead and sighed. She raised hers, a large red-and-yellow plastic child’s one. “Mine’s so sad.” She clicked it on, held it up. “See.”

“Just needs new batteries.”

"But we can't find no more." She clicked-off the light. "Randolph says we're supposed to save power." She looked up at him. "Do you have any batteries?"

"Not on me."

She sighed. They turned at the junction, a dead LCD TV hanging overhead and a toothpaste mural just beyond, the girl shivering as the LED headlamp so clearly illuminated those faces with so brightly brilliant revealed teeth. The smell of raw earth prickled their nostrils. The girl stopped, released his hand to point. "It all caved in. See?" Drive looked over the tapered run of earth that'd flowed into the end of the tunnel. "How're we s'posed to graduate if they don't finish the tunnel to the highschool?"

"Don't know."

She turned to look up at him. "But you're an adult," she said. "You're s'posed to *know* things." She grabbed his hand, tugged him back down the passage. "Randolph says we gotta play lord of the flies 'cause no adults are round." She pulled him along. "So since you're here, come tell'm we don't have to play anymore. I wanna play something else."

Various rectangular cutouts'd been slotted into the tubular walls, housing closed doors and darkened doorways, which they passed till they came to one with muffled noise carrying from the far side. She looked up at him, still ahold of his hand. "You see?"

"No."

She sighed. She let go of his hand and reached up to open the door. Flashlight beams stroked their faces amid cries and screams and yells.

Everyone froze under the cold gaze of the new bright light that appeared in the doorway, bright eyes and finger-painted faces staring at them.

"See," the girl said, and stepping through the doorway, she placed her light in a cubby and marched forward. "We're not gonna play lord of the flies no more." She glared upwards at the face-painted boy crouched on one of the desks.

And he glared down at her. "Idiot. There ain't no adults round. We're s'posed to play lord of the flies when there's no adults round."

"He's an adult." She pointed back at the doorway without breaking eye contact with the older boy.

The boy looked up, squinting into the bright LEDs strapped to Drive's forehead, looking as if he only acknowledge his presence because he had to. "Stranger." He rose, stretching out his arm and pointing. "Stranger! Stranger!"

The other children began to chant. "Stranger! Stranger! Stranger!"

"Stop it!" The girl balled her fists.

Slowly, the children's chanting morphed into song. "... *if there's a stranger ...*" The sound carrying through the classroom like a badly tuned imitation of a children's choir. "... *you're in danger ...*" Made all the worse by the necessarily a cappella nature of it.

"Stop it!" The girl turned and grabbed an empty puzzle box from off another desk and jerked round and slammed it down on the boy's toes.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA" And the boy, in screaming in this fashion that was totally beyond any physiological response, tumbled backwards from the force of his own acting, struck his elbow on another desk, and rolled into the floor. He stumbled up, clutching his arm. "YOU STUPID—"

"I'M NOT STUPID!"

But even with them both standing on the floor, because of the differences in age and genetics, he still glared down at her, and she still glared up at him.

"IDIOT!" He shoved her back, the girl falling to the floor, clutching at her pocket. "STUPID!"

"Ooooooh." Several of the other children cooed. "Randolph loves Celia. Randolph loves Celia."

The boy jerked round. "Shut up!"

But they continued: "Randolph loves Celia."

The girl'd struggled up in this time, instinctively protecting her shirt pocket with one hand. And looking round at the chanting children in the dark waving their weak flashlights, the boy scowled, turned his attention on Drive. He pointed. "He's here to shoot the school!"

The chanting slowed, dropped off, the other children's eyes turning on Drive, though they squinted because of the brightness of the LEDs.

A girl holding a stuffed bear against her chest uncrossed one of her arms and shielded her eyes. "Are you gonna shoot us?"

"LOCKDOWN! LOCKDOWN!" One of the finger-painted boys ran across the room with his arms in the air.

Other children chanted. "Lockdown. Lockdown. Don't run around. Lockdown. Lockdown. Shut the door or you'll aaaaaaall fall down."

