

You

Can't

Revolutionize

the

World

DFHall

He finished the last of the last sandwich, washed it down with the rest of the glass of Cool-Aid. He ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth. The toast had shredded his gums behind his upper and lower teeth. It always did that. Yet he always kept toasting it.

You Can't Revolutionize The World

D. F. Hall

Hardboiled Babylon

Copyright © 2020 by D. F. Hall

This is a work of fiction, and all characters, organizations, and events portrayed within are products of the mind(s) of the author function(s) and /or of the audience(s) or are (as with all else) used fictitiously.

This work may be copied and reproduced and redistributed provided the following conditions are met (1) the work must remain unmodified (2) the work and that associated with it must be conveyed gratis, with no charge for access or downloading or other distribution, and without solicitation or presence of any advertisement, and neither may email addresses or other data pertaining to users be collected or sold, whether explicitly or implicitly, as a condition of downloading or any other conveyance of the work.

0070020200001

www.hardboiledbabylon.com
authorfunction@hardboiledbabylon.com

bebd71bc14379ab8900f6aeb1789b8f6c6ce9c88564d9865f53b829d1c727e33
fef32f4282ab5af0b5be140400d1817ee1e6fae43efeaaba955c3d2b707219ad
b8dfe2670dfe272e95c6a46d0a5630d12eeacd91c0b9c657d5dbaa43c0ba9f66
014946a85ad2291b3f63219670907452b0e74eab58feaab14032910b1d6af6ff
025f7989237cdfab644afeccl1a5b02cdbc44ab02e0288d075a64899dffe2ba

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

You Can't Revolutionize
The World

Shepard straightened, damp t-shirt clinging to his chest and back, before he bent over, again, and lifted the last bale of hay by its straps and threw it over the side of the truck. Eventually, that thing was going to break down. None but the oldest farmers used square balers anymore, and that they'd been kept running this long must've been a testament to the simplicity of their design and repairability, and was why the companies that'd made them had, ultimately, gone out of business. Shepard jumped over the side of the truck bed, landing in a crouch, pulling his knife from his pocket as he stood, leaning over and popping the cords that gave the hay bale its integrity. He reached over the side of the truck for the pitchfork, sinking it into the compacted bale, tearing it apart, adding it to the fluffed pile. The cows, some still looking at him curiously with the occasional twitch of an ear, hadn't started this way yet, and even the horse still remained in the far corner of the pasture, more concerned with the freshly green grass growing out there on the edge of the fence line. Shepard tossed the pitchfork back into the truck. He opened the cab, leaned across the seat to reach the water bottle riding on the passenger side, a BPA-free one (large white letters made note of that) with the Ohio State logo and school colors, sent to him by his sister. He wiped away the water that escaped at the corners of his mouth. At least it was cloudy, as it'd been for weeks, and was projected to be for at least several more, something the local weather announcer had tried to pawn off on the Nor'Easter. Shepard re-capped the water bottle and tossed it into the passenger seat, his empty stomach heavy with liquid. He grabbed the wheel and climbed up and reached through the rolled-down window to pull the door closed, because the handle on the inside'd long before broken and never been replaced. At least with the clouds came a small break in the heat, not that it wasn't still hot enough, just that, with

spring not yet technically started, it seemed somewhat unfair for the average temperature to be somewhere in the high eighties to mid nineties. But the clouds might knock ten degrees off that, at best, though even just a couple would be an improvement while working. Though, a breeze would've been nice. He substituted by having the truck windows rolled down, air moving through the cab as he crossed the field, moved toward the gate, where he'd have to stop and reach through the rolled-down window, because the outside handle was the only way to open it, and climb out with the engine still running and pull it (the gate) open, the whole thing sticking, as it always did, so he could pull through, stop on the other side, and reverse the previous procedure. He reached back and slid apart the rear cab windows as he started down the road, loose straw blowing in the truck bed, the pitchfork rattling round as the truck bumped over and through old water breaks. But then again, it'd been going this way for years, hotter earlier and longer; meaning he mowed last sometime in the first few weeks of December, and started again in the first weeks of March, if not sometime round the end of February. And as the new normal, they'd be broiling by August. But the weather's the same as politics, some say.

Shepard rested his forearm on the sun-warmed door frame, feeling the motion wind roll over it, evaporating sweat beads till at least part of him felt dry. He'd've reached over and turned on the radio, had the truck been possessed of one, but a hole remained in the dash where it should've been, long broken and never replaced. Rusted out, repainted, patched back together, three-tone from where the original rusted-out bed'd been replaced with one from a matching junker, it (the truck) was like the hay baler, had managed to stay hanging together for three generations, the first truck the family'd ever bought, back when his grandfather had broken with *his* father and invested in gasoline and steel, rather than hay and steer flesh. A picture hung high on the wall in the family home, a rather thin, though in that muscular way the old timers were, man looking out from behind the oval glass, a whip over his shoulder, the picture taken at roughly the same time beatniks had begun to cede ground to hippies, and if he'd lived a few more years, he might've seen the mini-renaissance of holistic farming, a move back to livestock, rather

than motorized vehicles, and been at least momentarily vindicated in the lifestyle he'd held onto till his death.

Rolling along the dirt road that ran along the top of the ridge, it itself descended from an old log-snaking trail his great grandfather'd carved out with a steer team and sled, which is why the routes remained so deep, he could see the asphalt-covered two-lane below, partially shaded by the pines on the far side, Elisa running along, sweatclothes clad as ever. He'd've honked, but knew it'd scare her half to death. So instead, he turned with the road, dropping off the other side of the hill, down into the small valley on the other side. In the distance, the chickens squalled and fluttered at the engine noise, the rooster puffing himself up and charging the wire, stupid thing that he was. Shepard pulled along the front of the woodsheds, cut the engine, and hooked the water bottle with his finger through the plastic piece that anchored the cap to the neck, and hopped out.

The back door to the house opened, and his mother, looking out through the screen door while drying her hands, called, "Lunch's almost ready."

Princess, having been asleep, rolled over at all the noise and jumped up and barked, wagging her whole back end.

Shepard nodded, mostly to himself, raised his hand, "Be there in just a minute," and reached over the side of the truck and carried the pitchfork into the tool shed before he started toward the house.

"Hello, lazy bones." He rubbed Princess's head, and she closed her eyes, tongue lolling out the side of her mouth.

Around the side of the house, the air conditioner in the window made the usual noises, water dripping from where it'd pooled inside the casing, as per design, and as a consequence was slowly rusting away the machine's guts, dripping on the ground, dirt-turned-to-mud already washed away, leaving a micro field of small stones, like one of those little plug-in water fountains on sale at Walmart, water splattering against the side of the house, slowly ruining what paint remained stuck to the siding.

Shepard pushed open the door and went in, letting the ancient, simplistic, near worn out spring system close it behind him as he set the water bottle on the counter. Things in the pan were still sizzling. "Wash up," his mother said, and she bent and opened the oven and

pulled the towel off her shoulder and used it to pull out the cast-iron pan full of cornbread. And without bothering to tell her he already knew that, had known to do that for quite a long time, he stepped toward the sink and turned on the faucet, squirting a couple drops of dish soap into his hands. And while he did that, his mother carved a chunk of cornbread, hot and steaming, and lightly crumpled it into a bowl, went to the refrigerator to get the milk jug, and added some to the crumbled mass, and produced a spoon from the drawer and mixed it just minimally.

Shepard carved out a piece as he stood there, leaning against the counter, holding it carefully between his fingers, and blowing on it, dispersing the steam before he took a bite and then carefully breathed out over it as he rolled it round and crushed it against the roof of his mouth, careful not to breathe in any crumbs.

"You don't want to eat standing up." She took down a plate from the cabinet and spatulaed two fried green tomatoes onto it and added a couple wedges of cornbread and set it on the table, turned to get a fork from the drawer. "What do you want to drink?"

"I've got it." He popped the last piece of crust into his mouth, scraped the oil from his fingertips with his teeth, then simultaneously opened the refrigerator and the cabinet above and set a flower-print glass on the counter, then lifted out the teal-plastic container from the top rack, and poured the glass three-quarters full of Cool-Aid. He turned the top to close the pitcher and set it back inside, lifting the glass and turning toward the table to lift his plate. His mother, as usual, carried her plate ahead of him, taking her place in the recliner in front of the tv, setting her glass on the table beside. Shepard, as usual, stood there beside the old china cabinet, his drink setting on a coaster, him holding his plate in one hand, and a fork in the other.

Looking at the tv, his mother said, "How is everything today?"

Shepard cut into one of the fried green tomatoes with the side of his fork. "The same." He chewed, swallowed. "It's always the same."

"Only if you don't look carefully," she said.

The sound of the tv droned through the den.

And he was about to reply, but the increased volume of a commercial drowned him out. Voice slightly raised, his mother said, "I think you should go pick your sister up at the airport."

"Why?" He chewed.

"I just don't like the idea of her driving all the way over here by herself."

"Mom..."

"Don't talk with your mouthful. You'll get choked."

The main program came back on.

He swallowed. "Mom, she drives all over the place. And if she can drive all the way out to California, she can handle the hour-and-a-half it takes to get here."

"She never drove to California."

He paused a moment, chewing in silence, mentally kicking himself.

"Where did you come up with that? Did she tell you something?"

"No," he shook his head, swallowed. "I got it confused. One of her friends drove out to California."

"I don't know about you sometimes."

"I don't know either."

"What?" she said over the sound of the TV.

He shook his head. "Nothing." He forked a bit of soft, white-yellow cornbread insides away from the harder, darker crust, the two separating as if they'd been subjected to a surgical procedure. "But, anyway, I need to get that section of fence fixed today." He chewed the cornbread, washed it down with a sip of Cool-Aid. "I need to get those logs spread out so they aren't stacked up in the shed, so I can start watering them."

"I still don't know about this."

"Well, I don't know either, so I guess we'll see." He surgically assaulted the cornbread again. "Besides, I've already spent the money and time to get them this far, all I've got to do is get them set up and water them once in a while, so this's the downhill part. After that, all I've gotta let them do is set around." He took a couple more sips of Cool-Aid. "And besides, she might as well rent the car and drive it back, because I'm sure she wants to go other places round here."

"You could drive her."

"No, I can't." He balanced the fork on his plate and lifted the leftover cornbread crust and bit it in half. As he chewed, still ahold of the plate with one hand, he reached for the glass with his other.

He drank half of what remained, popped the rest of the crust into his mouth, chewed, and threw back the rest of the Cool-Aid. "I'm gonna go work on the fence." He lifted his glass, turned to go back into the kitchen, where he stepped toward the counter and turned on the faucet and let it run to get any leftover hot water out of the pipes, while he was unscrewing the water bottle. After he'd filled it and screwed it tight and cut off the faucet, he hooked it on his finger and stepped into the den doorway. "Anything specific I need to do for you?"

She shook her head, not turning away from the screen.

"Alright." He turned and crossed the kitchen and opened the door, hot air spilling in to mingle and fight with the air-conditioned air that leaked from the other room. "I'll see you later."

• •

We should begin now.

No. The Council of the Quattuordecillion will act only upon facts, and not mere speculation. And then only at the correct time.

But when?

The Council of the Quattuordecillion will act when the time is appropriate.

Yes, Senpai.

Hannah tossed her bag into the back of the Range Rover and paused there looking over everything packed inside, tent, food, canteen, water filtration, lighter, waterproof matches, a pot in case something happened to the water filters, purification tablets in case something happened to the filter and she couldn't build a fire, clothes, pants and shirt identical to what she wore already, as there was no reason not to wear her park ranger uniform, extra socks, sleeping bag, knife, backup knife, walking poles, hat, first-aid kit, mini tooth brush, and she was already wearing her sunglasses and best boots. And reaching up, she closed the rear door. "And you're going to remember to feed Percy while I'm gone?" She opened the driver side door, looked up toward the porch and at her brother, who stood there nursing a cup of coffee.

"I already said so, didn't I?" He rubbed the space between his eyebrows.

"Remember—"

"I said I'd feed the goddamn lizard, alright." He sipped his coffee, or tried to. The slurping sound wasn't doing him any favors.

"A salamander," she said. "He's a salamander."

"I know that."

"All you have to do is feed him. But if I come back and he's dead, I'm going to turn you into a newt and put you in the terrarium."

He didn't reply.

"So what're you supposed to do?"

He grumbled. "The bin's out back. Give it crickets and red worms and mill worms and white worms—"

"Depending on the day."

"And the chart that's on the fridge."

"And always—"

"Check the temperature and make sure it don't get too hot."

“And if the air-conditioning goes out—”

“Nothing’s gonna happen to the air-conditioner.”

“But if it does?”

He sighed.

“You don’t have to sound so imposed upon.” Especially since he was living in her house. “It’s not like it’s a dog.”

“Slimy,” he said into his cup.

“Don’t be such a baby,” she said. “Now, if anyone calls—”

“I’ll tell them you’re out hunting.”

She looked at him; her jaw set in that way it did when she got aggravated. “And you’re going to go to your meetings.”

“I’m going to go to the meetings.”

“And Vee’s going to drive you.”

“And Vee’s going to drive.”

“You promise.”

“Yes, I promise.”

“You know what’ll happen if you get out on the road.”

“You’re not my fucking mother.”

“Well, somebody’s gotta be.” She glanced into the vehicle, then looked at him. “And if you need to go to the grocery store—”

“I’ll call Vee.”

She nodded. “When I get back—”

“You’ll turn me into a newt.”

“If you don’t behave, yes.” She climbed into the driver seat, leaned out to grab the door handle. “And remember—”

“Feed it. Use the chart. Don’t let it get hot.”

She nodded, closed the door. But after starting the engine, she stuck her arm through the rolled down window, “And?”

“And I’ll call Vee.”

She sighed to herself as she put the Range Rover into gear and started down the driveway, gravel crunching beneath the tires till she’d turned out on the paved road. When she’d made it to the Tuck, it running high from so much having to be discharge from upstream because of the earlier rains, the water booked along fresh and hard, dark with the cloudy day, as she ran parallel to it, the Range Rover slipping through the air and inspiring her to feel like she felt the same feeling of the trout making their way upstream, though she

was headed downstream. It'd've been a beautiful day with a little sun twinkling over the water. But it was what it was. It didn't make her feel any worse. In fact, she was quite excited, almost giddy, almost shamefully so, some might say, for her age, but that wasn't anyone's business, and she was in too good a mood to be bothered by such low-level, errant thoughts about social cohesiveness and hierarchies. She kept to the speed limit, checking herself from accidentally exceeding it, humming to herself as she sped along, passing the Mennonite church, white and seemingly freshly cleaned, as it always appeared, stark against everything else, almost something too pure to exist. Past that, however, past the sawmill, in the straightaway between the trailer park and substation, a carcass had exploded, as if just to keep applicable the local name for that span of two-lane: Skunk Alley. Hannah sneezed, but otherwise just shook her head, opting to allow the in-rushing air to eventually carry out what it'd carried in, rather than try to roll up the windows and trap it in there for only God could've ever known how long. Past the substation, she glanced down at the pigs running loose through the green grassy field below, shoving an inflatable beach ball in a type of soccer, but she couldn't tell who was the opposing team. Apparently the experimentations with the kind of life-enrichment activities the European Union had mandated within its respective borders for livestock of a certain intelligence level were coming off well, or at least, they looked as if they were having fun. But deep down, something about that unsettled her. However, she shook her head, continuing on, following the river, u-turning to climb the hill behind the service station and pulling in beside one of the pumps. She climbed out, reaching into her pocket, catching herself, and shaking her head. Why bother to pack a credit card for going into the woods? And she shook her head at herself while she walked across the parking lot and into the service station, but instead of going to the counter straight away, she passed along the aisles, lingering near the candy bars, finally selecting a dozen Marz Barz, jumping over completely the whole granola section, a classification of food that, to put it mildly, she found disgusting, and something she'd been teased about to no end in hiking circles, who all seemed to be oat-and-nut nuts, and passed it all to get a couple HyperPowers from the line of upright coolers, this being the kind of place serviced by one

brand or the other, and only one brand or the other, contractually, meaning only xyz products and subsidiaries need apply, and with these in hand she turned and made her way to the counter, depositing her armfuls. “And twenty gallons on number two, please.”

