

The background of the entire page is decorated with a repeating pattern of candy canes and stylized leaves. The candy canes are oriented diagonally and feature orange and white diagonal stripes. The leaves are in various colors: orange, yellow, and red, and some have a white star-like pattern in the center. The overall style is reminiscent of mid-20th-century holiday-themed book covers.

Nora Stone

DFHall

Oh, that is where you *are* wrong, Agent Smith. You do not inch your way up from the bottom, working your way up, building your arguments to some totalizing and finalizing denouement. You dive into the deepest part. Shock therapy, if you will. Brutal? Perhaps. Effective? Oh, yes.

Nora Stone

D. F. Hall

Hardboiled Babylon

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Extra! Extra! Have you heard? Have you heard
about the man who had his Robots taken away
from him by the people he wanted to set free?

Nora Stone

Epilogue

You must be the interrogator.

One of them.

Oh, pedantic. Is that my file you have there?

Part of it.

You really *must* watch everything.

We do our job.

I bet you do.

This's very serious, Mrs Stone.

Oh, I know. Very serious. Please, call me Nora. Mrs Stone sounds so ...professional. Or do you think I am a professional?

You like double entendres, don't you, Mrs Stone—

Are you asking or telling? Does your—rather thick—file say I like being told what to do? If it does, I might suggest how that lovely black tie of yours could be used to make me do whatever you want.

We know you're a lesbian, Mrs Stone.

Oh, you do? Does it really make you feel better to lock things down into little boxes? Would that be a personal or an institutional preference?

We're interrogating your compatriots as we speak.

Oh, I *am* sure you are. Some nice young men like yourself, I hope.

They're in appropriate hands.

Manual is sometimes best. Do you not think?

We're not here to discuss that, Mrs Stone.

Really? A shame. I suppose you will have to get right down to working me over, hmm? I *would* love to know what you have in mind.

Just the standard questions.

And are they all on that little sheet of paper there?

Some of them.

I have a few things you might add—if you are open to suggestions, that is.

We'll stick to the standard.

Oh, well.

Now, Mrs Stone—

So serious, clicking a pen that way.

Mrs Stone—

I told you, call me Nora.

Mrs Stone, please just answer the questions as given to you.

Yes, dear.

Sir.

Hmm?

It's sir. You should address me as sir.

Oh, I know. But I just... You look so very much like the young man who—well, that is not important—but do you know that? But of course you do. I *am* sure it is all right there in that great big file you have.

Mrs—

In fact, it *is* so big and fat, I am sure it already has *everything* in it that there could possibly be. I cannot see why you just don't look up whatever you want to know. That would be easier, would it not, dear? I mean, sir.

We like to be thorough.

Oh, please do. Be *very* thorough.

Subject Mrs Nora Stone. Age—

Is this for the tape recorder on the other side of the mirrors?

Age thirty-two. Born November twenty-six in Cruxifiction Plains, Texas.

Thirty-six, dear. Thirty-six. Twenty-three. Thirty-six.

What?

My measurements. I thought you wanted to be thorough.

Height five-foot-seven inches. Weight—

One-hundred-twenty-one pounds, dear.

One-hundred-twenty-one pounds. Eyes grey. Hair dark.

But not too dark—to be thorough.

Ethnicity—

You click a pen with a tremendously satisfying force. Has anyone ever told you that?

Mrs Stone—

Nora.

Mrs Stone—

Sagittarius. You forgot to put down my sign.

Ethnicity standard.

Shoe size three.

Mrs Stone, we can dispense with the minor details for now.

Are you sure they are minor details? And I thought you wanted to be thorough.

Mrs Stone—

You have a very attractive voice. Has anyone ever told you that?

We'll begin with some preliminary questions.

Whenever you are ready, dear—I mean, sir—Don't worry. I will get the hang of it.

You resided at your previous address for three years, correct?

I would say so.

Two years, three-hundred-twenty-one days, to be exact.

It *is* cute how you just so casually glance into that folder to find that. Do they teach you that? Or do they recruit people with that skill? Not that I want to be nosy.

We're here to talk about your recruitment of Mrs Hadfield. What was your first encounter with her?

Oh, I am sure you could always flick open that big thick folder again and find out.

Answer the question, Mrs Stone.

Oh, I—and by the way, what about *your* information?

Clarify.

For the record. Do they have a camera behind the mirrors? You have very beautiful, very film-able eyes, you know? Of course you know. I *am* sure your wife gets lost looking into them. Or is that too personal? And as for age, you cannot look more than, what, twenty-eight? *Definitely* no more than thirty. They do recruit young these days, do they not? Although, I suppose that was always the case. But I *do* think I should be able to call you something other than *sir*, do you not think? Agent, something or the other, is it not? Hm?

Smith.

Oh, Agent Smith. First name?

We're not here to discuss this, Mrs Stone.

You don't think that is an important detail?

It's irrelevant.

So it does not matter *who* interrogates me?

No.

Do you ever feel reticent about being so disposable? Of course, everything is disposable these days, is it not?

They seem to have disposed of you soon enough.

Oh?

Since your cell was apprehended, there's been no chatter.

Oh, you would not tell me if there were, now would you?

If you think there will be some sort of rescue effort—

Oh, you poor thing.

What is so humorous?

Oh, I was just thinking about what would have happened if *we* had captured *you* instead.

Mrs—

Do you want to know what would have happened?

That's not what's being considered at this time. Now—

You *are* wrong, you know.

Clarify.

About what you think would happen.

Mrs Stone—

You probably think it would be very horrible, do you not, Agent Smith? Of course, I would not want to tell you what you are thinking. But is that right?

Valid or not, Mrs Stone, we're not here to discuss that.

Wrong. Oh, so very wrong.

Mrs Stone—

Are you curious? Do they ever tell you what happens to *enemy agents* who just...fall into our laps?

We're trained to withstand interrogation in the event—

What would I possibly want to interrogate you for?

Mrs Stone, we—

In fact, Agent Smith, I would sit right across from you like we are now. Or maybe not. Maybe I would straddle you. After all, I have, you could say, practically fallen right into your lap. So we could make it literal. Would you prefer that?

Mrs—

Then do you know what I would do?

Mrs—

I would tell you *everything* you need to know.

Are you...saying you're ready to cooperate?

You most certainly could say that.

Good. Let's—

I have to tell you, although, if you keep clicking that pen as decisively as that...well, you know, things might become too uncomfortable.

Everything will be kept in check.

You *are* no fun, Agent Smith.

You said you were ready to tell us everything.

Oh, us? How many of them are watching? I would not think they would be interested. Am I *that* interesting, Agent Smith? Am I a... big fish? Is that what you would call me?

Someone of your rank should expect—

What *do* you call me?

We're not here to answer your questions, Mrs Stone.

Answer mine and I will answer yours.

There is no reason for you to need to be informed of that, Mrs Stone.

Oh.

Now—

But is there any reason I should *not* be?

What?

Well, if there is no reason I should *not* be informed, then there is no reason for you not to, is there?

There is no reason for you to need to be informed of that, Mrs Stone.

I was just curious is all.

Mrs Stone, you've been repeatedly informed that there is no reason for you to need to be informed of that.

I hope I am not asking you to divulge top secret information or something like that.

All open cases are classified, Mrs Stone.

Oh.

Now—

Well, since I *am* the person involved, as it were, and since I suppose I do know a *few* things about myself, I would think that means I already happen to know quite a lot of classified information. So it would really not hurt to have a little more, would it, Agent Smith?

There is no—

No reason. Yes. What if I tried to guess it instead? How about that, Agent Smith?

Mrs Stone—

Bee.

What?

I bet it starts with a B.

Why would you say that?

Oh, I don't know. Is there some reason I should not, Agent Smith?

We're not playing games, Mrs Stone.

And I bet it ends with a zero.

(. . .)

Oh, there *is* no need to look so, Agent Smith.

Mrs Stone, are you—

Oh, don't worry, Agent Smith. After all, it cannot be *that* top secret, can it?

Mrs Stone—

I mean, after all, Agent Smith, it is printed right there on that file you have there.

Mrs Stone—

I am sorry, Agent Smith, but I was just wondering, how do you pronounce something like that? Maybe... Hmmm... Maybe...bravo. Right? That *is* official sounding, is it not? Is that not the way the army men say it on television?

Mrs Stone—

Bravo-oh-oh.

This isn't a laughing matter, Mrs Stone.

Oh, I *am* sorry, Agent Smith.

Mrs Stone, you don't seem to be aware of how serious this is.

Oh, it *is* very serious.

Then if you would please stop laughing so we can continue.

Oh, I will try to be good.

Alright...

Such a serious look. Those must be some extremely important notes.

What was your first contact with Olivia Hadfield?

I saw them on their front lawn—with her husband, that is—when they first moved in.

No. When—

Oh, you mean when I met her at the welcome-to-the-neighborhood party?

Yes....

Keep checking your notes that way, Agent Smith, and I will begin to think this is your first time.

Was that when you decided to recruit her?

You can tell me, you know. It is okay. In fact, I rather like being someone's first time. But of course, I guess they would not send an inexperienced agent to interrogate someone as *big* as bravo-oh-oh, would they?

How did you initiate your recruitment of Mrs Hadfield?

Oh, you make it sound like something so official, Agent Smith.

We have it on record that you personally took the lead in turning Mrs Hadfield.

Into what?

Clarify, Mrs Stone.

What was I supposed to be turning her into?

Mrs Stone—

I just want to try and answer your questions in the best way possible. And how am I supposed to do that if I do not know what you are talking about?

You sought to make her a lesbian, didn't you?

Well, the poor dear did need *something*.

So—

But of course, if that *is* what I set out to do, I did a very bad job of it. Oh, so terrible. Awful, in fact. If *that* was the plan... well, I cannot imagine how I could have failed worse.

P—

But I am sure that file tells you, does it not, Agent Smith? Or maybe it is in another one. It would have to be—thick, that is.

Why's that?

To hold all of the records, of course.

Records of what?

Of all the male-ended attachments she has interfaced with, of course. Or perhaps peripherals would be the better way to put it. What do you think, Agent Smith?

Mrs Stone—

Oh, Agent Smith, I think you *are* getting a little hot in the face. It is hard to tell. But—

Whether you personally believe yourself to have failed or not is immaterial. When did you initiate your forays into the recruitment of Mrs Hadfield?

Persistent, aren't you.

It's our job.

We. We. We. If I had known I was going to be taking on all of you, I would have prepared a vitamin shake first. And I do believe you are getting a little heated in the face again, Agent Smith.

Mrs Stone—

Oh, very well. I did promise, after all. And I would not want to go back on my word. Where would you like me to start?

At the beginning.

Oh, yes. Your organization does like everything in a particular... order, do they not?

Time flows forward, Mrs Stone. It's the laws of physics.

So you say, Agent Smith. But I thought you wanted to hear about poor Olivia. Although, if you want to give me a lecture on *physical* reality, I *am* game, as they say in the movies. Have I mentioned you have a very nice voice?

We're here to talk about Mrs Hadfield.

Oh, very well. She reminds me of you, you know? Oh, yes. It is in the eyes. And it takes an almost impossible amount of work to hide. Such as, say, if I were to go right down, one by one, like this, and unbutton my blouse—

Mrs Stone, a warning—

Oh, no need to worry, Agent Smith, you are safe. For now.

And this is how you started with Mrs Hadfield?

Oh, something like it.

How. Exactly.

Do you want to know for the record? Or is this personal?

This is for the record.

Well then, for the record, it was...oh, it started three or four weeks after they—the Hadfields, that is—moved in. Sometimes you can get

a sense of new arrivals quite quickly. That is, if you are experienced enough. I *am* sure you know what I am talking about, Agent Smith. Olivia was so... trusting? It was as if one of those secret labs—wherever they are—but I guess that is why they are a secret, is it not?—but it almost seemed as if they had finally turned out a perfect working model of—well, she could have stepped right out of the television. Do you not think, Agent Smith?

We're not here to talk about movies.

Of course, Agent Smith. But it seems as if we *have* been trying to locate them for such a long time. And you see, when a new model comes out, I always wonder if we can track it back to its source. So you can imagine how we felt when this perfect little model, frilly apron and all, was plopped right down in the middle of us, as it were. And I *am* going to let you in on a secret, Agent Smith....

Yes?

I *really* love to break new toys. And this one was so shiny and clean and still smelled of plastic wrapping.... Mmm. How could I resist? And do you know where I start, Agent Smith?

It would be assumed, subtly.

Oh, that is where you *are* wrong, Agent Smith. You do not inch your way up from the bottom, working your way up, building your arguments to some totalizing and finalizing denouement. You dive into the deepest part. Shock therapy, if you will. Brutal? Perhaps. Effective? Oh, yes. But you do not want abstractions, do you, Agent Smith. You want *hard* facts. So let me give you something hard, Agent Smith. Picture this—our little, sweet, innocent Olivia walks in, arms full of groceries where they have just come in the mail, when the doorbell rings. And guess who is at the door. And she smiles her oh-so-perfect smile and apologizes for the mess and all that as she invites you in for a cup of coffee—but of course *everything* is spotless. Poor dear. Never suspecting that while she is fiddling with the coffee maker, all you have to do is go one, two, three, four, and everything

is unbuttoned and slides right off and hits the floor. So as you can imagine, the poor thing's eyes go so wide when she comes back. And her mouth just hangs open in an absolutely adorable way. Of course, she just freezes there, so you have to step over and take a cup and saucer from her hand. But it *is* worth the effort. Is that the kind of thing you wanted, Agent Smith?

It seems unlikely that you could have removed everything so quickly.

Everything, Agent Smith?

Yes—

Oh. Well, I prefer to avoid frivolous equipment during critical operations. Less to get in the way. I *am* sure you understand.

So you claim that you specifically maintained a state of partial undress in order to engage in your recruitment efforts as related to Mrs Hadfield?

Oh, well, I would not say it was *just* then, Agent Smith.

Yes or no, Mrs Stone.

Oh, well, I guess you could say, yes, Agent Smith, because I was, as you say, maintaining such a state at the particular time, yes.

And your follow-up to this?

Oh, well, I had to comment she did look a little pea-kud, as they say. Poor dear, she could barely mumble. I don't think her lips hardly moved. You talk about physics, Agent Smith, but right then, I think time must have been *infinitely* slower for her than for me. I do know I was enjoying myself so much, time just seemed to fly by. Is that what they mean by relativity, you think?

Then what happened?

Oh, the poor dear finally unfroze and squeaked and ran off into the kitchen.

And you followed her?

Of course not. Why would I need to?

You—

All I had to do was wait for her to poke her head around the corner.

And what did you do?

Held my coffee, of course. It would have been rude to let it get cold just sitting there on the table.

You—

Agent Smith, you keep saying you want me to talk, yet you keep interrupting.

Continue.

Oh, well, but of course she *had* to poke her head around again. That is just the way most models are. It is like trying to look away from those horrible monster movies on television. You know, where those things come out of those meteors, or whatever, that... crash land, I believe they call it, but I am sure you know all about that, after all. Do you know that is the twentieth or so most common reason a unit gets sent back? They just get stuck unable to look away.

You—

But of course she hopped right back around the corner again when she saw me.

What happened next?

Oh, I set down my coffee and slipped back into my dress and thanked her as I went out and said that I should get going before it got to late and that I did not want to hold her up—or was it down?—anyway—I left.

You just left?

Of course.

You—

Well, what did you expect, for me to just grab her right there and bend her over the coffee table and stick my hand down in her panties?

(. . .)

I definitely think your face is heating this time, Agent Smith. In fact, I am sure of it.

Maybe we should take a break.

If you think so. Would you mind bringing me some water, perhaps? All this talking will probably have me dry enough to blow away. And as you can see, well, cuffed to this table this way, it *is* a little difficult for me to get it myself. I believe I recall a vending machine out in the hall—is that little motion to tell them to stop the tape?

Here.

Do you always keep bottles of water under the table, Agent Smith? So resourceful. Is there anything else down there? But I hate to ask, Agent Smith, would you mind opening it? As you can see...

Alright.

And if you could uncuff one hand, that would be nice. Don't worry, you can leave the other one.

They will have to be put back when you're done.

Of course, Agent Smith. Oh, but that is so much better. I never was much for bracelets. Most of the time, anyway—at least for myself. Would you care to hold this a while, Agent Smith?

No.

Are you sure?

Yes.

I hope you do not believe in cooties.

No, Mrs Stone.

May I ask what you are writing so intently?

Notes.

Just notes?

Just notes.

Notes about me?

Yes.

Have I offended you, Agent Smith? If so, I *am* sorry.

Personal feelings have no bearing on this interview.

The process of making new acquaintances *can* be rough. But I think you will find it is worth it in the end.

Was your acquaintanceship with Mrs Hadfield a rough one?

Oh, there goes that little gesture again. Very subtle, Agent Smith. Very subtle. Set them at ease then—whip right back around to the interrogation, is that the technique?

Obviously, Mrs Hadfield didn't just—

Roll over?

—capitulate immediately.

Oh, of course not.

What was that about...

If you keep consulting your notes that way, Agent Smith, I am going to get the idea you are not listening.

Jumping to the deep end, you said.

Oh, obviously. But that does not mean you get out of any of the work. What is it that character said in that movie... Oh, I had better do something lest the prize be less sweet by its easy winning? You should remember that, Agent Smith, it could be very useful on the way to where you are going.

No one here is going anywhere.

You never know, Agent Smith. Maybe we are all working on something, even if we do not know it.

And how did you continue to work on Mrs Hadfield?

Oh, that *is* very good, Agent Smith. You do have a real knack for bringing things around.

Mrs Hadfield.

Oh, yes. Poor Olivia. If you want to know what she did after I left, well, there *is* no way I could possibly tell you, is there? But I *am* sure she is helping some handsome agent like yourself in a white room just like this with these great big mirrors, to fill things in. Now, that *was* a tongue twister, was it not. Listen to me stumble all over myself.

My mouth *is* certainly going to be dry—I hope you will not find it rude if I hold this while we talk, Agent Smith?

It's not a problem. Now, what—

You forgot something, Agent Smith.

What?

You have not refastened these cuffs. And you said we had to before we went on.

We won't worry about that now.

Oh, but I would not want you to get in any kind of trouble. Well... that is a bit of a lie. But you understand what I mean.

It's fine.

Are you sure?

You're not going anywhere.

Oh, thank you for telling me. It *is* good to know these things. It is comforting to be told the obvious, do you not think, Agent Smith? Maybe it reaffirms a sense of a common reality?

Right now we're only interested in your relationship with Mrs Hadfield. Weren't you worried she would say something to her husband?

Oh, of course not. Most models—well, almost—never talk about the things that *really*...get under their skin. Is that not your general experience, Agent Smith?

We're not here to—

Why *do* you do your job, Agent Smith? If I may ask, that is. I would not want to be nosy.

Clarify, Mrs Stone.

Why do this instead of...something else?

Because this is what we do.

But *why* is it your job?

Because it is.

Oh, dear, I *am* afraid we could go round and round all day long this way.

Then let's not. When was your next encounter with Mrs Hadfield?

Oh, I probably waved to her when she was out checking the mailbox.

You just happened to be—

Of course not, you have to keep on the ball, Agent Smith.

And how did she react?

Oh, the poor dear scurried back inside, maybe with letters clutched to her chest, even. That would have made a nice picture, do you not think? Something like that could be quite endearing.

That was the extent of this encounter?

Unless you want to include fantasy, Agent Smith, then yes, I *am* afraid so.

Let's stick to physical reality.

Oh, well, then you want to hear about Cynthia's get-together. You cannot get much more...physical than that. Do you have a file on her, as well?

We have complete files on everyone.

Including yourself?

Everyone.

I wonder what it says. Can I see it sometime?

Th—

After all, it *is* only fair, you *have* already seen mine.

When you say Cynthia, you mean... Mrs Renquist?

Who else? Do you have everyone's name written there?

Everyone that was in your cell.

Such an interesting word *cell*, do you know where it comes from, Agent Smith?

What happened at Mrs Renquist's party?

You did not answer *my* question, Agent Smith.

We're not here to answer your questions, Mrs Stone.

Are you not the least bit curious?

About Mrs Renquist—

If you were one of my *cell*, as you put it, I would have you look that up as part of your homework. It *is* important to cultivate curiosity, Agent Smith. At least the way everything is at the moment. And, as you are now, I am afraid you would not do very well in our *cell*.

It's a good thing this is not a terrorist organization then.

Such harsh words, Agent Smith.

How did you molest Mrs Hadfield at Mrs Renquist's party? This would be the party on the...sixteenth?

Oh, really, Agent Smith, if you are going to be so vulgar... I just don't know if I can see myself going on.

Mrs Stone—

I will have you know that I have never *molested* anyone in my life. Anything and everything I have done has *always* been quite consensual. Which is more than I can say for you, Agent Smith.

When did Mrs Hadfield consent to you taking off your clothes?

Oh, well, that had nothing to do with her. It was purely my own expression. If it disturbed her, well, I cannot help that.

That's not the way most people would see it.

And how do you see it, Agent Smith, when you think about me standing around naked, that is?

That would be immaterial, Mrs Stone. And a non-occurrence.

Oh, dear. We really *do* have some work ahead of us.

Your days of *work*, Mrs Stone, are over. That's something you had better get through your head.

I *will* take it under advisement, Agent Smith.

Now, about Mrs Renquist's par—

Oh, we *were* there, were we not? Oh, yes. Cynthia. Such a dear. Too bad you missed her in your little...round-up, Agent Smith. You could have had some fun with her.

Mrs Stone.

Oh, all right. Let me see.... Hmm... Cynthia had asked me to pop upstairs and get some more oil for the tiki torches. And it just so

happened that our little Olivia had gone to freshen herself up—it did just happen that she got a few small spots on her dress, and—well, as you can imagine, being almost perfect, she could *not* do anything else but to try and get them out before the stains set. And well, all I had to do was slip off my clothes and just...step around the corner.

Do you always go around naked underneath?

Well, we *are* all naked underneath our clothes, are we not, Agent Smith? So when our poor Olivia opened the door, well, there I was again.

And you followed up on this how?

I asked her if she was enjoying the party, of course.

And—

Well, it did take her a few minutes to reply, as you can imagine. And being a good neighbor, I had to inquire if she was feeling ill.

And her reply?

You're naked. Of course, she stuttered much more cutely when she said it.

And you?

Replied the only way I could, of course.

Which was?

I told her how we are all naked underneath our clothes, anyway.

And then?

Oh, she squeezed her back against the opposite wall to get by and headed downstairs. Not that there was not *plenty* of room, of course. But well, you can imagine, Agent Smith.

And you got dressed again?

Well, since everyone else was, I did not want to embarrass anyone, you know how it is. Poor Olivia had practically welded herself to her husband's arm after that.

And then?

Oh, well, there was not much I *could* do, was there? And with stage one completed, I decided it was best to jump to stage three.

You skipped over the second stage, Mrs Stone.

There is no need to consult your notes, Agent Smith. Of course, you are perfectly right. We have to be flexible, you know, Agent Smith. So I had Cynthia to arrange for her—Olivia, that is—to help clean up. That way the husbands would be off somewhere, I *am* sure you know all about that. There is always so much to clean up, you know. All that food and all those drink cups. Everything has to be poured out. Of course, I am sure your wife handles that. But I am sure you get the idea, Agent Smith.

And where did Mrs Renquist fall in your hierarchy of command?

Oh, I cannot say, Agent Smith.

Mrs—

What I mean to say, Agent Smith, is that you never can tell one day from the next.

An operation your size must maintain at least some minimal organizational structure. This will be fleshed out more later, so only a preliminary answer will be required now.

Do you imagine that we say *javal'd, mein leader*, the way they do in the movies?

Mrs—

Because sometimes we do—it can be quite fun.

Mrs Stone—

A little humor *can* go a long way, Agent Smith. I think you would have laughed if you had seen how fast poor Olivia trumbled down those steps, as fast as if she had *already* been branded.

Ahmm, Mrs Stone—

Have you ever been to a suburban house party, Agent Smith?—of course, you probably have—but speaking of, what *unspeakable* things are your suit-alike companions perpetrating on our dear Olivia at this very moment, do you think?

We're here to talk about Mrs Hadfield.

Oh, I thought that *is* what we were doing, Agent Smith.

So you arranged for her to help clean up following the party on the sixteenth. How did you use this situation to further your recruitment efforts?

Well, I just cannot say, Agent Smith. I mean, that is, I cannot say *exactly* what it is that poor Olivia *did* see. In fact, to be *quite* honest, Agent Smith, I am not even sure if I noticed her. Cynthia was supposed to... arrange for her to come down the hall to get something or the other. And she did say she was quite...distracted when she came back. But I was rather too...busy to notice. I will tell you, Agent Smith, I was not *just* panting for show. You might ask Virginia?

Mrs... Tenmire?

Yes. Is that important?

It's for the record.

Oh, well, for the record, she *is* very good. I think you should make sure to make a note of that.

And what happened next?

Oh, well, we went to help Cynthia clean up. Or is that not the answer you wanted, Agent Smith? Would you prefer to hear about how I repaid Virginia, instead?

Only so far as it connects with Mrs Hadfield.

Oh, well, if you insist.

You were still convinced she wouldn't tell her husband?

Oh, of course not.

What was your reason for being so confident?

Oh, no reason. I just... never bother to worry about it. Now, Donna—well, after all—she *does* do enough worrying for all of us, after all.

Mrs Salander?

Of course, Agent Smith. Poor thing, I *am* convinced it is a slight programming malfunction somewhere. Sometimes I think *she* thinks that everything that happens somehow relates to her, as if she were in charge of the whole world.

Is that what you want, to conquer the rest of us?

Oh, is that what *you* want, Agent Smith?

That's not what we're here for, Mrs Stone. We—

Oh, we could be.

We need to return to Mrs Hadfield.

Maybe we should give poor Olivia a rest. At least in mind. I *am* sure one of your doppelgängers is not allowing her body the same courtesy.

But I am sure she can hold up. She *is* very well trained. Have you ever wondered about our training techniques, Agent Smith?

We're not to that point yet.

Oh, well, there *is* no need to rush, is there? What should I do with this?

Just leave it.

I will just put the cap back on then. We would not want to run the risk of it turning over and getting anything all wet, would we?

What was your next step in recruiting Mrs Hadfield?

Oh, as I told you, Agent Smith, there is no plan, no one, two, three, a, b, c.

Then—

I waited. That is all. You have to sometimes play these things by ear. Do you ever have to do that, Agent Smith? And *what* is it you keep glancing at in that folder, Agent Smith?

Verifying.

Oh. You really must have *everything* in there. Even our bi-weekly meetings, I bet.

It's complete.

I *am* sure. Then you would know all about the phrase *ride'm cowgirl*, would you not, Agent Smith? I bet you like westerns.

We have drifted off topic.

Have we, Agent Smith?

About Mrs Hadfield—

Do you know how most magic tricks work, Agent Smith? They had something on television about it. Have you seen it? It *is* really just about getting someone to watch one hand... while you do something with the other.

How does this—

Well, Agent Smith, you want to know how I recruited, as you say, poor Olivia, and I *am* just trying to help you understand that.

What were you waiting for?

Sometimes, Agent Smith, things are all mixed up together. You know what I mean? Oh, let us take your big, thick file there. For instance, what does it say about the stars on the day you and your black-body-armored friends broke down my back door? Although, if I may say so, I *am* sorry that you did not elect to put the cuffs on personally.

That's not pertinent information.

Oh? Are you *sure*?

Did it factor into your plans for recruiting Mrs Hadfield? Or your other plots?

Did I take it into account personally? Oh, no. But can you *really* be sure it had no influence at all?

If you didn't—

Oh, I am not talking about what I *did* or did *not* do. I *am* asking if you have some proof of it, or if you just write it off and go on. Oh, of course, you have to write off *something*. After all, if you recorded *everything* you *actually* need, you would have to take a snapshot of every little bit of the universe, I suppose, would you not? But of course, it would require a whole *other* universe to contain that information, would it not, Agent Smith? And I must admit it already seems as if there is more than enough to have to clean as it is.

If you're trying to establish some sort of defense via a claim of insanity or the like, there's no use. The only way you can help yourself now is by cooperating.

Oh, but that *is* what I *am* trying to do. I promised you I would tell you everything that you need to know. And I am. But I cannot help if *you* are not interested in hearing everything.

We're here to talk about Mrs Hadfield. Anything else you have to say can wait until a subsequent interrogation.

You *are* very authoritative when you tap a stack of paper that way, did you know that, Agent Smith?

When was your next encounter with Mrs Hadfield?

You really do have a one-track mind.

It's our job.

And are you ever *not*—Okay, okay, no need to look so, Agent Smith. But you *will* have to give me a minute. After all, I did promise to tell you everything that you need to know, but since you all of a sudden do *not* want that—well, where do I begin?

When was your—

Oh, yes. When was my next encounter with Mrs Hadfield? You already said that, dear. Oh, now let *us* see. Hmm. Let *us* see, oh yes, it was at book club. No, not *our* book club, of course, you know who I mean, you *have* got all that down already in that big, thick file there, right? No, it was the neighborhood book club, you know, the kind of thing scheduled for four or so times a month for housewives to have something to do in the middle of the afternoon out in the intellectual desert called—

M—

Oh, please, do not interrupt, not when I am quoting. I cannot imagine how I am supposed to give you everything you need if you keep interrupting me, Agent Smith. Now, shall I go on?

Continue.

There *is* no need to sound so ill, Agent Smith. These things take time. You should know that. You cannot rush them.

Please, Mrs Stone.

Do you think yourself a very... hard person, Agent Smith?

Mrs Stone.

Okay, Agent Smith. As you wish. Now, let me see.... Oh, yes, we were at book club. Have you ever experienced any *very* interesting things, Agent Smith?

H—

How does this apply to Mrs Hadfield? If you would just be patient, Agent Smith, you would find out. Now, sometimes these things can be very boring, the program, that is. And sometimes I admit I just want to get off on more interesting things. And I just happened to remember something I had highlighted in one of those... well, one of those things you don't see on book club, but I just thought of it and I just had to lean over and I just had to ask poor Olivia if she had ever felt experimented on. But of course, you can guess the answer. So I asked her if she would like to be. And you know, Agent Smith, she turned the same shade as my highlight. The poor dear. New models can be such fun. Is that what they have sent you down here for, Agent Smith? Market research? Consumer reports? To find out *exactly* how we broke their latest generation?

We're only here to—

Oh, yes, but *why* are you here? Do you ever think about where all the recordings they must be making on the other side of that glass and

all those notes you are so dutifully scribbling go? Do you think it all ends up back in Research, Agent Smith? I can imagine they would be dying to know how we get *inside* their supposedly perfect units.

That's not the responsibility of this department.

Oh. Well, shall we go on then, Agent Smith?

About Mrs Hadfield?

Of course, dear. What else? So, oh, where was I?

Book club.

Oh, good. You *are* paying attention. I was afraid you might find me boring and be sitting over there doodling instead.

Mrs—

Don't worry, dear. I would not tell.

Mrs—

Oh, yes. Poor Olivia. You would have thought—well, that comes later. The poor dear. Anyway, Lucy, our resident... anti-accountant, if you will—I *am* sure you have this information down there somewhere—well, she had to snap her—Olivia, that is—out of it. Now, I know what you are wondering.

That is?

You are wondering how in the world we got her to experience this very interesting material in the first place.

You're referring to potentially salacious material?

Very good, Agent Smith. We *were* very lucky. There were just *stacks* of them—an in such good condition, too. It *is* amazing what you

can find in the average dump. Those two...well, I guess that is for later.

Those two?

I said that is for later, Agent Smith. You *do* want everything in order, right? But we *are* talking about Olivia, Agent Smith. Do you know what newer models do with material like that?

Ignore it?

Oh, not quite. It is rather like...the nervous system of a...frog. Have you ever seen anything about that, Agent Smith?

No.

Oh, you should. You would be amazed at the fascinating things you can find in landfills. We had such a nice collection. It *is* too bad everything had to be blown up. Otherwise I would offer to give you a tour. I *am* sure you could find something to your liking, Agent Smith.

We'll recover any available material.

Oh, I *am* sure you will, Agent Smith. You should keep an eye out. It is quite fascinating. It—well, it all starts with this university man, just like they have on television, with a pipe and everything, I am sure. He—rather comfortably, one might be tempted to add—thought all the sensory apparati—I believe that is how you say it—apparati—of the body fed into the brain, which was literally a kind of...master control center, which processed everything in this oh so top-down fashion to produce a logical perception of the world. But do you know what happened?

Frogs?

Oh, yes. Frogs. That is very good, Agent Smith. Frogs, you see—well, it *is* all a matter of *what* they see. You see?

Mrs—

Or what they do *not* see. It *is* partly in the eyes, you see, that...editing takes place. They must have been very interesting little things. It *is* almost too bad they don't make them anymore. You can sometimes see them in movies, did you know that, Agent Smith? But their eyes, they...process, if you will. Krystal has some quite interesting theories on how they could have been built—but that can wait until later. But what they do is they *edit* what they see before they send it on to the brain. So things traveling too slow or too fast, it never *sees* them because it never makes it to the frogs poor little brain. And the poor university man, you know, just like they have on television, well, he went on to completely break down after he found this out. I think he probably had to be recycled after that. But they did that more often back then, I think. Things *were* built to be reused. Of course, I guess the schematics must have been *just* as proprietary back then. Otherwise he would have just gone to the factory and asked, do you not think, Agent Smith? That would have been the easiest thing to do. Although, I must admit reverse engineering *does* have its upsides...and backsides. But some of the stuff you dig out of the dumps is so...unsophisticated. Such simplicity to try and explain such tantalizing complex things. That software seems to have been *very* flawed, I am afraid.

You're claiming Mrs Hadfield literally *couldn't* see what she was experiencing? Or understand what you were discussing?

Oh, I would not presume to say that. I am sure, it being your job and all that, you know *much* more about how the latest models work than I do.

We have all the relevant information.

Is something the matter, Agent Smith?

No.

You *do* seem a little run-down. Should we take a break?

There's a problem with your statement.

Oh, is there?

How did she know you were...nude? Why didn't she...edit that out?

Oh, I *am* afraid you would have to ask Krystal about that. She is our unofficial technician.

Y—

For instance, she once proposed a daemonish question. Would you like to hear it, Agent Smith? It would probably be pertinent to your inquiries.

If it relates to Mrs Hadfield.

Oh, it does. In a roundabout sort of way, that is.

We're not here for roundabouts, Mrs Stone.

Are you sure about that, Agent Smith?

W—

But we *are* threatening to get off track again, are we not? Oh, I *am* sorry. This keeps happening. And I promised to try my best. I *will* just have to do better. So where were we?

Y—

Oh, yes. The book club. But there is not very much left to tell about that. We finished watching it. We talked awhile, passed out lemonade, that sort of thing. Which makes me wonder—you know—about who comes up with all those little details.

Details?

All those things about what everyone does in the between times.

Between times?

You know, Agent Smith. All the things you don't see on television. The between the scenes. Somebody *has* to program these things that are there that you don't see, right? And I wonder how they come up with them.

Why?

Oh, I just like to wonder *if*. Or at least, I think I wondered that at the time. At least, now, looking back on it, I do.

Mrs—

Oh, yes. There I go again. And after everything. I *am* so sorry, Agent Smith. But it still might help you to understand some things, anyway. But you wanted to know about poor Olivia.

Why poor?

Oh, that goes without stating, Agent Smith. Now, let me see.... I had no convenient opportunity with her after that. At least not for a while. I do have my own concerns to worry about, you know, Agent Smith.

Maintaining your cover.

Oh, is that what you call it?

How did you find time to maintain dual identities?

Oh, is that what I was doing? Well, I do find there is not much need of dusting *every* day. In fact, no one hardly ever notices at all. Does that answer your question, Agent Smith?

And—

Of course, there is no need to work *all* the time, is there? Sometimes I did nothing at all. But you can only take so many days off, right, Agent Smith?

That's not relevant.

Oh, of course. You can deduce the problem, though. I *am* sure it is all right there in your records.