Celia, who'd wandered back across the room, still instinctually protecting the egg in her front shirt pocket with one hand, looked up at Drive. "Make them stop."

"Why?"

"Because you are an adult."

One of the nearby boys, who'd been staring at him a long time, squinting, said, "Are you a pirate?"

"I have been."

"Do you have a ship?"

"No."

"How can you be a pirate without a ship?"

Other children, who'd continued on with the song over these conversations, began to quiet down.

"I have a tank."

"A tank with a GUN!"

"Yeah."

"That's so cool." The boy threw up his arms. "Buuuushhhuuuuuu. Booom."

Some of the other children giggled.

After a moment of this, Randolph stood there looking hard into the headlamp, his eyes twitching as he tried not to squint and tried not to blink. "Why don't you just go away?"

"No," Celia said. She turned. "Playing lord of the flies is boring."

"It doesn't matter if it's boring," Randolph snapped. "It's what we're s'posed to do when no one's round."

"Yeah," another kid said. "A teacher said it from a book."

"But," Celia said, "there's an adult here now."

"STRANGER!" Randolph finally blinked, welled tears breaking out of the corner of one eye.

"HE'S NOT A STRANGER!"

“YEAH—” Randolph gesticulated. “Then what’s his name?”

Celia paused.

“Hah!” Randolph pointed. “Stranger! Stranger!”

Another couple children joined in the chant.

Celia turned toward Drive and looked up at him. “Do something,” she said. “You are an adult.”

“What?”

“Adult things.”

He paused. “This’s all getting kind of boring,” he said. “And I’m hungry.”

“I’m hungry, too,” A girl said.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Me too.”

“And me.”

“Oh, just shut up,” Randolph said. “Being hungry’s just part of playing lord of the flies.”

“Then I don’t wanna play anymore.”

“Yeah.”

“We have to play. That’s what we’re s’posed to do when no one’s round. Are yuns all stupid?”

“You’re stupid,” Celia said.

One student said, “Yeah,” somewhere in the darkened classroom, but everyone else mulled that in silence.

The mid-Ks luminescence of the LEDs diminished, prompting Celia to turn, footsteps receding down the hall. She ran toward the door, looked out into the corridor. “Where’re you going?”

Drive stopped and turned. “To get somethin’ to eat.”

“Can we... Can we come?”

Other faces peeked round the edges of the doorway.

“No.” Randolph barged up and shoved Celia, pushed her out into the hall. “You can’t go off with strangers.” He stepped out into the hall, glaring at Drive.

Celia sniffed, pushing herself off the floor, and protecting her front shirt pocket with one hand, shoved him, but he was too much mass for her to budge.

Drive turned and started down the passage.

"Yeah," Randolph hollered. "You'd better get outa here. You're not s'posed to be in here."

Drive paused, sighed. He could already hear Primary and Ego screaming at him. He turned. "My sister makes pancakes, if yuh wanna eat with us." And he turned and started along the passage again.

Weak flashlight beams shown on Randolph and Celia, both still out there in the passage glaring at each other, faces and bodies crowding into the door frame. Celia only broke the contest to glance toward the retreating light of the headlamp, Drive disappearing round a junction.

"Now," Randolph said, and he looked toward those crowded in the doorway. "We gotta make a sacrifice."

"Tuhfooeey," Celia said. Several of the others gasped at what they thought had to've been a bad word. She shoved him. "Playing lord of the flies is stupid." She stuck her tongue out at him. And she turned and started up the passage.

"You're not s'posed to leave," Randolph hollered.

"Wait," Celia called. She hurried down the passage.

"YOU'RE GONNA GET ABDUCTED." Randolph stood there, could only hear her bare feet faintly resounding in the distance, the patter echoing through the junctions. "Idiot." He turned toward those filling the doorway. "Well, hurry up. We're s'posed to make a sacrifice." But none of them moved. "Well, come on."

"I want pancakes," one of them finally said.

"Yeah."

Randolph said, "You can't have pancakes and play lord of the flies."