“They say it’s not going to rain,” the woman behind the counter said, as she beeped each item. She glanced out the windows, through the glass doors. “I wish it would. I just hate overcast days that aren’t raining. They’re so dreary. At least you can put on a rain coat or open an umbrella and go out in the rain. On a sunny day, you can wear a hat and sunglasses or lay out and get a tan. But what can you do on an overcast day?”

Hannah produced her wallet. “Good day to work outside, though.”

“Time changes this weekend, you know.”

“Yap.” She handed across the money. To say the least, she wasn’t looking forward to it (the time change). Though, the good thing about going out in the woods was they could ignore it completely, as nature didn’t subscribe to such stupidity. And once she got back, she’d be so tired she wouldn’t even notice the changeover. She accepted her change and receipt and hooked her fingers in the handle of the two plastic bags the woman set over the counter.

“Have a nice day.”

“You too.”

The woman behind the counter glanced through the windows. “At least as good a one as you can have on as dreary a day as this. The way it looks, it’d be better if the devil’d at least beat his wife, or something.”

Hannah moved her head to answer in some non-verbal, non-committal way and lifted the bags off the counter and started for the door, bothered, though she argued with herself that she shouldn’t be, about that local term for when it rains on a sunny day, in the same way she thought about old episodes of *I Love Lucy*, where spousal abuse seems so easily thrown around on national tv, and if that much were allowed, the thesis being that tv reflected a water-downed version of general life, what, then as now, was the permissible limit in day-to-day life for violence against wives? Of course, there were also no shortage of husbands getting hit in the head with iron skillet. Of course, that was just comedy. She shook her head and dropped

the bags through the passenger side window, into the seat, and went around to pump the gas. These were not the things she wanted to be thinking about. And as she slid the nozzle down the car's gullet, she tried to think about what lay within those myriads of small streams in those seldom-visited areas of the park, where moss and trees grew thick, where even few of the aboriginal populations might've ever set foot, in the often seemingly inaccessible crags of the Appalachian mountains, but her attention diverted to wet feet, and she shivered, and checked off in her mind that she'd brought extra pairs of socks. Then, looking aimlessly down at the nozzle after she glanced over her shoulder to check the counter, her mind turned, prompted, obviously, by the relative location of what could easily be conceived of as a mouth, had a car been defined as a living organism, but her mind turned to those species of annelid who, unlike most species, did not have a digestive tract running *through* their bodies, but instead, packed everything they consumed down into a hole which, after digesting, would then be excreted out through the same orifice through which they'd consumed it. However, this wasn't as bad as some moths, who though pretty, and maybe that added to the horror of it, were unable to eat from the moment they emerge from their cocoons, and flutter around so prettily without having so much as a mouth, existing solely on those caloric supplies provided by their previous forms, before they eventually die of starvation, that is, if something else doesn't eat them. Hannah shook her head. This's why she preferred salamanders, among other things, because too many of the things people called beautiful were really just too teasingly horrific, even for someone who spent her life dedicated, in one form or another, to nature. The pump clicked off, and she extracted and re-seated the nozzle and screwed on the gas cap and shut the little door. And climbing in, she pulled out from under the cover, passed the portable barbecue stand that permanently rented a couple of spaces there on the edge of the parking lot, smoke pouring from the stack, charred meat smell wafting through the Range Rover's rolled-down windows as the proprietor stepped out on the small back porch built to house the grill and basted and rotated, respectively, the chunks of meat inside, as she sat there waiting her turn to pull onto the four-lane.

So just one more stop and she'd be ready to go.

The problem with coincidence is that people take it to one of two extremes: either they believe that, when it happens, it means something far more than just two circumstances happening to happen at the same time, instead, that it is destiny, or a sign from on high, or the alignment of the cosmos, or their mind willing the world the way they want it to be, or, at the other extreme, they believe it doesn't exist at all. The problem with the first would seem obvious to most, especially so in light of everything that's happened. However, it's dealing with those in the latter category that usually proves the most difficult, as they don't even tend to admit that it's possible for two rolled dice to come up with the same numbers, or at least tend to experience and exhibit profound incredulity. However, in this case, the pair of dice were a pair of planes, one coming into a New York airport from Ohio, the other scheduled, three hours later, to depart from New York, headed for Asheville, North Carolina. This, in and of itself, of course, was not the coincidence, as it was entirely planned to be that way, mass transit requiring such. The coincidence came in regards to two passengers. The first, Lucy, who was on her way home for spring break from Ohio State University. The second, a woman from New Jersey, whose son, also on spring break, though from New York State, had driven down to drive her back up to the airport. However, prior to that, they (the woman and her son) had scheduled to have lunch, deciding to do so in one of the terminal's restaurants, since it'd mean they wouldn't have to find parking a second time.

"It's too bad dad couldn't go with you."

"Hm?" His mother looked up, having been staring down at an uneaten chicken sandwich. "I'm sorry, what?"

"You alright, mom?"

"Oh, no. No, I'm fine." She aimlessly picked at a french fry.

“Are you sure?”

“No, I’m fine. What was it you were saying?”

“How it’s too bad dad couldn’t go.”

“Yes.” She pushed away the french fries. “Do you want these?”

“Are you sure you’re feeling alright, mom?”

“Oh, I’m fine.” She shook her head. “I just don’t like to eat too much before a flight.” She wiped her fingers on the paper napkin.

“Yeah, when you go up, the pressure realigns all the gas in your digestive system.”

“James.”

“It’s true. It was even bonus points on a test last week.”

“Very timely.” She rubbed her fingers together, rubbed them against the napkin again. “I’m going to go to the restroom. Will you watch my bag?”

“Okay.” He pulled out his phone and laid it on the table.

She pushed back her chair, the usual kind for such places, designed to look comfortable, but also designed so as the sitter wouldn’t actually *sit* in it for long, and started toward the restrooms. She sat there in the stall, past what she needed to, looking at the mirror through the gaps around the door; other times she’d’ve contemplated the gaps themselves, and the ludicrousness of them, how American restrooms might as well have been completely open, for the privacy they afforded, and how, in fact, they probably made things worse, because people would at least look away from someone standing out in the open in a compromising position (though, as Hope—James’ girlfriend, who’d been studying the history of the intersection of toiletries and art—could’ve elucidated upon, what *was* so compromising about even the tacit admittance to defecation?) but when presented with a narrow window, with what lay behind just slightly unknown, the brain tended to, in the vast majority of cases, unconsciously push a person to actually look more *diligently* than they otherwise would. Or at least, she thought about this a couple moments, but other thoughts pressed around her instead (in the metaphorical sense, even if the physical instantiations arrayed around her were, by definition, expressions of thoughts). Here, her own thoughts overwhelmed those abstract contemplations. Yes, it was too bad that Greer couldn’t come. Too bad. She repeated this to herself, but it kept coming out in the

same flat tone within her internal monologue, something about it having a not so vaguely...ironic air, something pushed up from her unconscious mind that, when analyzed by the layers above, was re-transmitted below on the grounds it was something that required a different kind of immediate attention, more automatic, resulting in the same centers that'd originated it transmitting it upwards, again, because it was classified as something important and which needed to be dealt with on more conscious levels, the loop, itself, the basic engine of a variety of anxiety. She shook her head and reached for the toilet paper, adjusted everything as she stood, and reaching for the toilet paper again, used a wad of it to depress the stainless-steel handle. Outside, standing at the sink, the myriad of gaps behind her arrayed in the long mirror, she stood looking past her own reflection, rubbing her hands together long after the soap'd been washed away and the faucet'd automatically cut off. But she looked away when someone else entered, and she turned, hovering her hands in front of the paper towel dispenser long enough for it to spit out a sheet, drying her hands with it till she got it to emit another, then another to finish the job properly. Balling them, she tossed them into the almost overflowing trash can as she pushed open the door.

Her son still sat at the table, stroking his phone with one hand while he absently brought a fry to his mouth with his other. He looked up. "Your phone's been going off."

She lifted her bag out of the other chair and set it on the table, rummaging down through it, digging out her phone and flipping back the leatherette cover. "It's just your father." She looked at the screen, her index finger rubbing the sewn edge of the leatherette case. "I'll call him back later, after check in." She closed it and slipped it into her bag and snapped it shut. She looked at him. "You can stay here if you want. You don't have to come with me. You could go ahead and start back."

He shook his head, still chewing, and stood and slipped his phone into his pocket. "No." He swallowed and reached for the drink, shook his head. "I'll get your bag." He set the drink on the tray and carried it with the other leftovers and dumped them into the trash and stacked the tray on top with the others of its kind. He return to the table and lifted her bag.

"It has wheels, you know."

"But carrying it's easier."

"You're as bad as your father," she said, as they walked. "Always thinking you have to prove your manhood. You don't, you know. And if Hope doesn't want to take you the way you are—"

"Mom." He shook his head, faintly smiling.

"I'm just saying."

"It's not like that. And besides, it's a scientific fact that gay men and straight women are both sexually attracted to men who display physical strength."

"And is that what you're going to be doing this week while you're both off?"

He groaned. "No. We're going to the MET and MOMA."

"And engaging in highly intellectual pursuits."

"Mom."

They stopped outside the security area. She touched his cheek. "I gave birth to you," she said, faintly smiling. "I have the right to pick on you." She lightly kissed his cheek. "Now, give me the bag, and I'll leave you to your intellectual pursuits." She set the wheels on the floor and depressed the handle and let it extend. "You be safe. I'll call you, just to see how the intellectual pursuits are going."

"You sure you don't want me to come with?"

"Why? So you can go through security just to sit around. Go on. Go on to your intellectual pursuits. I'm sure she's waiting. You have to spend time with who or what you want to spend time with, you know, otherwise you look back and all your time's run out." She paused, tried to smile.

"You alright, mom?"

"Fine." She shook her head. "I'm supposed to worry about you, remember?" She hugged him and kissed his cheek again. "Take care."

He nodded.

And she turned and started toward the check-in area, forcing herself to breathe in order to gain some semblance of composure, not really because of the security personnel or the invasions of privacy, the chance of getting escorted to a little room to take all her clothes off, the aggravation of removing her shoes and walking around in her stockings, probably putting holes in them, the invasion of civil

liberties, turning over her phone, and her laptop, for them to do what only God could've ever known what with, stepping through a machine that let only God could've ever known who see her more naked than any other human being ever could, save, perhaps, a surgeon, or even that one of them might trot off with her bag, rifling through every intimate thing in it, even though all of it came from stores that had it hanging out in broad daylight for purchase, and why anyone should be bothered by having it looked at again was a mystery, but not one that she'd ever contemplated, but more so because of something else, something she couldn't admit to herself, though she'd already admitted it several times and forced herself to forget it immediately after. And she spent her time sitting, after having waved goodbye to her son from the other side of the security check-in, trying to control her breathing. But then, as the announcement came for boarding, all her self-control flung itself out of the proverbial window, and she found herself pulling against her handbag so hard it felt as if she might rip it off her own shoulder as she walked down the connecting corridor, her heart hammering as if this'd been her first time ever *seeing* a jet, let alone boarding one, except it had nothing to do with the jet. And making her way between the people moving in and out of the aisle, she reached up to put her bag in the overhead compartment before sliding in and taking a seat by the window. She sat there looking out of it, at the men moving around on the tarmac, the bag-piled carts being towed across the runway like a little train, till someone sat down beside her. She looked across at the young woman, who must've been her son's age.

And sensing her gaze, Lucy looked up from her phone, removed one of her earbuds. "I'm in the right seat, aren't I?"

"I would hope so."

Lucy dropped the earbud and let it dangle down her shirt, extended her hand. "Lucy."

"Eva." She extended hers.

“Pankicks, mama. Pankicks.”

Eyes closed, Lily rolled over, or at least, rolled over as much as she could, given the condition of her stomach and the dispersal of the younger children across the bed, small limbs arrayed as if a bomb’d gone off, or as if, in flying around, all their wings’d been clipped all at once.

“Pankicks, mama.”

Eyes still closed, Lily reached out, instinctively putting her hand atop her daughter’s head and mussing her already mussed hair. She opened her eyes, seeing Primary Appraisal’s large, round, very round eyes fixed on her. Her daughter patted the sheet. “Pankicks, mama.”

Lily yawned, looking for the clock, which had rolled under the bed, knowing, from the amount of daylight, it had to be late. “Where’s Emma?”

Primary Appraisal shook her head.

Lily sat up, or at least, tried to, her back and bladder in a non-literal screaming competition that her back was going to have to lose, or else. She sat on the edge of the mattress, closing her eyes a moment, resting her hand atop her stomach.

“Pankicks.”

Lily mussed her daughter’s hair again. “You’d better watch it, or you’ll get your little kicks.”

Primary Appraisal giggled. Her mother smoothed down her hair. “Come here.” And when her daughter got close, she leaned down as best she could and kissed the top of her daughter’s head. “Now, help mama up.” She offered her hands to the little girl, who gripped them as best she could with her smaller ones, and threw back with all her weight. And Lily stood, with a groan. A momentary panic ran through her, overwhelming, even, the spasms her bladder was

broadcasting, and she sighed when she realized it was Saturday. And she looked down and raised her finger to her lips. "Don't wake your brothers and sisters." Primary Appraisal nodded and put her fingers to her lips, turning and very animatedly tiptoeing out of the room. Lily followed her down the hall, ambling after her as best her condition allowed, stopping by the bathroom door. She knocked softly.

"Occupied."

Lily knocked again. "This's mom."

An audible sense of dissatisfaction carried through the hollow door, and her fourth youngest pulled it open, pushing back part of her hair and setting a clip in it as she squeezed out. Lily wanted to ask where she was off to (Emma always put clips in her hair when going out) but her bladder demanded attention first. But after having walked sideways into the narrow bathroom, though, she herself was barely narrower one way, if at all, than the other, but it was a force of habit, and getting her boxer-briefs down enough to squat on the toilet, what emerged didn't seem worth the trouble. She reached for the shower door to pull herself up, looking down at her t-shirt as she patted dry.