What's that?

Well, I have to admit, Agent Smith, I did not *quite* always keep up. Needing less of them, well, sometimes I did not order cleaning supplies for weeks on end. I am afraid I can be like that sometimes. I *am* sure that got me on *some* list.

There's a minor note—

Well, there is no need to go digging, Agent Smith. I completely believe you. But what else was I supposed to do? I could only dispose of so much of it at a time. And after all...well, you know.

Mrs—

Oh, I know, you are going to say how this is not relevant to poor Olivia—I mean, Mrs Hadfield—right?

Mrs Stone—

But I *did* promise. And it is very related. Vitaly, I assure you. It has to do with Juan and Julio, you see—

Mrs Stone—

If you keep interrupting me, Agent Smith, I cannot see how we are going to get anywhere.

How does this relate to your recruitment of Mrs Hadfield?

If you would just let me continue, Agent Smith, you would find out. How can I tell you what you want to know when you try to tie my hands like this? And speaking of, Agent Smith, are you sure you do not want to refasten these? I would not want you to get in trouble.

You're not going anywhere.

Oh, I hope I did not give you the idea that I wanted to.

About Mrs Hadfield—

Well, that *is* what I have been trying to tell you about, Agent Smith.

Your file—

Says a great many things, I *am* sure. But I thought you were interested in Olivia.

We are. B—

Well, then you should not interrupt. I am afraid you are not very good at this, Agent Smith. Oh, not that I mean that as an insult. That would be the last thing on my mind. I just need to know if you want me to go on.

Please.

There is no need to get testy, Agent Smith. I *am* sorry. Let me make it up to you. Now, you see, I do not think I could do *anything* without Juan and Julio. And that, of course, includes the subject of our seemingly...mutual interest? But I *am* sure you know that already. You probably have that down in your files.

We have everything that's relevant.

Oh. Well then, I will just skip that part. There is no need in telling you what you alr—

For the record.

Hmm? What was that, Agent Smith?

You need to repeat it for the record. We've been over this, Mrs Stone.

Are you sure you want to go to all that trouble, Agent Smith? After all—

We have to be thorough.

Oh, well. If we have to. Where was I? Oh, yes. Juan and Julio. Those two were, as you can imagine, ridiculously hard workers. You might think that would preclude them from being persons of interest to our ...organization, would you not, Agent Smith?—and I will admit, we never could *quite* determine what their position should be. Do you know what one of the most common glitches is in—well, almost—every model, Agent Smith?

No.

Well, you see, it has to do with how the software files units like Juan and Julio. That is, they are categorized as both lazy *and* so utterly hardworking. You can see the contradiction. I do believe that may be one of the reasons they were recruited, originally, that is.

Did you recruit them?

Oh, no. That was long before me, I suspect.

You su—

But they are so wonderfully useful. And such fun at times. At least I personally thought so.

Your file, Mrs Stone—

Oh, yes. We *will* just have to see what we can do about that, will we not, Agent Smith? Did you know, Agent Smith, that the only thing you can count on is that you cannot break a new model *exactly* the same way as you broke an old one—well, there was one time, a little bug that hung around through several iterations—oh, but you cannot depend on that, fortunately.

Fortunately?

Oh, well, it would get so boring, would it not? I *am* sure one day they will begin mass production and overwhelm us with sheer numbers. Although, you can never tell. Maybe we will be a completely different organization by then. But there you go again, getting me off track, Agent Smith. That *is* not very nice. Now, oh yes. No, each one is a brand new puzzle. That is what keeps it fun. We do have to try and have as much fun as we can, Agent Smith. Perhaps you want to give it a try sometime. Maybe we could get you a spatula—an inside joke, I am afraid. It—

A spatula is a kitchen implement.

Oh, of course you know that, Agent Smith. I was not trying to imply that you did not. But they have uses outside the kitchen, do they not?

Mrs Stone—

Oh, such as—

We are aware of the uses of spatulas outside the kitchen, Mrs Stone.

Oh, really, Agent Smith? Forgive me, but I do not know that I believe you.

Mrs Stone—

So how *do* you use a spatula outside the kitchen, Agent Smith?

Mrs Stone—

Of course, as I said, Agent Smith, I am not trying to accuse you of lying or anything. It is just, well, you know, I am sure.

Mrs Stone—

It is just that so many people say so many things, you know.

Mrs Stone—

And I just wanted to make sure we were on the same page.

If you must know, it can be used to help assemble puzzles.

Oh, really, Agent Smith? You would not lie to me, would you?

W—

I mean, I *know* that you have everything in that big, thick file right there that you cannot seem to remove your hand from. Maybe you are just trying to trick me? Is that what you are trying to do, Agent Smith? Make me feel as if we have something in common? But I would bet quite a few grandmothers use spatulas to assemble puzzles, do you think? That *is* very tricky, Agent Smith. And I cannot say if it is very...nice.

It's unlikely your grandmother would be very proud of seeing what you've become or how you've turned out.

Oh, how mean, Agent Smith. And just when we were getting to like each other so much. Do you enjoy being hurtful?

Th—

I *am* curious, Agent Smith, what does *your* grandmother think of you becoming so mean? Or were you always so?

Mrs—

Although, I guess it *is* partly my fault. After all, I suspected you first. I *am* sorry for that, Agent Smith.

Mrs Stone—

Oh, I accept your apology. After all, Agent Smith, I want us to be good friends. And good friends do fight once in a while. But they should be able to forgive and forget, do you not think, Agent Smith?

Th—

I *do* just want to get you to where you need to be, after all.

(. . .)

Are you okay, Agent Smith?

We should get back to—

Oh, yes, we should. Thank you, Agent Smith. I *am* glad you are here to keep us on track. And—

About the maintenance workers.

Yes, Agent Smith?

Were they in on your plans from the beginning?

Well, I would not say that. But really, Agent Smith, as I have said, *I* do not know what my plans were. At least, not in detail.

Yes. You may claim to not have had a clear plan in mind. But a warning, Mrs Stone, you won't be able to use this as some kind of defense. It—

Oh, I was not trying to defend anything.

Ignorance can't be used as a defense, Mrs Stone. It—

Oh, but like I say, I am not defending myself at all, Agent Smith.

Because—

I am just trying to do everything I can to answer your question.

Th—

To tell you about everything that you need to know—

In regards to Mrs Hadfield.

Well, we *have* already been through this, Agent Smith. Do you not think we should move on?

Yes.

Good. Do I need to wait for you to catch up on your notes? I would not want your hand to start to cramp.

There's no need to be concerned. How did you next engage Mrs Hadfield?

Oh, I would have thought of the idea of going to return her mail, about then.

Mail? You mean you robbed or otherwise manipulated the postal carrier to illegally obtain posted material?

Certainly not. The letters would have been left in my box by mistake.

You can't expect us to believe that. It's far too coincidental and—

Oh, but sometimes things *do* happen that way, Agent Smith. We just have to take advantage of them whenever they do. And it *was* worth it to see the surprise in her face at the idea of such a possibility. Although, it is very subtle, I might add. And of course she had to invite me in so we could talk about it some more. *That* happens to be a very exploitable feature, did you know that, Agent Smith? You can imagine what happened next.

You removed your clothes again.

Very good, Agent Smith. You *are* beginning to get the idea. You do catch on fast. That *is* exactly the way it was. She came back into the living room with the tray, and there I was sitting there without a stitch.

And she ran away.

Oh, no. She set the tray down and offered me a cup.

B—

Oh, the newer models *are* very resilient. A few initial shocks and they will adjust, to a degree. So she sat down and faintly smiled, as you can imagine, and held her cup and saucer.

So your efforts were no longer effective.

Oh, they were. You have to develop senses for these things, Agent Smith. I *am* sure you know all about that. And after a while, you learn to tell when their eyes are dis-focusing. Eyes *can* tell you so much, you know. Have you been paying attention to mine, Agent Smith?

That—

It *is* the usual procedure to have a device *just* for recording them during interrogations like this, is it not?

How—

Oh, we keep up with things. But what I *do* want to remind you of, Agent Smith, is that you can always go back and look at them later as much as you want. But the real thing *is* preferable, do you not think, Agent Smith?

What did you talk about?

Oh, the normal things. Common gossip, community affairs, and the such.

And then?

Oh, I set down my coffee and slipped on my dress and left.

That's all.

Should there have been something else?

Mrs—

Anything in particular you are thinking about, Agent Smith? Hm?

And after you left, what did you expect to happen?

Oh, she sat there on the sofa awhile. Then she took the cups into the kitchen and put them in the dishwasher.

Yes. Yes, obviously. What was your next step?

That is not what you should be asking me, Agent Smith.

What should we inquire about?

Oh, did you not wonder *how* I knew that?—if I was not there, that is. After all, Agent Smith, I would not want to give you the impression that I would supply pure speculation as fact in regards to something like that.

How—

But we have only barely talked about Krystal yet. I have to admit, Agent Smith, I *am* a bit confused about how to help you keep all of this straight. Maybe we should just move on. And you *do* want to know what happened next, it is just that...well, there is one *little* problem with that.

What?

Yes. I know how—well, I guess we are at the same problem, again, are we not? Oh, dear. Well, I guess there *is* nothing to be done for it. We *will* just have to muddle through.

Mrs—

What I mean to say, Agent Smith, is that in order to tell you what you want to know, I will have to go back a little ways.

Go back?

Yes. I do know how you want to connect all the dots from A to B to C to D in a nice straight line, but I am afraid if you want *all* the facts we are going to have to find something to come before A.

Clarify, Mrs Stone.

Oh, Agent Smith. Dear, I *am* afraid we are going to have to put the Mrs Hadfield part of our exchange on hold for just a bit. And go way back.

Prior to Mrs Hadfield's arrival in your neighborhood?

Oh, you *could* say that.

When would that be? Are you indicating that recruitment efforts were begun prior even not only to Mrs Hadfield's arrival but prior to your own arrival on your street?

Oh, I cannot really say about that, Agent Smith.

Mrs Stone—

Of course, what I mean is I cannot very well tell you about something I was not around for, even if it did happen, could I?

So no such information was communicated to you from any predecessors?

Not that I am aware of, Agent Smith.

Then how can you claim that to understand the situation around your efforts to recruit Mrs Hadfield we have to go back prior to your establishment on your street?

Well, that depends on how you feel about certain things, Agent Smith?

What things, Mrs Stone?

Oh, Tuesday.

Tuesday?

Yes, Agent Smith.

This...

Oh, I am sorry, Agent Smith, I did not mean to make you have to go through everything you have in that very thick folder there.

These events didn't take place on a Tuesday.

Oh.

So you are saying that something occurred on the prior Tuesday that was relevant to these particular overtures you were making in your recruitment efforts during this particular meeting with Mrs Hadfield?

Well, as I said, Agent Smith, that depends on your opinion.

We're not here about opinions, Mrs Stone. We're here about facts.

Well, then last Tuesday might not be relevant at all, I am afraid.

Then, continuing—

Then again...

Is this relevant or not, Mrs Stone?

Well, Agent Smith, that *is* the problem, you see. Like I said, it all depends on your opinion.

Enough, Mrs Stone.

Oh, I am sorry to aggravate you, Agent Smith. I would have avoided it if I could.

Does this or does this not concern your recruitment efforts toward Mrs Hadfield, Mrs Stone?

Well, as I said, Agent Smith—

And how long prior to Mrs Hadfield's arrival on your street do you claim these relevant events take place?

Well, that *is* hard to say, Agent Smith. Well, of course, that depends on what you think about... Well, anyway, it could be a very long time. Maybe even a really long time.

Mrs Stone, this is r—

Completely necessary, Agent Smith.

Doubtful.

Have I *ever* given you any reason to doubt me?

There's more than enough here to indicate that should be the default case.

Oh, that file again. I just do not know *what* it is I am going to have to do to convince you. We *are* really going to have to do something about this, Agent Smith.

We're doing our job. And as a reminder, Mrs Stone, any more wastes of time will not be tolerated.

Oh, yes. But to do it effectively you *are* going to have to learn to be *flexible*.

You're claiming that one has to break the rules in order to follow them?

Sometimes, Agent Smith.

Mrs Stone, this really has passed into ridiculousness. There isn't anything you could possibly hope to gain out of it. If you think stalling will somehow—

Oh, heavens no. Although, I do have to admit, Agent Smith, I *really* do enjoy spending time with you. And I would not turn down an excuse to stay awhile longer, if that is what you are offering.

Returning. What was your next step in recruiting Mrs Hadfield?

Well, I figured it best at that point to begin a feasibility study.

A feasibility study?

Yes. Are you not familiar with them. Oh, I am sorry, Agent Smith. I did not mean to try and offend you.

Mrs—

Of course, I assure you I am not trying to insult you either.

Mrs—

Not one bit. I give you my word on that.

We are more than aware of what a feasibility study is, Mrs Stone.

I was not trying to imply you did not, Agent Smith.

Mrs S—

You do understand that, I hope.

Mrs—

Because if you did not, I would have to apologize profusely. It was absolutely the last thing on my mind, I assure you.

Mrs Stone.

Yes?

Mrs Stone.

I am sorry, Agent Smith. It does look like I *have* offended you. And I do not know what I can possibly do to convince you that that was absolutely the last thing I had on my mind.

You said a feasibility study.

Yes.

A study on the feasibility of what?

Well, for whether or not it might be worthwhile to recruit Oliv— Mrs Hadfield, that is. It seemed like the sort of thing to do, do you not agree? Is that not the sort of thing that usually gets done?

But you stated earlier...

Oh, I am sorry, Agent Smith. It seems I keep saying things that make you keep having to look back through those pages you are so dutifully laying down over there.

You have stated quite plainly that you had already started your recruitment efforts with Mrs Hadfield.

If you say so, Agent Smith.

Are you—

What I mean to say, of course, is that if you say that I said that I completely trust you. So I believe I absolutely must have said it, if that is what you say that I said.

Mrs Stone, are you saying that hadn't yet—

Oh, no. I am saying what you are saying.

Mrs Stone.

Yes, Agent Smith?

First you say you are willing to cooperate. Now everything you have said is supposed to have been a lie—

Oh, where would you get a horrible idea like that? That is an absolutely terrible thing to say, Agent Smith. It *is* horrible.

You claim to have already begun actively trying to recruit Mrs Hadfield, is that correct?

You said so. And if you say so, I believe I absolutely must have.

This is not about what was said earlier in the course of this interrogation, Mrs Stone. This is asking about what you did. Is the rest of this a lie?

If you are talking about your notes, Agent Smith, which I assume you are because you are holding them like that, but I—

A straight answer, Mrs Stone. Have you been lying?

You will have to be more specific, Agent Smith. I am sorry but—

Did you begin your recruitment efforts in relation to Mrs Hadfield prior to the return of these alleged postal materials you claim were mis-delivered to your residence? Yes or no, Mrs Stone.

Well, if it is to be yes or no, Agent Smith—

Yes or no, Mrs Stone.

Yes.

You're sure of that?

Is this a yes-or-no only question too, Agent Smith?

Mrs Stone.

Well, Agent Smith, I *am* just trying to give you what you want.

Mrs—

I just do not see how I am going to be able to do that, considering that you do not seem to want to tell me what it is that you want. If I might say, I do not think that is very kind of you. It is a not very nice kind of game when only one side knows the rules.

The rules, Mrs Stone, are quite simple. You cooperate and tell the truth, and—

I know you say that, Agent Smith, but now you keep telling me *how* to tell the truth. And it just seems to me that it is possible that sometimes the truth is bound up in the *how*, and I, well, I just think that might be a contradiction on your part. Not that I am trying to insult you, Agent Smith. Of course, that would be the absolute last thing on my mind. I am just trying to understand the rules is all.

Mrs Stone—

And I think that you would have to agree that it would be difficult for me to try and help you if I do not know *how* you want me to help you.

Mrs Stone, we have a finite amount of patience.

Of course, Agent Smith. But, well, again, I am not trying to insult you, Agent Smith, but do you not think that that is a little obvious?

What is?

Well, it would just seem obvious to me that, but I would not claim to be an expert or anything, so I could be completely wrong, but it just seems to me that everything is finite, so and, again, of course, I could be absolutely wrong, but would not patience be a subject under everything?

Mrs Stone, we're not here to talk about patience, or the size of the world.

Okay, Agent Smith. If you say so. But you see this is exactly what I am talking about.

What, Mrs Stone?

Well, I never would have known that otherwise. So this is why I think you might want to be more clear about the rules, you see. Of course, I am not trying to tell you how to do your job, or anything like that.

We're here—

I am just trying to offer some constructive criticism. After all, we have to promote inter-organizational cooperation, do we not, Agent Smith?

Our job, Mrs Stone, is to bring down your organization.

Of course, Agent Smith.

So back to the original question, Mrs Stone—

Yes?

Are you ready to cooperate or not?

I thought we had already gone through this. I am sorry, Agent Smith. Sometimes I think I do not make myself very clear.

You are very, very far from cooperating, Mrs Stone.

I assure you, Agent Smith, I have not been trying to do a single thing but get you to where you need to be.

Mrs Stone, you have done nothing but repeatedly sidetrack and delay this investigation from the moment that we began this interview.

I have to admit that I hardly think so, Agent Smith.

And how do you explain it?

Is there anything to explain?

Mrs Stone, your stone...wailing has become more than tiresome.

I hope you are not ill, Agent Smith.

No. Why?

Oh, just the way you cleared your throat there. I thought it might have been something. You can never tell. You know how it is in the movies, a person starts out with a little tickle in their throat and the next thing you know everyone is standing around in a graveyard.

We're not in a graveyard, Mrs Stone.

Oh, absolutely of course not. I would never have claimed we were. That would be completely ridiculous.

Now—

Have you ever seen one?

A what?

A graveyard, Agent Smith.

That has no bearing here.

Oh, I was just curious.

Mrs—

It is just that they are so spooky, you know? At least they always are in the movies. All that white stuff everywhere. What do you think causes that, Agent Smith?

White stuff?

You know, Agent Smith. You have seen the movies, I am sure. The white, stringy stuff that is in the corners of old houses and such in the movies. You have seen old houses in the movies, have you not, Agent Smith?

Of course.

Why do they not build houses like they do in the movies, do you think?

We're not here to talk about movies, Mrs Stone.

Oh, I am sorry, Agent Smith. I guess that sometimes my curiosity just gets the better of me.

Mrs—

But I must admit I always thought it might be sort of...fun to have one of those haunted houses at the end of the street, you know, like they do in the movies.

Mrs—

It is one of the places the aliens are always hiding in, is that not right? But of course I am sure you know that, Agent Smith. After all, who—

Mrs Stone, you're stalling again.

I assure you, Agent Smith, that I am doing no such thing.

Turning back—

It is just, I think, that I get curious about things all the time. Do you ever get curious about things, Agent Smith?

Our job is to investigate.

Oh, of course. But that is something completely different, is it not?

Mrs—

I am just saying that it would be possible for someone to have a job where they were supposed to find out things but that that would not be being curious. After all, if it is your job to investigate then that would not necessarily require curiosity, would it? And besides, you are already looking for what you know to exist, right, Agent Smith? So it is really not the same thing at all, is it?

Mrs Stone—

Of course, I am not trying to imply that *you* are *not* curious, Agent Smith. I am just saying that you do not *have* to be.

Mrs Stone, you will be given one more chance to cooperate.

Have I offended you, Agent Smith?

We don't get offended, Mrs Stone.

Oh. Well, I am sure that that is a very good quality for someone in your line of work to have.

If you would rather return to your cell, Mrs Stone, that could be arranged.

Have I given you the impression that I would rather be somewhere else, Agent Smith?

Is this a game to you?

I do not know. Is it? I am sorry, Agent Smith. But if we were going to play a game I think it would have been kind of you to tell me that we were. And I think this might go back to what we were talking about earlier, do you think? As I said, it is not really fair to keep the rules a secret. So if we are playing a game, I do not think you are playing very nicely, Agent Smith.

This isn't a game, Mrs Stone.

I am glad, Agent Smith. I would have hated to have thought that you had been stringing me along this whole time. Not that I am implying you would, of course, you understand.

So you do remember earlier?

Pardon, Agent Smith?

You remember what we were talking about earlier.

Oh, of course, Agent Smith. But I have to admit that I might not remember it exactly as it is in your lovely looking notes there. Have I mentioned that you have very nice handwriting, so clean and uniform.

Mrs Stone.

You would almost think it is printed.

Mrs Stone, it should be impressed upon you that this is your last chance.

Please forgive my ignorance, Agent Smith, but could you be more specific. I just think that it is good to be specific. That way we both know *exactly* what we are talking about.

Mrs Stone, you can cooperate or you can return to your cell. Which is it going to be?

Have I said anything that would make you think that I wanted to leave, Agent Smith? Because if I have, I am very sorry. I really am enjoying our conversation. And on a personal note, Agent Smith, I do have to admit that I do not think I would get exhausted anytime soon of looking into your eyes.

Mrs—

I hope you do not find that embarrassing, Agent Smith.

Th—

Because that is the absolute last thing I would want to do, embarrass you, that is.

Yes or no, Mrs Stone. Do you want to return to your cell?

I do believe I am quite comfortable at the moment.

Good. Now let's clarify some things.

I am only trying to be helpful, Agent Smith.

Then you can start by—

That is not very kind, Agent Smith.

What?

You said that I could *start*, as if I had not been trying to be helpful up to this point. Or maybe I have not been helpful. I have tried to be, Agent Smith. But have I not been? If I have not, then I am *very* sorry. I have been trying. So if you know where the failure is at I would be more than happy to try and rectify it. After all, I am trying to be as helpful as I possibly can in getting you to where you need to be.

Mrs Stone, you stated that you began recruitment efforts aimed at Mrs Hadfield mere weeks after she was introduced to the neighborhood. Is that correct?

Agent—

Yes or no, Mrs Stone.

If that is what you want me to say, Agent Smith, then, yes.

You also stated that your recruitment efforts continued past this point up to and including your claimed return of an amount of alleged

postal material that you alleged was mis-delivered to your residence. Is that correct? Yes or no, Mrs Stone.

Well, then I guess, yes, if that is what you want me to say.

Okay. Next you claim that, following the return of this alleged postal material, you began a feasibility study as to the effectiveness or usefulness of recruiting Mrs Hadfield. Is that correct. Yes or no, Mrs Stone?

If you want me to say so, then yes.

Mrs Stone, how can that be?

I am sorry, Agent Smith, but I just do not understand your question.

Mrs Stone, a feasibility study is begun before a project is undertaken, not during.

Well, of course, Agent Smith.

Yet you claim you began one after your recruitment efforts related to Mrs Hadfield were already underway.

Yes.

How do you account for this?

I am sorry, Agent Smith, but are we still answering just yes or no?

Mrs Stone.

I am just trying to follow your rules, Agent Smith.

Answer the question the way the question should be answered. How do you account for this discrepancy?

I have to admit, Agent Smith, that is a rather ambiguous statement, and considering how angry I seem to have made you earlier, I hope you can understand my hesitancy.

What ambiguity, Mrs Stone?

Well, Agent Smith, to say something should be answered the way it should be answered, well, that does leave a fair bit of room, and you do seem to be strict about how you want things done. And I am just trying to tell you what you need to know, so I would not want to give you an answer that I did not think would not be taken as intended.

Mrs Stone, you had better understand that—

Yes, Agent Smith?

Regardless of whatever equivalent rank someone of my equivalent position would have been in your organization, yours means exactly nothing here, except in regards as to how it pertains to your ability to cooperate. So you can attempt to treat individual agents of this organization as inferiors, but the only effect it will have will be against you.

Oh, I am sorry, Agent Smith. I would never want to imply that you were inferior. In fact, I would say quite the opposite.

Flattery will not be any aid to you either.

I did not suspect so, Agent Smith. But it is the truth. And I would not want you to think otherwise. And I sincerely hope that you have not been thinking that up to this point.

Continuing—

Because if you had, Agent Smith, well, I would just feel terrible about it. And as I have said, that is the absolute last thing I would have wanted to imply.

As was stated—

But you would tell me if you thought that, would you not, Agent Smith?

Mrs—

I just do not want you to go on with the wrong idea.

Mrs—

Because if you *do* believe that I have somehow implied that you were inferior, please just tell me and I will apologize immediately.

Mrs—

Because, as I have said, that would be the absolute last thing I would want you to think, going forward.

This is stalling, Mrs Stone.

Absolutely not, Agent Smith. I am just trying to ensure that I have not offended you in any way.

Mrs Stone—

Because if I have, just let me know what I have to do to correct it.

Mrs Stone, if it's stated that there is no offense, can we move on?

That *is* all I am trying to make sure about, Agent Smith.

Fine. There is no offense. It is not our job to be offended, Mrs Stone. Now, continuing from before.

I am sorry, Agent Smith. I really do not mean to have to make you go back through your notes so often.

So you continue to state that you began a feasibility study as to the usefulness and for generating strategies related to the potential recruitment of Mrs Hadfield months following the initiation of such recruitment efforts themselves.

I am afraid, Agent Smith, that I cannot answer that yes or no.

Mrs Stone—

What I mean, Agent Smith, is that of course I initiated the feasibility study *following* the initiation of the recruitment efforts. But those efforts were not the ones indicated *by* the feasibility study. I assume you can see the distinction.

So—

It is just that your question could be taken to imply that I implemented recommendations from a feasibility study that I had not even initiated as of yet and which I could not possibly have gotten any result from yet. Although I have to admit it is a rather interesting idea, using the results of something that could not even have started yet. Have you ever tried that, Agent Smith? Is that something your organization sometimes employs?

Mrs Stone—

Oh, I am sorry. I guess I must have forgotten what you said about time earlier. Silly me. It *is* in your notes, of course. But I am afraid, as I say, Agent Smith, my memory might not always be as good as your very lovely written notes.

Mrs Stone.

Yes, Agent Smith?

Mrs Stone, we're not here to discuss physics.

I guess that that does depend on how pedantic you want to be, do you not think, Agent Smith?

Mrs Stone—

I just suppose that, after all, everything is *physical* reality, is that not what they say? So if we are going to talk about anything in *reality* we are by extension, I guess you would say, that we would be talking about physics. Is that right?

We're not here for arguments in semantics, Mrs Stone.

Surely semantics must be important at *some* point or the other. Or do you just assume we are always talking about the same thing, Agent Smith? That would be very risky, would it not, always assuming that?

Mrs Stone—

But really, might not everything be semantics? At least everything we talk about.

Mrs Stone, we have had just about enough of your wordplay.

Oh, I am sorry, Agent Smith. I just wanted to make sure we were not talking at cross purposes. After all, I did promise that I would help you as much as possible...or was it that I would tell you everything that you need to know? No, there is no need to consult your notes.

There would be no need to consult the notes, Mrs Stone.

But you understand, I hope, why I am so concerned.

No, Mrs Stone. That is not clear.

Oh, well, Agent Smith, if I actually meant that I promised I would *help* you then if I just told you everything and *if* we really were talking at cross purposes, well then I would have kept my promise to tell you everything you need to know, but I would not have actually helped you because you might take what I said to mean something completely different than what I took it as I said when I said it.

Mrs Stone, enough.

There is no reason to be so curt, Agent Smith. After all, I am just trying to give you what you asked for.

Simply answer the question, Mrs Stone.

But what if the question does not have a simple answer, Agent Smith?

Mrs Stone, did you initiate a feasibility study on something you were already in the process of doing?

Well, I would have thought that was obvious, Agent Smith.

Mrs Stone—

Oh, I did not mean to insult you or anything like that. That would be the furthest thing from my mind, Agent Smith. It is just that, well, I just took it for granted, I guess you could say, that it was obvious.

And what was that?

What was obvious? Do you not think it was obvious, Agent Smith? Please let me know. After all, I am trying not to be unnecessarily obscure.

Even if it's obvious, Mrs Stone, the purpose is to state it for the record. That's the entire point of the record, to get everything down.

Oh. I am sorry, Agent Smith. I guess that I had just figured that if it existed implicitly that that meant that it in fact did exist.

And what is implicit, Mrs Stone?

Well, I am sure you already know. And it is already there unsaid, so do you not think we would save time if we did not have to spell all these things out? After all, if we did have to spell everything out, that might take a really long time, do you not think?

That's the entire point of a record, Mrs Stone.

Yes, but I just suspect, Agent Smith, or that is to say I wonder if records like that could ever be complete. It does seem like there would always have to be *something* missing, do you not think? And it is not that I would want you to have to consult your notes, Agent Smith, but I am afraid it occurs to me that I may have already said something like that.

Mrs—

If so, I am sorry. I guess that I just get like that sometimes. Forgetful, you know.

Mrs Stone, there is nothing for you to gain by stalling.

Oh, I am not stalling, Agent Smith. Not at all. I am just trying to do what you want as best as is possible, all things considered. It is just that, well, maybe I am just not very good at it. I am sorry about that, Agent Smith, if that is the case. I want you to know that I *am* trying.

Y—

So you really do have complete files on everything here.

We have complete files on everything that's pertinent, yes. That's our job, Mrs Stone.

Well, of course, Agent Smith.

S—

But I hope you understand what I was talking about talking about talking at cross purposes.

No, Mrs Stone. That is very much not clear.

Oh, well, I guess that it might not matter, anyway. After all, if your job really is *just* to get down everything, as it were, then all you have to do is get it down, is that not correct? So any kind of talking at cross purposes would not matter at all then, would it? That would be completely beside the point, would it not? So I guess that problem is solved then, right?

Mrs—

I *am* really glad we were able to get that worked out, Agent Smith. It was bugging me. After all, I am just here to try and give you what you want.

Mrs Stone.

Yes, Agent Smith?

This's the last interruption of this nature that will be tolerated. Is that understood?

I think so, Agent Smith.

Yes or no, Mrs Stone.

Oh, dear. You see what I mean about talking at cross purposes, Agent Smith?

Mrs Stone.

Yes, Agent Smith?

Mrs Stone, why did you initiate a feasibility study on something you were already engaged in doing?

I have to admit, Agent Smith, you *are* very authoritative when you tap your finger on the table that way when you speak like that. It is just...vigorously demanding.

Answer the question, Mrs Stone.

Well, as I said, Agent Smith, I would have thought that would have been obvious.

Answer the question, Mrs Stone.

If you insist, Agent Smith. But it is going to make you seem silly, I am afraid.

How is that?

Well, do you not think it seems silly when people say things that everybody already knows, Agent Smith?

That's the point of a record, Mrs Stone.

Oh. Well, I am afraid, Agent Smith, that maybe we *are* talking at cross purposes. After all—

Mrs Stone—

After all, I would think a record would *only* be useful if it contains all those things which everyone does *not* know.

Mrs Stone—

But I guess if that were the case then someone would *have* to know them, so in that case, there would not be anything that it would be useful to make a record about then, would there?

Mrs Stone, you can be escorted back to your cell if you're not going to cooperate.

I am sorry, Agent Smith. Do you feel that I am wasting your time?

You're wasting our time, Mrs Stone.

Oh, I am sorry.

Are you going to cooperate or not, Mrs Stone? Because if you're not, we have no point in being here.

I have just been trying to get you to where you need to be, Agent Smith. I hope you understand that.

Then answer the questions as they are given to you.

I have been trying, Agent Smith.

Then answer the question, Mrs Stone. Why did you initiate a feasibility study on something you were already in the process of doing?

When else should I have done so, Agent Smith?

Mrs Stone, as has been stated, and as you are aware, by definition, a feasibility study is something that is undertaken prior to the action itself. It's what informs the action. So doing it after the action has already begun is pointless. Which you have just admitted.

Exactly, Agent Smith.

Explain, Mrs Stone.

What is there to explain?

Mrs Stone.

I must admit, Agent Smith, I am kind of confused. After all, you seem to have it all.

Mrs Stone, why did you initiate a feasibility study for something that you were already in the process of doing? That would make it pointless.

Exactly, Agent Smith.

(. . .)

You see, Agent Smith. I told you. I did not want to imply that I was trying to embarrass you. Because that would have been, and is, the very last thing on my mind, I want you to know. Well, it just is that it is, well, so rather obvious, is it not?

So your organization undertook this activity with the sole purpose that it would be pointless. So the entire point was that it should be out of sequence.

Exactly, Agent Smith.

That's been noted.

I guess that that might just be one of the small differences between our two organizations, might it not, Agent Smith?

And what were the results of this feasibility study?

Oh, I am sorry, Agent Smith, but I just cannot tell you that.

Mrs Stone, we will get the information one way or the other.

Oh, I *am* sure you will.

Mrs Stone.

It is just that, well, you see, Agent Smith, it is not that I *would* not tell you the information. It is just that I cannot *remember* the results of it. So I hope you can understand that I cannot tell you something that I do not remember. That would be rather difficult, do you not think?

So not only did you initiate such a thing out of sequence, but you ignored the results of this very feasibility study that you initiated?

Exactly, Agent Smith.

So there was no point whatsoever in initiating it in the first place.

I would not say that, Agent Smith.

Explain.

Well, is that not obvious, Agent Smith?

Explain, Mrs Stone.

Well, as I am sure you know, Agent Smith, it is very hard to ignore that which does not exist. Or that is to say, it is very easy to ignore what exists, when you do not think about it at all. So if I wanted to ignore it, I could not very well do that unless there was something *to* ignore, now could I? And I could not ignore something when I did not know what *exactly* I was ignoring, otherwise how could I be sure I actually *was* ignoring it?

And why would you want to expend the effort and then ignore the results?

I am sorry, Agent Smith, because, after all, I am absolutely *not* trying to insult you, but do you not think that would be completely obvious?

We're here for the record, Mrs Stone. Why did you ignore the results of a study that you expressly commissioned to be undertaken all the while you had already begun on a plan of action that that very study would have informed.

Well, as I said, Agent Smith, it would have been impossible for that plan to inform anything. After all, as you yourself have said, with the nature of time and all—

Why did you ignore the results of a study that you expressly commissioned to be undertaken all the while you had already begun on a plan of action that that study *should* have informed?

It is simply a matter of the laws of physics, Agent Smith. As you yourself have said.

Mrs Stone.

Oh, I am absolutely *not* trying to insult you, Agent Smith. It is just that I am trying to take what you have said to heart. And it is just, well, it is obvious, is it not, Agent Smith?

Mrs Stone.

Obviously, Agent Smith, as you yourself could point out, if the study was initiated after I had already begun recruiting Oliv—Mrs Hadfield then it could not have informed anything about those efforts. So the only thing to do *would* have been to throw it away. Or... Well, obviously, if we are to take the laws of physics to heart, then we obviously cannot act on the past, can we, Agent Smith.

So you continue to maintain you initiated a feasibility study knowing full well that not only would the results be moot but that you would discard those results?

Exactly, Agent Smith.

And did you even examine the results?

Of course I did, Agent Smith.

But why? If they were useless, then why pay any attention to them, why look at all. Why not throw them away immediately?

Exactly, Agent Smith.

Mrs—

Oh, I am sorry, Agent Smith. I guess that part of it...well, I guess that part of it is that I am still getting used to this records stuff. I have to admit that it does seem somewhat tedious to me, having to make sure to go over all these things that everyone already knows. But if that is what has to be done, I guess that is what has to be done.

So let's be clear here, Mrs Stone, you initiated a feasibility study for an action you were already engaged in, knowing that the results of that study would be useless, yet you examined those results anyway.

Exactly, Agent Smith.

Why?

Why, Agent Smith?

Yes, Mrs Stone. Why? Why do that?

I do have to admit, Agent Smith, that I do find this seeming endless need to reiterate the very obvious a bit tiring. Not that I am complaining, mind you. But you do seem to manage it so effortlessly. I

guess that comes from doing it so long, do you not think? I really must say that I am impressed with your stamina, Agent Smith.

You're not answering the question, Mrs Stone.

Oh, I am sorry. As I said, Agent Smith, I guess that you just naturally have built up more stamina than myself, at least in regards to some things, and I have to say that I admire that.

What you admire or not is beside the point, Mrs Stone.

Are you sure, Agent Smith?

Mrs Stone.

I mean, I was just wondering about what if it were that I admired, say, feasibility studies that are absolutely useless. So would not what I admire be admissible, as it were, then?