"Well...maybe we won't play lord of the flies." The owner of the voice was unidentifiable to Randolph, so he had to try and look at them all at once.

"You have to play. That's what we're s'posed to do. There aren't any adults. And we're s'posed to play lord of the flies when there aren't any adults round."

"But pancakes..."

. . .

Huffing, Celia rounded the corner of a passageway, her bare feet clomping against the cool semi-smooth concrete. "Wait!" She paused, bent over, huffed, hands on her knees, which'd peeked from beneath the bottom of her shirt the whole way as she'd run. She looked up, still breathing hard, looking at the general halo of light in the distance attached to Drive's forehead, where he'd stopped and looked over his shoulder. Still breathing hard, Celia pulled herself upright and moved toward him, no longer running flat out, but not being slow about it either. She looked up at him, the light spilling over her face, her eyes watering. Drive reached up and adjusted the angle of the headlamp. "Can I..." She cleared her throat. "Would it be alright if I came with you?"

"Okay."

Celia nodded.

Drive turned and continued down the passage, hands aimlessly in his pockets. Silently, Celia kept stride with him, though she still breathed hard, necessarily due to the individual lengths of their respective legs, obviously, more extensive physical exertion required on her part to keep the same pace.

As she regained her breath, it and the sounds of their collective footsteps the only sounds, sounds that dully resounded against the solid passageways, she said, "Is it very far... where you're from?"

"Not really."

She nodded to herself and touched her fingers to the front pocket in her shirt. "I've never been up there before." He didn't reply to this; it seemed obvious and likely; he'd never had appropriate replies for obvious and likely statements. Celia glanced up at him as they walked. "Or at least... I don't think I've been." She looked thoughtfully at the barely illuminated passageways ahead. "I guess I don't remember anything before the pee pee kay." But then again, most didn't, on account of the typical amount of brain development present at the age most were inducted, recall anything prior to pre-pre-kindergarten. Though, in rare cases, some did, a select few, the ones who, usually, could claim some sort of memory, at least on the physical level, of exiting the womb, or something like it, or the time just before. "The teachers all said it was scary up there." She looked up at him.

"Depends on what you're scared of."

She looked ahead as they turned a corner. “Do they have spiders up there, too?”

He didn’t ask if she was afraid of spiders. If he’d done so, she’d’ve said, “No, they’re fun,” and giggled. “Don’t you think they’re neat? But the teachers say I’m not supposed to like ’em because I’m a girl.”

Instead, he said, “Yeah.”

And she nodded to herself.

The way he’d entered hadn’t been designed as a main entry point, in fact, had only been installed due to various sets of state building codes and strictures relating to the relation of the number of egress points to ingress points in a government-contracted structure, and hadn’t ever actually been meant to be used, only checked off on a form, and for various reasons’d been plumbed in after the fact, which’s why it was in such an out of the way place, and, from the inside, roughly impossible for anyone under seven foot to reach without assistance, which’s why he stood there beneath the hole, looking up into it, the headlamp illuminating the bottom of the ladder.

And because of the otherwise relative quiet, other than their own breathing, that is, it allowed them to hear the vague stampeding-esque sound of bare feet slapping against the semi-smooth concrete floor as the waves of such slowly dopplered toward them, the column stopping partways down the passageway, Randolph at their head. And he marched across the open space between them and grabbed Celia’s arm. “You gotta—” She jerked away. He grabbed at her arm. “You gotta come—”

She jerked away. “Go away, you—jerk.”

The other children gasped and or giggled. “She said a bad word.”

Randolph grabbed her arm. “You can’t go off with strangers. Y—*OW!*” He released her and rubbed the back of his neck, jerking round. His eyes contracted as he stared into the blueish LEDs strapped to Drive’s forehead, only able to barely discern Drive’s hand shifting, a rubber band hoolahooping round his index finger.

Pulling his hand away from his neck, Randolph turned on Celia. “You can’t go up there. You know what’ll happen. They’ll fly a plane into yuh. Blooey.” He motioned with his arms wide.