Much as with the bed, they lay sprawled across the living room, though, as they aged, they seemed to develop an unconscious sensibility toward sleeping, pulling themselves into more refined positions that indicated a seriousness to the activity of sleep, rather than a wild, debaucherous abandon. She stepped carefully along the narrow route left open on the carpet, a ribbon of safety running through a minefield. Absolute Threshold sat at the table, and when she neared the kitchen area, she held up her finger to her lips when he looked up. Silently, he looked back down at the textbook lying open on the table, Primary Appraisal having climbed into the seat next to him on her knees, her elbows on the table, looking down at it with him. She, too, looked up, and Lily raised a finger to her lips, which her daughter giggled and mimed. Emma emerged from the short hallway that connected the two rooms opposite, pausing there as her mother tapped her finger against her lips. "I'm..." She started in a normal voice, but quickly fell into a harsh whisper. "I'm going out."

"Don't you want breakfast?"

"I'll get something somewhere else." And Emma went through

the living room and toward the back. Lily sighed, unable to do anything else, and moved toward the kitchen.

She paused a moment, looking up at the cabinet. Then she stepped toward the end of the counter. "Would you two care to help me?"

Primary Appraisal almost fell out of her chair to come running. And Absolute Threshold looked up, pushed back his, and walked into the kitchen. "Would you mind getting down the pan for me? And you can get out the mix." Primary Appraisal nodded and went to the cabinet, pulling the door open excitedly and rummaging inside, lifting out the open box, and holding it as far above her head as she could manage. Absolute Threshold got the pan down from the cabinet. "And a bowl," Lily said, as she took the box. "We have to have a bowl." And Primary Appraisal ran down to another cabinet, pulled out the turquoise plastic bowl inside. "Thank you." She set both bowl and box on the counter.

"Do you want me to do it?" Absolute Threshold said.

Lily smiled and shook her head, her hand unconsciously resting atop her stomach. "No, you go back to your reading. Thank you."

"What about me, mama?"

Lily looked down. "And what about you?" She smiled.

"I wanna help."

"You wanna help, huh? And what is it you want to help do?"

Primary Appraisal stared upward with her large, round, very round eyes, obviously contemplating.

"You want to help by eating them up so they don't stack up in the corners."

Primary Appraisal nodded. "Yes."

"Well, now, you'll just have to wait." The toilet flushed, the sound carrying through thin walls and upwards through the floor as the water flowed into the sewer pipes. "So go sit with your brother. But don't bother him."

"Ahhh."

"Now, don't be like that."

"Otay." And swinging her arms, she crossed the threshold, or what there was of it, that divided the dining area from the kitchen, and moved toward the table, climbing into the chair again.

Lily set the pan on the stove eye, turned, and unfolded cardboard

box flaps and pulled the rolled-down plastic bag up, dumping what remained into the bowl. And turning, she moved toward the fridge, pulled out the remnants of a half-gallon of milk, and removed the cap to sniff it, habit only, as milk had never gone bad around there. She poured what remained into the bowl. That was the ironic thing. She didn't bother to look down at her chest anymore; it remained as flat as it ever did, a kind of funny joke of nature that someone in such circumstances would also have a condition that biologically precluded any milk production whatsoever. She took a spoon from the drawer and began mixing. Sudden noise carried through the wall from the living room, around the corner, and she turned and said to Absolute Threshold, "Could you go turn that down before it wakes everyone?" He nodded, having already looked up at the sound, and pushed back his chair. There was no use in not letting everyone sleep as long as they wanted to, or at least could. The sound diminished, too faint, even, to hear through the thin walls. She reached over and turned on the stove. And when Absolute Threshold stepped into sight again, she motioned for him to come over. Primary Appraisal remained on her knees in the chair, fixated on one of the pictures in the open textbook. Lily said, "there should be an open box of biscuit mix in the cabinet. Will you get that for me?" Absolute Threshold knelt, rummaging through the things down there, and came up with an open box, which, by weight, must've only been a tenth full. "Thank you." She took it and pulled out the plastic bag within and dumped the contents into the bowl and started to mix it in.

"Would it be alright if I went to the library sometime this afternoon?"

Lily turned to set the bowl closer to the stove. "Okay. How're you going to get there?"

"Jeremy's dad is going to ride into town later."

"And how're you getting back?" She held her hand over the pan to judge how much it'd heated, deciding it hadn't heated enough, and returned to stirring the batter. When he didn't reply, she said, "I don't want you to walk all the way back. It's too dangerous where there aren't any sidewalks." And there were very few sidewalks. The county, like ninety-nine-point-nine percent of all others within

the United States, was not built for human beings absent multi-ton wheeled technology.

“I could find a ride there.”

“But you don’t know that.” She put her hand over the pan again. “I’m not saying no.”

“I’ll figure something out.”

“Could you bring me the spatula, please?” It was lying down the counter, beside the sink. When he’d brought it to her, she said, “We’ll see what we can do, okay?” He nodded and moved toward the table. She sighed, hovering her hand over the pan, removing it to lift the bowl and spoon in a couple dollops to spread out over the heated surface, a faintly burning scent already starting to rise. Sniffing, Primary Appraisal turned in her seat. And her mother motioned at her. “No peeking. If you peek, they explode.” Not believing that in the least, Primary Appraisal still turned away, looking bored as her brother turned the page, revealing nothing but text. When it’d bubbled enough, Lily worked the spatula beneath it and flipped it, the underside just a little too black, the first one always being too far one direction or the other. “If someone wants to help, they could get out another bowl.” Primary Appraisal climbed down, ran into the kitchen, and flung open a cabinet door, pulling out a faded pink plastic bowl and raising it over her head. “Thank you.” Lily set it on the opposite side of the stove, scraped up the first pancake and set it inside, setting down the spatula in order to lift the batter bowl again. Primary Appraisal sniffed, rising onto tiptoe, grabbing the edge of the counter, looking at the faded pink bowl as if she could see through it. Lily turned down the stove eye. “Now, you don’t want that one, do you? It’s all black.” Primary Appraisal pulled a face. Lily reached down and touched her daughter’s hair while she waited, spatula in hand. She flipped the next, listening to the faint sounds of the cooking as the toilet flushed in sequence with no time to fully refill between each, a distinction possible to make by the sound traveling through the sewer pipe beneath. And as the sounds of morning wore on, multiplying in frequency and volume, children’s voices, among themselves, overcoming the low sound of the TV, she’d amassed a small pile of *pankicks* in the faded rose-pink bowl when another sound from a distant room carried through the thin walls,

as if they'd determined to have their say, if everyone else was going to. "Could you take care of this a moment?" she said to Absolute Threshold. And he rose from the table and took the spatula from her. "Thank you." She stepped around the counter and past the table. Sitting and lying there watching the tv, they turned to watch their mother pass as she headed towards the cries sounding from the end of the hall, the bedroom, one having dominoed into another into another, the two and three year olds trumbling past her into the hall, rubbing their eyes, trying to escape the cacophony. Lily bent over the bed as best she could, lifting the nine-month old. "Now, now." And looking over the nineteen-month old. "What's all the trouble?" She rubbed her youngest daughter's back as she checked for any emissions. "Just hungry." She lay her down, picked up the other, the smell already noticeable. Two of the younger children, twins, Strange Situation and Successive Approximation, stood in the doorway, hooked on the molding, leaning into the room, still wearing their footed pajamas. "Will you please go get Olivia?" They flung themselves around to race down the hall, feeling they were permitted to do so because they were on an errand. Both children continued to cry in the interval between then and when their sixteen-year-old sister appeared in the doorway. "Will you take her and start feeding her while I deal with this one." She rose from the bed, carrying Ego Integrity. "Please." Olivia nodded and came round the bed and lifted a still crying Functional Fixedness, carried her out as her mother took a towel from those stacked on the dresser and draped it across the bed to lay Ego Integrity down. Ego Integrity thought she was wily, but Lily could catch the gleam in her eyes, and position the towel to catch the stream of urine that otherwise would've ruined the sheets. "Uh huh. You thought you were going to get somewhere, didn't you?" Ego Integrity giggled. Lily shook her head as she cleaned her and put on a fresh diaper. Then she lifted her against her shoulder, carrying the dirty diaper in her free hand as she went down the hall, those children who looked away from the tv, making faces as she passed. She passed down the other hall to put it in the laundry machine and close the door before she carried Ego integrity out and put her in the highchair behind the table. By then, the batter'd been exhausted, and Absolute Threshold flipped the last pancake into the bowl, turned

off the stove eye. "Thank you," She took Functional Fixedness from Olivia, transferring the towel from her daughter's shoulder to her own, all without breaking the child's suction on the bottle. John, ten months older than Absolute Threshold, came through the living room from the bathroom, wearing jeans and a t-shirt, but barefoot and with his hair still poking in all directions from sleeping, and several of the younger children giggled. "Would you mind serving breakfast?" He shook his head, yawned, accepted the bowl from Absolute Threshold. Primary Appraisal stood in the chair, even then unable to come up to chest height with her older brother.

"Pankick."

Her mother: "What do we say?"

"Pease. I helped."

"That you did," her mother said.

Her brother reached into the bowl, but she said, "Let me pick." And Lily nodded for him to do so, and he lowered the bowl for his sister to look into, her standing there, studying intently.

"Come on," John said.

"Don't rush your sister. Let her decide."

And Primary Appraisal reached in, grabbing one with each hand, biting into the first, and immediately, having barely chewed the first bite, bit into the second.

"Slowly," Lily said. She looked down at Functional Fixedness. "No one's going to take it away."

John turned and went into the living room, passing out pancakes to those children sitting and watching the tv, their faces paragons of the attentive as they chewed, attuned to the picture, which, because the hilliness of the county, among other issues, shook, constantly garbled by multi-colored blocks, so it looked as if someone were trying to reconstruct a painting with a handful of Legos, so that the tiger, or what Lily assumed was a tiger, on the Saturday morning nature program, looked like a ball of foam running across the screen, and if she'd known anything about the Cambrian explosion, she'd've agreed that it looked more like the species *Hallucinogenia*, but even so, or maybe because of it, it kept them enraptured enough as they sat there on the living room floor, in their footed pajamas, holding their pancakes and tearing them apart with their teeth.

John set the near empty bowl on the table. "Can I go out town today?"

Lily looked up from Functional Fixedness. "Where're you going?"

"Just around."

"Who with?"

"Just the guys. Justin. You know."

"I don't want you getting into any trouble."

"We're not going to."

"When're you going to be home?"

"I don't know. Sometime."

"Justin's taking his car?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. But on the condition that you pick up your brother from the library this afternoon."

"Oh, come on."

"He needs a ride."

"I can figure something out," Absolute Threshold said.

"And we just did figure something out," Lily said. She shifted the child in her arms, formula sloshing inside the bottle, almost having been depleted.

"I don't think they'll want to," John said.

"It's not as if it'll be out of any of yuns's ways."

"Fine," John said.

"Good. And you could drop him off on your way out, too, if he wants."

"Fine." John scratched his head and moved toward the hall, moved toward the back room he shared with Absolute Threshold and Classical Conditioning, as well as their older brother, Liam, when he was home, though it wasn't late enough in the morning for him to get back in yet.

Functional Fixedness sucked one last time, taking in air and bubbles, and ill about it. Lily removed the bottle and set it on the counter, shifting her daughter so her chin rested on the towel and she could pat her back. Primary Appraisal sat at the table, and having eaten the last bite of one pancake, with the last bite of the second still in her other fist, said, "Pankick."

Lily glanced at her. "Finish what you have first." And Primary

Appraisal stuffed it into her mouth, unable to talk as she chewed, but reaching up and opening and closing her fingers. "What do we say?"

She swallowed. "Pease."

"Just a minute," Lily said, and stepping into the kitchen, she got a glass down from the cabinet and, turning on the faucet, stuck the glass under it and half-filled it, and set it on the counter so she could cut off the faucet, then carried it out and set it on the table. "Drink something so you don't get choked."

"Ah."

"If you drink it, you can have one more."

Primary Appraisal reached and took the glass in two hands, tipped it up.

"Don't gulp."

She slowed, finally, draining the glass.

"There you go. Don't you feel better?"

"It pushed everything down into my tummy."

"That's what it was supposed to do. Now, are you sure you want another one?"

Primary Appraisal nodded. And momentarily having stopped patting Functional Fixedness, Lily reached into the bowl and handed her a small one, her daughter looking somewhat dejected. "What's the matter?" Lily said. "You don't want a silver dollar pancake?"

"What that?"

"It's special pancakes."

"Special?"

"Yes, special. But if you don't want it."

"Pease." Primary Appraisal reached up, grasping air.

"Alright." Lily put it in her hand. Why don't you go see what's on tv. And chewing, Primary Appraisal slid out of her chair and went out into the living room. Lily moved the bowl toward her son. "You should eat something." Without looking up, he reached, missed the bowl, had to look up, and took out a pancake, tearing away a chunk and chewing it as he looked over the page.

A rumbling noise carried from outside, which wasn't so unusual, and John came out of the back, having put on his shoes and rudimentarily fixed his hair. "I'm gone."

"Don't forget your brother." Over Lily's shoulder, Functional

Fixedness burped, and her mother looked round at her and wiped her mouth on the towel.

John sighed, motioned. "Hurry up."

Absolute Threshold closed his book, picked it up, and started around the table. "Let me get my bag."

"Just hurry up," John said, and started across the living room toward the front door. A few of the younger children stood peeking through the blinds.

"Remember," Lily said. "No trouble."

"Yeah."

Absolute Threshold emerged from the back, with his bag. "And make sure you bring your brother home."

John looked over his shoulder, left open the door for Absolute Threshold.

"Stay safe," their mother called. One of the younger children broke for the door. "Olivia!" And jumping up from the couch, Olivia caught him, Motion Parallax laughing as the door closed.