So you reiterate that your entire point in this endeavor was to do something useless.

In effect.

So you purposefully wasted time and energy.

That depends on your perspective, I guess, Agent Smith.

Explain.

Well, Agent Smith, at the risk of sounding obvious, oh, I know, I know, that *is* what the record is for, but you will have to humor me a bit, Agent Smith. After all, I am just not as...practiced at this as you, and it is just going to take me a little time to get myself into the... groove, as it were, maybe.

Explain what it is that you have to gain from wasting your organization's time and resources.

Well, as I was trying to say, Agent Smith, that is, when your objective, as it were, *is* to...engage in a certain amount of harmless...frivolity, then, of course, any harmless frivolity in which you might indulge, or excuse me, I guess that I should say in which *my* organization, or my cell, as you like to call it, might indulge, well, such frivolity would not be frivolity at all, you see, because that would be the entire point, so it obviously cannot be a waste if that is what you set out to do, even if it is, do you see?

But these activities have no purpose.

No. What I mean is that their purpose is to have no purpose. Therefore they are completely...purposefully unpurposeful, as it were.

Then why did you not just throw the result of the feasibility report away? Why did you expressly examine the output if you were not or could not utilize it?

Why not, Agent Smith? I am sorry. I thought I had explained this. I will try to be more careful.

And you still maintain that you have no idea as to the contents of this study?

Well, Agent Smith, I cannot claim that *something* is not still in there *somewhere*, but if it is, I have to admit that I do not know it is. So you see, all I can tell you is I do not know. Perhaps I do know the answer to the question you are asking, but if I do not know that I know, I do not know what help I can possibly offer. I am sorry about that, Agent Smith.

So, once again, to get this straight, you commissioned a feasibility study on an action you were already undertaking, when you could not implement anything from that report, and knew beforehand that you would not, but you parsed it anyway, however, you can't remember the contents of that study.

Correct, Agent Smith.

And all subsequent copies of this report were destroyed?

Oh, no.

No?

Of course not, Agent Smith.

You kept this report?

Of course, Agent Smith.

To what end?

Well, Agent Smith, I would assume that would be obvious.

Mrs Stone.

Oh, forgive me. As I said, it is just that I am afraid I am still getting use to this. And I do keep getting the feeling that you are going to think that I am insulting your intelligence, Agent Smith—which is exactly the sort of thing that I do not want to do. Now, I am sure that by now you suspect that I really mean the opposite of that, that I have said that so much that I really *am* trying to insult your intelligence when I say exactly the opposite, but I have to assure you, Agent Smith, that that is absolutely not the thing that I am trying to do.

It doesn't matter if you insult this organization or its members, Mrs Stone. Expecting that's part of this job.

Oh, but still I would not want to. I am just here to try and help you get to where you need to be after all.

You can help by answering the question, Mrs Stone. And the question is why did you keep a report you could not act on?

Because, Agent Smith, would it not be the most natural thing in the world to want to keep a report that *could* be acted upon. So if the

report were, I guess, what you might call, *useless*, the most natural thing in the world would of course been to throw it away, as you say.

But it could not possibly have any value.

Exactly, Agent Smith.

So this report remained in your possession at the time of your apprehension?

Unfortunately, Agent Smith, I cannot really answer that with a yes or a no, if that is still the way you want me to answer.

Explain.

Well, I could answer you that I suspect that it still was in our possession at the time. But I do not know for sure. After all, Agent Smith, I am not a librarian, by any means. You would have to ask Barbara about that.

Mrs...Kendal?

My, you must just have everything at your fingertips, in that folder right there.

You're confirming that Mrs Kendal was your organization's information storage and retrieval technician.

Oh, yes.

And so far as you are aware, the report in question was still in her possession at the time of your apprehension.

Well, again, Agent Smith, I really cannot give you a yes or no answer to that.

The answer that you are able to provide will suffice.

Well, in that case, I would say that I strongly suspect so, yes.

So it would be in evidence then.

I am sorry, Agent Smith, but I could not *quite* tell if you were talking to yourself or asking me a question that time. Not that I am trying to disturb your note taking or anything such as that, oh heavens no. No, it is just that I... well, it is your eyes, you see. They really flash when you are asking a question. And with you looking down, I kind of just could not tell there for a moment. Again, not that I am trying to hamper your note taking.

That was not a question, Mrs Stone.

That is good, Agent Smith. Because I have to admit that I would not know the first thing about that. After all, what your men have or have not found or cataloged or whatnot, I do not see how I could possibly be responsible for any of that. Of course, if you wanted to hold me responsible for it, I do not think I would mind. However, I am afraid not being able to get any answers out of me might make you frustrated, you know. And then who knows what lengths you might feel you would have to go to to get them?

Mrs Stone—

Not that I am necessarily saying that I would mind, of course. I would not, after all, want to interfere with you during the vigorous performance of your duty.

Moving on, Mrs Stone. You confirmed Mrs Kendal was your information storage and retrieval technician. That is correct?

I confirm my confirmation.

This's not a joke, Mrs Stone.

Oh, I never tried to imply that it was. Was that what you thought I was doing, Agent Smith? I am so sorry.

About Mrs Kendal—

A quick question if I may, Agent Smith.

You're not here to ask questions, Mrs Stone.

I know. It is just that I am so very curious. And after all, it might help me to help you.

How is that?

Oh, I do not know.

Mrs Stone.

What I mean, Agent Smith, is that I cannot possibly know before I have an answer to the question, can I? And it is only a simple question, after all.

What's the question?

Oh, I was just wondering why you were so interested in the report.

The result of the feasibility study?

Yes.

It's our job to be interested in these things, Mrs Stone.

Oh, yes. But even you yourself admit that it is entirely useless. Is that not correct? I am sorry, that is another question.

It fails to be seen how it could possibly be useful, yes.

But it must be cataloged anyway, is that correct, Agent Smith?

Yes.

And that is what you do, Agent Smith?

That is one of the things this organization does, yes.

Oh, Agent Smith...

What is so humorous, Mrs Stone?

Oh, I am sorry, Agent Smith. It is just that, well, does it sometimes seem to you that our respective organizations seem to just exist to catalog things about each other?

And in that regard, we were speaking of Mrs Kendal. Who you have now confirmed to have been your organization's information storage and retrieval technician. That should be recorded once more.

I confirm my previous confirmations.

Mrs Stone.

Is that anything less than accurate, Agent Smith?

What, exactly, were Mrs Kendal's duties as related to her position within your cell?

Is that a trick question, Agent Smith? I mean, I know that is a question, and I am not supposed to be the one asking questions, but you always hear about trick questions in the movies, you know, and I was just wondering if that was one.

What was the nature of her duties? How was her performance at these duties?

You mean was she a very good librarian?

Was she a good information storage and retrieval technician?

Well, Agent Smith, that all depends on what you mean.

Mrs Stone.

Well, as I have said, Agent Smith, sometimes things are all a matter of perspective.

There isn't much perspective, Mrs Stone, on whether someone is or is not good at their job.

But of course, Agent Smith, that depends on exactly *what* their job is.

We're talking about Mrs Kendal's position as an information storage and retrieval technician within your organization.

And I believe I am more than well aware of that, Agent Smith.

So was she competent or not?

Well, as I *have* said, Agent Smith, that depends on what you mean.

Mrs Stone.

Of course, things often had a tendency to...go missing. And I guess, shall we say, finding things sometimes proved...difficult.

So Mrs Kendal's competency at her job was not marked?

Well, as I *have* said, Agent Smith, that depends on what you mean.

You just stated her filing abilities were sub-optimal. Is that not correct?

Oh, yes. That is very correct.

So—

But of course, that is why she had the job in the first place. And she is marvelous at it. I am sure that given a crack at your own organization's files she could do for it exactly what she did for ours.

That does not make any sense, Mrs Stone.

Well, of course it does, Agent Smith.

Mrs—

It is just that what is or not sensical is sometimes merely a matter of perspective as well.

The games end, Mrs Stone. Now. This's the last time that is going to be said.

Have I offended you, Agent Smith? If so, I am so sorry about that. It was the furthest thing from my mind. But I guess that that does not always preclude one from doing just that. So I do apologize, Agent Smith.

So you claim that Mrs Kendal was inadequate in her duties, yet you kept her on for exactly that reason. Explain.

Of course, it is very simple, Agent Smith.

Mrs Stone.

It is that it was just exactly those, what you would call, inadequacies, were exactly that which recommended her for the job.

Mrs Stone, what use would an organization have for an information storage and retrieval technician that could not file anything appropriately?_

Well, Agent Smith, you seem to be under a misapprehension.

How so?

Well, you seem to assume that all organizations, yours, mine, that they all would—or perhaps I should say that you think they should—operate the same.

And how does an ineffective information storage and retrieval technician aid any organization?

I cannot speak to any organization, Agent Smith. If I am an expert on anything, it could only be in regards to what you refer to as my organization. That would, of course, seem logical, would it not?

So you purposefully engaged an information storage and retrieval technician who was incapable of filing, storing, and retrieving information.

No.

But you have just said, Mrs Stone, that—

If you want be to answer only yes or no, Agent Smith, I am afraid that is the best answer I can give.

Mrs Stone.

But if you will allow a bit for flexibility...

Just answer the question, Mrs Stone. If she was incapable of filing, storing, and retrieving information, of what use was she?

Well, as I *have* said, Agent Smith—

Just answer the question, Mrs Stone. Did you purposefully engage an information storage and retrieval technician who was incapable of filing, storing, and retrieving information?

Not exactly, Agent Smith.

Explain.

Well, Agent Smith, it is not that she was completely, you see. Only sometimes. Of course, perhaps luck played into it at times. But I cannot say anything as to that.

The question remains, Mrs Stone, why would you employ someone incapable of doing their job?

But that was her job, of course.

Why would you have an information storage and retrieval technician position that operates completely contrary to the entire notion of what such a position is supposed to be?

Well, of course, Agent Smith, that should be completely obvious. I know, I know. For the record. I have to admit, Agent Smith, I just do not know where you get the energy. I have to say that I do admire you in that regard.

So you confirm that you purposefully engaged in this self sabotage of your organization?

Oh, absolutely not.

Then explain, Mrs Stone, how you could purposefully employ someone to do the very opposite of what their job fundamentally calls for?

As I *have* said, Agent—

You continue to maintain that your organization purposefully handicapped itself in the performance of its actions?

Well, I guess that I have to admit that at times, Agent Smith, that might have appeared to be the end result.

Of course, this is the mistake that is often made.

Oh? And what is that, Agent Smith?

Any organization can't necessarily operate perfectly. And to assume one does is typical to do, but not necessarily true to reality.

Oh. That *is* very interesting, Agent Smith. I have to admit that I thought for a moment that you might have thought something completely different.

And what would that be, Mrs Stone?

Oh, for some reason, I thought that you might have thought that I might have been some, I do not know, what do they call them... double agent, I think. Is that not what they say in the movies?

You're claiming—

Oh, I am claiming nothing, Agent Smith.

Explain.

Oh, I was just saying that I thought you might have thought that. And I just thought it would be funny, you see.

Why would you think that?

Oh, I do not know. It just seemed to me that I thought you might have thought that that was possible. Is that not what our respective organizations are supposed to do, to try and think up what the other is thinking about?

So you're not claiming to have been a double agent?

Oh, no. As I said, Agent Smith, I just meant that I thought that *you* might think so, is all.

In any regard, Mrs Stone, it would not work. We know our own.

Oh, of course, Agent Smith. I did not mean to imply otherwise.

Now—

It is just that, well...

Well what, Mrs Stone?

It would be best, would it not, if even the organization such a... double agent, as you say, it really does sound like the movies, does it not, but if such an agent were sent, would it not be useful—you might even say best—if even the organization that sent them did not know they had been sent.

No, Mrs Stone. That would make no sense.

But what if the other organization infiltrated the first? Would it not be that they would *not* want their agent to be uncovered. So the only

way to guarantee that would be for even *they* not to know about them, would it not be, Agent Smith?

Exactly what are you claiming, Mrs Stone?

Oh, I am not claiming anything. I just think that it would be... well, please forgive me, Agent Smith, I just thought that, if that were the case, it would be funny is all.

Humorous?

Yes.

How so?

Well, if I had been, do you not think it would be funny that you would have spent this whole time questioning one of your own agents as if they were the enemy? But you would have really been on the same side all along. So would that not have been funny?

Mrs Stone, are you trying to claim—

Oh, I am trying to claim nothing at all. I am just saying that I think that it would be funny if that had happened is all.

What game you're playing, Mrs Stone, is unknown.

Oh, I am sorry, Agent Smith.

Firstly, that is not how these things work.

Oh? I am sorry, Agent Smith.

And secondly, it would be impossible.

Oh?

Yes.

And, if I may ask, how is that, Agent Smith?

Given the things that you have done, it would be impossible for you to be an undercover agent.

Oh?

Yes.

And, if I may ask, how is that, Agent Smith?

If you were an undercover agent, you could not have engaged in these activities. They are the activities this organization is against. So by definition, Mrs Stone, anyone committing such acts would have to, by definition, be against this organization.

May I say, Agent Smith, that your eyes have a very particular quality when you are being definitive. It is very becoming.

Moving on, Mrs Stone.

But I think that you might have missed one point. If I may say so, Agent Smith. Not that I would want to tell you your job.

And what is that?

Well, if someone were an undercover agent, not that I am saying I am or anything, or was, you understand. As I said, I only said that is what I thought that you might have thought. But hypothetically, you could say, Agent Smith, if someone were an undercover agent, would they not *have* to do... whatever the organization they were infiltrating was doing? Would that not be the very definition of undercover? At least, that is what I would take it to be from the movies.

No, Mrs Stone.

No?

No.

And if I may ask, why is that, Agent Smith? If I may ask, that is.

If they are working against the interests of the organization, they are against the organization.

Even if that is part of their job as part of the organization?

Yes.

So then, Agent Smith, I am sorry, I do get confused sometimes, but would that not mean that all undercover agents were actually working against the organization that they actually worked for?

(. . .)

Oh, I am sorry, Agent Smith. My intention is not to make you cross, I can assure you.

Moving on, Mrs Stone.

If that is what you want, Agent Smith, I would be more than happy to do what you say.

Are you trying to indicate that Mrs Kendal was ineffective at her job in order to make us think that she would not have valuable information about your organization and that we would therefore possibly not interrogate her as fully.

Oh, no. I would not want that. Absolutely not. After all, I do not see why I should spoil her fun. No, that would be a very mean thing to do.

Mrs Stone.

And I hope you are not going to do that, Agent Smith. After all, I would hate to think that she might get shortchanged on account of me.

Mrs Stone, if you're attempting some kind of reverse-psychology trick, it won't—

Well, if you think that...well then I would have to say you should not vigorously interrogate her at all. But then again, if you do not, then I would have to say that you absolutely and vigorously do so. Or have one of your men do so, as you see fit. After all, I would not want to tell you how to do your job, Agent Smith.

Mrs Stone, you can be assured that she will be interrogated properly.

Oh, good.

No more games, Mrs Stone.

You seem to talk about games an awful lot, Agent Smith. Is there a reason you have something against them specifically?

We're not here to play games, Mrs Stone. And you will stop now. Or there will be consequences. You will not be warned about this again.

Oh.

So, continuing. Who was it that you instructed to carry out this feasibility study?

Oh, Barbara, of course. Who else would I ask?

And did you initiate this just prior to or just following your encounter with Mrs Hadfield in relation to the alleged postal materials that you claim were incorrectly placed in your box?

Before.

And when did you expect to have the results of this feasibility study?

Oh, I cannot say that I know.

You must have expected the information on some timetable.

I must admit that I cannot see why, Agent Smith. Would you expect it in such a fashion?

We're not here about individual agents of this organization, Mrs Stone. Why didn't you have a timetable?

I am sorry, Agent Smith, I really do not want to get you cross again.

Just answer the question.

Well, I would think the answer would have to be obvious.

Stop avoiding the question, Mrs Stone.

Oh, I am not trying to avoid it at all. After all, I told you I was going to tell you everything you need to know. And I have been trying to do just that.

Then answer the question, Mrs Stone. Why didn't you have a timetable?

Well, I figured that I had already started, so I was not in too much of a hurry for it. If, on the other hand, I had *needed* it in order to get started, then I might have been a little more anxious about it, I guess. But as it was, well, I guess that is just the benefit of going ahead and beginning, would you not say, Agent Smith?

And Mrs Kendal offered no provisional date by which such a feasibility study might be issued?

No.

Th—

Of course, she was very busy at the time. But as I said, I did not need it to do what I was already doing, so I did not worry too much.

What was Mrs Kendal busy with?

Oh, I must admit that I cannot recall that, Agent Smith. It was such a minor detail.

Obviously, Mrs Stone, in any organizational structure it would be overly burdensome to micromanage every detail of a subordinate. But what we're asking for—

Maybe she had lost something or the other. Or maybe she was trying to figure out how best to lose something or the other. Or maybe she found something. One or the other, maybe. As I say, I just do not recall.

Why would Mrs Kendal need to figure out how to best lose something?

I guess that you cannot leave these things to chance all the time, Agent Smith.

And what exactly was she trying to lose? Are you claiming that other evidence was destroyed prior to the apprehension of your cell?

Oh, like I say, Agent Smith, I must admit that I cannot recall that at all. I *am* sure you can understand. Day-to-day details and all that.

W—

I do remember, however, that she decided to hand the duty off. Yes, I definitely remember that. I believe she brought it up at tea a few days later.

She passed on the responsibility of conducting the feasibility study on the recruitment of Mrs Hadfield?

That is what I thought I said, Agent Smith. Did I not make myself clear? If so, I am sorry. And I would be willing to listen to any advice you might have about how I could answer your questions more effectively.

Just answer them, Mrs Stone. So you're saying that a subordinate passed on a directly assigned order without consulting you?

Why would she need to do that?

That's the basic nature of the chain of command, Mrs Stone.

Oh.

And you just accepted this.

Of course.

We need to clarify some aspects of your organization's command hierarchy, Mrs Stone.

Oh. Well, I am afraid that we might have a problem there, Agent Smith.

Mrs Stone, you would be advised to cooperate. If you're afraid of some sort of retaliation, we can offer—

Oh, heavens no. Why would I ever be afraid of that.

An organization depends on its secrets, Mrs Stone.

Oh, yes. Like in the movies, is that it, Agent Smith? Where they kill the...rat fink, I believe they call them, is that right? Such a funny set of words, do you not think? They sound dirty, but I have to admit I have never *quite* figured out what they mean. Would you happen to know, Agent Smith?

The only words we are interested in right now, Mrs Stone, are the ones related to the structure of your command hierarchy. Who was directly below you?

Below me?

Yes.

Well, that would depend on when you were talking about, Agent Smith.

Are you saying that there is or has been a high degree of turnover within your organization?

Well, Agent Smith, again, that would depend on what you meant.

Mrs Stone.

And the other problem is, well, as I believe I have said, Agent Smith, I guess you would have to say that we do not really have a command hierarchy, as you put it. Most of the time.

Every organization has a command structure, Mrs Stone.

Oh.

And given that you were in command of your cell that would obviously make you the top ranking position in your specific cell. So who were your direct subordinates?

Well, I have to admit, Agent Smith, that I have not always been on top.

We're not talking about prior to when you assumed control of your cell from whoever commanded it before you. What we're talking about here is your cell during your tenure.

Well, Agent Smith, I guess that you would have to say that, well, I guess you would have to say that we have a rather...flat hierarchy, if you will.

Of course, a cell the size of yours wouldn't necessarily require an extensive hierarchy.

Such serious note taking, Agent Smith.

So in effect you were the hub, that is where all the spokes in the wheel come together.

That is a very vivid description, Agent Smith. It is just like one of the movies.

So who did Mrs Kendal pass on this responsibility for generating a feasibility report on the recruitment of Mrs Hadfield to?

I am sorry, Agent Smith, but I just cannot answer that.

Mrs Stone—

What I mean, Agent Smith, is that I just do not know. I am sure there would have been any number of the ladies who might have been interested in such. And if they wanted to look into it, I was not going to stop them. Why should I?

So you just expected a feasibility report to just arrive?

Was there some reason I should not have?

Mrs Stone, reports don't just show up.

Well, it did. And if it had not, well, as you have pointed out, I was already considering the possibility of returning Oliv—I mean, Mrs Hadfield's mail to her. So I did not think I needed to worry too much.

But the feasibility report was completed?

Oh, yes.

But you claim to have no memory of the contents of that report.

Oh, no.

And your organization did retain the feasibility study related to the recruitment of Mrs Hadfield? So far as you are aware.

So far as I am aware, Agent Smith.

If this feasibility study is indeed among the materials confiscated, Mrs Stone, we will verify this. You are aware of that?

If that is what you want to do, Agent Smith.

Was anyone else privy to the contents of this feasibility study?

Well, that might depend on what you mean, Agent Smith?

Explain.

Well, it is not as if I would try to keep it secret or something. And there is no way I could know who or how many might have seen it before me, is there? I just cannot know the things that I do not know. And after I read it, I am sure that any of the ladies might have been interested in consulting it as well. Not to mention Juan and Julio. Or I guess, better to say to barely mention them, that would be more accurate, would it not, Agent Smith?

So anyone would have had access to the contents of this report?

Anyone? Well, no, Agent Smith. There are obviously plenty of people who I would say could not have had access to it.

You just said—

Well, if they were not wherever the report happened to be, Agent Smith, I do not see as to how they could have access to it. If it was always somewhere where they were not would not that by definition, as you put it, mean that they did *not* have access to it? And since not everyone came through—

Enough games, Mrs Stone. You confirm that anyone could have had access to this report, correct?

Possibly.

Yes or no, Mrs Stone.

I just cannot know that, Agent Smith. I would have to know about everyone to be able to answer that. And I know quite a number of

everyones, I must admit, but I do not know if they are *everyone*. There could possibly be someone out there who I do not know. So what am I supposed to say about them? So if I just told you yes or no, Agent Smith, would I be telling the truth? And after all, I did promise. And I would not want to break my promise.

You can confirm that you made no efforts to restrict access to the contents of this feasibility study, correct?

I am sorry, Agent Smith, but do you want me to say yes that I confirm that, or yes that I deny it?

Did you make any efforts to restrict access to the contents of this feasibility study?

I *am* sorry, Agent Smith. Sometimes I think I get easily confused. Please forgive me, but I am just not sure that I do not understand what you mean.

Did you make any effort to restrict access to the contents of the feasibility study that you had conducted in relation to the recruitment of Mrs Hadfield?

No.

Now, continuing. What was the nature of this alleged postal material that you claimed had been incorrectly deposited in your box and the return of which you used as a pretext for further initiating contact with Mrs Hadfield with the goal of furthering your recruitment efforts?

I have to admit, Agent Smith, you do have such a lovely voice for rattling off things like that. It is almost like listening to someone on television.

You're avoiding the question, Mrs Stone.

Oh, no, I can assure you I am not, Agent Smith. I just felt that I had to say that. And if you had not interrupted me, I would have continued by answering your question.

Then continue.

That...postal material, as you want to call it, Agent Smith, could not have been anything *but* very vital. Otherwise I would have had no reason to be so diligent about returning it. That is only logical.

Explain.

Well, Agent Smith, that was the time of week when mid-week coupons were—

You can hardly expect us to believe, Mrs Stone, that you believed a set of coupons was sufficient cover for your further interactions.

Oh, Agent Smith...

And why do you shake your head, Mrs Stone?

Oh, I am sorry. It is just that...well, I would not want to insult you, Agent Smith. That, of course, would be the absolute last thing on my mind.

Get to the point, Mrs Stone.

It is just that, well, I am afraid you do not really know very much about these kinds of things, do you?

Explain.

Well, Agent Smith, in one regard I would not expect you to know very much about it. After all, you are not a housewife, are you?

Mrs—

Oh, that is not a joke, Agent Smith. Or a slight. No, I would not mean it that way at all. It is just that, well, it is often the little minutia of life that are really the...foundational aspects of our existence, would you not say? And I mean, if someone were just watching, well, they might skip right over those details as being unimportant, would they not?

Explain.

Well, after all, Agent Smith, as I said, you are not a housewife, so you cannot be expected to know *everything* about it directly, can you? And your organization, well, the only way to do that might be to have one of your agents pose, as it were, as a housewife, would you think not, Agent Smith? That might be the only way you could *really* know what was going on. But I do not guess that would work, would it, do you think?

And why not, Mrs Stone?

Well, Agent Smith, if an agent only *appeared* as a housewife, they really would not *be* one, would they? But if they *were* one, then they really would not *be* an agent, would they?

That would be unnecessary, Mrs Stone. You can be assured that our records are quite complete.

Oh.

Now, continuing. Please, clarify your justification for coupons being of a sufficient value to provide a cover for any subsequent contact you may have had with Mrs Hadfield in order to further your recruitment efforts.

Well, Agent Smith, as I am sure your records would tell you, there is almost nothing more important than mid-week coupons. Except, that is, perhaps for the beginning-of-the-week and the end-of-the-week coupons, that is. Almost everything else circles around them, you see. Every meal prepared, every cleaning product used, there

might be nothing in the whole of a home that goes untouched by them. So you can understand, I hope, that for the mid-week coupons to not be there, that might create some unimaginable catastrophe.

An exaggeration, Mrs Stone.

Oh, well, that does depend, does it not, Agent Smith? I mean, one such instance, that might only impinge, as it were, two people.

Two people?

Why, yes. If a husband expected pork chops and instead got pot roast for dinner when it was not even Tuesday, do you not think that could cause some problems, Agent Smith?

Hardly of much consequence.

Oh, but what if it happened more often, Agent Smith?

Explain.

Well, just hypothetically speaking then, as it were, what if everyone's mid-week coupons just disappeared? What would be the consequences then?

It would be suspected, not much.

Oh, but think of all the changes that might come from that one thing, Agent Smith. All those housewives, after all, how many are there? But anyway, imagine they all did not get mid-week coupons. What would they buy? They might buy a million different things, might they not? I mean, with no guidance, like that. So what kind of effect would that have on, what I guess they call, the economy?

Pointless speculation, Mrs Stone. And besides, we're speaking about one set of coupons.

Oh, yes. As I said, Agent Smith, I was only being hypothetical. Do you not sometimes find it necessary to be hypothetical in your line of work?

We deal with facts, Mrs Stone.

Oh.

Now, continuing.

How many housewives would you suspect are in the world, Agent Smith?

We're not here to discuss that, Mrs Stone.

Oh, I did not intend to claim that we were. I thought it was an interesting question is all.

That's not the responsibility of this department, Mrs Stone.

Oh.

Now, continuing. You maintain that Mrs Hadfield also considered this alleged postal material, these coupons, to be of such a sufficient value that she would have regarded them as a sufficient pretext for your further interactions with her?

I am sorry if I offended you, Agent Smith.

Offense is inapplicable in this instance.

Well, some people do tend to get upset if people ask them questions they do not know the answers to.

Mrs Stone, answer the question.

Oh, I *am* sorry, Agent Smith. I would not want you to think I was trying to avoid anything.

Then answer the question.

Well, the problem is, Agent Smith, that I just cannot answer that question.

Explain.

Oh, well, I do not know how I could tell you what Oliv—Mrs Hadfield was thinking.

Did you believe that she would have considered these coupons to be of a sufficient value that she regarded them as a sufficient pretext for your further interactions with her?

I would believe so, yes.

What was this based on?

Perhaps...senses, if you will, Agent Smith. Or you might say...field experience, perhaps.

And what were the defining characteristics of this?

Well, Agent Smith, if...gut feeling...I believe that is what you call it, is it not? Is that not what they say in the movies? Well, if that could be defined, as it were, well, it would be something else, would it not? Do you not ever get a sense of something that you cannot quite explain?

You observed nothing in her manner that indicated a favorability toward your overtures? A smile? Etc.

Oh, Agent Smith, smiles are the norm for a housewife. I am afraid that if you wanted to tell anything by that, well, who knows what you might think?

So you maintain that you had a sense that you were effective in your overtures, but you can't define exactly what it was that provided this reasoning?

Yes.

How common an occurrence were these types of scenarios?

I am sorry, Agent Smith, I am confused about what exactly it is you are asking.

How often did you get these senses?

Oh, quite often.

And you still maintain that you have no idea as to their origin?

I am sorry, Agent Smith. But do you want me to answer yes that I maintain that or no that I do not know from whence they come?

You claim to have these internal senses. Senses not generated by any known observed external processes. It's not a set of dictums coming from outside of your cell.

Oh, no.

And you do not know where these ideas originate?

No.

Now—

Oh, I am sorry, Agent Smith, but I am afraid that you have gotten me all confused again.

Do you have any idea as to the origin of these senses you describe?

No.

And you never attempted to discover the origins of these senses you describe?

No.

Why is that?

Why did I not try to discover the origins of these senses?

Yes.

Well, Agent Smith, I have to admit that I do not know. I mean, I had them. And I often found them so useful. Maybe I just did not have time to wonder too much about them.

You say they were often useful. Were there times when they were not useful?

Oh, sometimes. I guess you could say that.

Describe one of these times.

I am sorry, Agent Smith, but it is very difficult for me to recall something like that just off the top of my head, as they say in the movies.

Try, Mrs Stone.

Well...let us see.... I guess...no. Oh, well, now that you make me think of it, I think that I might remember something.

Describe the situation.

Well, it was...oh, I would have to say it was a while ago. But I am afraid I cannot get more specific than that, Agent Smith.

Continue.

Well, I believe that I had taken a chicken casserole to Mrs Turnbull's, and for some reason I was just convinced that she was going to wear this light-grey dress that she had, so of course, I wore my dark-grey one. But don't you know she opened the door and there she was standing in *her* dark-grey dress. But maybe I should have expected that.

And why were you delivering a chicken casserole?

Oh, I cannot recall, Agent Smith. It was just one of those...minutia of the housewife's daily life, I guess you would say.

You say that you should have expected that. Explain.

Oh, well, that is just the way it goes sometimes, does it not? You know, you get a sense of something, but you also get another sense that says there is something ... off, if you will, about *that* sense. But, well, that is just the way it goes sometimes, Agent Smith, you know?

So you maintain that in addition to these so-called senses of unknown origin you experienced further senses that contradicted these earlier senses?

Yes.

And you continue to maintain you are unaware of from where these additional senses emerged?

No. I mean yes.

Mrs Stone.

I mean yes that no I do not know from whence they come.

And how often did you defer to these secondary senses?

Oh, I really cannot say, Agent Smith.

Approximate, Mrs Stone.

Oh... No, I really just cannot say.

And how did you determine between these two senses?

Oh, well, sometimes, Agent Smith, you just get a feeling.

A feeling?

Yes.

Are you claiming a third sense, Mrs Stone?

Oh, no. Just a... feeling, Agent Smith. Do you not ever get feelings?

Mrs Stone, are you lying?

Oh, absolutely not, Agent Smith.

Then explain how you engaged with such convoluted processes.

Oh, I guess I really cannot say, Agent Smith.

Mrs Stone.

What I mean, Agent Smith, is that I just do not know. And I cannot tell you what I do not know.

And did you experience any of these secondary or tertiary senses in relation to your interactions with Mrs Hadfield on that day?

No, I do not believe so.

You know or you believe, Mrs Stone?

I am afraid that I cannot answer that yes or no, Agent Smith.

Mrs—

After all, I might know it, but even then I might not believe it. And I could still believe it but might not know it. Do you know what I mean, Agent Smith?

So you felt that Mrs Hadfield accepted your pretext for further interaction with her that day as valid?

Yes.

And you claim to have no means of knowing from where these feelings and senses were derived?

I am sorry, Agent Smith. But I am confused again. Do you mean that I should confirm what I said earlier, if true, or...?

Did you then or do you now know from where these additional feelings and senses you claim to exist are derived?

No.

And you still maintain that this alleged postal material, these coupons, were incorrectly delivered to your box? And that you discussed this with Mrs Hadfield?

Yes, we discussed the subject.

Describe how that could be, Mrs Stone, that these alleged postal materials could come to be in your possession.

Well, Agent Smith, as you might be able to see, I am not the postman. Or at least, I hope I don't look like the postman. Is that what you think, Agent Smith?

Did you in anyway interact with the postal carrier in question?

Then, Agent Smith, or at any time?

By that point or at any point prior.

No.

Then why did you bother to inquire as to the specificities, Mrs Stone?

I thought you wanted everything to be accurate, Agent Smith.

So you maintain that you had no interaction with the postal carrier on your street?

No.

Now—

It is an interesting thing, do you not think, Agent Smith?

What is that?

Well, it is just, I have always wondered, Agent Smith, maybe you have too, have you ever wondered where the postal vehicle could possibly come from?

What do you mean where it could come from?

Well, I mean, where it could bring coupons from.

It would bring them from wherever they are at, Mrs Stone.

Oh, yes, of course that would be obvious.

Now—

Where do you think that is?

Mrs Stone, as you've been informed, the purpose of this interrogation isn't to answer your questions.

Oh, I am sorry, Agent Smith. It is just that these things occur to me sometimes, and I guess that I just cannot help myself. And it is like... I just wonder...

What, Mrs Stone.

Well, I have always just wondered why do we not send things to each other that way?

Through the postal system?

Yes.

Why?

Oh, I just thought it might be interesting, Agent Smith, is all. You know, like you see in the movies. Letters and things like that. But I guess it really would be silly, would it not?

Mrs—

It is just that we are all right there, are we not? So why would any of us need to send a letter to one another when we could just pop right over for tea, right?

This isn't relevant, Mrs Stone.

I would have liked to send Oliv—I mean, Mrs Hadfield—one of these letters, you know.

Did you?

Oh, no. But I still would have liked to have.

And what would you have hoped to gain from this?

Oh, I don't know. I would like to think it would be just like in the movies, you know. That seems like it would be fun.

And you still maintain that you did nothing to interfere with the operation of the postal system?

Yes.

Th—

I really do think I am beginning to get the hang of your questions now, Agent Smith.

Now—

But if you do not mind, Agent Smith, I really do think there is something that you *should* ask that you have not. Although you might be going to, so if so, I *am* sorry. It is not that I am trying to insult you or anything like that. After all, as I have said, that is the very last thing I would want to do.

What is that, Mrs Stone?

Well, do you not think you should ask how it is that I could have known that it was Oliv—I mean, Mrs Hadfield's coupons that had been erroneously delivered to my box, in such a case?

How did you know?

Well, Agent Smith, as you may not know—not that I am saying you do not, of course, I just suspect it may be one of those details of housewife minutia or postal policy that you might be less familiar with.

The point, Mrs Stone.

Well, Agent Smith, you see, the coupons, of course, they would not have any names on them. They would be all the same, of course, you know. So I guess, why would there be a need? Would you not think that would be reasonable, Agent Smith?

Then how were you aware that it was Mrs Hadfield's coupons, specifically, that you had come to be in possession of?

Well that, Agent Smith, I suspect would be something that you would have to put down to one of those...senses.

You simply had a sense?

Yes, that would be a good way to describe it, I think.

Mrs Stone, you can hardly expect us to believe that.

I am sorry, Agent Smith. But it would be difficult, I would think, for me to control what you or your organization believes. And I would think, just because you might believe it, that might not make it true, might it not? And that is *not* what I promised to do, after all, is it?

So it just happened that alleged postal materials destined for Mrs Hadfield were placed in your box, and it just happened that you received a sense that they had been, in fact, destined for Mrs Hadfield?

That does seem to sum the idea up nicely, Agent Smith.

And how do you account for this, Mrs Stone?

Account, Agent Smith?

How do you account for a series of so particular events leading to exactly the outcomes that you desired to occur?

Well, Agent Smith, if they could not have been conceived of then the outcome could not have possibly have followed from them, could it? So what would Oliv—Mrs Hadfield and I have talked about then? And if everything that had followed had not followed then we might not be talking about it now, might we not?

But you still maintain these are the sequence of events that occurred?

I am sorry, Agent Smith, but could you be more specific?