“I don’t care.” She stepped toward Drive.

The other children piled into the narrow corridor looked on.

Randolph glanced back at them, then straightened and turned and faced Drive, balled his fists. "This isn't how it's s'posed to be." He clenched his fists till his untrimmed nails bit into his palms. "*This isn't how it's s'posed to be at all!*"

"Ain't no s'posed to be," Drive said. And he slipped the rubber band back into his pocket.

"*The teacher said the books said—*"

"Anyone can write anything," Drive said. And he tilted back his head and looked up at the ladder. He could reach it with a jump, no problem. But he'd have to lift her up. And—

"Are there really pancakes up there?" The line of children'd slowly closed in, almost ringed him, or ringed him as well as they could, only able to occupy one end of the dead-end passage. Drive looked down at them, the LED light falling over their dirty faces.

"Yeah."

A whisper went back through the children.

"And can we...can we come to?"

He envisioned the tank packed full'a the lot of 'em. And he'd've said no; after all, what was the use of spending the end of the world hauling a bunch'a kids round? But he also clearly envisioned, more clearly than he'd envisioned the filled tank, because envisioning his older *and* younger sisters yelling at him and generally busting his ass merely had to be recalled from short-term storage, rather than invented and rendered in his mind's eye. He sighed. "Fine."

Randolph, of course, was livid, just the newly set shape of his face attested to that. "H—" But before he could say anything more, several of the children in the back'd shouted and yelled. Bare feet struck semi-smooth concrete. And dim flashlights packed in all the way back through the tunnel, small bodies pouring in from all the numerous side passages hidden in the darkness.

"Oh, crap." Several giggled at his bad words.

One little girl came up to him and said, "You're not s'posed to say bad words." And he looked down at her, the light momentarily fully illuminating her face, before he looked up again, looked down the passageway.

"There's really no adults here?"

Celia shook her head. "They all got buried in the tunnel."

Originally, many teachers'd worked second jobs to make proverbial ends meet. (Incidentally, some claimed this term slash phrase should be spelled with an 'a', as it was said there was an object, that is, a literal type of substance, once known as 'ends meat', though no one as of yet'd been able to produce a sample of such.) However, that'd come to an end through state legislation, which'd decreed that any and all secondary or tertiary employments and any hobbies undertaken by teachers and community college instructors must be pre-approved by the state in order not to conflict with what the state considered their primary occupation. However, since it'd technically been schoolwork, construction of a said facility for such, that is, it'd seemed reasonably within the purview of their respective job descriptions to require them to aid in the various manual activities involved in the construction of said facility, with no increase in pay. Initially, as some theorist'd argued, such policies were part of the reason for a so-called teacher drain from the state for proverbial greener pastures. Though, that'd been ended when other states'd ceased to exist. Which was timely in that it spared the legislature the necessity to devote time to crafting a set of laws dealing with that situation. However, the problem proved to be that that fortuitousness gave with one hand and took away with the other, opening a block of time in which they could've potentially done almost anything and which quite a lot of nervous energy'd been (both metaphorically and in terms of calories) spent in filling that block of time with anything that could be used to ignore the fact that they could've done anything, though no one had yet, on those few corners of the internet that still remained, and there were only a few, no one had yet come to devise a satisfactory term for this phenomena slash period, or at least, a term that sounded sufficiently professional, however, even without a term to describe it, everyone involved had breathed quite a few sighs of relief at its passing. Notably during this time so many of the legislators'd retreated toward the men's restroom that it'd been rendered impossible to get anything done in there, which'd necessitated a sort of overflow into the facilities next door.

Celia tugged on his pant leg, and Drive looked down at her. "Why don't we go out the other way?"

"Other way?"

"You can't go out that way," Randolph said. He stood with his arms crossed over his bare chest. "That way's only for coming *in*."