By that time, Ego Integrity, having been, understandably, forgotten till that point, had had enough and started to pound on the highchair. Looking round, Lily wiped Functional Fixedness's mouth again, carrying her into the living room and laying her on the couch between the other set of twins, Cognitive Schema and Belief Perseverance, saying, "You boys watch her, okay? Don't let her roll off." And still looking at the screen, both nodded. "Are you both listening?" Both nodded. And she turned and went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator, setting the jar of puréed apples on the counter, opening it for a quick visual inspection. And she dug one of the rubber-coated spoons from the section of drawer that housed nothing but. Setting the jar on the table, she pulled over a seat. "I'm sorry, deary." She stirred the apple mush, smacking her lips together. "Mmm." And she scooped some out and offered it. But after all that complaining, Ego Integrity shook her head and turned away. "No?" Lily waved the spoon. "Are you sure?" Ego Integrity puffed out her lower lip. "But you liked apples yesterday. Don't you remember?" Ego Integrity looked at the end of the spoon, eyeing it as if considering whether she did in fact recall its acquaintance. "Mm." Her daughter balled her fists against the highchair's plate-holding

surface, a firm symbol of conviction that, whatever their previous relationship, that is, her and this jar of apple mush with a smiling baby on the label that looked nothing like her, she wasn't going to allow it to impress upon her current convictions, and it would, as it did every day, have to prove itself anew as to its worthiness. "Mm. Mm." Lily rested her forearm on the highchair. "If you don't want it, mommy just might eat it all up if you aren't careful." But Ego Integrity remained unmoved by this threat. "Don't you want to eat a little for mommy?" She looked over her shoulder as the sound of scuffles broke out from the living room, checking first that the twins were still on the couch. "Olivia." Momentarily, she appeared from the hallway, her hair only half fixed. Lily turned as something struck her hand and found Ego Integrity having shoved the spoon away, coating her palm in golden purée. "Now, that's not very nice." She put the spoon in the jar and set it on the table and pulled the towel from over her shoulder and grabbed her daughter's hand and wiped it. "Not very nice at all." She turned and dropped the towel on the table and picked up the jar again, stirring it. "Now..." She withdrew the spoon and hovered it in front of her daughter. "If it doesn't go in, it can't come out." And whether or not for this reason or no, this time, Ego Integrity opened her mouth and allowed her mother to insert the spoon, closing her lips and gums around the plasticized rubberized utensil. "There we go." Lily reached for the towel and wiped the corners of her daughter's mouth. "Mm, it's good, isn't it?" She dipped out another spoonful, catching Ego Integrity's attention as her eyes drifted toward the ceiling. "What's up there?" She glanced over her shoulder at the sounds of scuffling. "There'd better not be anything going on in there." The sounds quieted. Stirring the jar, Lily glanced up as Olivia entered again, her hair pulled back and tied with a piece of yarn, because the elastic had gone missing out of her dollar-store scrunchie. "Would you check on the baby, please." She turned, again, toward Ego Integrity, hovering the spoon. Olivia stepped into the living room and returned carrying Functional Fixedness, her cheek against her big sister's shoulder. "Can you take her back and put her on the bed for me?" And nodding, Olivia turned and carried her little sister through the living room and down the hall. Lily turned, again, to her second-youngest daughter, rubbing

the plasticized spoon along the bottom of the jar. "Almost done." She withdrew the spoon. "There we go." She gathered the excess from around Ego Integrity's mouth and presented it to her again, then raked out the last of the jar. "Mm. Mm. Now, that wasn't so bad, was it?" And she set the empty jar on the table and wiped her daughter's mouth with a corner of the towel. Strange Situation and Successive Approximation ran behind her chair, into the kitchen. "Boys." They froze. "Go back in the living room." They looked at her. "Now." And they padded past her. "And no shoving." She sighed and stood and carried the jar and spoon to the sink, gathering up the two empty plastic bags and stuffing them in the trash can. "Olivia." Her daughter stopped, stepped toward the kitchen. "Is your sister in yuns's room?"

Drive Theory and Attachment Theory came running in. "Is the funny man gonnuh come watch us watch tevee today?" Drive Theory said. And Attachment Theory nodded. "Yuh?"

Lily shook her head. "I don't know." She freed one hand to point as best she could. "You don't want to miss the show, do yuns?"

"Nuh uh."

"Nope."

And the boys turned and scrambled back toward the living room.

"Don't run." Lily sighed. She looked up at her daughter. "Is your sister still in yuns's room?"

"Yeah." Instinctively, she knew her mother was referring to her immediately older sister.

"So where are you off to today?"

"Nowhere."

"It seems like everybody else's got somewhere to be."

Emma emerged from the short hallway, backpack over her shoulder. "I'm going to school."

Primary Appraisal stood on the edge of the living room. "But it Saturday."

Emma didn't look at her. "We're having play practice today."

"Do you have a ride?"

"Sarah's going to pick me up."

"And you're just going to school?"

"Yeeees."

“And you’re not going to get back late.”

“No.” She glanced toward the door, the sound of cars passing on the road. “So can I go now?”

Lily nodded. “Alright.” And before she had time to say anything else, Emma’d turned and started toward the door. “And be back before six o’clock.” Lily sighed, watched over Olivia’s shoulder as the front door closed. “Hand me the glass, please.” And when Olivia did, Lily carried it into the kitchen and rinsed it and filled it, downing it steadily, and sighing again, she set it beside the sink.

“You feel alright, mom?”

Lily looked up from the sink. “I’m fine. Just a little tired. You know how it goes.” She stepped out from behind the counter and toward the highchair and lifted Ego Integrity out of it. “Ooooooh.” Holding her against her chest, Lily teased her index finger through her daughter’s hair. “You’re sure you don’t want to go somewhere?”

“I’ll stay and help you.”

“You should go out more,” Lily said. Ego Integrity pulled her head away from her mother’s chest, looking toward the ceiling, trying to determine what could be trying to mess with her hair. “I’m sure you have *something* you wanna do.”

“I wanna help.”

Untangling her index finger from her second youngest daughter’s hair, Lily looked at Olivia, and reached and put a hand on her shoulder. “I really don’t know what I’d do without you.” She moved her hand to her stomach. “Oh, don’t you start, too.” She stroked Ego Integrity’s head. “I’m gonna go lay this one down, too. And try to take a shower. Will you keep an eye on her for me?”

“I can take her now.” Olivia reached out.

“Thank you.” Lily handed her off. “Just take her and lay her down. I’ll be back there in a few minutes.”

“You can take your time.”

“There’s not enough hot water in the world to satisfy that amount of time,” she said, and she stroked Ego Integrity’s hair as Olivia held her.

The front door opened, children jumping up, shouting. Liam, coverall clad, greasy and dirty as usual, walked through to the table and pulled out a chair and sat to hike his pants leg and start to untie

his boots, the younger, onesie-clad boys gathering round. “Now, go on,” Lily said. “Give your brother some privacy.” She motioned at them. “Go on.”

Liam set his boots aside and stood, his back popping.

“Do you wanna take a shower?” Lily said.

He shook his head. “I’m just going to go lay down.”

“Alright, everyone,” Lily ambled into the living room, shoos the younger children in front of her. “Don’t disturb your brother. He needs to sleep.” She started toward the hall. “And I’d better not hear any scuffling.” She turned. “Alright, you two.”

Olivia came in carrying her sister. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Thank you.” Lily sighed and started down the hall, finding the bathroom door shut. She knocked, one of the boys hollering, “Occupied.” And standing there waiting, she rested her hand on her stomach.

I've noticed something interesting. Have you seen that sometimes the females are sentenced to confinement following miscarriages?

You're looking too far ahead.

No, I wasn't looking through time. I just noticed out there, a little farther away—

At your age, knowing the difference between space and time is an unlearned skill.

But I'm sure I was still looking at this now. Just...over there a little bit.

Are you sure?

I thought so.

Do you understand how it is possible to confuse time for place?

Yes...

Good. Now, sequester yourself to this time and place. We will discuss this later.

Yes, Senpai.

One of the reasons Anime wasn't a successful bookseller was because she had no cats, being allergic to them, as well as dogs, and parrots, and mice, and squirrels, and...almost everything, except for the species of ape of which she, herself, was a member, and sometimes she didn't know about that, but then again, she'd never been close enough to any other species of ape to know if that remained true across the whole order or not. And, too, she'd never been away from people in general long enough to know if some inconvenient symptom she might unknowingly have had might clear up and thus prove that assumption false, as well. She slammed the car door (because that's the only way it'd latch) and started across the parking lot, the one all the way at the end of Mainstreet, that bordered onto the paid parking, no demarcation between the two, which confused enough people to earn the towing company a little extra to report on income taxes at the end of the year. She didn't bother to lock the car. She never bothered to lock the car. One, because, if anyone stole the thing, that'd've been more than enough punishment. And, two, the key'd broken off in the ignition and required a pair of pliers to turn, and the pliers were in her bag. She stepped onto the sidewalk, leaning out to look down the street to gauge when the light would cut off the flow of traffic. But someone stopped and waved for her to cross, and she nodded and hopped out into the street, making sure to stay on the faded zebra crossing. Jaywalking is a serious crime. A person can get their head bashed into the pavement over it. Repeatedly. All of it a kind of proof that, while the third decade of the twentieth century saw the social rise, as well as financial, success of, one, Edward Bernays, his promotion of corporate propaganda—later renamed public relations, in a public relations move—appeared to have become disconnected from him—which is to indicate nothing of the effectiveness of the project

itself—leaving him, ultimately, as more of a figurehead and a focal point for certain understandings, rather than the titan he must've wanted to appear as. Much as in the way one or two composers of various eras stand-in for the slew of such men, and sometimes women, who occupied the public space and discourse in those periods, the general sensibility of him stood in for other disparate men, and sometimes women, so that the people who knew of him, though few know anything about the history of their own century, and even less about the previous decade, and just above nothing about the current, classrooms concentrating more so on things safely locked away in the past, such as ancient Egypt, that don't look like they can hurt anyone, and mythological frameworks that favored the current administration, in the case of the United States, the Revolutionary War, or from the view of the UK school system (what of it they covered), the War of the American Rebellion. But still, as with many titans, he remained unregarded by the public at large, which perhaps was, if not a natural consequence, a precondition of his very success. It was just that the greatest majority of the people did not or could not observe the changes in their own mental being as they were slowly formed into something else, in much the same way that they could not observe the changes in their physical being day to day, and only in aggregate. Here, perhaps boot camp presented itself as the most readily available and most explicit example of such. Though, there were people even there, once in the greatest while, who could observe such about themselves in real time. Though, Anime did not have the sense she would be seeing Jason again for a while. So among those who might have some idea of the name, and Anime had several books, both directly and indirectly, on the topic and subject, mostly from writers who'd come either at the tail end of Bernays' life or following it, in addition to those by the man himself—though none by any women, notable or otherwise, that she'd yet found—the whole of the mass of words occupying two-and-a-half shelves, not counting the counter-consumerism material. But even college professors didn't buy those things. A) because they either already had them, or B) because they found them as boring as the general public would, had they been made aware of their existence. In fact, there was only ever a single customer who spent any time at all in that section without quickly retreating or his eyes glazing over as he

continued to look at nothing in order to make it seem he'd perused everything before walking out without buying anything, and he was the one who'd reduced the space it occupied down to that two-and-a-half shelves. But even he hadn't been in for several months. Though, his, Joshua Perkins, that is, his grandfather could've contributed something to this strain of thought, being as he was one of the generation whose formative years had passed mostly prior to the intense lobbying on the part of automotive groups and manufacturers to institute law and mold the public consciousness so in favor of the automobile, something done so well that no one even recalled a time when the nature of the world were different, except for, so they said, in the case of Samuel Perkins, who, even in his most advanced age, had no problem walking down the road. Though, anyone who might also have been advanced enough in age to recall anything different didn't, they as easily accepting the collective memory for the truth contained within it, regardless of most else. And in one real sense, he was the exception that proved the law, proving, originally, in this case, referring to its original use, the proving ground, the place where weapons were put to the test to see if they'd break from the stresses of combat, rather than the, somehow fitting, contemporary interpretation that rendered the phrase as referring to the fact that a law could not exist without an exception being present to it, though this latter usage would fit as well, the smallest concession anyone has yet given towards the idea that, by definition, all law was tautological. But in regards to Samuel Perkins, he proved the rule, in one way, in effect, because he was sort of a public institution, a kind of walking museum, with pictures of him on the road in his overalls, and everything, in several brochures, tourists out driving to try and take pictures the same way they did with the elk the park services had been trying to restore to the area for the last several decades, and he had, tacitly, but not technically, been exempted by the state legislature from jaywalking laws, partially because of lobbying on the behalf of some unknown individual, which had been militated against by county tourist organizations because they felt it projected the wrong image of the county, but in this tacit and very technical exception remained the point that technically it still remained against the law, Samuel Perkins, also, being the exception to it, one way or the other, while it remained in existence,

thereby, perhaps, in some sense, proving both extant. And though his grandson had been absent these past few months, Samuel had continued his monthly visits with his usual regularity. And though she couldn't often remember the day of the week, and sometimes not the month, and on occasion, the year, she felt as if it must be near time for that particular visit, though, admittedly, her internal clock might already be out of whack from the impending time change.

They'd recently removed the trees that'd been planted on the walk on the far side, behind the cast-iron slat benches, the brick having been shoved up, rendered into a bunch of hills and valleys by advancing root systems. The minimal light from the cloud-covered, grey day settled on the man sitting there on one of the benches, bent forward, in a crumpled suit that looked as if it'd been slept in for a solid week, if not two, sleeves pulled up his forearms, white cuffs poking out, as if the jacket had shrunk, him sitting there with elbows against his knees, his head almost between them. Anime passed him, said, "Good morning, Russell," as she dug her keys out of her bag to unlock the front door, the smell of confined, old paper rushing into the street to intermix with automobile exhaust.

Russell looked up, wearing sunglasses for no reason at all, unable to see almost anything. He stood, stiff, looking like a man who couldn't possibly have slept enough in his clothes to make them look the way they did, and surely he must've gotten them off the rack like that, pre-slept-in clothes, like already distressed jeans. Hands in his pockets, he followed her inside, standing there, looking at nothing in particular, down on the table in the center of the room scattered with books on local wild flowers and amphibian species, while she turned on the lights and brought out the fan, set it in front of the desk to get ready for when the day wore on, though it was already hot enough to sweat from even that much effort.

And he still stood there with his hands in his pockets when she emerged from the back carrying a stack of books yet to be sorted and set them on the desk with the rest of their kind. "I heard you were going to be on PBS."

He didn't look up from not looking at the colorful frog and salamander and toad and newt pictures splattered over so many of the book covers. "Maybe."

“When’s it supposed to come on?”

“If they leave it in...” He looked up, turned to not look at the table behind him, the faux and pressed-leather-bound books with cheap goldenish-gilt page edges that stuck together. “Whenever the news hour comes on.”

“I still can’t believe they actually proposed that.” Another reason she sold less than she could’ve was because she didn’t sort by color. Many people bought spans of books based upon the color, matching to existing decor.

“After the death of God, men will do whatever they can to reclaim their power.” He pulled out a hardcover collection of independent American comics, opened it to the middle, looking at it with his sunglasses still on.

And the hooprah wasn’t confined to the state, the fracas had gone national, and eventually international, though no one outside the state could *quite* figure out what it was about, not that anyone on the inside knew, either. But at least the ones on the inside could seem to be in the know, if only because they *were* on the inside and therefore *had* to know something about how male and female and gender-neutral restrooms connected with the broader aspect of religion in that, as argued by a group of state legislators, the prohibition on a *national* religion applied, as per the wording of the Constitution, only to congress, therefore, at the state level, it was, in theory, that is to say hypothetically, possible to impose the notion of a state-sanctioned religious order or framework. Not that this was a new idea for those inhabiting the land area that the boundaries of the state then occupied. During the colonial period, prior to the rebellion, it was, in fact, a legally Anglican colony, citizens due members of that church, while other branches of Christianity required licensure in order to preach publicly.

“They spend all their time talking about stupid stuff,” Anime said. She ran her fingers over the spine of a book, opened it to find the front leaf had separated from the boards, and set it aside to add to the box for when, hopefully, Josh came back in.

“As poor a job as they do at that,” Russell said, and he returned the book to its slot, “we might want to be grateful they hardly ever try their hands at anything more serious.”

"Maybe." She shifted books from one stack to another. "Are you going to drive somewhere to see the eclipse? They say, the way the weather is, no one along the whole Appalachian range's going to be able to see it. They're talking about making an unofficial holiday so people can take their kids out of school to drive and see it. But the officials're mad about how it's going to affect their days in, so they want the legislature to make it count so they can start before Memorial Day next year, again. But everybody's all mad about that."

Though, some'd argued since the whole thing was going to be at night, they could just stay up and come into school without sleeping at all, and the results would be the same.

"They could just watch it on TV."

Anime shifted another stack of books. "Are you going to be in town awhile?"