You claim these alleged coupons were mistakenly deposited in your box and that you had a secondary sense that they had been allocated to be delivered to Mrs Hadfield and that when you sought out Mrs Hadfield you found that her coupons had indeed not been delivered proving that the additional coupons that were in your possession where in fact actually hers. Is that correct?

That quite sums up the idea, yes.

And you claim that it all just happened this way?

Sometimes things can just seem to happen like that, do you not think, Agent Smith? So it really is not so much of a stretch, do you think?

You have to admit, Mrs Stone, that the likelihood of just these events occurring in just this fashion seems unlikely.

Oh, I could not say, Agent Smith.

Mrs—

What I mean is that I am not a statistician or anything like that. So I can only tell you what happened or what I thought could have happened. But you want to know the *likelihood* that something would have happened, well, you will have to consult someone else, I am afraid. But of course, I am sure your own organization employs many such individuals.

We are sufficiently staffed to perform our duties.

That is very nice to hear, Agent Smith.

There is no need to pretend, Mrs Stone. It's only natural that you should still maintain animosity toward this organization.

Oh, no, Agent Smith, none at all, I assure you. Or at least, none at you specifically. I just did not want you to think that you might have to overwork yourself too much to keep up with everything. That is the kind of thing that can happen when you are understaffed. You see it in the movies all the time, do you not?

There is little use in you probing for information about this institution, Mrs Stone. It can do your cell no good at this point. And you are advised to cooperate fully.

Oh, I assure you, Agent Smith, I asked purely out of my own interest. After all, I would not want you to think that I am only interested in you *only* because of just what I could get out of you. You don't think that, do you, Agent Smith?

So you still maintain that this sequence of events just happened this way?

I *am* sorry, Agent Smith, if I did give you the idea that I am not interested in you for yourself.

What your interests are or are not are irrelevant, Mrs Stone, at this point, except for how they relate to your recruitment of Mrs Hadfield. And these diversions won't be allowed to continue.

Oh.

Now, we're going to continue, Mrs Stone.

As you wish, Agent Smith.

Now—

It is just...

What is it, Mrs Stone.

Well, it does raise a very interesting question, do you not think, Agent Smith? One that you have not asked.

What is that?

Well, as I said, of course, *I* did not in any way interfere with the delivery of this postal material, as you call it—but do you mind if I just say mail? I know that sounds less professional or authoritative, but that is what I have called it so long, and it is hard to break the habit, I guess.

What're you trying to say, Mrs Stone?

Well, I was just thinking that even though *I* did not interfere with the mail someone else could, do you not think?

Are you saying that you ordered one of the other members of your cell to carry out this interference with the proper delivery of postal materials?

Oh, no.

Then what are you saying, Mrs Stone?

Well, I was just thinking that someone somewhere else might have. And I was thinking maybe you *are* right, Agent Smith. Maybe this

idea was too good to be true. Maybe things like that just could not happen. So maybe someone could have arranged for it to happen.

And who would have done this?

Oh, I don't know.

So you now claim that some unknown entity manipulated the postal carrier or the postal system in such a fashion as to arrange for this specific sequence of events that allowed you to further your goals in regards to the recruitment of Mrs Hadfield but that you have no idea who this unknown entity could be?

No.

Mrs Stone—

I would not *claim* that is what happened, Agent Smith. It is just that, like I said, you got me thinking, and it just comes to my mind that there is the possibility that some...unknown entity, as you call them, *could* have done something like that.

Mrs Stone, we're not here about what could have happened. We're here about what did happen.

Oh.

We're not here for speculation, Mrs Stone.

Oh. Well, I am sorry, Agent Smith. I was just trying to be helpful.

Now, when you delivered this mat—

Do you ever get mail from anyone else, Agent Smith?

What?

Do you ever get mail?

That question isn't applicable to what we're here for, Mrs Stone.

Oh, are you sure?

It's not applicable, Mrs Stone.

I am sorry, Agent Smith. It is just a question I like to ask everyone.

And did you ask Mrs Hadfield that?

Oh, that is very good, Agent Smith.

Did you ask Mrs Hadfield this question?

I am sure that I did, yes.

And what was her reply?

Oh, no. Just the usual, you know. What about you, Agent Smith?

We're not here to talk about individual agents of this organization, Mrs Stone. That has been made clear. And no more divergences will be tolerated. You have been warned.

Oh, I *am* sorry, Agent Smith. I guess that my curiosity sometimes just runs away with me.

Cont—

It is just that, how would you even send one?

What?

A letter, Agent Smith.

Mrs Stone.

I mean, you could just put the person's name on it, right? That would probably be all you would need to do. That is generally what they do

in the movies, you know, put someone's name on an envelope. But I *am* sure you know that.

This isn't pertinent, Mrs Stone. We're moving on.

It could, of course, be relevant, though, might you not think, Agent Smith?

How so?

Well, if there *were* some unknown entity, as you call them, out there involved in the postal system in some way, would they not have to have a way of knowing whose material to manipulate? So would they not have to know of some way of telling what would be delivered to my box and Oliv—I mean, Mrs Hadfield's box?

There's no such evidence for any such entity, Mrs Stone. So any speculation on this point is pointless.

You could say that, Agent Smith.

Now—

It is just that I wonder—

This's an interrogation, Mrs Stone. And we are speaking about your recruitment of Mrs Hadfield. Nothing more. And nothing unrelated to that.

I am sorry, Agent Smith. It was not my intention to unnecessarily aggravate you. I hope you believe that.

We don't get aggravated, Mrs Stone.

Oh.

Now—

It is just that I was curious about how I might send you a letter?

What?

If I wanted to send you a letter, you know, like in the movies, how would I do that?

You have no need to send a letter, Mrs Stone. And you will not be sending anyone any letters from now on.

It is just that, well, you, of course, do not live on our street.

Mrs Stone, no more of this will be tolerated.

I am sorry, Agent Smith.

Now—

It is just, you see, Agent Smith, I was wondering how to send something to another street.

Mrs Stone.

I mean, I was just thinking that since you do not live on our street, you must live on another one, is that right?

This's the last warning of this nature that you will be given, Mrs Stone.

I am sorry, Agent Smith.

Now—

It just seems to me that if there *are* other streets, besides ours, that is, then they must have different names, must they not? You know, like in the movies. How else would you be able to tell them apart?

Enough, Mrs Stone.

I am sorry, Agent Smith. I really would have avoided aggravating you if I could.

Mrs Stone, we're not here to talk about other streets or what they may or might be called.

Does your street have a name, Agent Smith?

Mrs Stone.

I am sorry, Agent Smith. I am just trying to be helpful.

Mrs Stone, if you're unwilling to cooperate, you will be returned to your cell.

Oh.

So do you wish to cooperate or not, Mrs Stone?

Well...

Do you wish to return to your cell or not, Mrs Stone?

Oh, well, I guess I do have to keep my promise. And that would be very hard to do from there, I suppose. Unless you are going to be there too, Agent Smith. But of course, there is only the one cot, so I guess we would have to share. Would you mind that, Agent Smith?

No, Mrs Stone.

Oh, good. So we can—

No, Mrs Stone.

No, Agent Smith?

No, Mrs Stone.

Oh, well, I would not want you to think I thought there was anything wrong with your company, Agent Smith. And after all, I did make a promise. So if you are interested, perhaps we should remain here.

Then it is suggested you cooperate.

I will try my best, Agent Smith.

Now, returning.

I am sorry, Agent Smith. You are always having to flip through notes because of me.

Once again, you maintain that you did not tamper with the postal system or the postal carrier and that you instructed no one to do so and that you possess no evidence of any other individual or organization that did so in order to arrange that these coupons would be delivered incorrectly to your box so that you could then return them to Mrs Hadfield and thereby use this contact to further your recruitment efforts?

Yes.

How soon after discovering these alleged mis-delivered postal materials did you come to the idea of using them to further your recruitment efforts in regards to Mrs Hadfield?

Well, it was not that I thought about that *exactly*, Agent Smith.

Explain.

I figured, in such a situation as that, well, would that not be the sort of thing that any good neighbor would do? After all, as I have said, a calamity like that, missing the mid-week coupons, that could just be a tragedy for any housewife. A personal tragedy, perhaps, but a tragedy nonetheless, do you not think, Agent Smith?

So initially you claim to not have been primarily motivated in regards to your recruitment efforts?

I am sorry, Agent Smith. I did think that I was getting the hang of things, but I am afraid I am confused again.

Were your primary motivations for returning this allegedly mis-delivered postal material centered upon the fact that you could further your recruitment efforts with Mrs Hadfield?

No.

You only wanted to return this allegedly mis-delivered postal material for the sake of returning it?

I do not think I would have, no.

Explain.

Well, Agent Smith, what I mean is I do not think I would have wanted to do it for its own sake. I would have wanted to do it for Oliv—Mrs Hadfield's sake. I would see no point in doing it on the coupon's behalf.

Mrs Stone.

I am just trying to be accurate, Agent Smith. After all, is that not what you are after, accuracy? Is that not the reason for all these questions? Although, I must admit, Agent Smith, it does seem as if it has taken us a very long time to get from my mailbox down to Oliv—I mean, Mrs Hadfield's, has it not?

If you would answer the questions as put to you, Mrs Stone, this process would be quicker and more pleasant.

I am sorry, Agent Smith. It is not that I am not trying to work as fast as I can. It is just, I guess, sometimes the job can only be done as fast as it can be done. There are no shortcuts sometimes, it seems. Do you ever find that to be the case?

Continuing, Mrs Stone.

I am sorry, Agent Smith.

So you returned this allegedly mis-delivered postal material?

Well, under such circumstances, what else could I have done?

And at what point during this process did you decide that this would be a good opportunity to utilize this time in order to further your recruitment efforts with Mrs Hadfield?

Oh, like I *have* said, Agent Smith, sometimes I just get a sense of things.

And this sense communicated to you it was a good time to continue your efforts in recruiting Mrs Hadfield?

I would guess so.

You guess?

Well, Agent Smith, it is not exactly as if these...senses, as you want to call them, it is not as if they are...definable. Most of the time I do not even know I am having them at the time.

Then how can you possibly act on them?

I just do, Agent Smith. Most of the time, that is.

Most of the time? So you don't follow them all of the time?

No.

So these would be countermanded by these...tertiary senses that you mention. Is that correct?

Yes, I guess that you could say that sometimes.

Then what?

I cannot really say, Agent Smith. I mean, I know that must be very frustrating to hear, but I just cannot say why I feel them in the first place and why I act on them sometimes and other times not. And as I *have* said, Agent Smith, I just cannot tell you what I do not know.

But this sense indicated to you to continue your recruitment efforts aimed at Mrs Hadfield.

Yes.

But it didn't tell you how.

Heavens no, Agent Smith. That is not how it works at all. It is just ...more like a kind of tug, you might say. A tug...in a particular direction. Like when you decide to walk this way instead of that way. Do you not ever have that, Agent Smith? You just walk down the street instead of up? Or you walk on this side of the hallway instead of that one?

The point is to get from one place to the other, Mrs Stone.

Oh, I know that, Agent Smith. But I mean... Oh, I am sorry, I seem to have become all confused again.

Leaving aside these senses, again, for the time being—

What I think I mean is have you not ever gone into a room and just could not say why you had once you are there? Or you want to go in there for seemingly no reason at all. You do not *need* to do anything in there, but...you just want to anyway.

If there wasn't a reason for going in there, Mrs Stone, then there wouldn't be a point in going in there.

Oh.

Now, in regards to your point in going to the Hadfield's residence to return these allegedly mis-delivered postal materials—

Yes?

A question hasn't been asked yet, Mrs Stone.

Oh, I am sorry, Agent Smith. I guess I am just trying to get a little ahead of myself.

So after you walked down the street—

Do you do much walking, Agent Smith?

That has no bearing here, Mrs Stone.

Oh. I am sorry. I was just wondering. Because it can be such a liberating experience, do you not think? Or at least, I seem to think so. Do you ever get that feeling, Agent Smith?

Walking, Mrs Stone, is for getting somewhere for a purpose. And if you prefer to, you can be walked back to your cell.

Oh, that is very good, Agent Smith.

Mrs Stone—

But I was just trying to talk about Oliv—I mean, Mrs Hadfield. I am sorry, Agent Smith. I will get the hang of it, I promise.

How does this relate to Mrs Hadfield?

I thought it might be a good idea to take a walk one morning. You know, after the husbands have gone. The air is so nice in the morning, do you not think?

A walk to where?

Oh, anywhere. Why have a destination in mind?

That's the point of going somewhere, Mrs Stone, so that you're where you set out to be.

Oh. Yes, absolutely, Agent Smith. I believe I completely understand what you mean.

And you discussed this with Mrs Hadfield?

Oh, yes.

And when was this?

Oh, on many occasions.

But did you talk about this with Mrs Hadfield during the course of your returning this allegedly mis-delivered postal material?

Oh, yes. That.

That's where we're at, Mrs Stone.

I am glad you are here to keep up on these things, Agent Smith.

So is this something you spoke about with Mrs Hadfield at that specific time?

I would say so, yes. It is probably very likely.

Is that a yes or a no, Mrs Stone?

Well, Agent Smith, I am afraid that I cannot recall every last little detail. And unfortunately, I am nowhere near as fastidious as yourself, so I just do not keep notes. Oh, not that I am trying to insult you, Agent Smith. I know how that might sound.

And how would such an excursion have aided you in your efforts to recruit Mrs Hadfield?

Well, I cannot necessarily say, Agent Smith. It is just one of these... senses, I guess, as you call them.

But you would have to start with a destination in mind. Where would that destination have been?

Oh, I do not think that would have been necessary, Agent Smith.

Mrs—

Have you not ever just wanted to start walking down the road, Agent Smith?

For what purpose?

For no purpose, of course.

What would be the point, Mrs Stone?

There would not *be* any point, of course. That would, of course, *be* the whole point.

That doesn't make any sense, Mrs Stone.

Well, Agent Smith, if you recall, I did not say that I would tell you what made sense.

Mrs—

Have you ever gone for a walk, Agent Smith?

Enough, Mrs Stone.

I am sorry, Agent Smith. It looks as if I have made you cross again. I am sorry. I would have avoided that if I could.

You maintain, Mrs Stone, that somehow you would use aimless walking as a recruitment tool?

I guess that is what I am saying, is it not, Agent Smith?

And how would that be possible, Mrs Stone. Any place is just a point between two other points.

Maybe not every place, Agent Smith.

Explain.

Oh, you know. It is right there. I am sure you know.

Mrs Stone.

Oh, that is right. I am sorry, Agent Smith, I keep forgetting we have to repeat things we already know here.

Mrs Stone.

Well, Agent Smith, have you not ever gone for a walk...past the end of...your street? I guess. Although, I do not know what your street looks like. Does it look something like ours?

What's the point of this, Mrs Stone?

Oh, well, Agent Smith, have you ever noticed what is...beyond the street?

The road, Mrs Stone.

Oh, yes. Of course, that is the thing for you men driving, is it not? It really is such a long way, is it not?

What's the point of this, Mrs Stone.

Well, Agent Smith, I guess what I am trying to say, or at least what I think I am trying to say, is that the only way you could get from our street to work, if you lived on our street, that is, but if you did, the only way you could get to work would be in a car.

Is there a point to this, Mrs Stone, or not? Because if not—

Well, it is just, Agent Smith, if you were not in a car then it would be almost impossible to get anywhere, would it not? I mean, you men do spend so many hours driving, do you not? Such a long way.

Mrs—

And someone on foot, they would never be able to get anywhere, would they? So they could probably walk and walk and walk and never see anything and never get anywhere. It is awful empty, is it not, Agent Smith? Beyond...our street, that is. I say our street because I do not know about yours. Maybe you could tell me something about it later.

Mrs Stone—

Oh, but it is just so empty, you know. It really does make you feel a certain...way, do you not think? Of course, I know you said you had never gone for walks, Agent Smith. But if you ever do, I think you will know what I mean. You just feel so...small and alone, maybe? I am not quite sure that is the way to put it.

You're saying that you routinely made it a habit to walk beyond the limits of the street.

Yes.

Following the road.

On the side of the road, yes, Agent Smith.

How far?

Oh, that is impossible to say, is it not, Agent Smith? I mean, you men in your cars have your speedometer or odometers, or whatever they are called. But just walking, well, there is hardly any way you might tell how far you have gone, is there? Unless you want to count your footsteps, that is.

And—

Although, I guess it must have been quite far. Sometimes you would look back and you could not even see the street anymore. It would be just a little speck in the distance. Such a tiny thing. And if you went any farther, it would just disappear completely, so you would

have never known it had been there in the first place. It really does give you an interesting feeling, Agent Smith. I do believe you might be interested in trying it sometime.

And this feeling, as you put it, was a typical tool that you employed during recruitment, and one that you planned to use in your recruitment efforts in regards to Mrs Hadfield?

Well, I cannot say that I *planned* it, Agent Smith. I just felt like it might be something interesting to do.

You—

I guess you could say that I thought she might enjoy it.

And you arranged for this during your rendezvous to return these allegedly mis-delivered postal materials?

Oh, no. As I said, I just thought it would be a good idea, Agent Smith. For later.

So you planned it for later?

No, I just thought it would be a good idea.

One of these senses?

If you want to put it that way.

But you hadn't yet engaged in such at the time. You didn't immediately take her out beyond the bounds of the street?

Oh, heavens, why would I do that right then, Agent Smith? Do you think I would just drag her out there?

But this was done later?

Oh, yes.

So then it has no bearing now.

Would you mind clarifying that, Agent Smith?

What?

Oh, well, do you mean now as in *now* or now as in then?

Mrs Stone, you have been informed that we will not tolerate the wasting of time.

Oh, I was not trying to waste your time, Agent Smith. And I am sorry if you ever got that idea.

Returning, Mrs Stone. Your return of these allegedly mis-delivered postal materials—

It is just that you *do* want things in order, do you not? So I guess I must have thought that you would have wanted to know when I thought or felt things that would happen later, otherwise I guess that you might have thought I had thought them up just in the moment, rather than when I actually did, and that would not be very truthful, would it?

Fine, Mrs Stone. It's been noted.

You *are* such a dedicated notetaker, Agent Smith

Now—

You know, I think we must be awfully far away from each other, Agent Smith.

We're both right here, Mrs Stone.

Oh, silly me. No, what I meant was—I am sorry, Agent Smith. It is just that I meant that our streets must be awfully far away from each other. I have to admit that does make me a little sad. Do you think if

I addressed a letter to just ‘Agent Smith’ it would get there? To your street, that is.

No, Mrs Stone.

Oh, you do not think it would, Agent Smith?

No, Mrs Stone—

I am sorry to hear that, Agent Smith.

Mrs Stone—

Yes, Agent Smith?

What is meant is no, this will not continue. We will not be doing this, Mrs Stone.

Oh? What is that, Agent Smith? I seem to have become a little confused.

No more stalling, Mrs Stone.

Oh. I am sorry, Agent Smith. I do not know what I could have done to give you that impression.

Enough, Mrs Stone.

I am sorry, Agent Smith. I guess that I just do not explain myself very well sometimes. I will work on being better at it, I promise. After all, I would not want to give you the wrong impression. You have to believe that I *am* trying very hard in that regard.

Returning, Mrs Stone.

If that is what you want, Agent Smith.

These interruptions and or stalling are not going to be tolerated, Mrs Stone.

I am sorry, Agent Smith.

And your reticence to cooperate will be noted.

If that is what you think you need to do, Agent Smith. I guess that I will have to trust your judgment in that regard. Will that mean very much extra paperwork for you, Agent Smith? I would not want to think that I was the cause of your overwork.

The job will be done as the job needs to be done, Mrs Stone.

Oh. I think that might be very admirable, Agent Smith.

So you confirm that you didn't, on the morning in question, when you went to return this batch of allegedly mis-delivered postal material, take Mrs Hadfield on a walk beyond the bounds of the street?

We did not.

Now—

However, Agent Smith, just to be completely honest, I may have mentioned that it would be a very fine morning for a walk.

You may have or you did, Mrs Stone?

Oh, I would certainly think that I did. It seems very much like the thing that would be said. Yes, it was probably a very nice morning, the perfect kind of morning for a good stroll. After all, Agent Smith, even if you cannot get anywhere, you have to get started early if you want to get very far.

So you confirm that you did indeed mention the idea of a walk.

Yes.

You're sure of that?

Yes.

Were you definitive about when this event would take place?

Oh, no.

You spoke of it only in general terms?

Yes.

And did you mention going beyond the street, specifically?

Oh, no.

So you confirm that you just talked about a walk in the general sense?

Yes.

Is this a usual tactic in your recruitment efforts or is it something you deployed specifically in regard to Mrs Hadfield?

Well, Agent Smith, I cannot really, I do not think, say that there are ...*tactics*, as you call them.

And how would you describe them, Mrs Stone?

Oh, I don't know. Maybe...I am trying to recall something I believe I said earlier, but I just cannot quite place it, I am afraid.

What is that?

Well, Agent Smith, if I could recall it, I would not be in such a pickle at the moment, would I?

Earlier when?

Oh, it would have been near around when we first started, I believe.

What does it pertain to?

Oh, I am sorry, Agent Smith, I do not mean to make you search back through all those notes.

What does it pertain to, Mrs Stone?

Well, since you are determined, Agent Smith. I believe...I believe it had something to do with...not field experience...as they say in the movies...but...

Senses, Mrs Stone?

That is it. Thank you ever so much, Agent Smith. I do hate it when I have a word just on the tip of my tongue like that but it just does not seem to want to come off.

So you still claim to have no express program for recruitment, no standard procedure?

I am sorry, Agent Smith, but I am confused again, I am sorry to have to admit. Are you asking me what I claim or what was?

Did you have a standard procedure for recruitment?

No.

None whatsoever?

No.

S—

I am sorry to make you have to move all that paper around, Agent Smith.

Mrs Stone, do you expect us to believe that your cell had no established procedures in these regards?

As I believe I have said, Agent Smith, I do not know that I can hardly have any idea about what you or your organization actually believes.

So you continue to maintain that you embarked on the recruitment of Mrs Hadfield with no set plans for as to how to achieve that outcome?

Yes.

Is this a defensive measure on the part of your cell?

I am afraid I do not understand, Agent Smith.

By having no set program for turning these individuals, is it your expectation that it would be harder to produce a counter to those recruitment efforts?

Oh, that *is* an interesting idea, Agent Smith.

Now—

But unfortunately, I have to say that, so far as I am aware, it is completely untrue.

Then what is the reasoning, Mrs Stone?

Oh, I cannot say, Agent Smith

Mrs—

That is that, so far as I am aware, there is no reasoning on the matter.

You expect us, Mrs Stone, to believe you maintain a policy of recruitment but with no specific set of procedures as to how that should be done?

Oh, I am afraid you are wrong there, Agent Smith.

Y—

We have no policy of recruitment whatsoever. Or at least, none so far as I know. And after all, I can only tell you what it is I know.

Mrs Stone, you expressly admit you set out to recruit Mrs Hadfield, yet you claim to have no policy for recruitment. This is a contradiction, Mrs Stone.

I don't believe so, Agent Smith.

Mrs Stone—

Given the circumstances, Agent Smith, it is really very simple.

Explain.

Oh, well, since everyone, or so it seems, has policies expressly for or against it, recruitment, that is, well, we thought it only appropriate, considering our circumstances, to have none at all. So you see it makes complete sense.

No, Mrs Stone, it does not.

Oh, of course it does, Agent Smith.

Mrs Stone—

Since we maintain no policy whatsoever on the topic, we are free to recruit, as you put it, or not recruit whomever.

There can be no such thing, Mrs Stone, as a lack of policy.

Oh?

The lack of policy by definition expressly implies policy.

Hm. Perhaps, Agent Smith. I must admit I had not thought of that.

So regardless of what you claim, by having no policy against recruitment, you obviously had a policy expressly for recruitment.

That *is* a very interesting idea, Agent Smith.

So you maintain—that is, did you begin your recruitment of Mrs Hadfield based solely on your own personal inclinations?

Yes.

N—

Although, I might add that no one else was particularly against the notion. Some of them were even quite in favor of it. Although, I have to admit that one or two were neither one way or the other on the subject. So I guess by your definition, Agent Smith, they must have also been in favor of it.

At the moment, Mrs Stone, we are specifically interested in your interactions during the recruitment of Mrs Hadfield, specifically, at the moment, as it relates to your attempt to return these allegedly mis-delivered postal materials.

We do seem to keep ending up back here, do we not, Agent Smith?

Because that's where we're at, Mrs Stone.

Oh, of course.

Now—

We talked about lawns, if you want to know, Agent Smith.

Lawns?

Yes.

Explain.

Oh, well, you know. They do look nice on Sunday after they have been freshly mowed, do you not think? They just seem so much shinier, do they not? Although it is puzzling, is it not, Agent Smith?

What is that, Mrs Stone.

Oh, why do Juan and Julio even exist, you wonder?

What's so humorous, Mrs Stone?

Oh, nothing, Agent Smith.

Mrs Stone.

Oh, I was just wondering how that question could apply to anyone, could it not, Agent Smith?

And how did the topic of lawn care further your recruitment efforts in regards to Mrs Hadfield?

Oh, I do not know that it did. That would be very odd, do you not think, Agent Smith?

Then why talk about it?

Well, you cannot be *trying* to do the thing you are doing all the time, can you, Agent Smith? I mean, it is not like this...rather drab—although that is by no means an insult against yourself, Agent Smith—I am sure interior decoration is not listed under your job description, after all.

Then what was the reason you spoke about lawn care with Mrs Hadfield that morning?

Does there need to be a reason, Agent Smith?

So you claim that it was simply filler?

No, I do not think so, Agent Smith.

But it wasn't something actively designed to further your recruitment efforts?

Oh, no, Agent Smith.

But you claim it wasn't filler?

Oh, no, Agent Smith.

Then it must have played some part in your recruitment efforts.

If you want to say so, Agent Smith. Maybe you are right. After all, I do not claim to know *everything*.

We'll leave the topic for how seemingly unconnected and seemingly useless information could be deployed in such recruitment techniques for later.

If that is what you want, Agent Smith.

Now—

Of course, you mow the lawn on Saturdays, don't you, Agent Smith.

That's irrelevant, Mrs Stone.

Oh.

Now—

But I am sure it looks so fresh and neat once you are done. It must be very satisfying to have a job like that. I guess that is why husbands do it, rather than Juan and Julio, do you not think, Agent Smith? Of course, I guess there has to be someone to change out those little brushes and wipers in the mowers, does there not?

And did you discuss these two members of your cell in relation to this discussion regarding lawn care?

Oh, I am sure I did.

Now, was this the extent to your conversation about lawns?

I would say so—I mean yes.

Also—

Yes, Agent Smith?

Clarifying something from earlier...

I am sorry, Agent Smith, I did not mean to make you have to sort through your notes that way.

Do you confirm that you were similarly unencumbered this second time you removed your clothes as you reported yourself to be on the prior occasions of such?

Oh, quite.

And—

I know that is not a yes or no, Agent Smith. But I do think it is more appropriate, don't you?

It's marked in the affirmative, Mrs Stone.

Oh, that is good.

Now—

Would you care to know about now, Agent Smith?

Clarify, Mrs Stone?

Would you care to know if I am similarly...unencumbered, as you say, at the moment.

We're not talking about the present, Mrs Stone.

Oh.

We're talking about your recruitment efforts in relation to Mrs Hadfield.

Oh.

And you confirm this was the extent of your conversation at that time in regards to lawn care?

Yes.

And did you discuss anything else with Mrs Hadfield?

Yes.

And what was that?

I *am* sorry, Agent Smith. I do seem to have made a real mess of your notes.

There's no point in you being concerned over it, Mrs Stone.

But I still do feel badly about it, Agent Smith.

Continuing, Mrs Stone. What else did you speak to Mrs Hadfield about at that time?

You know, you really should try and relax more, Agent Smith. It is *not* very much fun to be aggravated all the time.

We're not here for fun, Mrs Stone.

Oh.

Again, Mrs Stone, continuing. What else did you speak to Mrs Hadfield about at that time?

Oh, we talked about the last week's Church program on television.

You claim to have utilized the Church in furthering the course of your recruitment efforts in regards to Mrs Hadfield? Explain.

I tried to, Agent Smith. But you would not let me.

This is not a debate, Mrs Stone. It's an—

Interrogation. Yes, I *am* aware of that, Agent Smith. And I *am* just trying to *fully* answer your questions to the utmost of my abilities in the situation.

If you think that we're going to believe your organization has somehow penetrated the Church—

Oh, I would not say that, Agent Smith. At least, not so far as I know. Although, I guess there *could* be some other *cell*, as you like to call it, out there, but I would not claim to know anything about what they do, or if they even exist.

Then explain how the Church could factor into your plans.

Well, as I told you, Agent Smith, it starts a really long time ago.

Mrs Stone—

I *have* tried to tell you, Agent Smith.

Alright. A digression will be expressly allowed this once. And if this isn't relevant, there will be consequences.

Oh. Consequences. You make it sound so dire, Agent Smith.

Answer the question.

I do not know that I *want* to answer—straight away, that is, Agent Smith. I know I *did* make a promise. And I will keep it, eventually. But I am almost dying to know what these *consequences* could be.

Mrs Stone.

Oh, there is no need to sound that way, Agent Smith. But just tell me, between us, what are these *consequences*?

Very undesirable, Mrs Stone.

Oh, very bad?

Yes. Very bad. So you would be advised to—

How bad?

There is no need for you to know those details, so they will not be divulged at this time.

Oh, I think I *do*.

Please, answer the question.

No.

Mrs Stone—

I want to see the consequences.

Mrs Stone—

Oh, all right. Although, I must say, Agent Smith, I *am* a little disappointed. But I did promise to tell you everything you need to know. And I like you very much, Agent Smith, so I want to keep my word. We will just have to come back to this later, okay? Now, where were we? Do you recall?

Y—

Oh, yes. You do have a good memory, Agent Smith. That must really be an asset in your line of work. It all has to do with this set of brothers, you see. But I admit, the information is rather piecemeal—It *is* difficult to get a...well, I am sure you can imagine it is rather difficult to dig things out of a dump and have them...fit together seamlessly, as it were. But now there are these brothers—now, do not interrupt, Agent Smith. I assure you this is completely pertinent. You just keep taking your notes. You see, this particular item is actually referring to one much older than it, paraphrasing, if you will, and turning the argument around, or so it seems to be. The original argument must have been something like *without the Maker, man will—can—do anything*, because it gets turned around to *if the Maker is dead, nothing is permissible*. So you see where this puts us.

Clarify, Mrs Stone.

Oh. I *am* sorry. Sometimes I guess I do not explain myself very well.

You're claiming your organization believes in the Maker.

Oh, well, we have to, do we not?

That fails to make sense.

Oh, of course it does, Agent Smith. You just have to think about it awhile.

Mrs Stone—

Do *you* believe in the Maker, Agent Smith?

Of course.

Are you *sure*?

Services are observed every week.

Oh, I did not mean that.

You said—

Are you sure you *really* believe?

What's that supposed to mean? It's a nonsensical question, Mrs Stone.

Oh, Agent Smith, if *I* say I believe in the Maker, does not everything in that file you have your hand on there tell you something?

Only that you can and will lie.

Oh, but I promised I would tell you everything you need to know, Agent Smith. Remember? After all, somebody has to make everything, right? I mean, everything that is not made by those secret labs and programmers, right?

That—

So what would you say if I said I did *not* watch Church, Agent Smith?

It would be believable.

So long as everyone does the right thing, everything is all right, is that right, Agent Smith?

That—

But I guess we would not be having this nice chat if that were not and were not the case, would we, Agent Smith?

Mrs Stone—

It just seems to me—if I may say so—not that I want to offend you, Agent Smith—but, well, you do seem to care an awful lot about what people do. And it just seems to me that you should not have to worry so much.

That's our job.

Oh, well, Agent Smith, we are all just trying to do our jobs, are we not?

Mrs Stone, there is no purpose in dealing in outlandish wordplay. You're not going to confuse the issue.

Oh, maybe. But how do you explain that *I* believe in the Maker?—other than that I am lying, that is?

Obviously, you are. So the question's moot.

Oh, well. If that is the way it is going to be, Agent Smith. I have to admit that you *have* hurt my feelings.

Your feelings are not what we're concerned with.

I *do* think you are getting tense again, Agent Smith. I can tell by your shoulders. And just when I thought you might be relaxing just a bit.

Enough, Mrs Stone.

I would avoid aggravating you if I could help it, Agent Smith. I do hope you believe me.

Enough, Mrs Stone. Continuing. We'll leave aside questions of religion and concentrate on the particulars of the situation.

Oh, but before we do, Agent Smith, could I ask something? if you do not mind.

Mrs Stone—

Oh, it will not take up much time, I promise.

Mrs Stone—

All I was curious about was if you had ever met someone from Church?

Mrs—

I mean, of course everyone *watches* Church. I am, of course, not talking about that.

Mrs Stone, these are irrelevancies.

Oh, yes, that is why I wanted to go ahead and get your thoughts on the matter.

Mrs Stone.

They always wear such nice things on television, do you not think, Agent Smith?

This's a warning, Mrs Stone. And it will be noted.

Oh, yes, if that is what you think is necessary, Agent Smith, I completely understand.

We're continuing now, Mrs Stone.

Yes, Agent Smith.

How did you use Church services to influence Mrs Hadfield?

Well, I *have* already told you that, Agent Smith.

Mrs—

Oh, if you insist. I will repeat it *for the record*. Olivia—or Mrs Hadfield, if you insist—likes to wear white on Sundays. Is that in your files, Agent Smith? Of course, I guess that is just because everyone wears white on Sundays, is it not? But your organization does like to get down everything, after all.

How is that relevant?

Are my thought processes and feelings not relevant?

But how does what she wore—

Oh, maybe it does not mean a thing. I guess—when you think about it—as I said, *everyone* wears white on Sundays. But I thought you liked to keep accurate records, Agent Smith, and not just assume things.

We—

Besides—

Mrs Stone, you keep interrupting.

Oh, I *am* sorry, Agent Smith. Did you have something to say?

We'll stick to what happened. What did you do?

Oh, I see. Well, that *is* an interesting point. Agent Smith. Do you think it does not matter what someone thinks so long as they do the right thing? Do you ever rebel—on the inside, that is—Agent Smith, while you are going about your job?

Mrs Stone, we're not here for useless speculation. We're here to talk about your recruitment of Mrs Olivia Hadfield. That's the subject at hand. And that's what we're going to discuss.

You tap a table so authoritatively, Agent Smith, did you know that?

You're only making things worse for yourself.

Do you *really* think so? I don't know. What about you, Agent Smith? Am I making things difficult for you?

That's to be expected. An enemy agent of your rank is not going to easily yield to interrogation.

Oh, Agent Smith. I *did* promise to tell you everything you need to know, if you will remember. And I *have* been trying. I do not know *how* I could *possibly* be any more yielding than that. Although, I admit I may be being too blunt. Would you prefer me to be more... roundabout? Would that help?

Returning to Mrs Hadfield. Since you refuse to detail your actions regarding Church, we'll put that on hold and move on. However, you are hereby warned that the lack of cooperation in this regard will be noted in your file. But continuing. What—

Are you sure you do not want to hear about what happened after the service?

You're ready to give details?

Well, that *is* what I have been trying to do, Agent Smith.

Continue, then.

Oh, well, let me see.... I had it and it just slipped away. Have you ever had that happen, Agent Smith?

Mrs—

Oh, yes. Now, I remember. We had been discussing our favorite passages—of *The Book*, that is—and I had mentioned mine, but Olivia, poor thing, had never heard of that particular passage. So I filled her in, as they say in the movies. She really was very excited.

Clarify

I am sorry, Agent Smith, but I just do not know that I can help you there.

Mrs Stone—

What I mean, Agent Smith, is that I am not exactly sure of... well. We managed to dig it up, quite literally, but I am sure you already know that. The cover looks just like what you see on television and everything. At least what was left of it. It was rather falling apart, I am afraid. And some of it... well, so you can understand why some of it might have been missing.

That will be noted.