"Not if you go out that way *too*," she said. She took Drive's hand. "It's this way." And she led him through the throng of children, his headlamp lighting dirty faces, reflecting in eyes wide-black from so long in dimness. And they followed them down the passage, dim flashlights waving in the darkness. The smell of raw oil bloomed out of the distance, enveloping them, along with the stench of old metal, as they emerged into a larger, darkened area across which the beam from Drive's headlamp scattered too much to be useful, unable to penetrate that veil of distance. "Over here." Celia pulled him along, a oblong, rusting, yellow school bus emerging from the darkness as they approached, though, in wading through the space, it'd've seemed as appropriate to describe it as, and maybe just as accurately to record, that it moved toward them, as who could know what'd been floating out there in the darkness? Drive's headlamp scattered and reflected through bus headlights, giving it the momentary impression that it, in fact, might've been some type of alive, after all, who'd ever conceived a satisfactory definition of life, anyway? There'd been a story repeated, a thochtic construct that still lived on some still spinning hard drives of what few segments were left of the internet, even if they weren't widely accessible, if at all, but there'd been an anecdote about a science fiction writer who, every time he heard a new definition for what science fiction was, wrote a science fiction story that broke the rules of that definition. (This referred-to-science-fiction writer, however, had long before, even before the beginning of the end of the world, died, and it did not refer to the science-fiction writer still extant in the county, who happened to also be the then only extant veteran of WWII.) And if he'd been online (not the war veteran, though he wasn't a veteran, either, that is Gordon wasn't a veteran, but the veteran was) but if he'd been online and privy to such a set of conversations invoking such or similar, rather than standing out back of the old highschool building holding a cigarette and a plastic cup of punch to get momentarily away from all the "coupling" going on inside, Gordon'd've claimed it had more to do with the limits of human labeling systems, rather than proclaim anything of cosmic or esoteric importance, as he momentarily lifted the plastic

cup of punch toward the general non-direction it could be assumed Asheville and the former FBI satellite offices'd once been. So the situation with the definition of life could be likened to something like that situation too.

Celia still held Drive's hand. "So...what do yuh think?"

"Don't know." He moved toward the bus, and she released his hand, standing there watching him. It smelled old. Worse on the inside. He toyed with a rubber band as he looked back through it. It didn't matter that the key wasn't in the ignition; the gas'd probably already gone bad in the tank. Still playing with the rubber band, he looked out through the dusty windshield at all the pale flashlights gathered out there. And he groaned.

"It won't run," he said, as he stepped down out of it. Those faces immediately viewable were crestfallen. Celia said, "Are you sure?"

"There's no key."

"We could find one," someone said.

"You gots to have a specific one," someone said.

"It don't matter no way," Randolph said. He stood there with his arms crossed. "You can't go out'a way that's only meant for goin' in."

Aimlessly, still playing with a rubber band, Drive walked across the open space, other buses appearing out of the darkness, parked on either side, dim flashlights following him in the distance like so many fireflies, till he came to the chained large metal doors set into the concrete walls. He looked up at them as he played with the rubber band one-handed.

The ground, that is, the ground above them as well as that below, and to all other sides, shook, trembled.

Someone said, "W...what's that?"

. . .

In a distant corner of the county, Fuaran Dam ceased to exist, a wall of water that'd constituted the lake rushing downstream, sweeping up trees and debris, draining away to reveal what'd remain submerged beneath it, the town that'd been abandoned to make its construction possible, submerged so long before, the banks of the Tuckasegee overflowing, carrying away trees that'd already been so undermined and close to uprooting, debris, eventually, carried on its long circuitous

route through the valleys of the county, collecting against the trestle bridge below Presbyterian, the weight of the water against all that debris finally unseating the bridge and carrying it downstream, as well, lodging it in the not-so-distant bend, water surging onward to submerge the sewage plant that'd so-far only barely escaped the rising tied, washing the peers from the Helena bridge, asphalt and concrete collapsing into raging, black-and-white water, all of that rushing, churning, force hurtling towards the edge of what remained of the world, the earliest waves rolling off to separate into great sweeping torrents of beaded mists, twinkling in the light that streamed upwards from beneath what remained of the world, whale song carrying through the night sky, none of them able to fight the deluge, buffeted downstream by it, no matter how hard they fought.