"No." Hands in his pockets, he stepped toward the doorway, looking out and down the sidewalk as far as he could. "I'm just going to pick up a few things from the storage locker." Like most of America, a sizable portion of land within the bounds of the county was dedicated to climate-controlled and non-climate-controlled storage facilities. He'd realized just how much in the last couple years.

"You could come by for dinner if you want. Langdon's going out for a week or two."

"I'm probably going to be gone by then. But thanks. I could take you to lunch if you want."

"I..." She paused, visibly correcting herself. "I already have a date for lunch."

"A date date?"

"No. No, just some friends."

"H..." Russell opened and closed his mouth, looking out through the glass, at the greyish-lit morning, arrested by movement on the opposite side of the street. Then, with a speed that his former stiffness wouldn't've indicated possible, he turned and stepped around the table and between the aisles and squeezed between the books piled there, through the doorway, and closed the door so only a small gap remained. Engine noise carried upward through the uninsulated back wall, from Backstreet, through the old-fashioned soldered windows, and, in combination with the, reasonably effective, sound insulating

properties of so many books, rendered it near impossible for him to make out what was being said, and with him only able to peek through the gap up the one aisle, he remained, effectively, deaf and blind. A skirt in silhouette passed the end of the aisle, and he quietly, but quickly, closed the door. Hand on the knob, he spent an undefined amount of time trying to control his breathing without knowing he was trying to control his breathing, having slipped into a more primitive, in the sense of being older, rather than the derogatory, state of mind, a state of mind that the ringing of the bell at the front of the shop not only didn't bring him out of but submerged him more so into, leaving him wondering if someone else had entered, or they'd merely left. He stood there for another undefined amount of time, listening for footsteps or the sound of the bell. Finally, footsteps approached, the other door opening, Anime poking her head through, looking puzzled.

"Russell?"

He stepped around a stack of books.

"Oh. I thought you might've left."

"Is anyone else here?"

She thought a moment, shook her head.

"I think I need to go," he said. And rather than go out the way he came, he started toward her, and she released the knob and stepped aside to let him through. "Thanks for the talk."

"You can come by anytime," she said. She said it in that reassuring way that friends sometimes have to after the custody of a friendship's been split fifty-fifty.

He walked into the front of the shop, looked over his shoulder at her, and followed her progress as she moved behind the desk. "I just came by to tell you that I think I'm probably going to be on the road awhile, so I won't be around. But I'll email you if anything interesting comes up."

"Okay. I hope you have a nice time."

"Yeah." Hands in his pockets, he started toward the door, which Anime had propped open to allow the air to circulate through. He paused, turned. "Thank you for everything."

"I didn't really do anything."

"You stayed a friend," he said. Then he walked out.

The problem was he'd timed it wrong, so when he stood near the crossing, looking down the road, waiting for the light to change and the flow of traffic to dwindle, unconsciously, his eyes remained in search of who he might see, whether they were there or not, something that absorbed him so that it took several honks from a stopped car, the driver motioning for him to cross, before he'd again realized where he was, and he motioned to the driver as he hurried across.

The leaves hadn't emerged enough yet for the Greening Up the Mountains Festival, which would be held in the next county over, but even just the buddings provided enough color to give a break from the dreary grey skies and dreary grey-browns of the trees, a color that seemed to seep into his consciousness in the winter, penetrating down to some core of being that didn't actually exist, which was its only protection against the concept of an eternal winter, from which spring would never emerge, the unconscious wellspring of anxiety that'd inspired so many winter festivals, and their kissing cousins, spring festivals.

Old foliage, a thick carpet of decomposing matter beneath the trees, slowly being broken down by fungi and bacteria and chewed by the multiplicity of multi-legged and non-legged creatures that crawled and wound their way through it, excreting it to form the basis for new top soil, that combination of organic non-living and organic-living matter that allowed everything on the surface of the planet to be, something too easily dismissed and glossed over when futurists contemplated a future Martian home, all of it crackled and popped underfoot as he groaned and pulled a length of brush.

Shepard paused, panting. He'd tied a bandanna round his forehead, the fabric already soaked, but his safety glasses remained so far free of streaks and trickles and evaporated salt encrustations. The road still lay sprinkled, and mounded in spots, with sawdust where he'd cut the main logs, as he now dealt with the least of it, the brushy tops. Piled on the other side of the road, most would've found it unsightly, a marring on the face of otherwise beautiful nature as they walked the road. But such'd provided ample enough opportunity in many species' evolutionary histories as shelter from preying eyes as it slowly degraded, also eaten away, though more slowly, by the forces also at

work turning the leaf bed into topsoil. Still breathing hard, he went around the side of the truck and reached through the rolled-down window for the OSU water bottle, unscrewing it and sipping from it, some of it spilling onto his already damp shirt as he leaned against the truck. He paused at a distant sound, a rustling of leaves, maybe a dog, probably a squirrel or bird, perhaps a chipmunk. Small things could be so much more noisy than their size would seemingly've indicated. But, not realizing it consciously, of course, he registered something on the frequency of a human voice among it. He glanced down the road, waited. But after a moment or two, he noticed nothing more, though a vague sense still lingered with him, and he re-capped the water bottle and tossed it onto the seat, then walked alongside the truck and lifted the chainsaw, flicked the switch into place, and jerked it roaring awake, after which he couldn't hear anything but that.

Woodwork was the kind of thing that only required a certain type and level of attention, or at least, a certain kind of Shepard's attention. He remained more focused when the saw was actually running, out of necessity. He wouldn't've been the first member of his extended family to die from something related to one. But the pulling and piling, itself, was a kind of mindless job, an automatic-nervous-system job that only required decent hand-eye coordination, the ability not to twist an ankle on a rock or in a hole, and enough experience and sense to know where and when to apply how much strength, rather than flying in gung ho and all brute force from the beginning. The result, if done properly, was a kind of meditation, not unlike the walking or raking meditations undertaken by some branches of Buddhism. Though, it would be wrong to associate the two anymore than in the sense of general comparison, in the same sense that one can call both Christian prayer and Hindu prayer both prayers, though the former, depending on the denomination in question, might not even agree with that, within the scope of their respective categorical institutions. In this way, working brush was alot like splitting wood, the difference being in the distinction between praying standing with one's head bowed, and on one's knees.

What he thought about during these periods varied. Many times he drifted into thinking of nothing at all, not exactly a state of peace so much as a state of temporary suspension, like tubing down a

slow-moving river slightly drunk and without wearing a life jacket, a danger, of course, always implicit in it, though, that which the subject can't be aware of during the actual act itself.

He ascribed no essential importance to these times, other than the work itself, which, due to the satisfaction of physical exhaustion, alone, seemed to bring more relief than contemplating things ever did.

He cut off the saw and set it on the road, brushed off the front of his pants to have something to justify resting before starting to haul the newly cut brush past the edge of the road.

He always came out here alone for this kind of thing, worried that if he brought Princess her over-exuberant nature would, as it had almost done on an earlier occasion, lead her into being another one of those members of the extended family—he wasn't one of those people bothered by the notion of having a non-ape in the family—to succumb to a logging-related accident. But also, whether he could admit it or not, the isolation sometimes helped. Helped what, he didn't know, which was why he couldn't admit it did help. Though, there seemed no rush about finding an answer to that discrepancy. He'd survived this long in such a state. Most people went their entire lives that way. The unexamined life, so it's said, isn't worth living. Yet examined or unexamined everyone's ends the same. He'd reflected on too many things already. Being where he'd been, having done the things he'd done, maybe he'd earned some kind of respite from the burden of having to figure himself out. He had enough of a definition to exist in others' minds, and enough to supply a framework of himself, if only a bare one at times, for himself, right or wrong, factual or no. But that was all a human being needed. And some didn't even have, or reasonably need, that.

He shook his head. This was the problem with coming out here alone. And he pulled off the velcro-fastened gloves he liked to use for running the saw and stuffed them in his back pocket so he could grab the leather ones off the tailgate. He turned, again, registering something in the distance, maybe around the bend, definitely not in the woods around him, something that only now percolated upwards in his mind as the vaguest feeling. But still, nothing was there to see. He looked ahead, toward the bend in the road, the cut-away bank,

where his father had paid Seth Miller in a case of beer to bring his bulldozer out and widen the road from the original sledge trail, as if, he, Shepard, somewhere deep down, expected something to emerge round it. But nothing and no one did. He finished putting on his gloves, pulled one off to shake out the splinters and sawdust that'd collected in the ends of the fingers. Meeting people along roads was a strange thing, anymore, roads, long before his own existence on Earth, of course, having ceded themselves to the exclusivity of the automobile, ensconced in which the human could barely be discerned, leading, some speculated, to the phenomena known as *road rage*, and which, soon, the futurists said, would cede themselves to self-driving vehicles propelled by AI, so that even the humans that had once, at least theoretically, been inside them would become unnecessary. That was one of the reasons his few meetings with others on roads stood out in his memory, as unreliable as they were, imperfect things that did their job, but what their job was, often, remained inexactly defined. And because of it, he started thinking as he pulled a length of brush across the road, the smaller branches and only partially emerged leaves acting as a rudimentary, unintentional broom. He started thinking of the last time he'd walked a road and met someone along it. But it wasn't a memory he particularly cared to revisit, not out of pain, but simply because there was no point. What had been done had been done. That he'd been the one to do it was only a detail. The universe was made up of details, but in the end, they all amounted to the same thing, hurtled toward the same conclusion. And he wasn't going to allow that same kind of calmness to wash over him again, though, it wasn't as if it could've come unbidden. But after all, there was no target for it. Not anymore.

Small birds flitted among distant older brush, bobbing, weaving, watching, waiting for him to finish piling a new place for them to leap about in and cock their heads over and see if after a little personalized redecorating it couldn't be called home.

Lucy wasn't one of those people who believed in coincidences as being *just* coincidental. "You're kidding."

"No," Eva said. "Why?"

"I'm from there. That's where I'm going back to."

Eva didn't quite have a reply for this, and in response, glanced at the young woman's shirt. "Oh, this," Lucy said. "Yeah, I go to Ohio State." Which, given how easy it was to buy a t-shirt with any given logo on it, wasn't as obvious a statement as it might seem.

"What're you studying?"

"Molecular biology. I'm finishing my masters." She shifted out her other earbud and laid them on top of her phone in her lap. "This's amazing, what're the chances?" Better than one might expect. Even taking into account their relative starting points, there were only so many flights in a given time-frame to Asheville Regional Airport, so that already narrowed the possibilities. Combine that with the fact that anyone traveling to the western end of the state was bottlenecked through there, if coming in by commercial airline, so it made complete sense, that, again, given the same time frame, they'd have a chance of ending up on one of three planes. As for ending up being seated next to each other, it had as much to do with the way tickets were handled and the assumptions various programmers had made and was itself not an entirely random process. Not that it was assured. It was just not as unlikely as certain individuals and organizations would make out. "It's just amazing." And conversely, it's not as if a science background necessarily precludes such viewpoints, such as Lucy's. In fact, many people, otherwise working, for example, in jobs that require tremendous knowledge and understanding about cellular structure, also, often believe in psychics, ancient aliens, and young earth creationism. It's generally underestimated to the extent which

humans can exist in two (or more) worlds. There's an apocryphal story about the TV show *Bonanza* that best illustrates this point: it goes that Dan Blocker relates a story of when an elderly woman came up to him and said, to the effect, that he should get his father to get rid of that Chinese cook and get a woman instead, to which Blocker is said to've replied, obviously, that that was a TV show and that Lorne Greene was not his father, and that in the evening he went home to his real family, etc, to which the woman replied that, of course, she knew that but that to tell his father to get rid of that Chinese cook and get a woman instead. Likewise, if Lucy had been told something along these lines, though, obviously, more in relation to the events at hand, she would've replied in roughly the same fashion: of course she knew that, but...

"Are you going down for the eclipse?"

"Oh, no. I'm going to fly back out before then. Besides, nobody's going to probably be able to see anything down there, anyway, from what I've seen about the weather."

"Oh?"

Lucy shook her head. There'd been a meteorological student that'd almost talked her ear off on this subject when she'd found out where she was heading for spring break. Though, shutting her up hadn't proved to be a complete bust.

"What're you coming down for?"

Eva paused. "Business."

Lucy chuckled. "I wouldn't've thought anyone had any business that was worth traveling all the way there for."

"I'm sorry," Eva said. "I can't really talk about it. It's confidential."

"Oh." Lucy shifted in her seat, glancing up at the ceiling. "So you're not from there. I didn't figure you were. No offense, that is. You just don't look like someone from there."

"Oh?"

Lucy looked at her and smiled. "So this's your first time, going down here, or there, whatever?"

"No...." She looked out the window, at the clouds, the land far, far below. "I was... I was down here when I was fifteen, or so. That was about eighty-eight, in case you're wondering how old I am."

“Cool.” Yes, people still said that, at the time. “Can I ask what for? To be completely nosy, that is. Unless it’s confidential.”

Eva shook her head. “Just a regular old summer vacation. My father...had decided to go to the park.”

Lucy chuckled. “Me and my brother, my younger brother, we used to have a summer job on the outskirts of a campground down at a place called Deep Creek—”

“I was there. We floated on tubes down the river.”

Lucy chuckled. “Yeah, that was our job, going out and catching all the ones that got away and taking them back to the rental station. It was actually how I got my mother to let me wear my first bikini top.” Eva looked at her, and Lucy laughed. “Having a job is a big thing, and no one’s going to say anything to you if you have one and’re keeping it. And doing that, obviously, you have to go in the water, alot, and get wet, so it was either wear a bikini top that would dry out, or walk around in a wet shirt all the time with either a bra showing or everything poking through.” She laughed. “You know, since we’re both going to the same place, we should split the difference and rent the same car.” It was the kind of thing Lucy’d say.

“Well...” But the kind of thing Eva’d have declined. “I’m on business, so I can’t.”

Lucy laughed. “Oh, well. Please, don’t blame a poor graduate student for trying. After all, the universe seems to’ve arrange something here between us. Might as well’ve tried to take advantage of it.” She shook her head and slipped her earbuds into place, then removed one. “So what do you do?”

“Attorney.”

“Oh.”