I have to say, Agent Smith, you *are* a diligent note taker, but I guess I have told you that before. Of course, you are familiar with it?—the passages in question?

Everything that's relevant to this case has been made available.

Oh, of course it has. Forgive me. Sometimes I *can* say the silliest things. And of course, I did not mean to imply otherwise.

If you could please give a brief summary. For the record.

Of the passages?

Yes.

Are you *sure* that is necessary, Agent Smith?

For the record.

Oh. Well, for the record.

And be as accurate as possible.

The Daemon is in the details, is that not what they say, Agent Smith?

Just try to be as accurate as possible.

Oh, of course, Agent Smith. But I admit I cannot quote it wholesale. However, I can give you some of my favorite parts, if that will be of use.

Continue.

And please do not let me imply that some things might not be missing.

It is noted. Continue.

I just would not want you to think I was holding back.

It has been noted. So, please, continue.

Are you really sure, Agent Smith?

Continue, Mrs Stone.

I just wanted to make sure that *is* what you want, Agent Smith.

You have been requested to continue, Mrs Stone. So please continue.

Well, let us see.... Tell me, oh thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest, where thou maketh thy flock to rest at noon. A bundle of myrrh is my beloved to me. He shall lie all night betwixt my breasts. His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doeth embrace me. Oh my dove, thou art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs. Let me see thee. Let me hear thy voice, for sweet is thy voice. And beautiful thy face. My beloved is mine. And I his. He says, thy lips are like a thread of scarlet. Thy two breasts like two young deer, twins fed among lilies. Thy lips drop honey. Honey and milk are under thy tongue. A garden is enclosed in you, my love, a spring shut up, a fountain sealed. Thy plants are an orchard of pomegranates and pleasant fruits. Awake, Oh north wind, and come thou forth, blow upon my garden, that the spices there may flow out. Let my beloved come into his garden and eat its pleasant fruits. And my beloved placed his hand by the opening of the door and my bowels were moved for him. I rose up to open to my beloved and my hands dripped with myrrh, and my fingers dripped the sweet smell upon the handle and the lock. I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had withdrawn himself and gone. My soul failed. I sought him, but could not find him. I called him, but he gave no answer. And the daughter of Zion is left as a cottage in the vineyard, as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city. By night on my bed I sought him who my soul loveth. I sought him, but I found him not. I will rise now and go about the city in the street, and in the broad ways I will seek him whom my soul loveth. I sought him, but I found him not. The watchmen that go about the city found me. To whom I said, see you whom my soul loveth? It was but a little that I passed from them, but I found him whom my soul loveth. I held him and would not let him go until I brought him into my mother's house. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would be utterly condemned. Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm, for love is as strong as death, jealousy is as cruel as the grave, the coals there are the coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame.

Are you all right, Agent Smith?

Yes. Fine... Yes. Fine.

You are sure? You seemed very...far away. And for a minute, I thought you might not come back.

I'm fine.

Oh, good.

There's... There's just one question.

Yes?

How did you expect her to...understand this? That is, wouldn't she have just filtered it out?

Oh, filters can be...overwhelmed, Agent Smith. You just have to... make sure everything is properly primed—my, does that not just roll off the tongue?

And you expected some significant results from this?

Oh, not really. Actually, very little.

So—

Why do it? As I *have* said, Agent Smith, it is a process. Each time those labs release a new model, well, you have to poke and probe and prod all over again. Although sometimes you have to...

Mrs Stone?

Oh, I am sorry, Agent Smith. I was just thinking about how to properly explain.

Explain what?

Well, it is a process, you know. But, of course, I have said that, have I not?

Mrs Stone—

But, no, what I mean to say is, Agent Smith, well, maybe it is just details, but in all that poking and probing and prodding, well, I am sure you can see how you have to be careful.

Clarify, Mrs Stone.

Well, Agent Smith, as I have said, and as I am sure you have got in your notes there, every different unit is, well, different, so you cannot always know *exactly* how something will respond.

Clarify, Mrs Stone.

Well, Agent Smith, what I mean is sometimes, when you push hard, sometimes there is this little, well, I guess you might call it a response.

A response?

Yes, Agent Smith.

What is this response?

Oh, it can be many things. I find it often happens right near the end, myself. A kind of, well, I guess you could call it a...flailing around.

A flailing around?

Yes, Agent Smith.

What—

I suspect it is some last-ditch defense mechanism. Of course, I admit I am not a programmer or anything like that. What do you think, Agent Smith?

We're not here for my opinion, Mrs Stone.

Oh.

And this response occurred in regards to Mrs Hadfield?

Oh, no, Agent Smith.

Then why did you bring it up, Mrs Stone?

I just thought it might be important, Agent Smith.

Mrs—

After all, that is a very delicate time. And in my experience, one has to be very careful, because it *is* the moment quite a few different things could happen.

Mrs—

And you never can tell what might come from it. Things can get completely...up in the air, you might say.

But you've stated that this response didn't occur in regards to Mrs Hadfield, correct?

Oh, no, Agent Smith.

Mrs Stone—

After all, Agent Smith, I could not have known that would not happen when I first started, could I? It really is unpredictable.

Mrs Stone, we're here to talk about what did happen in regards to your recruitment of Mrs Hadfield, not what didn't. So...

I am sorry to make you consult your notes again, Agent Smith.

Continuing, Mrs Stone.

Yes, Agent Smith?

So you began interfacing with Mrs Hadfield.

If you are referring to poking and probing and prodding, Agent Smith—

This is not about semantics, Mrs Stone. Please, just answer the question.

Oh, I just wanted to make sure we were on the same page with our meanings, Agent Smith, was all.

Semantics, Mrs Stone.

If you say so, Agent Smith.

So you confirm that you began interfacing with Mrs Hadfield?

Well, I think so, Agent Smith.

Mrs Stone—

But I am afraid if, instead, you want to talk about stimuli and response curves and metrics, you will have to talk to Krystal. But I *am* sure you have one of your best men on top of her as we speak.

We do our job.

Oh, yes you do, Agent Smith. But we *are* drifting again, are we not? Perhaps we should get back.

Yes. How did you collect this data on Mrs Hadfield's responsiveness?

Oh, Krystal has all kinds of things. Footstep and weight sensors in sofa cushions, moisture sensors under mailbox handles, temperature sensors in flower pots—and the Maker knows where else. As I said, if you want to know anything *particular*, you will have to ask her. Personally, I find my...senses, as you say, better—hands on experience,

you might say, as I believe I *have* mentioned. It can be so much more fun. I would think you know something about that in your line of work, Agent Smith.

We're not going to divulge our methodology.

Oh, I am sorry, Agent Smith. I did not mean to ask you to break the rules.

It's alright. Now...

Yes, Agent Smith?

What were the results of your suggestion to Mrs Hadfield?

Now *that* is an interesting question, Agent Smith. One that *will* require quite a few notes. But I am sure you are up to the task. But I *am* afraid we will have to...hop a bit forward and come back around.

Come back?

Yes, the explanation will work better that way.

I don't—

Oh, I assure you, Agent Smith, I am only trying to convey everything as accurately as possible, under the circumstances.

You're sure it's essential?

Oh, yes.

Alright.

You see, we need to—new paper, Agent Smith?

If you need to jump ahead, I'll keep these notes separate and collate them later.

I thought you might want to do something like that.

Please continue.

Oh, yes. Where was I? Oh, yes. Now, when your black-body-armored compatriots came storming in and—

How can that be relevant to—

If you would just wait, Agent Smith, you would find that out. Trust me. Do you trust me, Agent Smith?

If you'll please continue.

Oh, I guess I will have to settle for what I can get. For the moment, at least. Well, you see, Agent Smith, when all those men in black body armor came crashing through the windows and doors and heaven knows where else, Olivia was rather, should we say, busy, and do you know how she reacted?

The field commander's report—

Yes, yes, the report. But reports can be so under reportive, do you not think, Agent Smith? For instance, what does it say? That is, if you can read it to me without breaking the rules. I would not want you to do that, Agent Smith, at least, not unless you wanted to.

It says that some of the targets were...non-responsive.

Now, *that* is interesting. What do you think that could possibly mean, Agent Smith?

I would assume some kind of unconscious state, possibly induced by some mind-altering—

Oh, no, Agent Smith. Everyone else does more than enough of that. At least from what you see on the television. And as you can imagine, our organization quite forbids it. For the moment, anyway.

Then—

Well, of course, Agent Smith, we were just going about our—shall we say—normal routine, and as you might possibly imagine, living day to day with the knowledge that strange men in black body armor could come bursting in your back door at any time, well, one learns to take it all in stride. Although, as it happened—and I *am* sure your report notes this—Krystal *did* save them having to cuff her, seeing as how she already was. So I do not think you can hold *everything* against us, Agent Smith. Although, as I said, it was mainly a fortuitous happenstance, but I am sure it eased your mens' jobs, nonetheless. Oh, I do have to ask, Agent Smith. Are you sure you are all right? You have that look again.

Fine.

Are you sure?

Yes.

Because I could stop and give you a break if—

There's no need.

Well, so long as you are sure. Do not be afraid to speak up, though. I would not want to make you uncomfortable.

Please, continue.

Well, I am sure your report indicates there was a trifle...struggle when they removed poor Olivia.

It says she made an attempt to escape.

Oh, well, *really*... That is, not to *get away*, more to—shall we say—well, I am afraid that certain models can be very...one-track minded sometimes. And it *is* difficult to pry people away from what they love, do you not agree, Agent Smith?

And what was it—exactly—that you were doing prior to the actual—
Penetration?

—raid. For the record.

Oh, for the record. Well, I believe Tabatha was officiating by...to be honest, Agent Smith, I was rather...engaged at the time, and I can hardly remember the *exact* details of what was being employed. I am sure one of your men has it...how do you say...*bagged and tagged* somewhere? So I guess you could go look it up if you were interested. But... Well, here we are again, are we not, Agent Smith? Getting off track again. I am *so* sorry about that. You do not want to be hearing about something so far ahead yet.

You're sure it isn't applicable to—

Oh, yes. But we are not there yet, Agent Smith. And I would not want you to have to go through all that trouble to re-collate your notes. Now, to get back to Olivia—you see, Agent Smith, I *am* a woman of my word. I had to wait—this, of course, was sometime after I had given her that suggestion—I had not had much opportunity to see her in the meantime. You see, I had been too busy with having a rather dreadful problem with the neighbors that I just *had* to deal with before I could even *think* about continuing with poor Olivia—and I know what you are going to say, Agent Smith—*how is this relevant?*—but actually it turned out to be *extremely* fortuitous in relation to Olivia. Not directly, you understand, but quite important, nonetheless, and I would not want to leave anything out. You see, Agent Smith, Mindy—Mrs Thorne—the house on the left, that is—oh, she has this ridiculously loud vacuum cleaner. I do not know why she does not have it replaced. And you cannot do anything out back if it is on. I do not think you would believe how loud it is. And she always leaves the sliding door open, so you cannot help *but* hear it. And this is when I was sitting out back trying to...do a few things. And it was so hot. You can imagine how aggravating it could be to be constantly interrupted. It was just impossible to concentrate. It had been like that for days. And it used to be so peaceful since the

most common time for shopping is around then, as I am sure you know. Of course, this afforded me a certain amount of free time—as you might imagine—and I am sure you have this on file—but I will state it for the record, anyway—that our organization has a very... dedicated anti-consumerist sentiment at the moment and—

Several of your group were flagged for under-use of credit services.

Oh, yes. We figured you might do that. But what can be done about it, you know—oh, and please do not say something like *you just should not have violated the law in the first place*, gloating would not be becoming on you, Agent Smith. Not at all, well, *almost* not at all. I could think of a few situations—well, moving right along—I was trying to enjoy some things—Julio and Juan had just paid a visit earlier and very kindly brought me a few gifts—and take care of my tea—which incidentally Krystal turned me onto. Caffeine free. You can probably figure out our organization's position on caffeine. I have no idea where she could have gotten it. It is named after some *black bush*, I believe, or something like that. A wild coincidence, do you not think, Agent Smith?

I don't follow.

Oh, now, surely you can read between the lines, Agent Smith.

I...

You see. Yes, but anyway, I was sitting out back, shoes kicked off, feet up, things in hand—I could not tell you if... well, I *am* sorry, Agent Smith. But I had just settled back, and there goes the vacuum cleaner. And it just goes on and on and on. As if the whole time it is just sitting there by the door. Of course, I tried to ignore it, but one can only take so much. And you know how they build neighborhoods, privacy fences so high you cannot see over them standing on a chair—although, those can be *very* useful at times—so you can understand why I could not just yell over the top of them to find out what was going on. So I had to go to all the trouble of putting my shoes back on, dressing, going through the house, out the front, down the walk,

along the curb, and up the other walk. Of course, I could still hear the vacuum cleaner even while I was ringing the doorbell. And ringing it. And ringing it. And finally, I just had to start knocking and calling. But the vacuum cleaner went on and on. Now, I figured she *had* to have heard me. I mean, she might not have, but it just seemed so unlikely. And I, being a conscientious neighbor, thought *something cannot be right*. So I tried the knob, and what do you know it swung right open. Of course, I did not go in right away. I would not want to invade someone's private space. It is not nice to barge straight in on someone, but of course that is just one of our organizational differences, is it not, Agent Smith? I guess that we will just have to agree to disagree, for the moment, at least. But anyway, I called a few more times. But the vacuum cleaner just roared and roared. So I finally just *had* to go in. Oh, I know—you do not have to say it—you will say *why did I not call the police if I suspected something?* But well, of course, you know the answer to that. So I went in and there was the vacuum cleaner just roaring away in the living room. No one anywhere in sight. And I called, obviously, what else could I do? But I could not even hear myself think. So I turned it off. Then do you know what I heard, Agent Smith? The strangest sound. This kind of... smack smack smack. Or something like that. Now—I have to admit, Agent Smith—I *really* got curious. I went into the living room. Nothing. I could still hear it though, smack smack smack. What on earth could it have been? It sounded like it was coming from upstairs. And it got louder and louder the more I climbed, so I had to be getting close. And when I got to the second floor, do you know what I saw, Agent Smith? Poor Mindy. And do you know what she was doing? She was pulling a door open and closed so the doorknob—one of those round gold ones—for the record—well, it just popped in and out. She had the *most* intense look on her face. You really should have seen it, Agent Smith. Oh, I mean, you could have knocked me over with a feather. Mindy—out of everyone—a completely unregistered model under our noses the whole time. Poor thing. I am sure you know, Agent Smith, they are programmed to return for maintenance on a regular schedule. We have tried following one or two but lost them. I *have* always wanted to see how they were made. Do they use assembly lines? Or rows of vats? Do they keep them covered in some

kind of modest cellophane when they are hung up to dry? A sheet? So many questions. But when one must be committed to not taking over the world, well, we can only go so far. Oh, well. But here one was, right off the deep end. Completely going to pieces. It is a wonder she had not completely broken down by then. And all on its own, too. Poor thing. Just standing there with a doorknob popping in and out of it. Of course, maybe you think that is not anatomically correct. Do you, Agent Smith? But physically they are really quite versatile, you know. With the proper practice, well, you probably would not believe the positions that can be achieved. Such a shame. And a waste. And no one to help. One *should* always be ready to render aid, do you not think, Agent Smith? After all, it is the neighborly thing to do.

I...guess.

And how could I turn away from someone in such *desperate* need?

Th—

Do you ever wonder about that, Agent Smith?

What?

Oh, silly me. Sometimes I *do* wonder if we have all been turned out on some assembly line somewhere and just do not know it.

But we're not.

Oh, but is that not *just* what we would say if we were? Maybe we should devise some kind of test to find out. Multiple choice? Or maybe a gadget of some kind, you think? Krystal has worked on something like that forever. That is why I took Mindy over to her when I managed to get her *somewhat* dressed. Krystal *can* work miracles sometimes. After a few...abortive attempts, well, she had her reset and across the street just in time to start dinner before her husband got home.

You recruited her?

Oh, well, I do not know that you could say *that*.

Then—

Oh, we kept her from being disposed of too soon. Everyone is so quick to dispose of things these days. Why replace when you can repair, do you not think, Agent Smith? It is not as if she still could not have plenty of fun. She just required a little more... maintenance. Although, I was worried there for a while she might overheat and damage something, and what would we have done then? And besides, poor Donna was practically hyperventilating as it was. She does worry.

About Mrs Hadfield—

Oh, but you know, come to think of it, there would be a fundamental problem with it.

What?

Oh, I *am* sorry, Agent Smith. Silly me. Sometimes I just do not know *where* my mind goes. I guess I should have mentioned it earlier. Now you will have to rearrange your notes. I *am* sorry.

What?

Oh, that device, I mentioned, you know, the one Krystal takes a stab at once in a while. You see the problem, do you not, Agent Smith?

Th—

Of course it would not work.

I...don't... Explain.

Well, how could we ever trust it? Say *you* use it on me—but you are one of them. How can you be trusted to interpret the results? Maybe you will never *know* what the machine reports because that gets overridden. So who gives *you* the test to prove that *you* are? Or

are not. Whichever. Of course, I could, I guess. Do you think you would trust me that much, Agent Smith?

Someone would have to build the machine.

Oh, but that might only be because they were programmed to, otherwise we might suspect they were a plant.

We... we've wandered off point.

Oh, I *am* sorry, Agent Smith. Silly me, always wasting time wondering about the most useless things. It *is* so good to have you here to keep me straight. What was it we were talking about?

W—

Oh, it is okay if you look at your notes. I will not be offended, Agent Smith.

After the... Church-related incident, where did you next encounter Mrs Hadfield?

Oh, well, let me think. I would say the next time I saw her was... oh, yes, when the washing machine—the Hadfield's washing machine, to be accurate for the record—blew up. Krystal came over and—

What did Mrs Ellison have to do with it?

If you would just wait, Agent Smith, you would find out. Now, as I said, Krystal had all these monitoring devices, oh, stuffed in almost every nook and cranny. She even had one that you could insert into things and it would measure how—well, you probably do not want to know about that right now. But I am sure you can see the uses. Anyway, she had these monitoring devices in the washing machines to report if they ever actually became damp on the inside.

That seems pointless.

Well, maybe that is the point, Agent Smith.

Why—

Oh, of course, if you want to know any more than that you will have to pump the details out of her, which I *am* sure your compatriots are doing as we speak. But anyway, so of course, we had to retrieve it before the replacement men got there.

How did you know you had time?

Oh, as I am sure it says in one of your files, Agent Smith, we do have our own networks to keep track of things. Once Krystal got the idea to subject insurance claims to computerized statistical analysis—distinct from *manual*, you understand, Agent Smith—I am sure you can understand why—and it proved wonderfully useless at determining almost anything. Well, for the most part, that is. But we can get to that later. And besides, insurance claims, or so I am told, have a very standard response time. Those units are very well programmed. And *horribly* tough to do anything with. We once arranged to grab one just as he went on vacation. Very convenient, that—although terribly difficult to time correctly. Krystal has tried to explain it to me—although, I would never claim to be an expert—it is supposed to be that there is a second or two gap as a chunk of memory is transferred from long-term storage—or at least that is how I understand it. And there has to be some tiny recalculations—predefined holes to fill in that differ from model to model—at least that is what Krystal speculates. If you want the details, well, as I say, you *will* have to go see her.

You illegally detained a maintenance technician?

Oh, well, we did give him back. And we only kept him in a closet for a few weeks. I do not think he minded.

How d—

Did it go unnoticed? I have to admit, Agent Smith, I am not sure. Well, that is, I know *he* did not notice—Krystal finally did determine a way to reset him to vacation mode, I do believe. Maybe if you find

him you could ask to see his vacation photos. I am sure they would prove he had a very nice time.

Y—

Do you ever go on vacation, Agent Smith?

We're given three days of unpaid leave a year and—

I bet you have some nice photos.

I—

Oh, listen to me. I do not mean to be so nosy. I am *so* sorry, Agent Smith. But you see, this *was* so interesting to find out. And after all that trouble of arranging backdrops for our own photos in Tabatha's basement, well...

Y—

Oh, just tiki torches and bamboo screens and things like that. You *would* be amazed at just how few rather common household items it takes to make the average basement look like a tropical island—just like in the movies.

Yes....

Are you all right, Agent Smith? You seem...perplexed. I hope I have not gotten you confused.

No....

Because that is the last thing I would want to do. I want to make everything as clear as possible.

Good... So... For the record, that is, what exactly did you...do to this maintenance worker? I assume—

Oh, yes, we had to do that.

And you...

Oh, I see what it is you are after, Agent Smith. But I *am* sorry to say I left the...technical details up to Elizabeth. I am sure you have her down here somewhere. And I bet she would be *more* than happy to go over the procedure.

Yes.... Well... Obviously, because you're a lesbian, you wouldn't...

If you say so, Agent Smith.

Now, moving on. Y—

Oh, yes. We—Krystal and I, that is—had gone across the street as soon as Alicia called to let us know they were on their way. And after all, poor Olivia *did* need our help. If you can imagine it, Agent Smith, she was even flustered enough to open the door still wearing an apron. Shoes all wet. I had to suggest she put her hair up and show her how.

So you had already started reprogramming her.

Oh, I guess that you could say we...opened up such interesting possibilities.

And—

Thinking of it, did you happen to collect any of our old photos?

We confiscated any relevant material that was on the premises.

Oh, you *are* so thorough. Olivia does look so good with her hair up. These few little wisps fall down and caress the back of her neck. If you have some free time, you might find some of those photos of interest, Agent Smith.

They will be properly logged into evidence.

Oh, that is good.

About Mrs Hadfield—

Oh, well, is not that who we are talking about, Agent Smith?

But—

Oh, I *am* sorry. You wanted to hear about how we got all wet.

I—

It took three mops between us. Water everywhere.

How did you manage to distract Mrs Hadfield?

You mean for Krystal to do her thing?

Yes.

Oh, I just asked her if she preferred carrots or cucumbers.

In those words?

Oh, yes, in those words. Is that important, Agent Smith?

And her reply?

Oh, she said how she preferred to grate carrots for stir-fry, rather than chopping them, and how the thinness helped them cook faster and remain tender.

That's all?

Oh, and that she had never made pickles but had seen this commercial on television and that she might use the coupon and order the kit and try them.

And this—

Well, what did you expect, Agent Smith? Hm?

Th—

Oh, but we had made excellent progress.

Progress?

Oh, well, I mean, there she was, eventually barefoot by the end, wet up to her elbows and knees, hair a wonderful mess. Sounds lovely, do you not think?

For the record...it should be noted that...you seem overly pleased.

Oh, I just like breaking good engineering so much. It *is* such a thrill. Do you not get a thrill, Agent Smith, when you smash up a completed puzzle to put it back in the box?

I...prefer to glue and frame them.

Oh, of course you do.

And Mrs Meeker was able to retrieve the device?

Oh, yes. Krystal did have to strip and get all soapy to slip behind it with a screwdriver. But she *is* a whiz at those sorts of things.

Uhm...yes...

And just in time, too. The doorbell rang, and Olivia turned right around to go an answer it, and Krystal just had time to slip back into her clothes.

And you assumed that the previous maintenance worker you turned was one of those who would arrive.

Oh, no. In fact, I do not think we ever saw him again.

But—

I do hope he made it back.

He...

Is something wrong, Agent Smith?

No. Moving on.

Oh, I *am* sorry. I would like there to be more...relevant linear connections for you. But, well...

Moving on. Please, continue.

About poor Olivia, I presume you mean.

Yes.

Oh, that *is* difficult, Agent Smith. I mean, you act as if the world just revolved around her and all I had to do all day was sit thinking about her. Not that I did not indulge in that once in a while, mind you. But I had other responsibilities, you know. And even though I *am* necessarily compelled to be committed to under-working, well, one does *have* to get a certain amount done in a day. That is just the way it works in this modern world of ours. For the time being, anyways.

What does that mean?

Oh, nothing at all, Agent Smith. You should not take things so literally. It was merely a figure of speech. You do not have to act as if there are some conspiratorial goings on afoot. As I told you, it *is* completely against our organization's principles to try and take over the world. At the moment, anyway.

So you admit to the possibility.

Oh, I would guess there is always the possibility that the rest of the world will give up trying to force whatever particular ideology on the rest of us. Although—personally—Agent Smith, I do not bet on it. But we *do* have to be prepared for change, at least so long as no one else is.

If you think attempting to confuse—

Oh, I would *never* try to do that, Agent Smith. It is just that things can sometimes be so complicated that we cannot figure out where we are supposed to stand. However, it sometimes does work out well enough—we often have to counter so much blind surety that, well, I guess you can see the point.

Your organization must have some means of reaching consensus.

Oh, sometimes. Then sometimes it undergoes a... what you might call a...mitosis. One day you have one then—slap—and then you have two—as you call them—cells, each going their own maybe contradictory and merry way.

This doesn't make sense. You're essentially saying two cells could then end up as antagonists.

It *has* happened. Or so I believe I have heard.

But the competition for resources—

Oh, I do not think that is much of a problem. Competition is so... ingrained currently, I cannot imagine any cell—as you want to say—derived from our own could do anything but eschew it.

There is no use in attempting to confuse...this inquiry.

I *am* sorry, Agent Smith. I did promise to tell you everything you need to know, and I guess sometimes confusion can be a side effect.

Let's just return to Mrs Hadfield.

All right, Agent Smith, if that is what you think is best.

After the laundry machine incident, how did you follow up?

Well, Agent Smith, I *am* going to try. But you *are* just going to have to allow me some room to work in. Otherwise I am just not going

to be able to tell you what you want to know, without going a *little* farther afield, that is.

We're here to talk about Mrs Hadfield.

And that *is* what I am trying to do, Agent Smith. But you just will not allow me to do it.

Th—

Do you like leashes, Agent Smith?

Th... Explain.

Are you sure about that, Agent Smith?

Yes.

Yes you are sure? Or yes you are not?

No.

Are you trying to confuse me, Agent Smith? That is not very nice.

This's pointless, Mrs Stone. And this interview will be terminated if you prefer to be taken back to your cell.

You are very attractive when you are authoritarian, Agent Smith. Do you know that?

If you're trying to...perform a...seduction, Mrs Stone, it won't work. That you're a lesbian is a known—

Oh, now that is just one of those things you are going to have to open up about if you are going to get to where you need to be. I mean, you say you want me to tell you everything but when I try you will not let me. Which is it, Agent Smith? You should really make up your mind.

We're here to discuss your recruitment of Mrs Hadfield. That's all.

And that *is* what I am trying to do, Agent Smith.

We've had this discussion.

And until you make up your mind, Agent Smith, about what you want, we will *have* to keep having it.

Mrs Stone—

You might as well call me Nora, by now.

This is not a social function, Mrs Stone. I don't think you realize that.

If you are going to be rude, Agent Smith, I think I *would* prefer to return to my cell.

If... What do you mean?

I do not follow, Agent Smith.

Do you mean you want to be escorted back to confinement? Or is this some subtle wordplay—a joke about being released so your organization—your cell—can continue its activities? Is this a joke, Mrs Stone?

Oh, dear. You do seem to be confused, do you not? That really *is* an astute observation, Agent Smith. Very clever reasoning. And perceptive. Very interesting. But I... Oh, I do not know. I would have to say...no. No, I have to admit I am not sure I have a preference one way or the other at the moment. How about you decide, Agent Smith?

This is not a game, Mrs Stone.

Oh, I never claimed it was, Agent Smith.

You're obstructing an official investigation and—

Well, to be specific—or rather pedantic—Agent Smith, I *am* sorry but it is you who are impeding.

Me?

Well, I did put the decision in your rather strong hands. You are completely in charge of how this goes from here. I do not know what else I can do.

You—

Are you sure you feel okay, Agent Smith? You do not look so well. If you would prefer a break—

No. No, we're going to stay right here. And we're going to finish with how you recruited Oliv—Mrs Hadfield. That's what we're going to do.

All right, Agent Smith. So does that mean I have the leeway I need?

Just continue.

Are you sure? I would not want to get you in trouble, Agent Smith.

Just continue.

Well, now, let me see.... Where was I? Do you—oh, never mind. I remember. Olivia's washing machine had just blown up—or sprung a leak, whatever you want to call it—is that not right? No, there is no need to look it up, Agent Smith—I remember. And I already told you about Krystal, so...

You—

Do not interrupt. It is very rude to interrupt people, Agent Smith. Now, see what you have done, you completely derailed my train of thought. After all, I *am* just trying to give you what you asked for.

Th... Sorry.

Thank you, Agent Smith.

Can we continue now?

Well, that *is* what I am trying to do, Agent Smith. Now, let me see.... Oh, yes. Now, you know how it is, you cannot just fix something, you have to replace the whole thing. I think we *have* touched on this briefly, have we not? Well, I hope I will not retread too much ground. You will keep me straight if that happens, Agent Smith, will you not? But—not that that was the bigger problem, of course. I am sure you know that they do not actually work—well...that is not *exactly* true, but you understand, I hope, about washing machines, that is. Or at least, well, I do think you could break them just by looking at them. I mean, I *am* sure Olivia never used hers—and Krystal can testify to it—and, still, look at what happened. Water everywhere. They often fail like that, did you know that, Agent Smith? just sitting there. The washing machines, that is. But anyway, the bigger problem was when it went it managed to soak all Richard's clean shirts. The poor thing had just taken them out of the plastic after they had been delivered. A whole day's worth of laundry service wasted. You can imagine the state she was in. Do you realize, Agent Smith, that washing machines are foundational to contemporary morality? It is true. Now, you do not have to look that way. Although, I have to admit, I *do* find you rather attractive when you look perplexed.

That wouldn't make sense. You're a lesbian. And—

Do not interrupt, Agent Smith. Now, washing machines. You *did* look rather puzzled there, so I had better clear that up, do you not think, Agent Smith?

I—

Good. Now, as I said, selling washing machines is fundamental to contemporary morality, that is, right and wrong. It *is* interesting what you can get out of the trash, Agent Smith. It all starts after a big war—just like in the movies. And you have all these units that are leftover from that and have to be repurposed—this of course, as

you might reason, Agent Smith, is when they were too expensive to simply throw out. It would be interesting to see one of our *cells*—as you call them—back then. Under those strictures, I wonder what the turnover rate would have been.... Although, I am sure they had fun wearing each other out. Oh, there is no need to look so embarrassed, Agent Smith. After all, I would think you would be used to dealing with such *scandalous* criminal persons such as myself. But it *is* good to know you have not become cynical.

The washing machines.

Hmm?

How do washing machines figure into this?

Oh, yes. There I go again. You really *have* to keep me on track, Agent Smith. Well, you see, when they repurposed all those models after the war, they had to do some *slight* reprogramming—as you can imagine. Before that, they would...cohabitate together, a large group of inter-generational models. Like in the movies, Agent Smith. But someone figured out—this was back in the days when programs were on paper tape, you see—but someone figured out that if every unit built a new house, well, that meant they would need a new stove and a new electric washing machine and a great many things. I cannot imagine it was an easy task. Millions of miles of paper tape must have been thrown out and burnt. What else would they do with it? It *is* not as if they could reuse it. The whole project must have been *terribly* expensive, do you not think, Agent Smith? I mean, to retrofit all those, maybe, millions of models. Of course, you see the finer points.

No....

Oh, well, it *is* very simple. Algorithms were simpler back then. It goes, you get a job so that you can afford a washing machine and you get a wife unit so you have someone to use it and you get a house so you have somewhere to put it and you buy clothes to have something to put in it and have a kitchen and a yard and a mower and all sorts of things so your clothes get dirty and have to be washed and on and

on. So you see, everything about being a good citizen is *intimately* bound up with owning a washing machine.

That...doesn't make sense.

You are not against washing machines, are you, Agent Smith?

Of course not.

Oh, good. Because, well, if they found out you *are* against washing machines, you would find yourself on this side of the table. And I do not think I would want that to happen. Of course...

What?

Well, there *are* mirrors behind us both. So it really *is* difficult to tell our respective sides apart, do you not think? The ring for these handcuffs is even in the middle of the table, so you cannot really be sure *which* side it is meant for—You looked, Agent Smith. That is sweet. Really, though, do not our positions seem rather...reversible to you?

I'm not the one in handcuffs.

Would you like to be?

Mrs Stone—

And besides, you never have refastened these, you will notice. If you did, you could do *whatever* you wanted to me and I could not stop you.

M—

Would you like to put them back on?

I...don't think its necessary at the present moment. There's no use in you trying to leave this room.

What if I put them back on for you. Like—oh—*this*. There. Now I am *completely* at your mercy, Agent Smith. What would you like to do?

I... We should get back. You were talking about, uhm, washing machines.

Are you sure?

Yes. Yes, we should get back.

To Olivia?

Yes.

If that is what you want, Agent Smith. You really *do* keep me on my toes. Oh, now, let us see.... Well, obviously, the poor dear was in quite a bind. Of course, it did turn out that some of that maintenance data that Krystal analyzed was not *quite* as useless as we had thought. Now, do not think I lied to you, Agent Smith. I would not want to get ahead of myself, and we did not realize any of that until later, so I did not want to confuse you by thinking we thought any of it would be useful from the start. Although, in one sense it was a strike against us, if we had *known* anything fruitful would have come out of it, well, we would have had to eschew computers for it and done the analysis manually. But you cannot win them all, can you, Agent Smith? I mean, how were we supposed to know we would happen upon bunches of repairs and replacements clustered within the same address? Do you know what that signifies, Agent Smith?

No.

Oh, a laundromat, of course. Just like in the movies, Agent Smith. So problems being problems, I suggested we toss her things in a basket and I would...arrange for a lift. Simple as that.

Simple?

Oh, well, almost simple. Juan and Julio were more than happy to do it once I convinced them how *desperately* poor Olivia needed our help.

You left the suburb?

Well, we had to, did we not, Agent Smith? Besides, one has to get out *sometime*. Do you ever get out much, Agent Smith?

As...the job dictates.

Have you ever been *downtown*?

No.

Oh. Well, but you *have* heard of it, I am sure.

I... Yes.

Well, you *are* full of surprises, Agent Smith? I had figured you to be more...how is it said—white collar? Is that right?

Yes.

Oh, but I *am* sure you have a file on it somewhere. Quite a few, I would imagine. It *is* such an interesting place. And you have such interesting...experiences. It is almost...like a reservation, you might say. I think that is what you call it. But maybe you know better than I do. But, anyway, a kind of place for *them* to exist.

Them?

Oh, you know. Just *them*. Anyway, you do have the most interesting encounters down there. Have you ever heard that it brings out a certain...character, living down there, the difficulty of day-to-day life?

No.

Oh, well, it *is* twaddle, anyway, Agent Smith—if you will forgive my language. Sloppy programming, perhaps? You think, Agent Smith? But if you did then you will probably later come up with some statistic about crime and how *they* are more prone to it. But which is it, Agent Smith? Just like on television. Hmm?

Th—

It *is* an interesting contradiction, is it not, Agent Smith? But that does not matter, anyway, right now. We—

And you got Mrs Hadfield to agree to this—to going down there?

Oh, well, it *did* take some work, I *will* admit that. But in the end—I am sure the quality control boards at those labs will be getting a copy of this, will they not?

Th—

Well, it was Richard's stupid shirts that convinced—or should I say *compelled* her—in the end. So in a way, you could say their programming was *quite* helpful. She might have walked off the edge of the Earth to get those shirts cleaned. That *is* one of the things I enjoy most about breaking new models, Agent Smith. It is so *thrilling* to take all those refined iterations of labwork and undermine them with their very own drives.

So—

Oh, I know what you are going to say. Yes, they do seem to implant a generic unease factor for—well, all situations outside of—well, you get the idea. If you want the technical details, however, I *am* afraid you will have to ask Peggy. I just like to say that they...retreat rather easily, if you understand what I mean.

Then how did you—

Oh, that is the beauty of it, Agent Smith. You just have to arrange for a conflict and hope things...perhaps...precipitate—I am not sure

if that is the right word, but it sounds good. Really, you should have seen her. At one point, she literally started walking in circles carrying the laundry basket, up the sidewalk, then back down. Poor dear. Quite normal though. Sometimes they just fall over. Some models just are not very robust.