. . .

Drive looked disinterestedly up at the ceiling. Still playing with the rubber band with the fingers of one hand, he turned and aimlessly walked back between the buses, toward the way they'd entered.

"Wait," Celia called. She ran up to him. "Are you leaving?"

Drive shot the rubber band into the distance, it landing somewhere in the darkness between two distant school buses. As if there were a time-traveling radio stuck on somewhere, he could hear his sisters screaming at him. He stopped walking and turned, hands still in his pockets, Celia stopping too, at a distance. "I can't do it. I'm only one."

"One what?"

He didn't reply. But he didn't turn away and start walking again, either. "Gahhh." He jerked his fists out of his pockets. Several of the nearby children fell back, eyes momentarily wide. He stood there and sighed, tilting back his head, closing his unpatched eye. "Fine." He lowered his head and opened his eye. "I'll try." He looked at Celia. He glanced around at firefly weak flashlight beams. "Everybody'd better get close." But no one moved. Even Celia just looked at him perplexed. He just stood there in silence. After a moment, Celia started toward him. And after a few more moments, so did the rest of the children, all of them crowding round him, Randolph among them, only in the throng from having been pushed by the mass of

diminutive bodies, and he stood there with his arms crossed, face set, tall enough to see over almost everyone else, taller, even, than most of the girl's who'd started to rush ahead of the rest of the boys their same age, they, already quick to parrot that girls matured faster than boys, everyone, including the teachers that'd told them this, forgetting that getting there faster implicitly meant that everyone got to, roughly, the same place, just some faster than others—the same mistake, Drive'd long figured from experience, they'd long made with the so-called gifted program—but he (Randolph) stood there watching as Drive removed the patch and looked upwards, using both his eyes.

An old truck, driven by an old man who had two rifles in the rack on the rear window and who, between the ancientness of the Ford and those, had no immediate concern over any positive or negative definitions of himself, traveled at a walking pace down the road. Augusta tried to ignore him and what he called through the window. She'd finally discarded the bilious robes. Her clothes continued to dry. Though, the white dress shirt fabric, as it often tended to on cheap shirts, showed through too easily, revealing a complete lack of a bra, that being, of course, something she'd never needed to buy till then. She walked along the edge of the road, the driver still in no hurry to pass her, till she turned onto the gravel drive that led up to the old school, and toward all the cars parked there, the various lights visible through the windows set rhythmically in all that mortar and stone. Then, finally, the truck went on down the road. She stopped at a sound, a momentary flare of light in the darkness near the cars.

"Sorry." Clive stepped out into the pale illumination. "Didn't mean to startle you." He drew on his cigarette and blew smoke into the pale light that weakly emerged through the dust-covered window panes. "Can't smoke real ones around anyone anymore." He'd found his way outside after going out the back of the building when his bladder'd started screaming at him (in the metaphorical sense) and the line to the restrooms'd been too long. And afterward he'd rounded the building, finding some kind of ease in watching the empty road at night. He took another draw from the cigarette, motioned with it after he withdrew it from between his lips. "The party is still going on." He expelled smoke through his nose. "I don't think there's such a thing as being late to this one."

She stood there in silence, just listening to his voice, having recognized it instantly.

“The food’s good,” he said. Though, he was only hiding in banter what she was hiding in silence. Finally, he dropped the cigarette onto the gravel and rubbed it into the small, compacted stones with his shoe. He’d never been the kind of man to believe in love at first sight. Of course, neither had she. But that didn’t particularly matter as they stepped toward one another, Clive bending down to kiss her, Augusta stretching upward to kiss him.

And out there, over distant ridges, tumbling end over end, everyone securely harnessed into their stations, finally, one of the practice drills wasn't actually a practice drill, and everything live fire came pouring out of the vessel, pouring massive explosions into the void out there, as if they'd been fireworks, silent in the distance, the distance and the void and the disintegration of everything rendering them as tame as fireworks, or maybe *really* high-powered fireworks. But terrible and beautiful, nonetheless.