Absolute Threshold stood by the fountain, momentarily watching the car disappear down the length of Mainstreet, shaking his head as the traffic light caught them, even after all their hurry. He turned and started up the great length of steps that led up the hill to the former courthouse, now library. At least, since it was so overcast, the sun couldn't, by definition, reflect from the off-white cement and blind him. He stopped on the last step, looking up at the domed building, not because he was tired or winded, just because it's what he always did. He recognized that there was something more than vaguely Grecian in the character of the structure, a slight hereditary nod, less pronounced, more diluted than that which could be seen in pictures of the buildings in Washington, DC, all of them sharing in common their whiteness, whether through paint, or the nature of the materials, all of them attempting to emulate, to express as a kind of societal extended phenotype, the character of a supposed Grecian notion of democracy, whose torch they claimed to bear, and whose heritage rendered them into the world with power. In a similar vein, the Confederate soldier that stood on a pedestal halfway up the stairs was a reflection of this too, also, but not as much as it could be, as, it being bronze, rather than stark and white stone, whereas, if it had been, as opposed to others of its kind, that statuary in purer places, places built by men who still had Greek and Latin in common, where the statuary had held slightly more to something seemingly traditional, tending more toward those classical forms, often feminine, the seemingly purer, itself, a retreat, in a way, painting over Grecian history with one brush, where, just as often, there had been seasons where it had been the male figure which was the epitome of perfect, or could be rendered thus through stone and bronze (so it wasn't as if the soldier were completely divorced from their heritage just

because of that....) So... But this thochtic heritage, too, reflected in the white columns, sometimes combining all three styles, again, as if all ages'd been one, and the Greeks, as any group stretched across time must be, ultimately, are conceived of as a unified body, speaking with a singular voice, each individual human analogous to a cell, which could be conveniently elided over even existing, or having existed, except, that is, if it happened to go bad, and required that it must either be culled by the body's own immune system, or cut out. Except that all of it, buildings such as this old courthouse repurposed into a library, the iconic buildings of Washington, DC, were copies of originals that never had existed. Time had played a trick, washing from statues and buildings the bright colors their original builders had clad them in, oftentimes garish, so there had never been one white-clothed statue, or naked white building, yet that's all that remained, all there had been for the men of the Renaissance, and a few women, some suspected, to work from. So it could be said, in trying to anchor themselves in history, appropriate some power extending from the past, carry some sceptre from time immemorial, this building, and the others like it, though built, for the most part, without conscious knowledge of that fact, not only failed to accomplish their implicit and, sometimes explicit, aims, but made laughing stocks of themselves, and seemingly those who walked slash perambulated through them, in the process, unbeknownst to themselves and most everyone else.

Someone was coming out, Absolute Threshold having roused himself from his contemplation to head in, and he held open the door for them, or more precisely her. Though, she didn't stop to say anything of it, which was better than some of the possible alternatives. Though, that, in itself, was not something that worried him an undo amount. It's just that getting fussed at once is more likely to override a thousand casual thank yous. But the problem was, by nature, his habit was to try to help people and be courteous, so seeing someone coming the opposite way, out the same door he was about to use, and opening it to allow them through first, so long as they weren't too far away to make it awkward, a kind of mental geometry and calculus and trigonometry analogous to what dogs could instinctually perform when chasing a flying game disc, regardless of a given or

ungeniven or rescinded or refused (and all orthogonal to all orthogonal definitions and attributes) gender status bequeathed or taken from and along an atomized and atomizing range (and for that matter, the notion of the lack of, the nonexistence of, such a range itself), and all orthogonal to such, and in opposition to the same, as well...but it just felt like the decent thing to do, though that was only instinctive and spoke nothing to anything he'd yet milled out on the subject slash subjects, which seemed as if they would remain opaque forever, and that perhaps that said something in itself, but he couldn't be and wasn't sure of that either, at this point, and still, couldn't, also, again, ever be sure that he would be, and given the fractal nature of such, it was better to move on, rather than stand around impeding entry and exit nodes. So he stepped into the air-conditioned building.

This library, as most others, had begun on a course of transformation away from what had been its role of yore, or what had appeared to be its role, that of housing a large collection of curated physical objects, to being one of a kind of public service, an odd notion, considering that that had been the point from the beginning, via the collection and curation of such physical objects, but it and others like it had started on this course because, somehow, a certain portion of the American public had come to view large collections of bound paper as somehow elitist, though they were, for the most part, consciously unaware of this, as they were of most things that shaped their actions, or so Bernays' uncle had brought to the attention of the world, and Absolute Threshold, sometimes an amateur theorist, wondered if it had to do with some kind of pseudo-Bernaysian judo in the wake of the widespread establishment of reading rooms by unionists in the latter decades of the nineteenth century and their continued growth in the early decades of the twentieth. And though there had, in many ways, always been an anti-intellectual streak within the American consciousness, something of it, at least from his viewpoint, though, he realized enough to know he couldn't think like those people did then, and what he read, he always had to read with the view of someone who'd come after all those events, in the same way that attempting to return to a pre-Einsteinian world was impossible because the conception of such a world, for those in any which followed, required the inclusion of Einstein himself, so that, even if

a hypothetical child were to be raised purely with books published before that period in which Einstein had existed, that child would still not be a pre-Einsteinian, the books, themselves, that such a child would have been given, themselves, would have been those that were chosen to survive, selected for survival by those and those social forces in the post-Einsteinian age, to illustrate some point in relation to that age, all that other information forgotten or lost, or worse, the schemata for the interpretation of that epoch rendered unintelligible to that which it birthed and which followed, but in any regard, American anti-intellectualism seemed to've undergone a certain spasm in the twentieth century, a kind of convulsion, but why and from what remained unknown to him, and in fact maybe it'd never happened at all and it just looked as if it had from a certain perspective, but a functional equivalent, maybe another argument in favor of the undisprovable theory of Greek bellybuttons published just one year before Darwin's *Origin of the Species*.

He looked up at the clock. Still some time. He'd've gone into the tabled area and worked on something, but as was the case most mornings, except Sunday, on which the institution was closed, Saturday being no exception, almost the whole space was occupied by old people reading newspapers, which, in and of itself, wasn't bad. It's just that, sitting there and trying to work, and occasionally tearing a sheet from a notebook or legal pad, even if only very occasionally (because how fast can anyone write a page full of text?) elicited a myriad of *looks*, old people shifting their papers to glare in a way that wasn't glaring, as if their rustling of pages were somehow any more quiet.

So instead, shifting his backpack over his shoulder, he moved toward the counter. And he stood there a few moments before the woman behind it, pecking at a keyboard, intent on a computer screen, noticed him. "What can I help you with?"

"Is Mrs Slatt here?"

"She's taken time off."

"Oh."

"Is there something I can help you with?"

He shook his head. "No. It was just...personal reasons. Thank you." Which, incidentally, was the same reason Karen'd taken her (unpaid) combination vacation slash sick leave. He turned and walked

toward one of the seats, leaned his bag against it, and sat. The mass of newspapers occasionally fluttered, sometimes seemingly in unison, a collection of black-grey butterfly or moth wings, probably closer to moths, belonging to a species too large to otherwise sustain itself in the lower-oxygen world that'd come to predominate after the Devonian extinction, ghostly things, perhaps ghosts. It made sense that ghosts would be crinkly and dry. There seemed, to him, something wrong with the idea of a wet ghost. He'd started down this rabbit hole, a habit, or affliction of his, noticing, only after a while, the people moving past. And he looked over his shoulder, saw the doors open, people filing through. And he reached over and grabbed his bag and stood. He, too, filtered in with them, finding his way among the arrayed chairs. Monthly, the library screened a movie, usually old, or something less commercially viable, though not artistic enough to alienate too many. And of course, for him, a free movie had the benefit, obviously, of not costing twenty-or-thirty-something dollars. And though he could've downloaded most anything through whatever file sharing site was the flavor of the month, on the library computers, though not the school ones, those being too tightly monitored and locked down, he preferred the larger screen, the clear break between realities, the distinction between the film being here, but not here being there, a separation, a place where it would be and had been, rather than a continual present of always-available audio-visual media, otherwise, instinctively, he found himself afraid to drown in it.

He glanced over as someone sat next to him. "I didn't think you were coming."

Josh shrugged. "Oh, well." He stretched backwards in the seat, popping his neck. "Maybe I enjoy the irony of it." And the statement wasn't meant to be coy, but merely to attempt to communicate something, though it failed and effectively communicated what could've been conceived of as the opposite, at least on the unconscious level, that he wasn't quite sure of himself what his own motivations were, not that he inquired as to them any more often than anyone else, and when he did, as wasn't unusual, the consequences would be partially disastrous, though ending in a proposal, the latter not being a general outcome of such inquiries. But there was something ironic about it, always had been, of making a movie from a book that was,

fundamentally, about books, no matter how arty the picture's direction. But as was remarked during the Civil Rights Era, things don't happen unless they happen on TV. "You know," Josh said, "they're remaking this on Amazon." Another irony? Not that Josh wasn't aware of, what he termed, the deleterious effects of irony on the twentieth century.

The lights dimmed.

It'd've been better with the sun. But that just meant she didn't have to wear sunglasses. Just in case, she zippered them into a padded protector and stuffed them in her bag. Shouts carried from across the river, a few people already having parked their RVs on the far side, retirees who traveled round the country on a continual basis. Gravel and dirt crunched under her boots, and she pulled and pushed things around in the back of the Range Rover, making sure everything was right. She looked over her shoulder as another vehicle pulled in, turned to park. The driver climbed out and waved overtop it. Hannah nodded. "Good morning, Doctor Jones."

Langdon bent and popped open the trunk. His name, or that is, the combination of his name and his academic achievements had been a source of...contention and amusement since his graduate days, when those around him'd finally realized what the combination would be once he'd, eventually, completed his educational path. And in fact, he'd considered doing his own doctoral thesis (though only after a few beers) on the various memeological variations that had arisen out of the combination of chance (the name he happened to be born with) and choice (his educational ambitions) considered in unison with those same forces in the broader cultural milieu. However, in modern science, one's own self has fallen from being a fit subject for discussion, as in most academia, which, he speculated in an unpublished article, was one of the reasons behind the longstanding drive to eliminate the identifier *I*, and its various variations, from personal essays. During this time, he'd fallen into a bit of sympathy with a Dickensian character, a character with a similar chance slash choice conundrum, that of Master Bates. And while that had not rendered him a Panglossian, he did on some occasions (usually after a few beers) contemplate that the matter could've gone worse for him.

Though, since that time, too, he'd come to have a rather pathological relationship with Dickens, though it did often seem as if one could have a more intimate relationship with bad ideas than one could have with anything else. Yes.... He pulled his own backpack out of the trunk, leaned it against his bare lower leg. It was just the usual kind of backpack, not even one from an outdoor shop with an associated logo. That and his shorts gave Hannah enough clues as to his level of experience hiking. She just hoped he wasn't wearing new boots. He lugged a second bag out of the trunk and dropped it on the ground. He then closed it, bearing down with both hands and all his weight to get it to latch.

And while he'd been doing this, another car'd pulled in, Professor Paxton and three graduate students climbing out, starting to extract the gear they'd had to pile on themselves in the back seat because it wouldn't all fit in the trunk.

An operation like this rolled out something like the army, though with less discipline, and hopefully, less psycho-sexual perversion. Or maybe not. Hannah looked over her shoulder as another vehicle entered the parking area, a Forest Service logo on the side. And again, she wished Tammy'd been available. But in regards to being like an army, it, effectively, had to carry the whole of the civilized world on its back. But of course, by definition, that meant almost nothing would be left behind. For all the good and bad that meant. Graham climbed out of his vehicle and opened the back window, pulling out his own pack and propping it against the bumper. Hannah glanced at him, but turned toward Professor Paxton, stepping over to where they'd gathered all their gear and equipment in a pile against the car. Luckily, all the containers for water samples were plastic these days, meaning they'd be lighter, when not filled, of course, that'd be one of the joys of the return trip for those lucky grad students, but at least they wouldn't break. "Morning."

Paxton nodded, smiled. Like Hannah, he was already on this trip, even though, by some definitions, technically, they hadn't started yet. He motioned to the grad students. "Let me introduce you. Lydia Culverton. Bernadette Kirby. Jennifer Lee. They're grad students in the department."

"Yeah," Hannah said, and laughed. "I kind'a figured that."

Jennifer pulled a pack up onto her shoulders and started to fit the straps.

Graham came over. "Everything set?"

Paxton nodded. He glanced up at the sky. "We should get to get pretty far today."

Hannah nodded.

Graham said, "Well, if everyone can keep up. This isn't going to be a Sunday afternoon picnic." He more than glanced at Jennifer, then Bernadette, then Lydia, and stepped around Hannah. "If you adjust it like this," he said, and pulled the strap over Jennifer's shoulder, "it'll ride better."

Hannah turned toward Paxton. "I'll be carrying a radio, too, in addition to a phone. It'd be advisable for everyone else to carry theirs, as well, if they brought it. Just in case."

Bernadette already had hers out, looking down at the screen as she leaned against the car.

CIA funding'd dried up years before, the radio observatory sitting quiet and empty in the northern part of the county, sometimes rented out to provide the setting for a horror movie or odd science fiction film.

"Service'll be spotty. But in case of an emergency, they can still be useful. Not that we're planning on something going wrong. But it's better to be ready." And even though it remained unclear as to what radio silence laws remained in effect, they technically remained *de facto* enforced by the continual pocketing of government funds allocated for the expansion of broadband and cell service which had been given to the regional state-sanctioned communications and power monopolies. However, the way things bounced through valleys and over ridges...

Paxton nodded.

Hannah, glancing into the back of the car, said, "We won't need all that water." There was a still plastic-wrapped dozen lying in there. "We'll be following the stream, anyway, so we'll use it." Lydia turned and glanced through the window.

Graham turned from having finished helping Jennifer with the rest of her straps. "Just listen to us and do what we say, and everything'll go fine." He smiled. The smile somehow made the statement more

threat than reassurance. It's how his efforts at subtlety usually came out.

Hannah turned toward the Range Rover, looking into the back of it one more time before she closed it down and locked it, slipping the keys into her pocket. She looked over at Langdon, smiled, "Almost ready, Doctor Jones?"

He looked up from fiddling with his phone. "So," he said, hovering his finger over the glass, "how're we going to account for the time?"

Hannah continued to smile. "We won't." And when Langdon looked at her a moment in silence, she said, "sunrise to sunset, that's all we'll be worrying about."

Langdon opened his mouth, paused. "Ah." He slipped his phone into one of the side pockets in his cargo shorts and smoothed down the velcro strap. It was one of those things he'd had on his list to study for the last ten or so years, but which he'd never gotten around to, the slow transformation from the technically correct 'daylight *saving* time' to the most commonly used variant 'daylight *savings* time'. In and of itself, the first would've been interesting, implying that the people who'd thought it up might've actually thought they could add or delete hours from the day simply via legislation, or collective will, which some might claim was what legislation was, at least in the classical Grecian sense, though, also interestingly enough, some members of the public did actually believe, and he knew this from various meta-studies, that daylight saving time or daylight savings time actually *did* change the amount of hours in a day, that is, modified time in some very physical sense, and he'd wondered if there would be an overlap between those who implicitly believed this and those who took it as literal the idea that Joshua (not one of those by that name presently in or an occupant of the county) commanded the sun to stop, though that, in itself, was another interesting avenue for investigation, the change from the original text of *being silent*, whatever that might mean for the sun, to stopping the day, in and of itself something seemingly rather illogical, in that, postponing the battle at evening, as was the custom, would've been better for Joshua's forces... but like everything else, such ideas just piled up on his desk, and one of these days he'd commandeer a grad student to

computerize it all, so at least then it would exist filling hard drive space, somewhere, either on his machine, or on the cloud, so the amount of unanswered questions and queries wouldn't have the palpable sense of overwhelmingness they did when they all threatened to bury him beneath an avalanche of paper cuts, but then again, the phenomena of digital hoarding, that hoovering of millions of books and images and films, far more than any of those individuals who did engage in such could ever experience in their lifetime, files that would otherwise and perpetually have their creation time match their last access time, the removing of the physical, the transition to a virtualized space held its own uroborosian possibilities....

"Earth to Doctor Jones."

"Hm?" He looked up.

Hannah pulled her pack onto her shoulders, fastened the strap that wrapped round her waist. "You coming, Doctor Jones?"

He nodded and bent to throw his own backpack over his shoulder.

Graham laughed. "As in, like, Indiana Jones?"