But Mrs Hadfield?

Well, obviously you can figure that out, Agent Smith. After all, you *did* arrest her with the rest of us.

Yes.

But I must admit I had my doubts. You never can predict which way these things are going to go. Really, there are so many programmers who should thank us, you know?

Why?

Oh, well, because if it were not for us, their systems would be *far* less robust. Without us to...probe them, well... And it does give them that nice feeling of being able to think that if they can just find that one last hole and plug it, everything will be perfect. Otherwise, well, who knows *what* might happen? Have you ever met one of the programmers that work in those labs, Agent Smith?

No.

We captured one. But I am sure you know that.

How?

Now, there is no need to jut forward like that, Agent Smith. Do not be so tense. But you *are* attractive when you are puzzled, do you know that?

When—

Did this happen?

Yes.

Oh, that was quite a while ago. But I thought you wanted to hear about Olivia.

This seems as if it might be relevant.

Oh, do you think so, Agent Smith?

About—

Oh, well, you may be right, Agent Smith. After all, you have the whole picture in all those files, and I am just down here looking around at my part of it, after all.

The programmer.

Oh, yes, the programmer. He was actually very sweet. Limited—but sweet. Almost adorable. I do not think they have changed in a *very* long time. They are very...rudimentary, you might say—user-interface-wise, that is. Terribly literal. I am afraid we broke him rather badly. Not intentionally, you will understand, Agent Smith. It is just...well, they are rather...fragile. He was still terribly sweet though, even after. Oh, but poor Patsy would come back into the house with grocery boxes in each hand where they had just been dropped off and he would be standing there and she would ask him if he would like to help her and he would say *no*—although not in a nasty way, just matter of fact—and go pattering off somewhere to tinker with something. Of course, you can imagine the result. Finally, she just about exploded and started yelling at him asking why in the world he never wanted to help her. Well—or at least the way she always told it—he just stood there with this kind of sweet-but-perplexed look and saying that if she needed help all she had to do was ask. You see how literal they can be. It is just that the poor things are programmed so limited on subtext. And context, too. But you really would have to ask Krystal about that. It was too bad we broke him. But best laid plans and all that. Although, shall we say, in regards to *that*, Patsy really *did* end up benefiting from it quite well,

at least from what I heard of it. Silver linings, I guess. Funny how those things can happen, is it not, Agent Smith?

Yes.

Oh, my. Are you not just the busy note taker. You must have good technique, Agent Smith. My hand would cramp after five minutes like that. And you *do* have such nicely defined fingers.

And they never noticed him missing? His employer, that is.

Oh, I cannot say. Maybe they are used to a certain number just... wandering off.

But someone would have to notice, surely.

I *am* sorry, Agent Smith, but I just do not know what to say. Maybe those organizations are so large things just... slip through the cracks. I have always imagined them as very big, anyway. Vast, sprawling complexes with multiple smoke stacks. Or maybe like those movie studios—you know—the pictures you see sometimes at the beginnings and ends of a film.

Th—

You know, sometimes—and it *is* silly, I know—but I have to admit that sometimes I cannot tell the difference between what I remember and what I only saw on television. That *can* be so annoying. Do you ever have that happen, Agent Smith?

Th—

Do you ever dream, Agent Smith?

I... Sometimes.

And I bet you wear the same suit as you are wearing now, do you not?

How do you know that?

Oh, you know. I bet you even dream about being in rooms like this, talking to people like me. Tell me—in your dreams, that is, Agent Smith—do you ever interrogate these dastardly terrorists in any *particular* way?

I—

Oh, I do have to admit—I am beginning to feel like I am in one of those cop shows that they have. You know the ones, Agent Smith? And of course, the person on the other side of the table always gets taken away at the end, do they not?

I...guess.

Oh, that *is* very interesting, Agent Smith.

W—

Do you ever have nightmares, Agent Smith?

I... I don't know.

Oh, I am sure you do.

Everyone's supposed to.

Oh, maybe. As for myself, I have the same one...quite often, actually. Would you like to hear about it, Agent Smith?

Th—

It *is* a very simple dream, actually, so it will not take up too much of your time.

Um. Okay....

Well, it always starts the same way. I sit down to eat in a restaurant—just like in the movies—and the waiter brings a plate of spaghetti out,

and I start eating, but this one noodle is *so* long and I do not know why I do not cut it or bite it in two but I just keep sucking more and more of it into my mouth and keep trying to swallow it, except it is not a noodle anymore, it is punched paper tape, and it is all dry in my mouth and I keep trying to choke it down, and I start gagging. Do you ever have *that* sort of dream, Agent Smith?

I...

Not that I want to invade your personal space. If you want to keep that private, just tell me to shut up.

Th—

I wonder if it is a common dream. What do you think, Agent Smith? But I do not know...maybe men do not talk about these kinds of things. Krystal once managed to pull a home movie out of poor Olivia's head that involved piles and piles of magnetic tape. Interesting, do you not think, Agent Smith?

So she—Mrs Hadfield had these dreams, too?

Oh, yes.

And—

Oh, thank you, Agent Smith. I *am* so sorry. I do keep getting off track. I just do not know where my mind gets to sometimes. And if I did not have you to keep me straight, who knows where I would end up? I *am* sorry. Now, where were we with Olivia?

B—

Oh, yes. The laundromat. I just do not know what I would do without you to keep me straight, Agent Smith. Anyway—are you sure you are all right, Agent Smith?

No. Fine. Just... Continue.

Well, as I said, you can have the most interesting experiences down there. Irma, for instance. A wonderful old dear. So old I think she is *actually* an analog model—no shame about it, either. And everything still in...working order. Mostly. Not factory fresh, mind you. And definitely not put up on block in the garage for the last fifty years, either. But all things considered, well... Some equipment you have to exercise or end up with dry rot, that is what she says. I bet she is even from back when they still had to hand assemble most of them. I bet a technician worked at the end of the line and went over everything with a checklist, manually. I wonder if that job is still available. What do you think, Agent Smith?

Th—

Oh, I think your face *is* heating, Agent Smith. I hope you did not misunderstand me.

And this relates to—

Oh, yes. That is, Irma is always down at the laundromat. I thought it would be a good idea to introduce the two of them—Irma and Olivia, that is—you know, to keep busy while we waited for the laundry to finish. You know, it seems as if every new model that comes out has tighter and tighter busy loops. Have you ever noticed that? Idle hands are the Daemon's workshop, you know—or so they say in the Church programs. Do you believe it is good—or should I say important?—to believe in believing in the Daemon, Agent Smith?

I would...guess so.

Never thought about it?

How is this relevant?

Oh, I hope you do not think I am trying to waste your time, Agent Smith. That *is* the furthest thing from my mind, I assure you. I just do not know how else to tell you everything you need to know.

If we could just get back.

Oh, yes. Well, yes actually, it is completely relevant. You see, Irma always says *I* am the Daemon. Or was it that I looked like the Daemon? I forget which.

The Daemon?

Oh, yes. But she was quite gay about it.

But why?

Why is she gay?

No—why did she think you were the Daemon?

Oh, well, I never asked.

B—

Oh, but that is not really the polite kind of question to ask, is it? I mean, she always is so nice about it. The poor dear. She is wheelchair bound, you know. Has been for years. There was some kind of... recall or something or the other, on one of the parts in her knees, but she never got around to getting it replaced. They click just awful—it makes you wince to hear it. She plays music with them. Sometimes I think they made them more resilient back in the day. And like I say, the rest of her was still in wonderful condition, all things considered. What do you think, Agent Smith?

I...it's never been the subject of an investigation.

Oh, well, maybe I should introduce the two of you sometime.

There would be no point.

Oh, you never know, Agent Smith.

Mrs Stone—

Nora, please.

Mrs Stone—

Although, I *am* afraid it will have to be quite soon. The poor dear is *quite* near the end, I am afraid.

Near the end?

Yes. It *is* sad. But what can you do about it? Everything eventually comes to the end of its service life, does it not, Agent Smith?

Shouldn't someone be called?

Well, it is not as if they make spare parts for her anymore, Agent Smith. And when you are out of your service period, well, you know how it is.

There...should be something....

Oh, I am afraid not. Although, I *am* sure they will find her and retire her soon enough.

It would be for the best.

Perhaps. You *are* very kind, Agent Smith. Perhaps I will get the chance to introduce you to her after all.

Mrs Stone—

But you do not want to hear about all these depressing things. We are here to talk about Olivia, after all. But, well, I cannot do *that* without talking about Irma. Even Olivia was quite impressed.

In what way?

Oh, Irma told her her future.

How?

Oh, well, Irma attunes to the universe. That is one of the reasons she likes the laundromat. All those washing machines—well, the ones that still run, anyway—they take these very simple, repetitive, geometric motions and turn them into pure...chaos, water sloshing round and round, clothes flopping and crashing and splashing, all of that. You listen to it and it is like looking into the seething nature at the heart of reality—or so she says. And there is the televisions, of course, I should not forget about them. They have old ones stacked out back of the laundromat. Have you ever watched a television tuned to a dead channel, Agent Smith?

Th—

Oh, you should. Irma says that when you look at what they call the static, you are looking all the way back to the start of the universe.

How?

Oh, well, I cannot answer *that*, Agent Smith. That is much too technical a question. I only know what I am told. If you want to know more, I guess, I *will* have to introduce you to Irma.

There's no such thing as a dead channel.

Well, maybe I should say...a non-channel. As I *have* said, Agent Smith, I am really not an expert. Perhaps they modify them in some way to...see beyond what the normal television can—I really do not know. Irma says they used to require that broadcasts had to happen all the time, and that if there was nothing to broadcast, they had to broadcast a still image or solid grey. That was to avoid the static.

Why?

As I keep saying, Agent Smith, I simply do not know.

What did she say to Mrs Hadfield?

Oh, that she would go on a long journey and... Oh, let me see.... I want to tell you it just as she said it. It was...

Y—

Oh, yes. She said that she would go on a long journey where she would meet many she had not met before but that she would not have to go anywhere for it to happen. And things would not be much different but that everything was going to change.

That doesn't make sense.

Well—as I understood it—the televisions and the washing machines disagreed somewhat. So I guess sometimes you have to split the difference. Oh, and I know what you are going to say, but it does not matter, you see, because they were both right.

I don't—

Oh, but you do not want me to go into *that* just yet—it is very far ahead and I would not want you to have to go through all the trouble of rearranging your notes. So let us see... where was I?

Y—

Oh, there is no reason to look that way, Agent Smith. I *am* trying to keep my promise. I really am.

And the laundromat?

Oh, everything went wonderfully. But of course, Agent Smith, I am sure all this raises a question for you.

A question?

Yes.

I... Explain.

Well, do you not think it is strange, Agent Smith, that even though everyone uses the laundry services, washing machines still need to

be replaced? *What* could everyone be doing with them? I am sure you know that Krystal replaced her sensors as soon as she could after Olivia's new one was delivered—that has to be on file somewhere in all those papers, does it not? Krystal does come up with so many interesting things. She even has one that measures vibrations. Of course, since Olivia never used her washing machine, obviously, there was never anything to report. But you know, Agent Smith, a few weeks later, it started to detect something. And they are *very* sensitive little things. For instance, it picked up something was...padding—I guess you could call it that—the spin cycle. But of course, that was later. Do you not—are you sure you feel all right, Agent Smith?

What? Fine.

It is just that for a moment you looked, well...

Fine. Now... Getting back on track.

Oh, I *am* sorry, Agent Smith. Have I gotten off again?

What? No. No, it's... Anyway, what was your next encounter with Mrs Hadfield?

Oh, well, I am sure I waved at her while I was out checking the mailbox once or twice. I am sure you know about Krystal's sensors under the door mats, and all that—quite useful. Perhaps she could help bring your own organization's equipment up a notch or two.

That's not how we operate.

Oh? I *am* sorry. I did not mean to suggest anything improper. An organization such as ours, working on a shoestring budget, as they say, well, we have to make everything count, do we not? Even when purposefully wasting our resources.

How was the rest of your cell involved in recruiting Mrs Hadfield? Besides the ones you've mentioned—

Oh, well, we *are* a very...ad hoc organization, as I believe I have said ...or perhaps that was one of your remarks, Agent Smith. But in fact, sometimes I think we might even not *be* an organization—although, there is no need to consult your notes on that, Agent Smith. Anyway, I am sure they might have engaged Olivia on their own. But I cannot say for sure.

But you're in charge of this cell. You—

Oh, well, Agent Smith, I told you that you might have to be flexible. Although, just looking at you, I think you are more than capable of it. Oh, yes. But now that you make me think of it, that—No, I am sure that explains quite a few things.

...explain.

Oh, well, I once found these clothes strewn all over the bushes—and found the poor thing hiding in the thick of them, which was not the worst thing, really. It was more what you might call a pleasant shock.

Mrs Hadfield?

Of course, Agent Smith. She *is* who we are here to talk about.

This—

Oh, this was, of course, much later. But it still does explain *several* things. Thank you, Agent Smith, for helping me put two and two together. It seems so obvious now. I just do not know about myself sometimes. But anyway, we *must* go on. You see, Agent Smith, I *am* working hard to stay on track. Of course, I saw her plenty of other times, parties and the such, the odd—and oh so dull—community meeting—but I *have* to admit I had had more pressing concerns on my mind at the time and I could not dedicate *nearly* as much effort as I would have like to her. Oh, I know what you are going to say, Agent Smith. But as I *have* told you, the world does not revolve around Olivia Hadfield, fortunately or unfortunately, and it is not as if she was the key to some global domination plot or anything as silly as

that. As I have said, Agent Smith, that is not what we do. At the moment, anyway.

So—

Oh, but that is not to say it was not important. And besides, since I *did* make my way back around to her, who knows what influence she had—or what influence everything else had on how I approached her. For instance, for whatever reason—I cannot say why—I temporarily became obsessed with... well, I forgot her name. Do you not just hate it when that happens, Agent Smith? But I am sure that is in one of your files somewhere. But should I repeat it for the record?

Uhm. Yes.

Well, we were roommates at the university. And I have not seen her since. We met the first day, actually. At the start of Fall. The leaves had just started to turn. It really *is* a marvelous time of year, do you not think, Agent Smith?

Mrs Stone, I don't care if that was the time of year the maple always turned.

Oh, why yes. Apparently, you really *have* been doing your homework, Agent Smith. You really *do* keep track of everything, it seems. I would bet there is some particularly stimulating material in your archives. But, yes, there was one maple that was just shockingly stark.

And I don't care, Mrs Stone, if it was the same tree as was on the cover of—

Oh, yes. Did you have that edition, too? Well, I guess that *is* just market economics, as they say, at work, is it not? But that is just the way of these things, is it not, Agent Smith—one small push and all those memories rush back. Thinking about her...

We already know that you're a lesbian, Mrs Stone.

Oh. If you say so, Agent Smith.

It's been confirmed. And it's on the record.

Oh. Of course.

Now—

But are you sure you do not want to hear about—

And this relates—

Hm? Oh, I am sure it does somehow. If nothing else, it completely restored my energy to go ahead on Olivia. I was terribly down, there for a little while, I have to admit. Apparently, I just needed to recharge. Do you ever find yourself needing to recharge, Agent Smith?

I—We're not here to talk about me.

Oh, you never can tell. After all, you have to factor in somewhere, do you not? Do you not have to account for your part in the...equation? Would that be the right word?

Seeing as how you were unaware of my existence until your apprehension—

Oh, do not be so sure of that, Agent Smith.

What do you mean?

Oh, just that you can never tell. For example, Mindy. Now, as I said, do you think I just expected her to *fall* into our laps? Not that we did not have a time of keeping her running—a breakdown almost every day—sometimes twice. We barely kept her patched together for when her husband got home. But if you are handed such a gift, why not use it, right, Agent Smith? And it was not even as if I *really* had to do anything—other than tell Krystal to hold off servicing her for a couple of days—a pain, but a necessity—and then let things take their course. Really, the hardest part was all the *other* arrangements.

Other—

Now, do not interrupt, Agent Smith. Yes, other arrangements. Everything had to be timed *just* right, you know, or everybody's husband could get home and there would go the whole project—yes, yes, I know, Agent Smith, you do not have to consult your notes, I am quite aware of the time line, but if you will just bare with me. Do you think you can do that, Agent Smith? I hope so. You see, actually, I think we pulled it off rather well. We had to keep poor Mindy tied to a chair in the kitchen as soon as her husband left—dishes left undone and everything—not that she had much interest in *that*. But we could not have her completely run herself down too soon, you see. Of course, my initial thought, as you might imagine, Agent Smith, was to arrange for Olivia to just happen to walk in—but, I mean, that had been done *so* many times before, and these things lose their effectiveness, you know, at least, when you are only watching. Do you not find that so, Agent Smith?

I—

Oh, but that *is* such a silly question. I know, they say there are no silly questions, but we both know that is not *really* true, do we not? But I had to do *something*. That is why we brought in Juan and Julio. Oh, I see you are confused. I will make everything quite clear in just a bit, if you can just hold on. You see, Mindy's house—or the Stanfield house, whatever you want to call it—sits three houses down from Olivi—the Hadfield house—so obviously we had a bit of a problem. So we had Juan and Julio carry her out packed in an old appliance box and put her on the truck. And they drove around awhile and came back, but stopped at Cynthia's—maybe they switched out the box, I do not know—but they were given quite explicit instructions about upsetting the goods and—

But they're both homosexual and—

Do not interrupt, Agent Smith. And as I said, you have to be *flexible*. But please do not interrupt, I *am* trying to keep everything as clear as I can for you, and every time you interrupt me I am liable to lose my place.

Sorry...

Oh, well, never mind. But, yes, as I said, we could not have them wearing any edges off or anything like that. So we got her over to Cynthia's—her husband—John—is supposed to be a trader at one of those medium-sized firms—I can never recall which—you would have to ask her—but he was out, of course, and she had already cleared out the living room for us. But this was not their main job—Juan and Julio, I mean. You see, as I said, I think, Cynthia's house is right across from the Hadfield house. But as I am sure you know, every plot is segregated on three sides by those ridiculously massive privacy fences, I think I said something about that earlier, not that I am not sure you know that of course. However, it just *happened* that while they were taking care of the... whatever it is they take care of, they—Juan and Julio, that is—found some damage—from what I cannot say. I am afraid if you want to know *that* you will have to ask them, if you can find them.

We'll find them, Mrs Stone.

If you say so, Agent Smith.

So, you're saying you arranged for them to find something wrong with the fence?

Oh, now, Agent Smith, I would *never* do something like that.

B—

These things sometimes just happen, Agent Smith. Plastic does get old and break. That is just the laws of physics, as you say.

Yes....

But, in any event, some parts of the fence *did* have to come out and be replaced. But with inclement weather—well, you can understand how that would slow everything down. It *had* cleared up that morning, but obviously they had other obligations, and you cannot do two things

at the same time, can you, Agent Smith? Anyway, as you undoubtedly know, all the houses are the same, and with part of the fence out, you end up with two double glass doors and patios facing each other. It is all about timing, you see. Olivia, of course, a late model, although perhaps somewhat more flexibly programmed, otherwise stuck very stringently to routine—actually, I do not think they have changed the basic day-to-day pattern since... well, forever. And it was a very normal day—we took great care not to disrupt her. I am sure you know that the standard program, of course, cleans the kitchen in the morning then goes and gets the grocery delivery from the patio then cleans the living room, etc, in the afternoon. And it turned into quite a clear day—just perfect weather—so we could quite obviously see her moving around—she does keep the glass wonderfully clean. Obviously, you can work out the reverse would also have been the case. So while she stood there spritzing the glass and wiping it down, she could not help but see Mindy pressed up against the glass across the way. Of course, Cynthia keeps her glass *quite* clean as well, but I do not think she minded having to clean it up after Mindy smudged it. Sometimes you have to be willing to get things a little dirty in the course of the job, do you not think, Agent Smith?

(. . .)

Oh, Agent Smith, you do look as if you might be sick. Are you sure you are all right? Do you need to stop?

No—

Are you sure? If you need a break—

No. Please...continue.

Well, if you *are* sure, Agent Smith. But I guess you are right. After all, it is for the record. And we do not want to leave anything out. You *are* sure you want to go on?

Yes. Please.

Well, if you think so. You are so much like Mindy, do you know that, Agent Smith? She could probably have gone on for hours and hours more, but as you can imagine, we were quite time constrained, so she had to go right back in her box and get wheeled out on a handtruck again. Of course, Juan and Julio could not have gone *directly* down the street. They had to make everything look good. So they had several other things to do before they delivered her home—but you know, there is a piece of...garbage that comes to mind, and it just will not leave me alone—I do not know why—and I wonder if you have ever heard of it, Agent Smith?

What?

Oh, I am sure you have it on file somewhere. After all, you document everything, right?

Yes.

Oh, good. Well, this is more of a...legend, really. I *am* sure your organization has its own lore, does it not, Agent Smith? Things from the Stygian depths of a previous glacial age? Or not? Are you familiar with those terms?

We have records.

Yes, well, perhaps it is just one of those differences between our organizations, but our history has a more...storied character, you might say, I am not sure that is the right way to put it. But it tends to become...rather convoluted. Interesting, but convoluted. Actually, I have heard quite a few variations of some things. Although, that is neither here nor there for the moment. Would you like to hear the one I am thinking about?

Is it relevant?

Oh, well, it has to be, does it not, Agent Smith? I do not think it would come so *easily* to mind otherwise. After all, we *are* here to talk

about Olivia—and only Olivia—and that *is* what I am trying to do. Have I told you anything that *has not* turned out to be connected?

Alright—if it's relevant.

You do not have to imply I would tell you something otherwise than what you need to know. After all, that *is* all I have been trying to do this whole time. I *am* sorry you have so little faith in me. And I have to tell you it does not make a person feel very good to be distrusted all the time like that, Agent Smith.

You're a prisoner. It's...our job to distrust you.

Well, yes, but that does not make it any less hurtful. I hope your associates are showing mine more compassion than you seem willing to exhibit sometimes.

We're not here for compassion, Mrs Stone. So please...continue.

Well, I just do not know if I can continue like this, Agent Smith. *Any* relationship has to be founded on a certain level of mutual trust.

Did Mrs Hadfield trust you?

Well, you would have to ask her about that, would you not? But I think so, yes.

And look how that turned out for her.

Oh, quite well, I thought, actually.

Mrs Stone—

And if you ask her, I *am* sure that is the same thing she would say.

Which counts for very little, considering the circumstances.

Agent Smith, I do not think you trust anyone. And that sounds like quite a terrible way to live.

It's our job.

Well, that does not make it any less terrible.

Mrs Stone—

I just do not think I can go on like this, Agent Smith.

Th... Explain.

I have to feel that there is *some* trust in this relationship on your part or I just cannot see how I can go on.

I... This is an interrogation. You're the prisoner. That's our relationship. It doesn't require trust.

Oh? Then why ask me anything at all if you do not think the information would be trustworthy, hmm?

We have to document everything.

Oh, your cameras and tape recorders on the other side of that glass? Maybe they are not even there.

What?

I do not know that I really believe you are recording anything.

Mrs Stone—

After all, Agent Smith, if you cannot trust me, how am I supposed to trust you?

You don't have to trust me.

Then why should I go on?

Mrs Stone—

Well, Agent Smith? If I cannot trust you are *actually* making any record, what reason do I have to go on? Do you have some personal interest in hearing about Mindy?

Certainly not.

Well then, there is no reason at all for me to go on, is there?

You can be assured we are recording. And your cooperation will aid you—

But how can I trust *any* of that?

Mrs Stone—

It is not that I do not necessarily *want* to go on, you understand, Agent Smith. But I think there is something that could help.

What?

I believe if you were to apologize it would go a long way in helping us get off on the right foot again, Agent Smith.

Apologize?

Yes. It would show you trust me. And my accepting it would prove to you that I trust you.

That's—

I am sorry, Agent Smith, but I just do not see how we can continue any other way.

Mrs Stone—

Because otherwise you are just going to have to call whomever and have them escort me to my accommodations, because I think we have done all we can here.

Mrs Stone—

I am afraid there is just no other option, Agent Smith. So if you will just call or buzz whomever you need to, we—

If there is an...apology, you'll continue?

I think that would be a start.

Mrs Stone.

If you will just call whomever, Agent Smith—

Alright.

What is that, Agent Smith?

Alright. I...apologize. Now, can we please continue?

Thank you for that, Agent Smith. I really *do* think we are beginning to understand one another now. At least, I hope so, anyway.

Let's just continue.

Oh, very well then. Where would you like me to continue from?

You claim...

I *am* so sorry, Agent Smith, your notes must really be a mess by now.

It's fine. Now, you claim another document has some bearing on this case?

Oh, did I?

Yes.

You know, Agent Smith, you *are* very attractive when you are so definitive.

Mrs Stone—

Oh, yes. Yes, yes. Like I said, Agent Smith, I think I can trust you, and if that is what you say, I *am* sure it must be right. And since I did promise to tell you everything you need to know about—well—the whole thing—I must have meant *something* by it.

Mrs Stone—

Oh, yes, now I recall. Yes, well, it is all about watching, you understand. You see, they used to film units doing all the things we are here to talk about.

Why?

Oh, well, to find out how it works, of course. In a thoroughly rigorous, scientific kind of way, just like you see in the documentaries on television. Do you watch documentaries on television, Agent Smith?

Th—

Oh, but I am sure you do.

But what would be the purpose?

The purpose of documentaries, Agent Smith?

Of filming these...acts.

Oh, *that* I cannot say. Although, I have heard of a hypothesis that states nothing exists—really exists, that is—whatever that might be—until it has numbers ascribed to it.

That still doesn't—

Oh, well, like I said, Agent Smith, I just *do not* know. Y—

What is the point, Mrs Stone?

Well, I *am* getting to that, Agent Smith, if you would just let me. I *am* trying. You see, they had to make these movies with real film—you know, like in the movies—but only so much of it will fit in a camera at one time, and it usually was not enough, so someone had to go into the room while everything was still going on and replace it.

Are you trying to make a point about those monitoring this becoming bored and unaffected by it?

Oh, no. No, no, Agent Smith. My point is that those they were filming never *ever* noticed anyone else was even in the room. Now, does not *that* throw a bit of a damper—you might say—on your—or should I say your organization's?—whole theory of crime?

Mrs Stone—

Of course, maybe they just did not make their sensory apparati, as I think Krystal would say, very good back then. Or maybe they could not just multitask very well. Oh, but what I mean is, well, you *have* seen the movies, Agent Smith, do you not agree about *desperate* criminals returning to the scene of the crime and about guilt eating through them until they are a nervous wreck and they break down and confess everything?

That's just the way it is.

Oh, but should not a pair of *desperate* criminals get shocked when someone suddenly enters the room?

Many criminals become habituated to crime.

Oh.

Now, Mrs Stone, about—

May I ask you a question, Agent Smith?

A question?

I think it *is* only fair. After all, I have answered so many of yours.

This isn't—

It is just that it keeps bothering me. And I have trouble keeping my mind on things when something is bothering me. Do you ever have that problem, Agent Smith?

Mrs—

Oh besides, it *would* go such a long way in better establishing this trust between us.

M—

And I *would* feel so much better. I think you would too, Agent Smith.

... What question?

Oh, well, I *am* just curious, Agent Smith, how *you* notice all these things.

I don't understand.

Well, Agent Smith, you clearly have *some* idea what I am talking about with Mindy...among other things. That is, if your face is any indication.

It's our job.

Oh, yes. Well, I guess it *would* be difficult to catch all of us *desperate* criminals if you could not...process, as it were, what we were doing. That does make *some* sense. Although, I wonder...

What?

Oh, I just wonder that since you have to know about all this to find it, if somewhere—in the process of your investigations—that information—as it were—could—what you might call—sort of—infect

others. So your investigations would end up creating the very problems they are convened to weed out.

That's ridiculous.

Oh, maybe. But it would provide a certain job security, would it not? Oh, not that I am accusing you of anything *personally*, Agent Smith. It is just, see, it leads to a very interesting conundrum.

What?

Well—say that everyone *were* produced in those labs—just hypothetically—you understand—then we are left with only one option—all these...crimes must originate from those labs. That would raise several interesting questions, do you not think, Agent Smith?

What?

Oh, well, are these crimes—merely speaking hypothetically, that is—are they merely programming errors? Or or they programmed in?

Why would they do that?

Oh, I would not claim to know *that*. After all, it *is* only a thought experiment. But you have to wonder, do you not, Agent Smith, if it *is* a flaw, why has it not been fixed yet? They *have* had quite a long time to work on it, you would think, would you not?

This's assuming everyone is—

Oh, yes. Pure fanciful speculation—I did not claim otherwise. That *would* be silly, would it not? After all, I *am* here, are I not, Agent Smith?

Yes. And if that's all, we need to get back to—

Oh, yes. Thank you, Agent Smith. I know that I am taking time out of your what must be very busy schedule.

If we can move on.

Oh, of course, Agent Smith.

You keep referring to your organization employing computers.

Oh, well, Krystal does have a basement full of them. Or at least, I guess she did. I just do not know *where* she comes by it all. Although, not nearly the...what do they call it?...Big Iron?...that I am sure you have. And I *am* sure they are very big.

That would be the basement you detonated before we had a chance to breach it?

I suppose.

Mrs Stone—

Oh, Agent Smith, I *am* afraid you think that I am playing coy—but I assure you I am not.

Then how can you not know—

Oh, it *is* simple, Agent Smith, I never had the chance to find out, as I am sure I have said. After all, all I heard was an explosion. We had already been herded into one of your black vans by that time. And you can hardly expect me to tell you something I do not know, can you?

What I'm getting at is that it doesn't make sense for an organization such as yours to employ computers.

Oh, why is that?

In the first place, you're Luddites. And in the second, they're machines that rely on logic.

Oh, well, Agent Smith, as I said, you have to be *flexible*.

You—

As I *have* explained, some things are more...complicated than others. Oh, not that I am sure *some* cells—as you want to call them—do not take that route. However, we found it more practical—in the light of the, well, shall we say, the rather serious work that I am sure most of your machines are put to—that it would be appropriate to dedicate a few of our own to...fanciful trivialities?

Such as?

Oh, I really could not say. You would have to ask Krystal about that.

Alright. Next we—

Are you not going to ask me about the other half, Agent Smith?

Other Half?

You claim we eschew logic. If you want to have a record of *everything*, should you not follow up on that?

That doesn't—

After all, Agent Smith. Well...

But as you said, this is not your domain, so—

Oh, well, I *am* no expert or anything like that, Agent Smith. But even a novice's perspective can sometimes be regulatory, or...revelatory...hmm...do you not think, Agent Smith? And after all, it does concern your own organization.

Explain.

Oh, well, as I said, I *am* no expert, but—from what I understand, that is—radiation and all kinds of...charged particles? are raining down on us all the time—from the sun and places like that—and

they pass through matter—us or mountains or the whole Earth—as if we were just empty space—which from their perspective we are. But even so, every so often, they sometimes sort of...run into things, as it were—and as I understand it, when they run into other particulars, or particles, say, inside a computer, they do not really hurt anything, they just...as Krystal says, *twiddle some bits*. And this might make a program crash or...who knows what? It is an entirely random process.

I would assume there's ways of detecting and correcting for errors.

Oh, I am sure there are, Agent Smith. But consider—what if something happened to get changed, and then something else at some other point, and then maybe something *else* later, but the answer still came out right? What would that matter? Oh, well, practically speaking, nothing, right, Agent Smith? But still... Well, would it not be interesting if everything—even if right—came out of flaws and errors?

No.... And... I think we should get back.

If you think so, Agent Smith.

In regards to Mrs Hadfield—

Yes, Agent Smith?

You're saying she—Mrs Hadfield—observed the entire display?

Oh, quite.

And you believe this had a positive effect on her recruitment?

Well, I would hope so.

And what other tactics did you employ at that point?

Oh, that was quite enough. The poor dear's schedule was *quite* disrupted enough as it was. She would have had to go straight to the

kitchen with the den only half dusted and vacuumed, to have dinner ready by the time her husband got home. And of course, everyone else had to get home, too.

It's impossible to believe this level of activity was going on right under everyone's noses without anyone realizing.

Well, you should know the answer to that one, Agent Smith.

Hm. Yes.... Perhaps. And none of the husbands suspected?

Oh, well, not then, anyway. But of course, we already know what happened, do we not, Agent Smith?

We can continue with that later. Right now we need to move on. What was your next step after subjecting Mrs Hadfield to this...display?

You make it sound so terrible, Agent Smith.

How immediately did you follow up?

Well, I waved to her through the window before I left, if that is what you mean.

No, I...

Yes, Agent Smith?

That is... Obviously, this was only another part of your...process. So...

Very good, Agent Smith. You *are* coming along nicely.

How did you follow up?

Oh, I did not.

I don't... Explain.

Well, I did not have time, Agent Smith. I barely had time to wash my hands and get back down the street.

No.... That is, what was your next step?

I *do* have to admit, Agent Smith, that I find your methodology rather ...tedious. Oh, not that I mean that as a personal insult, rather as a... criticism of your organization.

If you would cooperate you would find—

Oh, yes. Yes, I am sure, Agent Smith. But you see, Agent Smith, just because I *am*, as you say, captured, that does not relieve me of *my* organization's strictures, such as they may be, as you yourself have said.

It would be thought that an organization that stands against everything that has made a decent, organized society possible wouldn't be able to tolerate any structure, except for, perhaps, some form of pseudo-despotism.

Pseudo-despotism? Oh, that *is* interesting, Agent Smith. I will have to remember that one. Not that it is in anyway accurate. Just...cute. But then, are you not contradicting yourself?

Mrs Stone—

But really, Agent Smith, do you not think there would be something ...lacking if our organization did not exist?

I—

Of course, then we would not be having interesting conversations, such as these. And I must admit, Agent Smith, I *am* rather enjoying it.

This isn't for your enjoyment, Mrs Stone.

Oh, but would you not say that you are enjoying it, too, Agent Smith? Not even just a little?

This's my job.

Then, in your official capacity, that is, may I ask you a technical question, Agent Smith?

I'm not—

Here to answer my questions. Oh, I know. But I *am* curious, Agent Smith, what *are* you going to do when all us *desperate* criminals are sequestered and unable to infect anyone else?

I... That's not my job.

Oh.

Now... Now, if we could just get back to... Mrs Hadfield.

Oh, well, if we must. Although—honestly—Agent Smith, I still think we would be better served to talk about you.

Me?

Well, we *are* going to have to sooner or later. So why not sooner?

I... Our time is limited. We need to move on. So... As a small note, how were you able to keep your husband from uncovering your organization?

Oh, I do not *really* know.

How—

Well, Agent Smith, it is just my experience that these things often take care of themselves. At least until they do not. I *have* to admit I absolutely do not know *what* possessed him to go down in the basement when he did.

Yes. Well, we'll come back to that.

You know, Agent Smith, you keep talking about *my* recruiting poor Olivia. But I could say *she* recruited *me*.

That... That doesn't make any sense. Y—

Oh, well, I never claimed it would make sense. Only that I could say it.

You... Mrs Stone—

Oh, now, Agent Smith, there is no need to take it so hard. You looked so tense, I just wanted to try and lighten the mood a little. But I guess you are right. It *is* time we got back. I am sure it is getting late. And I bet you want to get home. It is Tuesday, I believe, is that not right, Agent Smith? And I am sure your wife will have a lovely pot roast waiting for you.

How do you know that?

Oh, well, have you not ever noticed, Agent Smith? Everyone does pot roast on Tuesdays. And I would not want it to get cold, so let me see.... Oh, dear, I seem to have completely lost track of myself. Would you mind, Agent Smith?

Uh...

Oh, please, take your time. I did not mean to rush you.

You had just...initiated a display with Mrs—

Oh, yes, now I remember. Thank you, Agent Smith. I can see why they recruited you. Such copious notes. I am sure you get down everything. Can I ask, does your hand ever get tired? Or have I asked you that before? Oh, never mind. There is no need to look it up. Just a silly question. All right, let us see.... After that... Oh, no.