Silent, as stated, they were visible through the large windows that lined the main dining room, half those children eating platefuls of pancakes looking over the table and out through those windows as they chewed, the other half, the ones with their backs to those windows, having turned round in their seats, pancakes still in hand. Drive glanced that way, out over what remained of the distant ridges, as he passed down along the table, one hand in one of his pants pockets, playing with the last couple rubber bands he had left. He didn't bother to think about the buses—any more, at least—standing out there amid all that up-churned earth, beat up and pock marked, one of them having turned purple, one end or the other half buried, protruding crooked into the air, as if to give him the finger for being only half of something, all of it looking like some kind of hinge dedicated to automobiles and gasoline worship, except that one of them'd turned into a giant cast-iron clothes iron, obviously, spoiling the harmony of the whole. But he didn't think about it.

He shot a rubber band at the nose of some mythological creature encased in a large painting in a gilded frame that hung on a distant wall.

Light flashed through the windows, trying to burn shadows into the walls and floors and ceilings.

He readjusted his eye-patch from one side to the other, for no particular reason.

And out there, if looking from exactly the right point, a pink 1967 Ford Mustang convertible arced over those massive explosions, driven by Michael Grant, or GodsFistsOfFury₃₁₆, or GoldStarLesbian₃₂, names only extant on paper files in a disintegrating courthouse, or on the collective hard drives and router caches of a crumbling internet, him and slash or her or they who'd liberated it after escaping from the detention camp with everyone else, driving it as fast as it would go, as if there'd remained deputies to give chase, driving while fitting the oxygen mask, the bottle rolling round in the passenger seat, driving it with the speedometer pegged out, out toward where the four-lane'd crumbled over the edge of what remained of the world, up the still extant side of Cowee, accelerating off into the void, now, still up there, looking out at all those terribly beautiful fireworks, as the pink 1967 Mustang convertible slowly rotated along its trajectory.

This wasn't visible through the small windows in the kitchen. And even if it'd've been, Celia'd've been too concerned to notice. She stood in the doorway, it itself a rock-lined arch, looking as if one might expect to step through it down into a dungeon, rather than a kitchen, but she didn't think about this as she looked round. She started to say something. Primary, near the fireplace, bowl against her stomach, stood turned away, and hadn't heard Celia's bare feet on either the carpet or the hardwood or the stone that led down here.

"Have you..."

Primary turned. But Celia paused, looking at the half-empty bowl revealed behind her, as Primary automatically and unconsciously cracked an egg on the edge of the batter bowl and opened it one-handed so the clear and liquid gold flowed down and sat atop the off-white mixture, waiting to be folded in, tears welling, in the figurative

sense, from the core of the little girl's being, and in the literal literal sense from the suddenly over-saturated glands at the corners of her eyes, which'd started to overflow without warning, much like all that water that'd been behind Fuaran dam'd done, when someone touched her on the shoulder. She turned.

"You should keep an eye on this." Drive offered her the egg. "Or you'll lose it."

Celia sniffled and took it in both hands. She wiped her nose with the rolled-up sleeve of her oversized shirt, and smiled up at him, and cradled the egg against the front of her shirt in one hand so she could wrap her free arm around his pants legs, only to pull away and run out of the kitchen, covering her face.

Primary stood there with the bowl against her stomach, whisking, and she glanced up from the pan, at him.

"What?"

But she didn't say anything.

Drive grumbled and shoved his hands in his pockets. "I'm going out." He turned to go back through the doorway. "Can a guy go out round'ere?"

But Primary didn't say anything.

He turned through one of the passages that came out under the main stairs, the doorway disguised in the paneling, only openable from the outside by depressing a carved flower in the decorative chair rail. He sighed, standing there with his hands in his pockets, looking round at nothing. He looked over his shoulder. "How many times yuh gonna read that?"

Reciprocal sat there on the stairs with a stack of manga. "Till the world ends."