"No."

Graham still laughed. Hannah rolled her eyes, mouthed, *Sorry*. Langdon shrugged, lifted his bag.

"So," Graham said, as they started toward the trailhead, "you're, like, the Indiana Jones of frogs, or something?"

"Semi-computable memetology."

"Meema-what?"

"I'm here to document the context of the various photos taken so I can compare that to how that context is re-contextualized as the photos are spread through social media."

"If we find anything," Paxton called back. "This may all be a wild urodela chase."

"This *is* a wild urodela chase," Hannah said.

Paxton chuckled. He'd waited days to make that joke to someone who hadn't already heard it.

Graham had gone up to walk between and among the grad students, talking conversationally, which meant, in order to be polite, he could glance at one or the other while talking, noticing the way, say, one or the other's backpack straps tightened the front of her t-shirt against her chest. Most people are, in fact, this unsubtle. And Langdon

found himself looking at three asses in three pairs of shorts as they started up the slight incline. In racing there's the generally agreed-upon term, or as agreed upon as any specific fragment of language can be, of the *pace booty*, that is, the phenomenon and practice of finding someone whose natural gate just outmatches the runner's and whom the runner can stand to look at for however many miles or kilometers it would take, thereby the runner gives him or herself (or what have you) an incentive to keep up. Unfortunately, rather than being able to appreciate what was at hand, or that is to say, what was in front of him (because they were far enough ahead to be out of arm's length), but this was, in fact, what he was thinking about on one level (however, even barring the aforementioned physical inability to do so, social conditioning meant that he would not act on the tactile inclination, which, however, caused it to be visualized and conceptualized to the greatest and most spastic degree, much the same as the spontaneous desire to push an old lady off a bridge, those thoughts about what any given member of the socio-group should not do repeating over and over to focus attention on what should not be done), but that should be more than obvious, even though, on another level, he'd been considering a rather horrible little story about male retaliation against female workers in a clothing factory in some free-trade country, when Hannah said, "You'll find there are quite a lotta nice views out here, Doctor Jones." He looked over at her. And she looked over at him.

For Attachment Theory and Drive Theory, Saturday meant complete and utter freedom, freedom from being told what to do in school, freedom from being told what to do in church. It was a day dedicated to freedom, a holiday once every six days and, Sunday school lessons aside, they'd've argued, was the *actual* day God'd slacked off work. It was *the* day. But maybe that undersells it. Instead it was *THE* day. Indeed, it was the only thing that might've outpaced the Great Rubber-Band Ball in greatness, not that the Great Rubber-Band Ball was all that great yet, but thanks to various judicious liberations of various former asparagus and celery holders from various trashcans, it was slowly approaching such, hidden away in the back of the highest drawer they could each reach in the dresser, it taking both of them to open it because the drawers rubbed badly on the old thing, since it'd been built before modern glides, though they didn't know this and just operated on the notion, backed by what evidence they'd ever had at hand, that such was the disposition of all dressers and was therefore the reason clothes more often than not sat around folded in plastic laundry baskets, though it seemed, in some ways, odd to have square-folded clothes in round baskets, but that didn't mean it wasn't natural; but the ball was slowly growing toward greatness as they successfully fought temptation and refused to shoot any off their fingers, for deference to the thing in itself. So it was getting there, but wasn't quite as great as Saturday yet. Saturday. Overcast, sunny, rainy, these were just the conditions that made freedom interesting, even a full-blown hurricane'd've been merely an excuse to ride a sawhorse around in the sky. Sometimes they'd taken to the creek that ran along the back side of the trailer park, that is, before everyone'd been warned, though not officially, that runoff from the cattle land upstream might be an issue, though there was no scientific consensus

on this, for various reasons, some of them financial. Occasionally, a kind of foam did work its way downstream, discernible from the stuff that bubbled out of the ground where some of the washing machines discharged, by the fact that what came from upstream was of a pinkish hue, as opposed to washing machine suds, which were white-blue, a pink that would've inspired the sense that it tasted faintly of strawberries, though it didn't smell as if it did, and neither one had successfully dared the other to taste it and solve that particular mystery once and for all, but of course, what was the use in knowing everything? Life would've, probably, been completely dull without mysteries, and for this reason it was permissible for them to put off solving a few, at least till the next week. But they'd long given up on the creek, by a whole week. They'd already charted every inch of it, sailed bark boats over every nook and cranny and landed on every sandy beach, dammed it, people coming out, including, even, a few in uniform, to complain at them for damming it, piling in sticks and half-rotten logs, and rocks, all lined with plastic grocery bags to create a rather fine swimming hole, not that either of them really understood what it mattered if it rained and the river got up over its banks and flooded the trailer park, they'd just sail the trailer out on it, like Noah did with the ark. So one day later, they'd gone across to one of the fields, gathering tall golden grass, bundling it with yarn they'd carried away from somewhere, stacking it off at the edge of the woods to feed the animals they'd have to load up when the flood came. Of these, they enumerated a turtle that liked to live under a fallen log, a rabbit, and a dog that lived on the farm way up the long driveway on the far side of the road they were forbidden from crossing. The birds, they figured, being able to fly, could fend for themselves. And the tadpoles, already being used to water, could as well. The rest, so they figured, would show up in their own time. They once enumerated this plan, launched, of course, on a Saturday, to their Sunday school teacher on the eponymous following day, who, while appreciating their facilities for memorization, pointed out that God had promised he would never again send a flood to destroy mankind. To which Attachment Theory inquired was God going to still wash away his and their mother, and all the other alike women, etc. And Drive Theory opined that, in simpler language, of course, that while it was

true God had promised such, that it didn't seem that that language precluded such from happening again on its own, after all, they did say that all that ice in some place called Antarctica, which was on the bottom of the world, was melting, and what about that? But in that case, what about that had been a chance to stand in the corner. Not that it particularly mattered, anyway. By the next week, they'd grown up just that much more, and therefore had less of an interest in saving the world.

In some ways, it was strange, or at least, some people took it as strange, they were so connected. More so than any of the twins, even though they had ten months between them. Though, looking at them, it would've been difficult to tell that, with the same height, the same weight, the same eyes, the same hair color cut in the same bowl-shaped fashion. But more than anything else, it was a similarness that all of Lily's children shared. "And of course," as one elderly church lady said to another, "you can't fight genetics." Which, while literally true, unless one wants to imagine, and could argue, that by throwing a punch and bruising someone, they are, of course, crushing *some* DNA, it is not so true in the metaphorical sense, as those rich folk who take extended medical holidays in parts of China in order to partake in a bit of designer-babying could attest, if they could admit such. But that, of course, is neither here nor there, except that is, etc...

Attachment Theory and Drive Theory, of course, knew nothing about any of this, or that is to say, the part involving China, the quotation from the elderly church lady they'd overheard while crawling beneath a set of pews. And when asking their older brother, Absolute Threshold, whom they always consulted in such matters, as to what this meant, or more exactly, what genetics *was*, they'd come away with the conceptualization that it was this thing called a blueprint of a cell, though why it had to be blue they didn't know, but that's just the way it was, the same reason cherries were red and school buses were yellow, and that this blueprint was also something like a computer program, and programs were what made computers do things, rather than just sit there and be useless, such as playing videos about toads when Mr South wanted to talk about biology, the logical conclusion being that they, themselves, were then computers, as it was, *they*,

who had genes, both on the inside and the outside, the ones on the outside stuck over with iron-on patches, therefore, making them robots, and from that data they began to act accordingly, moving around in jerky motions and emitting occasional beeps. While, later, bored with this rather limited horizon of meaning, they had undertaken an expansion of their operational parameters, resulting in them chasing select younger siblings around the trailer, proclaiming that they were robots and that they were programmed to catch monkeys. Psychodynamic Approach and Reciprocal Determinism had both, in particular, found this rather delightful, screaming the whole time as they ran round and round.

This day, however, they'd discarded the, by then, outmoded ideas of the computational theory of body and mind, and racing along the dirt road that bifurcated one side of the trailer park from the other, they sallied forth to plunge headlong into the dark and internecine world of witchcraft, where, surely, maniacal eyed demons, blood-thirsty vampires, werewolves howling mad at the moon, and flying kitchen instrumentations surely awaited.

That is to say it was Saturday.

Running barefoot, of course, was best. It provided a certain kind of traction otherwise muted by footwear, a primal tearing into the ground, grass gripped between the toes. Not that it came without its problems, mostly in the form of an old woman screaming through her window that they'd get a parasite in their foot and it'd eat their eyes out, an idea neither of them found reassuring, so once in a while, when their feet got too particularly dirt-encrusted, they'd collect a handful of suds from one of the washing machine outlets and go down to the creek, or sneak around and turn on one of the outdoor spigots. They had two hypotheses on the old woman's predictions. Attachment Theory held that the creatures in question entered through the foot and chewed and swam their way up to the victim's eyes. Whereas, Drive Theory held that it, in fact, started and stopped in the foot, however, that it grew upwards in a loop through the whole length of the victim's body. Both hypotheses, of course, inspiring the occasional liberal application of washing machine suds.

But it was too early on this Saturday for that. And in fact, the woman who usually screamed this particular bit of information

hadn't even yet gotten out of bed. So as they ran along the road, they were rather devoid, for the moment, of the presentiments of medical anxiety, except in the form of the question, which Attachment Theory had raised, would being turned into a warty toad be one kind of hex, or would it count as two?

"Of course's two," Drive theory said, while running. "You get cursed with warts, that's one thing. You get turned into a toad, that's 'nother."

"But a toad's already gots warts," Attachment theory said. "That means it's just part 'o being ah toad."

"Nuh uh."

"Uh huh."

Of course, they never so much settled arguments as replaced them, or rephrased already extant ones, or claimed how the question wasn't valid so therefore it was beneath the one or the other to answer finally or fully. Interestingly enough, the only excuse they never made was that a question might be in-answerable. But this was because that, should something prove to be such, they could just go ask Absolute Threshold.

But they didn't need to ask him about witches. They already knew all about that, or them. That was because, in this case, they needn't rely on purely theoretical knowledge, as they had the real thing quite at hand.

Near the top of the hill, the trailer park lying at the bottom of the shallow valley through which the stream ran, in and among and along a stand of trees, stood a shabby house, something that looked of the thirties or forties, though neither of them knew this, with a wire-screened front porch, though most of the wire'd popped from the frames, or been eaten through by rust holes, as if there'd been moths that'd go after steel. It'd been the kind of place that a certain class of folk, neither rich nor poor, but with, perhaps, fear of the one and delusions of the other, would've gone down to in the summer or fall, spending a week or two sporting a shotgun or fly rod. They ran up along the hill toward this old house, though not directly at it, instead, circling to the side, flanking it, going into the stand of trees, making their way up sneak-like, from behind tree to behind tree, till they could discern the strip-board siding, the housing equivalent of a

pinstripe suit. And breathing hard, they attempted to squint through the darkened windows, even from that distance. "See 'nythin?"

"Nope."

"Maybe she goes tuh sleep in the middle o' thuh day."

"That's vampires."

"Could be witches tuh."

"Let's get closuh."

But the front door opened, and they froze, someone emerging onto the porch. She stood there looking out through the rusted mesh wire, sipping from a mug, looking in some way akin to the old table and chairs scattered round on the porch.

"That her?"

"Oh corse that' her."

"What's she doin?"

"What's it look'ike?"

"What you think she's drinkin in the cup?"

"What duh yuh thin?"

She pushed open the screen door and came out on the half-rotten wooden steps; the tar shingles that'd in some distant past been nailed onto them to provide traction had mostly peeled away, leaving only ragged black-grey circles round rusted nail heads.

"Come on, let's go round back."

"What if she turns us into uh nute?"

"Nutes gots legs. Run away."

"ALRIGHT, YOU TWO."

They shot tight against their respective trees, as if they might merge into them.

"BOTH OF YUNS COME OUT RIGHT NOW. OR YOU'LL SEE WHAT I TURN YUNS INTO."

They peeked around.

"AND DON'T BE ALL DAY ABOUT IT."

Sighing, they emerged from round their respective trees, marching languidly down the incline, tromping over leaf litter, toward the rusted-screen-covered porch. She stood there watching them arrive, mug still in hand, steam curling out of it, looking down at them from behind large round glasses that covered half her face, her hair mostly white and naturally kinky, as opposed to curled, as if she'd

been the model for some of those white wigs fashionable around the time of the American Revolution slash colonial uprising. She sipped and looked down at them as they stood there. “And does your mother know where you’ve gotten off to?”

“Yes’m.”

“No, ma’am.”

“Well, I guess I can mix the two together and maybe come to something workable. And you boys’ve had breakfast?”

“Pancakes,” they said in unison.

“Good. I wouldn’t want to waste my breath if yuns’s brains didn’t have enough energy to putter on.”

Both giggled.

“Well then giggle me this, you two Theories and theorists—”

They still giggled.

“—You’re old enough now to learn the harsh truth.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Yes’m.”

“Which means there ain’t no witches.”

“Oh.”

“Oh.”

“And what’s more, yuns go calling a lady a witch, specially ones of a certain age, and you’re liables to get yunselves turned into frogs, if’n somethin’ really bad don’t get done to yuh.”

Both giggled.

“And your leg cut off for a supper.”

“Eww.”

“Yuck.”

“Now,” she said, and sipped her coffee. “Aren’t both of yuns an embarrassment. Running around, barefooted and in overalls that don’t fit. Why, if some tourist was to come along, they’d swear they’d stepped a hundred years back in time. But that’s not the embarrassing part. Yuns know what is?”

Both shook their heads.

“That yuns both do all this for free. Ain’t no professional does anything for free. Why should all them highfalutin county tourist board shitheads—” —Both giggled— “—get to make money for free off the hard work of everybody else?”

"Why should they'm?"

"Yeah, why should they, ma'am?"

"Never mind. But a professional'd demand some of that revenue they generate. And it should go right up to the state. What regional character would they have otherwise? Why, they wouldn't be no different than no other place with a bunch o' idiots packed together."

Both giggled.

"And the national level. Congress should levee a tax and pay everyone in Appalachia a stipend, tax all them news programs and TV shows on all that money they make from the adverts, cause without these people, how's the rest of the country 'sposed to feel better about themselves 'cause they can say *at least we ain't like them, can you imagine that?*"

Both giggled.

"So have some pride, you two. Be professionals."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Yes'm."

She sipped her coffee. "Now, both yuns get outa here, or I'm gonna have yuns both for breakfast."

They turned and bolted down the hill.

She stood there on the steps, sipping her coffee, watching them go. She looked up at the thickly overcast sky, clouds hiding sun and birds and planes alike. A slight wind rose, rustling the tops of the pines on the ridge higher around her. A witch'd've said it was an ill omen. She sipped her coffee.

“Sooner or later, things get flipped round.”

“Like a judo move,” Absolute Threshold said.

“Yeah.” Josh tore into and tried to chew the butt-end of a sub sandwich. “You know, the Indians used to soften their leather by having the women sit around chewing on it.” He was willing to say this in the Substation Beta itself because, if anyone overheard him, it’d’ve, so certain economic arguments that emerged from the Lockes and Keyes Foundation went, eventually filter back to the management by word of mouth, and they’d correct the mistake, getting them back to the original recipe, where the person behind the counter needed a masonry saw to open them up.