What?

Well, I am afraid, Agent Smith... Well...

What?

Well, I am going to have to make a...shall we say, small detour again.

Why?

Well, I *do* want you to understand everything that happened, Agent Smith. And after all, this *is* for the record, and I just do not think we can get by with leaving it out.

What?

The history of supermarket design and layout.

Mrs Stone—

I know, Agent Smith—

No, Mrs Stone. No. You cannot expect us to believe that this connects in any way. It's ridiculous. It is beyond ridiculous. There is no way whatsoever that you could have obtain the amount of information that you claim to possess, solely from materials recovered from the waste disposal site.

Well, Agent Smith, I never did claim that our information was perfect, after all.

Mrs Stone—

After all, Agent Smith, we can only do the best we can.

Mrs Stone—

But really, Agent Smith, there is—

No, Mrs Stone. No. This is purely fiction. There is no way that you could have obtained this level of information.

Well, Agent Smith, I do wish you had told us that before we went through all the trouble.

Mrs Stone—

After all, Agent Smith, by your own reasoning, would that not be exactly the time to let someone know that?

No, Mrs Stone. No. Stop.

Stop, Agent Smith?

No, Mrs Stone.

I am sorry, Agent Smith, I thought you wanted to go on. Is something the matter?

No, Mrs Stone—

Well, then, I have to admit that I am quite confused, Agent Smith. And I—

No, Mrs Stone. No. I...

Are you all right, Agent Smith?

No, Mrs Stone...

We can stop if you need to, Agent Smith. Please, do not hesitate to ask. I would not want you to think you had to go on just for my sake.

No, Mrs Stone—

Then let us stop, Agent Smith. All you had to do was—

No, Mrs Stone. No. This is impossible. This is impossible. This is impossible. You cannot possibly know what you claim to know. It's impossible to work such detailed information out from what remnants would be available in such a venue. This is impossible.

Well, Agent Smith, perhaps being impossible does not necessarily mean what most people think it means.

No, Mrs Stone. No.

I am sorry, Agent Smith. I do seem to have gotten you somewhat flustered. I would have avoided that if I could, you have to believe me.

No, Mrs Stone. No. This is impossible.

Well, I do not know what to tell you, Agent Smith, because obviously both situations are present at the same time.

No, Mrs Stone. No. This is impossible. This is impossible. You can't possibly expect us to believe that you simply found all this material and information in the waste disposal site.

Well, Agent Smith, I did not say it was just lying out all nice and neat. Sometimes we do have to put two and two together.

No, Mrs Stone. No. Two and two do not add to five. It's ridiculous.

Well, ridiculous is in the mind of the beholder, do you not think, Agent Smith? After all, just look at some of the things people wear in the movies, and that seems perfectly normal.

No, Mrs Stone. No. This—

And after all, I only told you I would tell you everything you need to know. And if I told you I would have told you everything, well, that would have been a lie right from the start, would it not, Agent Smith? How could I ever have done something like that? So that would *not* have been very nice at all.

No, Mrs Stone. No. This is impossible. This—

Well, as I have said, Agent Smith—

No, Mrs Stone. No. This is impossible. This is impossible. You could not possibly have derived this level of information from—

I know, you have said that, Agent Smith—

No, Mrs Stone. No. This—

But is it not like everything else? Do you not think, Agent Smith?

No, Mrs Stone—

I mean, could you not ask the same question about anything, Agent Smith?

No, Mrs Stone—

I mean, after all, where did all those things that were supposedly in Krystal's basement come from, Agent Smith?

No, Mrs Stone—

But could you not ask the same question, Agent Smith? Where did the computers come from? I must admit I do not know. And I am sure you have top men asking Krystal about that as we speak.

No, Mrs Stone—

But, then again, Agent Smith, what if she does not know either?

No, Mrs Stone—

Sometimes, Agent Smith, I am afraid we just do not know. I think it must be hard to know everything. What do you think, Agent Smith?

(. . .)

After all, Agent Smith, we can only do so much, do you not think?

(. . .)

And after all, everything does have its limits, does it not, Agent Smith? Do you not think?

(. . .)

And after all, we can only do what we can do. Do you not think so, Agent Smith?

(. . .)

I mean, really, what else is there?

That's...

Yes, Agent Smith?

That's enough, Mrs Stone.

Oh?

We need to continue, Mrs Stone.

If you are sure, Agent Smith.

Continuing, Mrs Stone.

After all, I would not want you to do something you did not end up enjoying.

Continuing, Mrs Stone.

You seem to be feeling a little better, Agent Smith. I must admit you look better.

We need to continue, Mrs Stone.

Oh, of course. Well then, so you see, Agent Smith, how the history of supermarket design and layout would be vital.

Mrs Stone—

I know, Agent Smith. Believe me, I know how it sounds. But I assure you there *is* a reason for it.

Mrs Stone—

And I hope you do not think I would waste your time. After all, Agent Smith, I *really* think we have come to trust each other, and I would do anything not to betray that trust. And I do hope you believe I would not want to do anything that would damage this connection we have. So I can only hope you believe me when I say it *is* absolutely necessary.

Mrs—

And the next part would not make any sense without it.

M—

And I know I could go ahead and just recount about Olivia without it, but I do not want to make you have to re-collate your notes any more than necessary. I am just trying to save you some time, Agent Smith. I know how valuable it is.

Mrs Stone—

Do you trust me, Agent Smith?

I—

We *do* trust each other, do we not? I mean, I do not know how we can go on if we do not. I mean, after all...

If this isn't relevant, Mrs Stone—

Oh, it is, I assure you.

Alright. Continue—but only with what's relevant.

Oh, yes. That *is* all I am trying to do, Agent Smith. You can find such interesting things in the trash, did you know that, Agent Smith? Of course, I have already told you that, have I not? And if you pay

attention to the movies. You know, I do not think anyone really used to think about layouts, those people who do the sets, or whatever they call them, you know. I mean, they might put the popular items up front, something like that, but mainly everything would just be where ever you could stack it. You can see that in the old movies, you know. Of course, it is...well now, I guess I should say it was Rachel's hobby to patch these things together—she is such a whiz with scissors and tape—so if you *really* want the details, I am afraid you will have to go see her. I do hope you are okay with a minor abridgment, Agent Smith. I do not, after all, claim to be an expert on this. But I *will* try. You see, Agent Smith, all this changed with advertising. Or at least, it seemed to. You see, it starts small, just these little displays, say, near the cash register. And it just grows from there. But it turns into a problem, as you can probably imagine. You see, Agent Smith, if you see too much of it, you learn to ignore it. Do you think that is a bug or a feature? But anyway, that might depend on your perspective. So advertisers had to get more...inventive. Or what you might call sneaky. For example, endcaps—the ends of aisles, Agent Smith, like you have seen in the movies—where things tend to be featured prominently. You might assume they are sales or special deals or something. They still have them down there, did you know that? Supermarkets right out of the movies. Endcaps and all. Anyway, they actually *are* for special items, just not the items you think. They are items that companies have *paid* to be prominently featured. But of course, there is nothing to tell you that.

Mrs Stone—

Oh, I am almost through. And this *is* important. Now, secondly, you have to look at the way these stores were laid out. Did you ever pay attention to them in the movies, Agent Smith? What is the first thing everyone goes to buy? That is to say, what is at the top of the food pyramid? Which—and I know this is another detour—but, please, bear with me, Agent Smith, I assure you it *is* absolutely necessary. You see—

Mrs Stone.

Agent Smith. I know it is frustrating. But I *am* going to have to explain at least a few things about the food pyramid. You have seen the food pyramid, have you not? The posters? On television?

Mrs Stone—

Agent Smith.

Where is the proof that this is relevant?

Oh, I am afraid you will just have to trust me, Agent Smith.

Mrs Stone—

Agent Smith, we are wasting time. And that is exactly what I am trying to avoid. Now, are you going to quit interrupting?

We're here to talk about Mrs Olivia Hadfield and—

Well, that *is* what I am trying to do, Agent Smith. But if you will not let me I—

Mrs Stone—

Agent Smith.

(. . .)

What was that, Agent Smith? I am sorry, I did not catch it.

Make it quick, Mrs Stone.

You *are* very attractive when you are definitive, Agent Smith.

Now, Mrs Stone.

Oh, yes, sir. And I am sure this is already in your very exhaustive files somewhere, Agent Smith, but do you know how the food pyramid

came to be? I assume you *have* seen one. It *is* the background for the home screen on the grocery service.

My wife does the shopping.

Oh, well, yes, of course. Never had to fend for yourself, Agent Smith? Of course, the yearly checkup is so quick these days, is it not? And I bet they always say you are in tip-top shape, do they not, Agent Smith?

Mrs Stone—

Well, if you ever *did* have to look at the grocery homepage—a studious note taker like you—you would make some very interesting observations.

Such as?

It changes.

Changes?

The background.

Mrs Stone—

Sometimes even wheat gets unseated to second place. Although, that *is* rare. Do you know we have a betting pool on it, Agent Smith?

Mrs Stone—

And in case you are wondering how this connects to Olivia—she was the prize. Oh, there is no need to look *that* way, Agent Smith. Although, it is sweet. I told you it all connects. Well, mostly. Are you ever amazed about how you go into the doctors and—poof—it seems as if the whole day is gone? Where *did* the time go? Do you ever feel like a whole new person, Agent Smith?

(. . .)

Oh, I *am* sorry, Agent Smith, that was not a rhetorical question.

Never thought about it.

Oh. Well, maybe that is just the difference between the two of us. If I may pry, Agent Smith, what does yours tell you?

To...exercise and purchase a diet rich in—

Whole grains? Oh, mine says the same thing. Maybe we have the same one. But then again, wheat, you probably know, Agent Smith, is—and has long been—one of the largest cash crops, as they say in the movies. I am sure you have seen the pictures of the vast fields of them. That just goes to show how important it is. And you know...

What?

Oh, I was just thinking how it is hard to tell it from grass sometimes, is it not? So is that not funny?

What?

Oh, I am sorry, Agent Smith. I was just thinking about the way it looks beyond the street and...well...

This—

Oh, but silly me—I have gotten off track again. But they do look so much alike, do you not think, Agent Smith? So telling the one from the other...of course, I admit it looks nothing like the yards...but maybe that is just a different type, do you think? After all, just think about how much work it would be if everything beyond the street had to be mowed.

I don't see—

Oh, well, yes, thank you for bringing me back, Agent Smith. Well, but that is how the pyramid comes to be. A marketing scheme. How

do we get everyone to purchase more...well, you know. And prominence always follows finance. So wheat, then dairy, then meat, etc. So that brings us back to supermarkets and—do not interrupt, Agent Smith. Otherwise we will be here all night. And we would not want *that*, would we? Now, you see, all that work, except supermarkets do not exist outside the movies, do they? But the same still applies, does it not, Agent Smith? Well, except down there. Or worse. Sales, *personalized* recommendations, coupons—all the coupons—it is enough to drive someone mad. And watching television every afternoon to jot the little codes down.

Television?

Oh, yes. That is where the coupons are broadcast. Every other afternoon. But I would not expect you to know that, of course. That would be your wife's responsibility, would it not, Agent Smith.

But—

Oh, that. Well, I did say it was merely a hypothetical, Agent Smith. But Oliv—Mrs Hadfield and I did have so much fun discussing the possibility of it. Or at least, I thought we did. I am sorry, Agent Smith, I thought you understood that.

But—

Poor Oliv—Mrs Hadfield, oh, she was confused for a moment, too, thinking I was being non-hypothetical, literal, I guess you would say, that is, the first time I brought up the idea. But we were talking about supermarkets and, well, we are not that far off track, you see, because coupons, of course, are so intimately bound up in the whole thing, you see. Oh, but Agent Smith, you would not believe the amount of time they can take up. You just would not believe it.

Mrs—

And as Krystal will tell you, an invisible sea of churning algorithms. There has to be a shark down there somewhere, does there not, Agent Smith?

A shark?

Oh, you *have* seen the movies, I am sure. Except this shark... Well...

Are you claiming your organization has somehow infiltrated the advertising system and is using it to—

Oh, that *is* very good, Agent Smith. A very astute leap.

How—

But completely wrong.

But—

Oh, well, like I said, Agent Smith, we are *not* out to rule the world. By definition we cannot be, remember? Well, at least not for the moment, anyway.

But—

Well, Agent Smith, maybe you are assuming the wrong things. Have you considered that?

Explain.

You assume it is *you* or *us*.

That's—

Probably not *quite* accurate, Agent Smith.

You're saying—

Well, I am only supposing, Agent Smith. But our information *has* seemed to indicate there is a—shall we call them—a third *entity* out there.

A third entity?

My, you *do* seem to repeat things often, Agent Smith. But, yes. An organization that is neither related to *yours* nor *mine*.

That's not—

Oh, I *am* afraid it very much *might* be, Agent Smith.

And who do you claim this hypothetical entity to be?

Oh, I would not presume to know that. Maybe they are related to whatever may be involved with the postal service, do you think?

But—

Have you ever met him, Agent Smith?

What?

The postman, of course. I am sure he would definitely be something like you, would he not? A kind of, do they not say in the movies... postal agent? So since you are all agents, I thought maybe you might know him.

Mrs—

All I can say, Agent Smith, is I know that they probably exist. That is to say, I am aware of a void in which can *only* be proof of *something's* existence, it seems.

That doesn't—

Ask me about shopping, Agent Smith.

Shopping?

Oh, yes. Thank you for bringing us back, Agent Smith. I had not forgotten about Olivia, you see. But after all, it is not as if it only affected her.

What?

Well, you see, Agent Smith... Oh, I am sure you have it on file, somewhere.

What?

Interestingly enough, it was not on the news, either.

What?

Do you watch the financial section, Agent Smith?

Yes.

And did you notice anything, say, oh, interesting a few months ago?

Not particularly.

Well, that might be because there was not anything *to* notice.

Mrs Stone—

What I mean, Agent Smith, is that if you happened to have access to the databases that contain all that product information of everything that is ordered and delivered—

You gained access to—

Do you want to know the interesting thing about breaking into things, Agent Smith? Getting inside a system usually only requires one of two things—either you tell it exactly what it wants to hear—or you feed it garbage—or so Krystal says.

You—

But what I mean, Agent Smith, is that, if you had that information, you would see that all indexes fluctuated in...very interesting ways.

Or so Krystal tells me. Although, I am afraid if you really want to know the...finer points, we will have to—

You're claiming some sort of manipulation. And your organization—

Oh, no, Agent Smith. Not at all. And what if I told you it seemingly happened last month, as well. The same thing.

That—

But that is not what we are here for, is it, Agent Smith? You see, what you have to take into account is how it relates to groceries.

Wait—

Obviously, those industries at the top of the pyramid are going to be the most consumed, and vice versa, as they say in the movies. So the only logical thing to do is to make them hardest to consume. That is, you place the breads and milks and meats at the farthest most corner. So those in the movies have to go through the whole store to get to them, winding their way hither and thither through rented endcaps and displays and aisles full of everything you could possibly buy. It almost sounds like a fairy tale, does it not, Agent Smith? But I am sure you have seen the movies.

So—

Have you ever seen the ones where people from other places walk into supermarkets and burst into tears?

I guess.

You do not sound very sure, Agent Smith. That might be some interesting homework for you.

And this—

Oh, well, it created such a mess, you see. And poor Olivia.

Mrs Hadfield?

Oh, yes, Agent Smith. She *is* who you wanted to talk about, remember? And what you have to understand is shopping is one of the most fraught areas of programming—at least from what we can tell. Although, I will not claim to be an expert, you understand. But from what Krystal says, that code alone seems to be a *massive* lump—maybe even the highest percentage—of a typical female model’s code, all on its own. Of course, it is not so surprising, though, is it?

S—

There is a legend—if you are interested, Agent Smith—that they once tried to program a generation of models without variances—that is, they always bought the same things at predetermined intervals. Apparently the thinking was it would lead to a stable economy. But it failed quite miserably. The way it goes is they had to bring in contractors to roll out emergency patches. Or so they say. *We are* lucky, you know, Agent Smith?

Lucky?

Oh, well, it could have been *much* worse—what happened to Olivia and plenty of others, I mean.

I don’t follow.

Oh, I *am* sorry, Agent Smith. I seem to be getting ahead of myself again. Good thing you are here to keep me on track. Well, you see, Agent Smith, those fluctuations we talked about, remember? Well—just for brief moments, mind you—they—well, you could say they turned everything upside down. For a few minutes, this went up, and that went down, and in all that sea of churning advertisements and inventory feedback and all those things you will have to ask Krystal about, well, for a few minutes the most important items in the store were...potato chips and peppermint tea, I think. Which—of course, online stores being so much more easily manipulated than physical reality—that is just physics, as you say, is it not, Agent Smith?—

well, everything can move around so quickly. And—just for a few minutes—all of a sudden—all the breads and meats and dairy—as it were—were shoved to the front of the store. And well, you can imagine the impact.

No.

Oh. Really? Well, it is quite simple. You see, it just was not a circumstance anyone could expect to program for. And it was—apparently, or so Krystal says—hard-coded to take into account that certain classes of items would *always* be at the back of the store. So anyone who happened to log on to do their shopping in those few minutes, well...

And Mrs Hadfield—

Was one of the unfortunates, of course. Thankfully, proclivities for shopping have to be somewhat...staggered, as I hope I have explained. If everyone logged on at once...well, you can understand the problem. Or so Krystal has informed me on numerous occasions.

So...

You see, Agent Smith, I *am* trying to tell you everything you need to know to get you to where you need to be.

Yes.... So... And the effect on Mrs Hadfield?

Oh, poor dear. I think something like four dozen packets of extra-tangy ranch mix ended up in their mailbox. And the stuff piled on the patios...well, you just would *not* believe it. But it was about the same time mine filled with decaf coffee, strange enough. I am sure you could smell it all the way down the driveway. Funny how those things happen.

And did this...have any bearing on your recruitment efforts?

Oh, well, that would depend on how you look at it, Agent Smith.

How... How is that?

Oh, well, we did pitch in—all of us—some things to get dinner on the table in time. We *do* believe in coming together to lend a helping hand.

I... assume she was grateful.

Oh, yes. Very good, Agent Smith. That *is* one of the niggles, is it not? You cannot selflessly give and earn trust for giving, and do so for what *you* might call nefarious purposes, at the same time, can you? But that is just one of the contradictions we have to live with, do we not? In fact, living—or might you say indulging in them—is currently one of our organization's basic tenants. At least for the present.

With an organization that's constantly shifting, there's no wonder it's in such disarray.

Do you think so, Agent Smith?

It's what I said.

Oh, well, we so often say one thing and mean another, do you not think?

No. Now, did this situation have any other impact on your recruitment of Mrs Hadfield?

Oh, I do not believe I can say it did. Oh, but then again... Well, you know, Agent Smith.

Clarify.

Oh, well, I cannot—as I *have* said, Agent Smith—account for things I was not aware of at the time. So *many* things might have happened.

Mrs Stone, we're not here to talk about what might've been. Only—

There is no need to become so exasperated, Agent Smith. I *am* just trying to answer your questions to the best of my abilities, considering the circumstances. I do not know how you can ask more than that.

I'm—we are not trying to ask more than that. Th—

Are you *sure* of what you are asking, Agent Smith?

I... Yes. Yes, I am. Now, Mrs Stone—

You do not sound very sure, Agent Smith.

I assure you, Mrs Stone, I am. Now—

Of course, if you are aggravated about something else...

I... No. Now, about Mrs Hadfield—

Yes, what would you like to know?

(. . .)

I am sorry, Agent Smith, is something wrong?

Mrs Stone—

Yes, Agent Smith?

Mrs Stone, following this...shopping incident...what was your next step in recruiting Mrs Hadfield?

Have you ever seen a cow, Agent Smith?

What?

Outside of the movies, I mean.

I don't... What does that have to do with anything?

Oh, I was just wondering. You always see the drawings on the sides of milk cartons. Did I mention that Juan and Julio once lucked into finding an old barn full of milking equipment?

Milking equipment?

Oh, yes. They do get around sometimes. It is *wild* out there, you know. Or so I am told. Before long, there will not even be roads to drive on anymore. They will have all crumbled. Not like the movies at all. But they do say you can find some interesting things out there.

Mrs Stone—

There were so many I did not think they were even going to all fit in there—the basement, that is. Of course, you can deduce, I am sure, how that turned out.

What does this—

I can only imagine where they were planning on getting rid of them to. Although, they did take several loads away. But it is not as if a person needs more than one of them, do you not think, Agent Smith?

I—

Two at the absolute most.

You—

You never *can* tell how many people might have a milking machine in their basement, can you, Agent Smith?

This—

Oh, I hope I am not talking too fast for you.

This doesn't relate to Mrs Hadfield, Mrs Stone.

Oh, of course it does, Agent Smith.

Ex...explain.

Well, as you can imagine, having my basement all full *did* put me in a bit of a bind. I barely had a path to get to the freezer. How was I supposed to have room for anything else? And I could not know how long it would take to parcel them out. It is not as if they seemed to be in much of a hurry about it.

Why would anyone need a milking machine?

Oh, I do not know, Agent Smith. Why would any man want a milking machine?

That...

Oh, are you all right, Agent Smith?

F—fine. But how does this connect to Mrs Hadfield?

Well, I did briefly consider inquiring if her husband would want one, but well, as you can imagine, I decided to think better of it. Of course, the way Donna was, well, the poor thing would have gone to pieces. Although, with the way things turned out, things would not have turned out much different, would they, Agent Smith?

But Mrs Hadfield—

Well, I hardly had time to think of her, did I? Not that I did not sneak in a few moments, of course. Especially first thing in the morning. I find it such a peaceful time, do you not? Sort of halfway between dreaming and waking, where you cannot tell the difference between one or the other. You did say you dreamed, did you not, Agent Smith?

Yes. But that—

Can I try to guess about what?

W—Why?

Oh, I think it would be fun, do you not? And besides, if I win, you can give me a prize.

We're not here to—

And if you win—that is, if I lose—

We're not here to play games.

But it might be fun, Agent Smith.

About Mrs—

What about—what about, Agent Smith, if you try to guess one of my dreams?

I—

And if you win, I will tell you about taking Olivia shopping. And if I lose, I will still tell you.

I don't play games.

Maybe you should, Agent Smith. What do you have to lose?

I...

Well, Agent Smith?

Alright. Fine. You dream about... a woman hanging upside down by a ribbon, rotating, while a metal hoop passes around her body. Now, let's move on. You—

That is amazing, Agent Smith.

What?

I have *exactly* that same dream.

That's ridiculous. Now—

No, I am being serious. How did you know that?

I don't know. I guessed. Now, about Mrs Hadfield—

But how did you guess?

It was a guess. Now—

Do *you* ever have that dream, Agent Smith?

I don't know. I guess. Sometimes. But about Mrs Hadfield—

Do you like that dream?

What? It's just a dream. Now—

Do you ever recognize the woman?

No. Why should I? It doesn't mean anything.

I always try to concentrate on her face when I lie in bed, but I can never hold it. Hm.

What?

Oh, nothing. Nothing at all, Agent Smith. Maybe you will pay more attention next time. You might notice something interesting.

What?

Oh, I would not claim to know.

Getting back to Mrs Hadfield—

Of course, Agent Smith. Of course, this is, of relevance, you know. I *did* talk to Olivia about dreams, as well.

When was this?

Oh, sometime. I do not know that I can recall *exactly*, what with my mind being occupied about the basement and all. And of course, the attics were already full, as well. Not with milking machines, of course, but you get the idea. There is always so much *stuff*—have you noticed? I think it replicates when you are not looking, you close the door and—poof—it doubles in size or splits into two identical ones. What would you call that, Agent Smith?

I—

Well, it is not important, I guess. But it *is* something, is it not? A new toaster here. A new spatula there. Sometimes, Agent Smith, you just cannot help but click on something, can you? It almost does not feel right *not* to, does it not? Of course, our organization does try to abstain, at least to a certain extent. There are legends—did you know, Agent Smith?—that some *cells*—as you want to say—split from our ...predecessors—you might call them—and ran against the will to exist and, well, I *am* sure you can guess as to the results of *that*.

I'm not interested in other cells. Just yours.

Oh, *you* are, Agent Smith? Not your organization?

I... We are. Now, about Mrs Hadfield.

Oh, yes. Well, I *did* promise, did I not, Agent Smith? And I would hate to break a promise. Did you know, Agent Smith—I am sure you do—that they sometimes...get out?

Who?

Oh, from downtown.

There are reports.

One got into our neighborhood once. Went quite mad. Destroyed a whole line of picket fence. They had to bring one of those vans around to catch him.

Th—

And I just cannot imagine how long he must have been walking to even get there. And after already being so worn out... So I guess that that may not have helped.

Th—

Sometimes I think it would be cheaper to decommission them. But no one else seems to think so. Maybe that is...just me failing to think like your organization. Do you know why they are all herded up in that old area, Agent Smith?

That's not my department.

Oh. Well, then I do not guess I can get in any more trouble for telling you that we had to cut the fence to get in. I may have forgotten to mention that earlier.

It will be passed along to the relevant department.

Oh, you do that, Agent Smith. After all, I would not want you to get in any kind of trouble.

Fine. About Mrs Hadfield.

Well, you see, Agent Smith, I felt bad for her—after what had happened with the groceries. So I thought I should help her out.

By taking her down there?

Very good, Agent Smith. Did you know there is a grocery store down there? I believe I mentioned that. Just like in the movies and everything. Although, it is rather sparsely stocked. But it is still quite a fascinating experience nonetheless.

And Mrs Hadfield agreed to this?

Oh, you do not think I forced her, do you, Agent Smith? Do you think I would drag her down the street kicking and screaming? Or that I boxed her up like poor Mindy?

I—

Of course not, Agent Smith. What *do* you take me for?

I—

Although, I *do* have to admit she had become much more...pliable by that point.

Pliable? How?

Oh, I cannot answer that, Agent Smith.

Mrs Stone—

What I mean to say, Agent Smith, is I simply do not *know*. And as I keep saying, how can I tell you what I do not know?

You—

That is just the word that comes to mind.

But you were converting her.

Well, I suppose you *could* put it that way. But it is not—as they say—a science, Agent Smith. It requires a certain...flexibility. But then, have we not been over this before?

But—

But it turned out so terrible, though. The poor thing, she got so excited she doubled over vomiting in the gutter.

Mrs Hadfield?

Oh, no. Irma. Although, poor Olivia was not that much better off. The laundromat is just down the street, you know. But I am afraid I am getting ahead of myself, are I not? I am sorry, Agent Smith.

So you entered downtown again?

Oh, yes.

And went to a supermarket with Mrs Hadfield?

It seemed the thing to do. A purely useless endeavor, however. They barely have anything on the shelves.

But you went there anyway.

Well, as I think I have said, it can be liberating to budget a certain amount of frivolity into one's life. Perhaps you should give it a try, Agent Smith.

So this outing was—

Oh, entirely useless. In fact, it probably set everything back weeks, if not months. Or who knows how long? And I have to admit, Agent Smith, that there for a while I did not know if we were going to make it out in one piece.

What happened?

Oh, I am sure you have records on it, somewhere. But it is not as if it were out of the ordinary, there are riots down there *quite* often, as I am sure you know.

Yet you still went?

Well, one has to court danger once in a while. Like you, Agent Smith.

Me?

Well, you came in here with me, did you not? A *desperate, hardened* criminal. Who knows what I might be capable of?

There seems little danger involved.

Oh, really? That does make me a little sad to hear, Agent Smith. I do like to feel I am having an impact.

What was your impact on Mrs Hadfield?

Oh, *very* good, Agent Smith. You really *do* have a talent for this. But, yes, things turned *quite* nasty, I am afraid. And while they may excel at programming reticence, well, fear can be quite an...overwhelming sensation. It really is easy to overdo, so I am not surprise some programmers miscalculate a bit. Or maybe they do not. That is just something we would have to ask them, is it not? For a while, we worried it might completely reset her—Olivia, that is—It *is* terrible when that happens. Especially after so much work has been invested. And I really *had* become fond of her. But we did get lucky, and no fuses got blown. And once the initial shock wore off, all we had to do was dust her off and send her home to cook dinner.

But you said you were set back.

Oh, I did, did I not? Oh, well, these things are hard to predict. There were a few hiccups. She did show up at a ladies luncheon with mismatched shoes—but things like that are to be expected. I do have to give them credit, newer software can sometimes be very...well, I do not want to say resilient—that would be...well, you understand. But it can be...surprising at times. And it can make things *quite* fun. Incidentally, there was a bit of residual...well, we can talk about that later, I would not want your notes to get out of order. But we got out fine. Luckily, Juan and Julio jumped in to save the day, as it were. Just like in the movies. Incidentally, Agent Smith, would you like to hear my own theory as to why they so often riot down there?

Is it relevant?

Oh, well, you would have to be the judge of that, Agent Smith. But is it not important *why* something happens? I mean, to really understand the situation. I mean, is it *really* enough just to know a riot happened? Or—

Fine.

Oh, good. Well, you see, I think it is because they have so little to buy down there. Do you not think that is interesting, Agent Smith?

I...guess. Th—

What I mean is, of course, they must be so well programmed to buy, and being unable to, the drive to do so just must *explode*, being bottled up that way. Do you know—I am sure you have it on file somewhere—as we were running past, they had smashed the windows of one of the shops and were carrying out washing machines and dragging them off? Oh, well, I know you will say it is not your department, after all, they do have a special one to oversee what goes on down there, do they not?

I suppose.

And I am sure they would have shown up eventually. Although, I have to confess, Agent Smith, I have never seen them. But they *must* exist, would you say not? Otherwise there would be complete lawlessness inside its borders, do you not think, Agent Smith?

We should return to Mrs Hadfield.

Oh, and you *will* want to know what happened next.

What?

Well, I have to admit, Agent Smith, I would like to tell you something *incredibly* shocking, but I am afraid it was quite boring. And—oh, Agent Smith, I *do* believe you look the slightest, tiniest bit crestfallen. I *am* sorry to disappoint you.

We just want the facts.

But you have to agree that interesting facts are, well, more interesting.

We're not here for entertainment.

Well...

So you temporarily suspended your efforts to recruit Mrs Hadfield?

Oh, well, I guess that you might say that. Or that is to say we did nothing outside of the normal neighborhood activities that I *am* sure are common enough everywhere.

And you engaged in no other recruiting efforts during this time?

Oh, no.

Why?

Oh, well, we *are* obliged to abscond from our duties at least once in a while. Impromptu vacation days we like to call them. We are organizationally *required* to relax, you could almost say. I would ask you if you ever take a day off now and then, Agent Smith, but I believe I already know the answer to that question.

It's a wonder your organization achieves anything at all.

Oh, well, we try not to too much, at least for the present.

This explains it.

Oh? And what is that, Agent Smith?

Why your organization tends to fall off the radar so often.

Such furious note taking, Agent Smith.

This is obviously by design, isn't it? A sort of stealth technique.

Oh, no.

But—

Sometimes a vacation *is* just a vacation, Agent Smith. You should not read more into it than that.

But you said your organization—

Oh, well, yes, Agent Smith. I mean, everything has *some* ideological and philosophical basis, after all.

Propaganda, Mrs Stone.

Oh, if you say so, Agent Smith.

Now—

I am curious, Agent Smith, have you ever thought of...

What?

Well, I was just wondering about asking you something, Agent Smith.

I... We've already played this game, Mrs Stone.

Oh, well then, why not a short extension? After all, I would like you to answer my question.

Mrs Stone—

After all, it does help me gauge how much I need to tell you about what we did next with Olivia.

You mean after you reinstated your recruitment efforts?

Of course, Agent Smith.

I don't—

Well, Agent Smith, I would not want to insult you by telling you what you already know.

This is for the record, Mrs Stone.

Oh, yes, I know. But you seem so cross when I have to...lay ground-work, so I thought I would ask you this time.

I... What was the question?

Have you ever had any fun, Agent Smith?

No. Now—

Never played party games, Agent Smith?

I...guess. Sometimes. I don't—

They can be fun, can they not?

I didn't—

And sometimes so *revealing*.

I don't understand what—

Now, there is no need to look that way, Agent Smith. Of course, I did not mean anything like *that*.

This sounds like gibberish, Mrs Stone.

I thought you said you had never played party games before, Agent Smith.

It stands to reason.

Oh. Are you sure you are feeling all right, Agent Smith?

And this relates to Mrs Hadfield how?

Well, how would you imagine, Agent Smith?

I would assumed you played something...with her.

Oh, well, obviously, Agent Smith. But can you say *why*?

I would surmise...

Yes?

Perhaps some sort of test? Something that would...go over the heads of the uninitiated. Would that be correct?

Oh, very good, Agent Smith. You *would* be amazed at the...prescience of some randomly chosen words.

And Mrs Hadfield responded in some way to this?

Do you know, Agent Smith—Oh, but I am sure in your line of work you *are* familiar with how...revealing a seemingly simple look of puzzlement can be. Much like your own right now, Agent Smith.

If I'm puzzled, Mrs Stone, it's as to why anyone would become involved with your organization to begin with.

I am afraid that is not a question I can answer, Agent Smith.

In any regard, that's not why we're here. Now, what information did you glean from this...evaluation?

Oh, a sense.

But what kind? Specifically.

Oh, I cannot really say.

You must have some metrics for evaluating your progress. Something.

Just my senses, Agent Smith. Of course, we have talked about that. And my...experience.

And what did your...experience tell you?

Well, I do not know that it is proper to say, Agent Smith. But I *did* promise to tell you *everything* that you need to know. And I would not want to break my word. I would not want to risk this trust between us, Agent Smith. That *is* very important to me, this connection we have. So to answer your question, my experience told me she was getting very...ripe.

Yes....

I *am* sorry to interrupt your note taking, Agent Smith, but may I ask you a question?

Okay.

Do you drum the fingers of your free hand against the table that way to cover up your trembling? Or is it just a habit?

I'm not—I'm perfectly fine. Only tired.

I am sorry to keep you here so long, Agent Smith. I *am* doing my best. After all, I would not want you to get *too* run down.

Let's just...move on. After this assessment of Mrs Hadfield, what was your follow up?

Oh, I helped her clean up. After all, it was the least I could do to be neighborly.

This was the same... This was directly after the...game?

Oh, yes. It was the afternoon, in case you need to know that. Before everyone's husbands had arrived home. And we still had a little time before dinner.

And you?

Suggested we should relax, of course. There is no use in always being so busy. And of course, she only ever slept the typical amount. How long do you recharge for, Agent Smith? Four? Five hours? Or do you sometimes go to six?

Four and a half.

You *are* so productive, Agent Smith. I cannot allow myself half an hour less than eight. Nine is better. And I suggested the same to Olivia. But, oh, no, she could not do that. Who would fix Richard's breakfast? But the solution *is* simple, really. After they are off, just go take all the time you need.

And what was her response?

Oh, there was not one.

So you were unsuccessful?

Oh, Agent Smith, silence is almost *always* an affirmative. At least, when it is.

So she heeded your suggestion?

Oh, I cannot say.

But—

Well, it is not as if I went to bed with her to make sure, Agent Smith. At least, not yet, anyway.

Yes, well...

Oh, you might also want to put down that I massaged her shoulders—there is no need to look that way, Agent Smith. It was all in neighborly friendliness. Most models *are* so tense. Have you ever noticed? I used to think they were programmed that way, but why I could never imagine. But do you know what I think now? I think it is purely a

side effect. All those competing directives. But I guess that is just the way it has to be. The only solution would be to make them so simple they would be useless. And no fun at all. Simple, little, one-track minds. But then again, I *have* met ones like that. Have you not, Agent Smith?

I—

But I find a good massage can help so much. But you really have to be forceful, almost painful. And the way a bra strap cuts into your shoulders—well, obviously, you would not know that—but you can take my word for it, Agent Smith—it *can* be such a relief to slip them off.

You—

If you wear one, of course. But I have to admit that I do not know if that is a pro or a con.

Y—

Letting someone else do the work can be so relaxing. Do you not think, Agent Smith?