"But they discontinued that," he said. "It's never gonna have no ending."

"I've decided I don't care."

"A—" He looked up to see someone descending the stairs, a bunch of clothes in her arms, the clothes she'd had to find to wear when she'd woken one time and nothing would fit. Now, the skirt and blouse haphazardly fitted over her frame made her look like she'd taken a ride on a tornado and'd been dropped where she couldn't've known. She walked down the stairs barefoot.

She stopped at the bottom, standing there with the clothes in her arms as she looked at Reciprocal. "Um..."

Reciprocal looked up.

"I just..." The woman cleared her throat. "I just wanted to say... I wanted to say that I'm...sorry for what we...I...anything I might've said a long time ago about..." She paused. "...yes..." And she turned as if to go out the front, but turned, again, toward Reciprocal. "Can I ask you... I mean... Is it diff... I mean... Um... Are you mad or...anything? Because...I mean...because some of us wanted to... go back...? I mean—not that. I mean...since you had to spend so much time...and money...I guess...and...um...and the ones of us it...just...happened to are...just...do you think we're...throwing it away...? It's just...you know...well...I didn't really wanna be... a man... So...I..." She paused. "So..." She paused. "I'm not... I'm not trying to say anything against you... I..." She paused. "I... I'm...sorry..." She turned, all those clothes still bunched up in her arms. She turned back, opened her mouth. But she didn't say anything. She turned and went down the hall and opened the front door as best she could with all those clothes still piled in her arms.

"Did you understand that?" Reciprocal said.

Drive shrugged. "People're weird."

He turned and wandered down the hall, hands in his pockets, ignoring the sounds of the silence of the audience and the sounds of a movie that sneaked out through a barely open set of double doors. He wound his way through the halls and out onto one of the many back patios. The tank sat out there on the grass, still chained to the only bus he'd managed, after no small amount of time, to arrange to land on its wheels, the thing dented and dinged from the effort, to the point it was a borderline miracle the steering'd remained functional enough.

Randolph stood out there near it, still barefoot in the grass. The sheep, the de facto residential grounds keepers, had gotten used to him, but'd looked up when Drive emerged onto the patio and started across their buffet.

Drive stopped near the tank, hands still in his pockets. "Pancakes," he said.

"Yeah." Randolph looked round at the countryside.

Drive turned toward the bus. He paused. "Yuh did a good job steering."

"I know that," Randolph said. His stomach growled.

Drive climbed up onto the tank, turned to see Randolph step onto the patio and start inside. He sat on top of the turret, looking up at the top of the house, the edges of the architecture set against the black void beyond, as he worked his hand into his pocket. He sat playing with the rubber band when something tapped against the armored tank, and he looked over to see a piece of spherical glass momentarily twinkle in the dim light as it rolled off the side, dully tinkling as it dropped along the armor, finally hitting the grass with a solid, almost unheard thud.

The clacking sounds spread out over what remained in existence, all those glass beads falling against concrete and wood floors and tile and dirt and rock and rolling away, in all their colors, rolling along up hills at times, rolling across the face of what remained of the world, finding their way, finally, to the edges, rolling off, plummeting into the void, only to curve upwards again, as if propelled by that same force bending light round what'd remained of existence, streaming upwards into the void, a myriad of multi-colored twinklings.

Drive leaned back, hooking the last rubber band on his thumb, pinching it, stretching it, launching it toward one of the many cornices of the house, the rubber band disappearing up there in the general direction of where the pair of them still stood.

Shepard, who'd looked away from everything going on out there to turn toward Amirah, now looked down at a black cube in the space between them, and DATA RECORDER hovered there a moment before slowly ascending. They looked up, watching it till it'd disappeared into the void, a choir of white phosphorescent whales circling round it high above.

"You know," he said, "I've always had the feeling that if someone'd've just been able to explain what that was, it'd've answered a lot of questions." He looked down at her, released her hand, and put his arm round her waist. She put her arms round his neck.

They didn't say anything.

He smiled.

He kissed her.