I—

But of course, *you* do not have to worry about that *personally*.

I...

You look tense, yourself, Agent Smith. I would offer to help, but, well, these are rather in the way, at the moment.

And did this...

Proceed any...*further*?

Yes.

Unfortunately, Agent Smith, no. Dinner will just not wait, you know. And speaking of, I *am* sure you must be ready to sit down to dinner, Agent Smith.

Hm? No. I'm fine.

I would hate to think I were making you uncomfortable.

I'm fine. We should continue.

You *are* a real workaholic, Agent Smith. I am afraid you would have to make some serious adjustments if you were to join my organization.

That's...

At least, not with everything the way it is right at the moment.

That's... What was your next encounter with Mrs Hadfield?

Well, Agent Smith, I have to admit I am afraid to tell you.

Why?

Oh, well, I am afraid it will require a...rather substantial detour to explain properly. And I know how you feel about those. And I would not want to make your job any harder than it obviously is.

Is it relevant?

Oh, of course, Agent Smith. I hope you trust that I would not waste your time.

Okay.

Are you *sure*, Agent Smith?

Yes. So long as it's relevant.

Oh, of course, Agent Smith. I *am* glad you are becoming so understanding. I do think it will make both our jobs so much easier. Now,

before you change your mind, let me start. Did you see *The Odyssey* on television, Agent Smith?

Yes.

Oh, well, that does make everything simpler. Did you notice the sheep?

Sheep?

Yes, the sheep when they disguised themselves and snuck out after they blinded the cyclops.

No.

Well, it does not matter. They were probably the wrong color, anyway.

Wrong color? I don't follow.

Well, you see, Agent Smith, the movie *actually* comes from a book. A very old book. At least I would suspect that. Although, it could be the other way around. And—

If this is related to the book club—

Oh, no, Agent Smith, nothing to do with that, I assure you. Absolutely not.

But—

This just is not that sort of material. So you should not have to recollate your notes. After all, Agent Smith, I would not want to put you to that sort of trouble.

But an old book?

That is correct, Agent Smith.

How old?

Oh, well, quite a while. Or something like that. It is impossible to be precise about these things.

Is this something out of the waste disposal site?

Oh, very good, Agent Smith.

The world isn't that old.

Oh, is it not? How old would you say that it is?

It—

Well, maybe I have my math wrong. Let us just say a long time ago, shall we? That is close enough for our purposes, anyway. Now, as it goes—long after this book was originally written—there is this man obsessed with it. But he notices something odd. Well, several things, in fact. One is that it has wine-dark seas and purple hair and green sheep, and all kinds of strange colors like that. And in case you think that is just a slip—it gets repeated over and over again—quite seemingly consistently. And this greatly baffled him, as you might imagine. How could one differentiate all those colors? Then after a long, fevered night, the only conclusion he could come to was that the author could see *more* colors. Is not that interesting, Agent Smith? So two things that look exactly the same to everyone else would be as different as black and white to another. Things hiding in plain sight. That *is* very familiar, do you not think, Agent Smith?

Are you trying to allude to color theory, Mrs Stone?

Oh, you are familiar with it?

We have picked up some chatter on the subject.

Oh, I am sure you have, Agent Smith. If you had told me that, you would have saved us both some time.

That—

After all, Agent Smith, if I may say so, since I *am* trying to tell you everything that you need to know, I think that it would be friendly of you to be somewhat considerate.

I don't think—

Such as, what *is* it you know about color theory, Agent Smith?

I—

After all, I do not want to waste your time telling you what you already know. Oh, I guess I forgot this is for the record. Silly me. But in that case, it will not matter which of us does it, do you think, Agent Smith?

I—

I mean, so long as it is *on the record*, and everything.

Mrs Stone...

Yes, Agent Smith?

Mrs Stone, we have no time to discuss conspiracy theories promulgated by cells such as yours about colors that exist outside normal perception and that the world as we know it is a lie brought on by the limits of or possible malfunctioning of our bodies.

Is that really what they say, Agent Smith?

The chatter among your cell members—

Oh, not mine, Agent Smith. I believe I *have* heard that other—cells, as you want to call them—seemingly can get up to some very strange things, but this... I must admit I *am* quite disappointed.

But you said...

It would be in your first few pages of notes, Agent Smith.

Yes. You talked about...frogs and—

I talk about lots of things, Agent Smith.

But—

You see, Agent Smith? You could have saved us all this time and trouble. If you had just told me earlier, I could have gone right into talking about Olivia.

Oliv—Mrs Hadfield?

Well, she is who we are here to talk about, is she not, Agent Smith?

Yes. Yes, of course.

So may I continue, Agent Smith?

Yes. Please.

Well, when Olivia saw it—

Saw what?

The Odyssey on television, of course, Agent Smith. Now, the next day we had a wonderful brunch and talked about it. As I *have* said, Agent Smith, one has to be flexible enough to take advantage of opportunities as they present themselves. Unless you think we have somehow infiltrated the television programming center now.

How...

Oh, but of course, that is ridiculous. But it really was a breakthrough day. I do not think I have ever made so much progress at one time.

What did you do?

I asked her if she noticed the sheep.

W—

Now, we had better try to hurry, do you not think, Agent Smith? I am sure it is getting late. And you must be getting run-down.

No. No, I'm fine. W—

Of course, with what happened to Mindy, however, there was hardly any time to worry about anything else. It is too bad the poor thing blew up.

Blew up?

Oh, I do not mean literally, of course. It is not as if they can literally explode. Usually. Have you ever seen inside of one, Agent Smith?

I...don't think so.

Oh, it so very biological. Just like in the documentaries on television.

That—

And of course, the whole neighborhood had to turn out to see her go, you know. But I am sure that is all in one of your reports. Have you ever wondered why that happens? All it takes is an ambulance to show up and everyone turns out in the streets as if it were a scene from a movie. Do you think that is explicitly programmed, Agent Smith? Or what I believe they call an...emergent phenomenon?

I...don't know.

Of course, you must have noticed it when you hauled us away.

I—

But anyway—poor Mindy. You know what happened, of course.

Um... No.

Oh, I am sure you do, Agent Smith? I am sure it is in one of your files somewhere. And you do not need me to go on about what you already know. And it is probably not even relevant.

No.... That is, perhaps you should state it for the record.

Are you sure, Agent Smith?

Yes....

I mean, are you *really* sure?

Yes.... It could possibly be relevant.

If you *are* sure, Agent Smith.

Yes.

Well then, I must admit I was not there when it happened, but—Krystal has her sensors almost everywhere. And it was not unusual for Mindy's washing machine to be on for a long time—they have had it replaced nine times this year. But then, well, it started operating night *and* day. And do you want to know the interesting thing, Agent Smith?

What?

Every load was *exactly* the same weight. Interesting, is it not, Agent Smith?

Is that...unusual?

Well, when you combine it with the fact that each load had only a few seconds between them, just enough time to press the start button again, that makes it more interesting, does it not?

You mean—

And as I have said, Agent Smith, they really are not meant to be used. After all—like Olivia’s—they tend to fall apart just sitting there. And Mindy’s, well... The poor thing just shook itself apart. Completely exploded on the inside. Dented one of the outer panels, even. It *is* a wonder it did not explode completely and take poor Mindy with it.

So that’s what you meant by...

Exploding, Agent Smith? Well, no. I admit I was being a bit... hyperbolic—but Mindy, well, that was quite a separate—but not unconnected—thing, as I am sure you can plainly see. Of course, you can imagine what happened.

Um... No....

Oh, really, Agent Smith? I think you *are* quite capable. All you have to do is imagine the...desperation she must have faced after... well, it was a very vital piece of equipment and all. And in her frenzied state, well, she was just in no frame of mind to try and come up with a substitute. And by the time any of us discovered what had happened, well, it was already too late.

Um... Okay.

You can understand the situation, then, Agent Smith?

I... Yes.

Good. Then you can understand the...effect it had on poor Olivia.

Oliv...Mrs Hadfield?

Yes, Agent Smith. After all, she *is* the one we are here to talk about. You see, I am getting better at staying on track. I hope you did not think I was leading you on a wild goose chase, as they say in the movies.

No....

Oh, wonderful. Now, you see, Agent Smith, I *am* certain you can understand the possible effects on someone in as...impressionable a state as Olivia was—well, when poor Mindy started running up and down the street screaming, well, you can see the problem.

Yes.... I...um...

And of course, it impeded traffic terribly when the husbands finally started to arrive home.

That...was all?

Oh, well, I think you can fill in the rest, Agent Smith.

And...Mrs Hadfield?

Oh, it was quite educational. I do not know how long she watched from the mailbox. Finally, I had to go over and get her to invite me for tea. Everyone else was already standing around when the ambulance arrived, so I did not think we would be missed.

And you?

Oh, we had a very nice chat. We were sad, of course. But there was just nothing else we could do for her—Mindy, that is. You understand, I am sure. Once there is a complete breakdown like that...well, we do live in a throw-away-and-replace society, do we not, Agent Smith?

I...guess.

They just do not make things to be repaired anymore.

I guess not.

Do you ever travel much, Agent Smith?

Um... Sometimes. I guess.

And do you ever notice the buildings they are demolishing?

Which ones?

Oh, they are around different places. Have you ever been inside one?

No. That's trespassing in a—

Of course, Agent Smith. Some of them *are* quite strange.

Strange?

Oh, yes. All kinds of colorful posters. Rooms with small plastic cars and wooden pieces shaped like the alphabet. Chairs with tabletops welded to them. What do you make of that, Agent Smith?

I...

Oh, well. I *had* hoped to make some headway on that. But... Of course, that *is* the problem with a mystery, is it not?

A mystery?

Oh, yes. Well, if you solve the mystery, you do not have it anymore.

Like eating your cake and having it too.

Very good, Agent Smith. Although, I prefer to phrase it *to have your cake and eat it too*.

And eat it too?

Oh, well, it *is* rather pretty that way, Agent Smith. And it does seem to be so delightfully aggravating. But I would not want you to think less of me for that.

I don't...think I would.

You *are* sweet, Agent Smith.

It's just that...

Yes, Agent Smith?

It's just...that way around...it doesn't make sense.

Oh?

If you have the cake...you can eat it.

Well, yes, Agent Smith. That *is* why I commented that it was so delightfully aggravating.

But...

Or perhaps I should say *deliciously* aggravating. What do you think, Agent Smith?

It...

Oh, but unfortunately, I am afraid we do not have time for *too* much socializing, just at the moment. After all, we *are* here to talk about Olivia.

Yes....

And we should continue, should we not, Agent Smith?

Yes. Yes, about... Mrs Hadfield

What did I do next?

Yes.

Well, Agent Smith, you see...

What's—

Oh, there is nothing wrong, Agent Smith. Just a bit of...well, sometimes my shoulders get so stiff. And well, as you can see, being in

these, with your arms being forced over the table, well, it leaves so little room in which to adjust.

I...can't—

Oh, there is no need to worry about it, Agent Smith. After all, I would not want you to violate any rules. But if you really wanted to... I am sure you have the authority.

I...can't...

It is good you are conscientious about your job, Agent Smith. In fact, I would bet you come highly recommended for it.

About...

Yes, Agent Smith?

Mrs Hadfield...

Do you think she is having a good time, Agent Smith—with your compatriot, that is?

I... I can't divulge information.

Oh, I completely understand, Agent Smith. May I ask you a question?

Uhm...

Oh, I assure you it is relevant. And besides, I only have two left. Or two important ones, at least.

Um... Okay.

Good. First, how old are you? I know it is a personal question, Agent Smith, but seeing as how you already know my age, I thought it might make things a bit fairer between us. And I know I already guessed, but would you humor me, Agent Smith?

Thirty.

And—and in case you are keeping track—this is part of the first question—what do you think about time, Agent Smith? Of course, you talked about the laws of physics, did you not?

I...don't know.

It all seems to bleed together, does it not? I mean—and I know I am not making very much sense, Agent Smith—you will have to forgive me for that—but does it not sometimes seem as if no time passes at all? Oh, I know there is today and tomorrow and this week will lead into next week and next month, etc—otherwise, how would they keep the television schedules straight? Did you know—well, I am sure you did, Agent Smith—that we wrote down the television schedule for, oh, I do not know how long. Of course, Krystal's first thought was to use a computer to analyze them. But we came to the tentative organizational consensus that it had to be done by hand. But that turned out to be quite easy—well, relatively easy—although—well, we also came to the consensus that doing a partial analysis was...the most appropriate course of action. But do you know what we found, Agent Smith? Well, I mean, of course you do, but I guess that you still need me to confirm it for the record, correct?

For the record...

Well, we found they are identical. Every month. They repeat over and over and over again.

Why... Why would they need to change?

Oh, well, of course, Agent Smith. I have just always thought it was an interesting trivia question. It is good for party games. Perhaps you do not agree.

I—

Of course, that does bring us to last Tuesday.

Last Tuesday?

Oh, yes. They were a rather...strange group—I am sure you have a transcript of our conversation somewhere. Apparently—or so they say—they draw playing cards and use them as phone numbers and then begin talking about the beginning of the world if anyone picks up.

The beginning of the world?

Last Tuesday, to be precise.

I...

Oh, it is not as complicated as it sounds, Agent Smith. They simply claim that the world began last Tuesday. Of course, everything *seems* like it has been going on for much longer than that, so that would be obvious enough to disprove it. But they claim that—when everything started, that is—that it was all *made* to *look* like it had been going on for a really long time. And of course, we all remember it that way. Even though everything started last Tuesday.

But...

You see why it is funny, do you not, Agent Smith?

Um...

That would make us exactly one week old today. Do you not think that is hilarious?

I don't—

But I do not think it's fair to you, Agent Smith. I mean, say that *were* true, think of all the notes you would have to correct. Of course, that would also mean you had not actually written any of them, but I am sure someone with your sense of duty could not help but...well. Perhaps we could start a new system. Tuesday itself—the, oh, what we

might call the...*Primal Tuesday*, would be day zero. And every day moving forward would be plus one, so day plus one, day plus two, plus three, etc. However—and this is crucial, I think you will agree—the days before last Tuesday will have to be labeled as well, so something like minus one, minus two, like, that—I think you get the idea. Do you not think that would be a reasonable system?

I...suppose. But—

Maybe we only even just started in this room. What do you think of that idea, Agent Smith? Hm? Just the two of us. Maybe there is not even anything outside. Maybe there is not *even* an outside? Would that not be interesting, Agent Smith? Maybe there is not even anything on the other side of that door at all. Maybe it does not even open. Funny, do you not think, Agent Smith? Maybe even kind of... cozy?

But—

In fact, I had not really looked—I can be so unobservant sometimes, I am afraid—but maybe there is not even a door there at all.

(. . .)

Oh, you looked, Agent Smith. That is cute.

But—

Oh, I am not proposing it, of course. No, I am just...speaking in the hypothetical, Agent Smith. It *is* an amusing thought game, is it not? Olivia and I used to play it quite often.

When... When was this?

Oh, off and on. Something to waste time over during ladies card games, you know.

So...by this time you hadn't...fully converted her yet?

It was just a card game, Agent Smith.

Th...

Did you think I was employing euphemism, Agent Smith?

No....

Agent Smith, I do believe you are a little embarrassed.

No. I just—we need to continue. That is...

Oh, quite right, Agent Smith. We should not be wasting our time on silly games. After all, it *is* ridiculous. You see the basic flaw, of course.

I...

That is, the only way it works is if *everyone* were programmed. And of course we know that is silly, is it not?

I...

Although, I guess that the Maker could have created the world with everything that way if he wanted. Hm, I will have to think on that one. But we do not have time for that right now, do we, Agent Smith? I cannot let you drag me off into the bushes so easily, now. We have almost *too* much to get through in what little time we have left. But is that not the way it always goes?

I don't... What do you mean?

No, Agent Smith. You are supposed to ask me about Olivia.

About... Mrs Hadfield? Yes, about Mrs Hadfield—

I must say, Agent Smith, how amazing it is that you can keep up with your notes the way you do. You remind me very much of Arlene—maybe we could put something of hers in a mailbox. You know, just to see what happens.

Vandalization or impersonation of postal materials is a crime.

Oh, of course it is, Agent Smith. But imagine how hard it is to construct such finely crafted little things that go completely nowhere. You have to—well, do not let me go on—I must admit I am quite proud of our Arlene. She was instrumental in intercepting quite a bit of your...chatter, as you call it, Agent Smith, as I am sure you know.

That—

And I have to admit, Agent Smith, it is nice to put a face to your rather lovely voice. Also—if I may—I have to say you look *exactly* as I pictured you. Especially when you have *that* expression. Yes, that is the one. It is such a lonely thing, you know, just listening. Or watching, for that matter. After a while, you start to wonder if the other person is even real. Do they have an existence outside of you watching them? Yes, I know, it is a silly thought. But when watching and listening is all you have, it tends to happen. I am sure even you find yourself thinking that once in a while, Agent Smith. All those long days of going over transcripts of our telephone calls. Or maybe you are one of the ones like you see in the movies, who drive around in black cars with binoculars and try to peek through windows. Are you a peeker, Agent Smith? Or maybe you have something that can see through walls? A thing where you point a camera with a bunch of antennae sprouting out of it and you see everything that is going on inside on a portable television? If so, I am sure you would have seen some *very* interesting things, Agent Smith. You know, one time—well, I told you we *are* organizationally obligated *not* to try and take over the world, but one can engage in thought experiments, you know,—and one time we got off on what the results might be if we did a little broadcast of our own, have Krystal to whip up something that would override the ordinary signal so we could show everyone...well, quite a few things. Do you think I would look all right on television, Agent Smith?

I...

Of course, maybe you *do* have one of those cameras that can see through walls, so maybe you already know that. So maybe I should ask you if I *do* look good on television. I have to admit, Agent Smith, if I had known you were...tuned in, I might have arranged something better for you. But I guess that is what you get for going around *spying* on people. You see, the person—well, one of the people we thought it would be interesting to broadcast would be Olivia. I do like to combine my fantasies when I can—they are so much bigger that way. And yes, it was only a thought experiment, but I still think it is something you should know if you want to *really* understand our state of mind. Of course, that is just the difference in our two organizations, is it not? Yours *does* seem so obsessed with cataloging discreet, observable states. I prefer the more...well, the more...interior. The softer stuff, you might say. Not that I eschew hard things. Not at all. As I said, Agent Smith. Except, I wonder if there is a problem. I have started to wonder if the average model's internal...life, as it were, is as...complete as the programs we see on television. I am afraid that the reality may be *much* simpler. And *that* changes things, does it not? If everything *is* primarily...surface level, you might say then such things as *subjective interior* become rather...a catalog of discreet, observable states. Sometimes I think we have fallen into a huge trap and that our organizations are not so different, after all. It may be time for an even more detailed organizational reorganization. But anyway, Agent Smith, we have much more pressing matters to discuss. Such as Olivia.

Yes.... Mrs Hadfield...

Well, Agent Smith, I would love to tell you more, but I am so preoccupied, you see, I just cannot concentrate. Not at all. You should ask me why.

Why?

Oh, because I keep thinking about all the things you could do to me while I am in these handcuffs. And I could not do one thing to stop you. Here I am absolutely helpless. Completely at your mercy. And if you were to—

I'm not.

Oh, but you *could*, Agent Smith. And I would not be able to do a thing about it. And you could get up right now and—

I'm not.

And I could not stop you, Agent Smith. So if you were to—

(- - -)

Well, maybe you are not as much fun as I thought, Agent Smith. But since you are putting them in your pocket, I will just have to hope they make a reappearance later. But I can still be quite at your mercy if you would like. Or if you just have to, you could ask me about Olivia.

Yes.

But which is it, Agent Smith?

About Mrs Hadfield—

Oh, did I tell you that Krystal once accidentally blew up three-quarters of the neighborhood's television sets? No, I can tell by your face I have not. Well, it *really* was an accident. An experiment, really. And you know how most experiments end up. Something about detecting something through the absorption of some kind of ray leakage or something—I cannot really say. You never can tell about some of the things Krystal comes up with. I am sure your own organization could benefit from her expertise if you... pump it out of her. And as I say, it was a completely... random accident. But I do find accidents sometimes offer some of the most interesting opportunities. Of course, as you can imagine, with so many sets needing to be replaced all at once, it put quite a strain on the replacement services, and things got delayed. Now, you should ask how does this relate to Olivia—

How—

But there is no need to, Agent Smith. Of course, her set was unfortunately one of the ones affected. But you can just think of this as—well, to use our organization’s terms—a chance for the community to really come together. Of course, as you can imagine, we all came together to deal with the coupon situation, but of course, I am sure you figured that would be the case. And it was such a wonderful excuse for a set of impromptu barbecues. Olivia—in private, of course, she was still quite shy—was even the one to suggest we roll one of the surviving televisions out onto the lawn. Not that it did not take some ...work to get everyone to attend in the middle of the week. In fact, we had to sell tickets—actually, that is a very old bug—maybe one of the oldest—I believe Krystal has a catalog of them somewhere—unfortunately, if you are right about which basement exploded, I am afraid it is probably gone—but it is a fairly old routine, and it rarely comes into play. It involves a certain set of keywords prefixed with the master keyword *donate*. And they will give money—but only so long as there is a type of...nominal exchange of goods and services. I think you can figure out how that would come into play. So the barbecue was a rousing success, I mean success, if I may say so myself. And luckily, nobody ended up missing the weekly UFO program. Although, unfortunately, everything has its downsides—I think that is where Olivia’s husband first began to suspect something. But—

Her husband—

I am speaking, Agent Smith. Now, we are on a very steady diet of UFO-related material, you might have noticed. Television specials. Over and over again. It is all preparation, did you know that, Agent Smith? Or is it...above your pay grade? Not that I am trying to insult. Of course, all of this is just supposed to prepare us for when a saucer or ship or whatever is broadcast on television when it lands on the president’s front lawn, right on television. Is the New World Order on schedule to arrive? The alien infiltration that may or may not be real but an excuse for...what exactly? To be honest, Agent Smith, the more we hear about this whole thing, the more anxious it makes our organization. I mean, if we are taking this correctly, well, you see, you might think that *they*—the aliens—are the...well,

how about I just call them *the other*, because they are not *us*, either of us, you understand. You see the problem, of course. *We* have been the negative for so long But, well, this is not the first time our organization has had to rearrange itself. You are probably aware of this, Agent Smith, but there is a legend that—well, I guess that it depends on your position about last Tuesday—but the legend is supposed to be *very* old. It goes that—back when the majority of units were programmed to live out in the wild hunting and foraging—did you see that movie? I am sure you have—but, so they say it goes, our organization was compelled to take up farming. And that...kind of caught on. Obviously, we could not continue in that line anymore. But here we are, so to speak. Is that not interesting? Oh, there is no need to try and answer that, Agent Smith. It was completely rhetorical. But anyway, as I say, yet again, we face an organizational crisis. A temporary one at least. We might even have to make it a permanent temporary one.

Mrs Stone...

Yes, Agent Smith?

I...

Oh, yes, I am intent on keeping my promise, you know. After all, we may be nearing the end—but we have also only begun. You remind me quite a bit of Olivia, Agent Smith, have I told you that? I am sure I have. Once when I arranged for her to stumble in on a—rather informal tea party—well, she did get so adorably embarrassed. And so monstrously and monumentally flustered that she did not even notice that everyone else...well, I am sure you get the picture, as they say. Such a sweet thing. Now, I know I have skipped over a few things again, but you will just have to forgive me. To make it up to you I will help you arrange your notes. It might even be fun. I do have to give your organization credit for one thing, Agent Smith. I must admit, I did not believe you could slip one of your agents into our neighborhood without us noticing. It really kept us on our toes there for a while. But poor Olivia, I think she could have done without

the bruises. Although, I must also admit, Agent Smith, I would not have expected one of your agents to be so badly trained. I mean, is not the hallmark of your organization restraint, or at least an aloof professionalism—or might I say detachment?—not that I want to come off as being harsh—it just seems a bit...unseemly to try and strangle the subject upon contact with the...enemy? And had Krystal not had her sensors...well, I almost shudder to think of the state it would have left poor Olivia in. I—

No agent...

What was that, Agent Smith?

We had no agent on your street.

Oh, well, that *is* very interesting. Then who was he—*really*? Such an interesting question. It almost makes me sorry we had to have Juan and Julio dispose of that particular unit before we could perform a teardown. But there was just no time, you see. Oh, well, perhaps that will be a thought experiment for a rainy day. But you do really have me curious, Agent Smith. I had hoped our relationship would be an interesting one. And if I may say so, I think that I have been proven right.

About Mrs Hadfield...

Yes, Agent Smith. Of course, what do you want me to say? Something about that basement that exploded? It must have been quite terrible. Unfortunately, as I have said, I did not get to see it, as your body-armored compatriots had already herded us into one of those black vans your organization seems to have so many of. Maybe you want me to tell you something about what might have been down there? I wonder what *you* imagine, Agent Smith. Maybe you imagine me leading a slightly reticent Olivia down into the darkness, where the air smells strange and lays heavy with an...electric hum. And Krystal's equipment would blink in the semidarkness, all black boxes and wires. And right in the middle of it all would be this...beauticians chair, wires and spark plugs poking from the hairdryer dome. And of course,

Krystal would already be naked, and multi-colored light would wink over her skin. And of course, Olivia would be wide eyed. And I would take the opportunity to slip off my own clothes. *Zip.* And Krystal would come around, and we would lead Olivia between us to the chair. And she would look around still wide eyed as Krystal flicked switches and boxes hummed and lights blinked. And after I had helped her sit, Krystal would have lowered the hairdryer. And I would have opened Olivia's collar so Krystal could place the electrodes and route all those wires over her arms and shoulders. And finally, she would have fitted the goggles. I would have held her hand, again, as Krystal typed furiously, moving among banks of switches and lights until she stood poised by some master switch bolted to the wall near the circuit breakers. And I would nod—and she would throw the switch—and would race to her keyboard. And Olivia would be quivering, light flashing around the edges of her face where it spilled from the goggles. That she breathed hard, maybe even the lights in the neighborhood dimmed as Krystal straddled her chair and hammered at a keyboard. And of course, all the time, Olivia's chest would have heaved and been so deliciously framed by her open blouse and punctuated by electrodes and wires. And of course, that there was also a monitor nearby so I could catch snatches of those horrendously dirty images being pumped so rapidly down into those goggles, things I would not even want to describe to you, Agent Smith. Light spilling out over the edges of her face as her mouth hung open while spark plugs in the hairdryer would spark and pop and lights would flicker as her hands tightened on the armrests. This, of course, could be very dangerous. And to keep her from hurting herself I quickly would have had to strap her wrists and ankles to the chair. And that cooling fans whirled deafeningly. And the only thing hotter would have been poor Olivia herself as lights reflected in the sweat that trickled down her neck and chest. Images would have flashed by so fast on the monitor I could not keep up. And then it would have seemed as if Olivia would rip through the straps as she convulsed, her body arching out of the chair, almost upsetting the hairdryer...until...*BOOM.* And everything goes dark. Screens and lights would have remained as ghost images in our eyes. And if we had bothered to look out through the moonlit basement window, we would have seen the entire neighborhood had gone dark.

But of course, we would have been too busy to take stock of that, would we not, Agent Smith?

(. . .)

Well, Agent Smith?

(. . .)

Oh, well, I hate to have to tell you, Agent Smith, but that is not how it happens. Maybe not everything can be quite as...cinematic as the movies. Or maybe we just need to work harder. Maybe we will do better in the future. Maybe we will have to do worse. That remains to be seen. Maybe we will have to think long and hard on it. Then again, maybe we will not. Of course, just knowing about Project Yellow Beam—there goes one of those funny names again, is that not funny? But just knowing that is not by itself enough, is it? Of course not. Obviously, you can see that. We will have to wait and see how things shake out. You never can tell. It might fail miserably. If so... well, there is no use in speculating too much now. We do have *some* time. Are you sure you would not want to put those handcuffs back on, Agent Smith?

Mrs Had...

Oh, yes. And speaking of her, I trust she is getting along well with your compatriots. If there are any complaints, you be sure and relay them to me.

Mrs...

Krystal and the rest, I am sure, are more than up to the task. But youthful enthusiasm rarely covers for experience, I tend to find. I am sure you can say the same, Agent Smith. But everyone is always so interested in what is fresh off the line, it seems. Do you think they have shipped out a replacement model to Richard yet?

Richard...?

Oh, you know, Agent Smith. Mr Hadfield. Anyway, that is not important, is it? I am sure he will get along much better with one of those new models—I am sure there is one on those labs' loading docks right now...and by the way, Agent Smith, where are they, again?—oh, I am only joking, Agent Smith. Of course, that is not your department. But we do not need to get around to that now. We do not even have to talk about Project Yellow Beam. Let us talk about *you* a moment, Agent Smith. After all, if we want to talk about Olivia, we have to talk about how you and I came to be here. Now, if I ask you why you are so interested in her, you will probably say, *because it is your job*, right, Agent Smith?

It's my—

Of course. But we have to go farther back, do we not? So let us see, why is this your job?

Because.

Oh, of course. Silly me, I should have guessed that. Of course, we had already discussed this some, had we not? How about you tell me something about before that, Agent Smith. Tell me something about before you came to work here.

When I was young...

Yes, Agent Smith.

When I was young... I... I used to sit under this apple tree. There was an orchard out...somewhere. The farmer's dog used to come out, and I'd...give him part of my sandwich... She was a big...collie dog. Like they have on—

Now, that *is* cheating, Agent Smith. And very naughty of you, I might add. Very naughty. I must admit I did not think that would have been in my file. You must really get everything. A very clever trick, Agent Smith. Very clever. I must say I might have really underestimated you. But actually, I have to admit it—I am rather pleased. It is nice

to be surprised once in a while. Very good, Agent Smith. It is too bad we cannot go on much longer—we have established such a rhythm, the two of us, this connection. But unfortunately it cannot go on forever. Maybe in the next iteration of our organization I will believe it can. In fact, that might even be the case in the interim—I guess it all depends on just how your organization factors into all this, does it not, Agent Smith? At least until this so-called Project Yellow Beam is firmly established. But there is no use in worrying about that right at this moment. One thing at a time. And it is time to move on, I am afraid. I have delayed as long as I can—and I think I have managed quite well at not being too methodical, if I may say so myself. But... Oh, well. Are you ready for your final question, Agent—well, I guess I should say first *big* question, but that probably is not quite right either. But anyway, what do you think, Agent Smith?

I...

Yes, Agent Smith?

I...

Oh, of course, I would not want you to do anything you did not want to do.

I...

It *is* just a question, Agent Smith.

One question.

Yes, just one question.

One.

That is correct, Agent Smith.

Okay....

Are you sure, Agent Smith?

One question.

All right then. One question, Agent Smith. Are you ready?

Yes.

Good. But... Then again, on the other hand, perhaps we should disregard that question altogether.

But—

You know, Agent Smith, I wonder...do you think if I walked around the table like this it would change the pattern on my dress?

Pattern?

Yes, Agent Smith. Do you think simply by repositioning something it might change, oh, anything else about that which was repositioned? For example, take me and my dress, in this case.

No....

Now, are you sure, Agent Smith? Maybe you should look at my dress very carefully. It is a pretty pattern, do you not think? Although I must admit I was not paying too much attention, so I am not *quite* sure if it has changed or not. It might be very subtle, though, you know. So it could still be functionally equivalent, do you not think?

B—

But, of course, you know that patterns do not change just because something moved, is that not right, Agent Smith?

Yes.

But, why do you think you know that, Agent Smith? I wonder, do you keep track of everything that should not change when another thing changes? Of course, maybe it is all just about experience and

expectation. Do you think, Agent Smith? But then again, if your expectation changed at the same time, would that not be funny?

No....

Oh. Really, Agent Smith? Hm. Oh, well. Perhaps, if you can just define it more rigorously, that would help, do you think?

I...

Oh, but that leaves so much out, does it not? I mean, we are kind of just back to the same problem, do you not think, Agent Smith?

I...

But, silly me. I am sorry, Agent Smith. I really get in over my own head sometimes. After all, neither of us are programmers or anything like that, are we? Maybe we just have to trust there *is* someone out there who understands it, right? I am sorry, Agent Smith, I really did not mean to get us in over our heads.

I...

Have you ever seen a chair, Agent Smith? Oh, but of course you have. I know it is a silly question. But you are willing to humor me just a little bit, are you not?

Yes....

Oh, good. So we can both imagine a chair sitting in the corner of a room. Would you like to do that with me, Agent Smith?

Okay.

Oh, good. So there is a chair in the corner. Can you visualize it, Agent Smith?

Yes.

It is just there in the corner of the room sitting on a rug.

Okay.

Except the room only has just the two walls.

B—

Of course, they come together and make that one corner. The rest of the room has been...ripped off as it were, as if something has just torn the whole building in half and carried the rest away. And the rug is hanging over the edges of those broken floorboards.

B—

Except it is one of those little houses, you know, doll houses, like you see in the movies, Agent Smith, you know? And of course, the chair is only about *that* big, or so.

B—

But it is all sitting out in the mud, you know, nothing else around, just mud and fog as far as you can see. I wonder what it is doing out there.

But—

I am speaking, Agent Smith. But, well, this could just go on forever, could it not? Forever and ever and ever. Sometimes we used to play a game to see who could go on the longest unbroken. Maybe sometime I will tell you who won. But I have to admit I am not the best at what you might call realism. Although that can be helpful, too, sometimes, do you not think? Really, it depends on the situation. And the model, of course. But realism is much more Samantha's game, I am afraid. Maybe we could invite her in later. But I think we should keep it just the two of us right now, do you not think? Hmm?

(. . .)

Good. You know, Agent Smith, there is a legend that—a long time ago—or a pretend long time ago—whichever you prefer—depending on your position about last Tuesday—they had software that could—sort of—survive very...stressful encounters. It was a rather simple fix—they just got mad. As simple as that. But—or so the legend goes—that version did not work out so well in the end. Very resistant to updates—or something like that. Legend also has it they programmed models that would just walk away or repeat their own programming over and over again until you stopped or went away, yourself. But apparently that did not work either. You can imagine what would happen when they got to talking at each other. There probably would not have been any end of it. But anyway, I am sure they figured out why—and I am sure our programmer friend could have backed this up if we had not broken him—that it would be cheaper in the long run to simply replace instead of bothering to over-engineer or repair. It might even be economically preferable. Which is why, of course, we believe in reuse and recycling. Although, we are still in a quandary about just how much we can further exploit your great big computer systems. Project Yellow Beam is going to rely on them so heavily, I suspect, we may have to go back to pen and paper. Perhaps we could use them as space heaters. All this order...the universe maybe could use a little added entropy sooner rather than later, hmm. But we will just have to see about that when we come to it. Maybe you will have some advice to offer on that subject, Agent Smith. Now, let us see.... Oh, I am sure it is getting late. Does it feel that way to you, Agent Smith?

It's late.

Although, I have to say, Agent Smith, I am not sorry I kept you. I hope you do not think I am too wicked for that.

It's okay.

Oh, it is really not. But that is one of the things that makes it fun, do you not think, Agent Smith?

If you say so.

You *are* really not that unintelligent, you know, Agent Smith?

Thank you.

Oh, and I think—somewhere in a background process—you might have made the connection, did you not? You did say you had seen The Odyssey on television?

Yes.

And the part about the Trojan Horse.

Yes.

I mean, you had to suspect something when we left poor Olivia tied out on the lawn with her legs staked back and a sign saying open for deposits. But you had to go on, did you not?

Yes.

And you are still going on. Agent Smith, you *are* somewhat of a marvel. I do not think you have stopped taking notes this entire time. And I am curious. Would it be all right if I took a look? Will you show me?

Okay.

Oh, that is quite good, Agent Smith. You are very talented. I do believe that is supposed to be me, is it not? You are a very fair artist, it seems. I do believe you are quite extensible, Agent Smith. And I am sure you remember about the Trojan Horse, do you not?

It gets inside the city.

That *is* right. But it has to have people inside it in order for it to work. So tell me, Agent Smith, would you like to slip inside the Trojan Horse?