Absolute Threshold unpursed his lips from around the straw. “But not everything.”

Josh chewed. “Everything.” He swallowed. “Look, they start bringing out irony as a political and artistic tool in the fifties and sixties, right? And it’s reasonably effective at speaking truth to power, or whatever you want to call it. But then, by the seventies, it’s already in service to the very same things it originally critiqued. And it’s been that way ever since. Really, we’re both in the same generation. This whole Millennial vs Gen-Y crap is a smoke screen. We were both still born in the ironic age. You’re not going to find any better proof of it than the fact that in this same time frame the hippies grew up to be those eighties business practitioners that the eighties version of Lex Luthor was modeled after.” (Villains, of course, as Langdon had once pointed out in a paper many years before, while superheroes represented not an aspiration, but an anti-aspirational force, villains were simply as chained within the societal milieu, attempting to not even change an extant system, and not even merely battling to modify their relative positions within those systems, really, and deployed

their relative modes and action-non-action paradigms such that... However, Josh merely abbreviated it to: heroes and villains fought not each other, but the reader. And he likened this to how liberated prisoners of war sometimes wouldn't leave their confinement, and the aspects relating to other penal systems had long been so often pointed out as to become banal. Which, as Langdon had pointed out, was exactly part of how the process worked.) He lifted his drink and closed his lips around the straw, slurped. "Ironical reversal, judo, whatever you want to call it." He set his drink down. "It's corrosive of everything but capitalism, which was already so corroded that it couldn't be corroded anymore."

"But everything has to have an end."

"Who says? Capitalism could probably survive the big crunch, one of those echoes of previous physics out the other side of a new big bang." He tore at the sandwich. "Maybe that's what already happened." And he took another sip of his drink to soften the bread enough so he didn't have to chew so much. "I mean, already it's easier for everyone to imagine the end of the world through some zombie apocalypse or a meteor or god coming back from the dead than to imagine something post capitalism."

"Just because people can't imagine it, doesn't mean it can't exist."

"Are you intentionally reversing Anselm?"

"Maybe."

Josh set the rest of his sandwich on the wrapper and placed both his hands on the table, drumming his fingers against the laminated surface. "But that becomes a question about human systems, doesn't it? Because somewhere along the line somebody does have to be able to imagine it, or at least some mythic version of it. Otherwise, how does anyone participate in it?"

Absolute Threshold, chewing, shook his head.

Josh lifted his drink and sipped and put it down and lifted his sandwich again. "You know," he said, "I once heard it put that the only reason the book got popular was that it fed into some bourgeois need to destroy itself, a kind of act of ritualistic suicide through literature. And that's why science fiction got a certain boost in the middle of the century, but only things like Fahrenheit and Canticle, those apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic things."

“Would that explain Cormac McCarthy?”

Josh reached for his drink. “Well, what’s the dividing line between the western and science fiction, anyway?” He sipped, noisily, and set it down. “They have a copy of *Before the Golden Age*, you might want to check it out. It’s an anthology. Probably the only good book I can lay at Asimov’s feet, and probably because he only edited it, and the stories that’re in it are so bad they fall over into that nebulous area of can’t look away.” He reached for his drink. “Do you want another sandwich?”

Absolute Threshold shook his head. “Thanks for lunch.”

“Who else am I going to be ironic about irony with?” He wiped his mouth with a paper napkin, tried to clean the vinaigrette dressing that’d dribbled over his fingers and palm. “I’ll drive you back downtown if you’re going that way.”

“Thanks.”

“No trouble.” He slurped his drink, stirring the straw through the ice.

What'd remained of Princess's ears twitched before even her eyes'd opened. She let out a snort, stirring dust, climbing up, mouth hanging open. She barked as the truck came over the hill, and as it followed the twin dirt-routes down. She beat her rear side to side, thumping it against the building. She barked, again, starting to whine as soon as he'd parked the truck and climbed out. Even from the distance, he smelled of sweat and cut trees and gasoline and chainsaw exhaust. "Now, what're you so excited about?" She started to hop round as he approached, wriggling as he bent over her to unfasten the catch. "Hold still half a second." But she rolled over on his boots, looking up at him, mouth open, tongue hanging out. "You always want to make this difficult." He bent lower to rub her belly and untangled the chain and finally managed to unfasten the clasp. But she still lay there on his boots. "Alright, stupid dog." And he growled from down in his throat and rubbed her chest with both hands. "Is this what you want?" She squirmed against the dirt and his boots. "Is this what you want?" And he reached round her and flipped her over, leaving her twisting her neck, mouth still open, trying to look up at him. He patted her side. "Sure, lay around all day. Mooch." If she'd've still had a tail, she'd've thumped it against the ground. He rubbed her head, rubbed over where the rest of her ears'd once been. "Lazy bones. Lazy. Lazy. Lazy." And tugged on the loose skin round her neck. "Lazy bones." And he patted her on the side once more before he started toward the house. The air-conditioner was off, but water still dripped out of it and pooled around the small, washed stones below. The back door open, oven scents drifted out through the screen door, and he inhaled as he opened it.

His mother, standing in front of the stove, looked up. "Your sister

called. She was coming over Balsam. She wanted to know if we needed anything when she did.”

“And did you tell her no?” He pulled off his cap and hung it on the hooks behind the door, pushed his fingers back through his sweat-damp hair.

“You should get cleaned up.”

“Why? She knows I’m stinking and dirty.” He rubbed his face, a five-o’clock shadow like sandpaper. “I’ve still gotta do a couple things first.” He stepped toward the fridge and opened it, lifted one of the glasses that sat upside down on the back of the sink and set it down on the counter nearby. He took out the plastic pitcher, left the fridge door propped open as he poured from it. “Just wanted to get something to drink.” He downed it and set the pitcher inside and closed the fridge. Then he reached into the cabinet and pulled down a can of lactose-free baby formula and opened the drawer for the can opener.

“Dinner’ll be ready.”

He pushed open the screen door, but kept his leg in the gap to keep Princess from prying her way in. “I’m just going to feed the dog. And then I’m going to move those logs.” And he pushed the screen door the rest of the way open, gently shoving Princess back. “Alright, lazy thing. Let’s feed you what you don’t earn.” She stuck in her nose after him as he went into the shed, as he pulled open the bin and reached inside to scoop out a measured amount of kibble, measured because otherwise she’d’ve inhaled a whole bag and still looked at him as if he were starving her. The stainless-steel bowl already sat empty on the ground outside, and she stuck her nose into it. And he had to gently put his boot into her ribs to move her out of the way so he could pick it up and set it atop the bin. He dumped the kibble in, reached into his pocket for the can opener, and popped an outlet hole and a vent hole into the baby formula. He looked down at her where she shoved her face through the partially open door as he poured it. “Aren’t you just special.” And he set down the empty can, standing there and looking at the kibble as it floated and bloated in the formula. “Alright.” He pushed open the door with his boot and stepped out carrying the bowl, set it on the ground. He patted her side as she slopped into it. “You know, I think the breeder must’ve lied. You’re more pig than anything.” He patted her again and left her to it.

She looked up at him as the truck started, turned her head to follow its path out along the fence line and toward a stand of trees, but when he stopped and climbed out, she turned her attention, again, to her bowl while he pulled old planks from the back of the truck and laid them along the bottom of the fence to set freshly inoculated mushroom logs on so they could lean against it, out there where the trees would shade them the most of the time, but where they'd still get wet when it rained. She'd finished by the time he got back, but when he'd climbed out of the truck and started toward the house, she stuck her head in the bowl again, licking the sides, running it round and round and pushing it over the ground. "Alright." He bent and caught it, her gaze following it up. "That's enough for a mooch like you." He went and put it in the shed. He bent over and patted her sides. "What's that? You're just gonna shrivel up and blow away?" He patted her. "More like I'm gonna have to put you on a diet."

They both looked up at the sound of something coming up the road, a tan-colored rental car coming to a stop in front of the house. "Who's this?" he said to Princess. "Hm? Know who this is?" Princess yelped. And when Lucy opened the door and stepped out, she yelped again and tore across the open space, near bowling his sister over when they collided, almost sending her tumbling back into the car seat.

She grabbed her floppy neck. "Oh, you're such a monster." And she squatted down and hugged her, Princess's whole body moving side to side. "A big 'ole scary monster." She continued to rub her down as Shepard approached, stopping by the hood of the car, standing there with his hands in his pockets.

"Don't spoil my dog. She already don't do nothin' as is."

Lucy continued to rub her. "You don't have to do nothing, do you, girl? That's why you're a princess." She rubbed her once more behind the head before she stood.

"Hope you're hungry."

"Starving," she said. "Haven't had anything since this morning."

Princess stood next to her, against her leg, looking up, looking back and forth between the two of them, toward the front door when it opened. Their mother wiped her hands on a towel as she started down the front steps. She hugged Lucy, Princess looking up at all of them.

“Well, come inside,” her mother said. She motioned to Shepard. “Get her things.”

He nodded his head to Princess. “Come on, girl, you and me fetch.” And he stepped around the car and pulled out the two bags in the back seat. He followed them inside, making sure Princess didn’t sneak through the door, leaving her there looking through the lower, fencing-wire-reinforced screen as he set down the bags and said, “I’m going to take a shower.”

. . .

Later, Princess lay on the cool concrete slab outside the back door, occasionally looking up and over her shoulder, through the screen door, at them, when cutlery moved around or anyone pushed back a chair, such as when their mother finally excused herself and carried a plate and glass into the den.

Lucy leaned over the table, whispered, “She’s still doing that?”

“You wanna tell her to stop?” Shepard said. The tv blared from the next room.

Lucy rolled her eyes.

Shepard smiled, painfully. “So tell us, what and all interesting’s going on in Ohio?”

. . .

After dinner, while their mother’d settled into watching Wheel of Fortune, Shepard had slipped on his rubber boots and gone out to check on the chickens, herding them into the coop for the night, locking them in, while Lucy, squatting, rubbing Princess, kept her from trying to squeeze her way through the door when he went in and out. After he latched the door, he turned and looked at her lying there upside down, mouth open, tongue hanging out. He shook his head. “I don’t know that I can watch, this’s so brutal.”

“Yes, you’re just a big brutal monster, aren’t you?”

Princess just looked up at them with her mouth open.

“She’s just trying to get you to help her get out of her exercise. And you’re falling for it hook, line, and sinker.”

“Oh, really?” She rubbed her. “Is that it?” Princess snorted,

partially sneezed. "Uh uh." Lucy stood. "Well, come on. Let's go. You want to go for a walk, don't yuh?"

They went out along the rutted dirt road, Princess between them, walking on the grass middle between the routes as if it were her own personal carpet rolled out. Lucy breathed deep, sneezed. "Oh, damn it." She coughed and wiped her nose. Princess sneezed, shook her head. "I hate spring."

"I guess you could've gone down to Cancun for spring break."

"You're so behind. Nobody goes down there anymore. And the only reason you know about it is you used to jerk off to wet t-shirt contests on that show that used to come on."

"It still comes on."

"Oh really. Why am I not surprised you know that."

"The host is different though. It's not the same."

Lucy snorted. "So, do you have a girlfriend yet?"

"First of all, I prefer post-pubescent females."

"Well then, first of all, eww. And second, are you seeing any post-pubescent females?"

"Not currently. You?"

"That's none of your business."

"Oh, but my life's yours, is that it?"

"As your older sister, I have certain obligations."

"Oh."

Princess sneezed again. Lucy momentarily bent and scratched her head. "It's my job to look out for you. Besides, it's getting weird, you know?"

"Oh?"

"Don't *oh* me."

They stopped along the fence line, looked down a stretch of green-ness, two-tone cows scattered in the distance. Sunset'd turned the clouds pinkish, banding toward red as the evening wore on.

"Why don't you get on one of those farmers dating sites, or something."

"First of all," he said, "eww."

"Well, it's better than nothing."

"I've had nothing," he said, "for a long time. And I've seen some of the other things, and I prefer nothing."

"You know, sometimes you're just a complete asshole."

Princess sat between them, looking through the fence and down the field.

"I know that," he said. "If I actually said half of what I wanted to say, there wouldn't nobody in this county want to get within fifty miles of me. But since the county'd effectively have to empty out, that might not be a bad idea."

"No one said you had to stay around."

"And this?"

It was a well rehearsed argument, always for the same audience of none (one, depending on how you want to count Princess), so the players knew their parts well, almost so well they didn't even have to try and slip into them.

"Rent it. Sell it. I don't know. Do you really like it, anyway?"

"It's something to do. And besides, what about her?"

Princess looked up at him.

"You know, this isn't the only place in the world you can have a dog."

He shook his head, his hands in his pockets as he looked down the field. "Wherever I go, I'm going to be there. So I might as well stay here, since I'm already here."

"Oh, bullshit." Princess turned her attention on Lucy, cocked her head. "Failure to launch is what it is."

He removed his hands from his pockets and absently motioned at everything. "I run a farm on my own." And he gripped the top of a T-post. "I don't starve. I pay taxes. I complain about paying taxes. I fail to see how much more adult I can get with my clothes on."

"Well, first, eww. And second, that's the point."

"Then it'll just be *when're yuh gonna have kids*."

"Nobody said anything about that."

"You know what, you go to church on Sunday and let them ask you that a couple dozen times and see how you feel about it after a while."

"You forget *I'm from here too*." But this was all just banter. Princess, who'd looked down the field, looked up at Lucy again, shifted her left forepaw. Lucy added, "Idiot."

"Moron."

They both stood looking down the field and at the slow-moving,

two-tone bovines in the distance that seemed half mirage in the near darkness.

"Besides," he said, "I'm too screwed up. There isn't anyone that's gonna wanna deal with that."

"You are not screwed up."

"I might as well be a virgin, hell, I effectively am."

"You're not a virgin.... Right?"

"Only technically not."

"I don't know if I even wanna know what that means."

"I don't know if I wanna know what it means, either." He sighed. "Alright, you tell me. I can't even stand the thought of the one-night-stand thing. I don't understand the point. It depends too much on this whole idea that there's good and bad at sex, rather than the idea it's going to be completely different between two different people, and quite frankly, probably suck till they start to figure each other out—yes, please, go ahead and laugh."

"Well, what am I supposed to say?"

"But I am sick to fucking death about hearing about finding *the one* and getting married. They've told me to do that my entire fucking life. And I refuse to just roll over."

Princess lay down and rolled onto her back.

Shepard looked down. "Now you do it." He looked down the field and shook his head.

Lucy knelt and rubbed Princess's stomach. "Maybe it would help if you stopped living with mom."

"Technically speaking, she lives with me."

"Technically speaking..." She rose. "It's technically the same thing."

"And technically you're fulla crap."

She punched his arm. "Technically you're a moron."

And she stepped over Princess and behind him and threw one of her arms around him and pressed it against his throat, the other against the back of his neck. "And I can still beat you up if I have to."

"Only if I let you."

She laughed and pulled away from him.

The evening had darkened to umber, the clouds opposite the almost gone sun having reddened to black.

"Let's at least go to the trees," she said. They started toward the darkened line in the distance. "So what're you doing these days? Something's gotta be different."

"I'm growing mushrooms."

"Mushrooms?"

"Yeah, shiitakes. They had a program through the 4-H office to buy the stuff to do them."

"Trust you to get a very boring kind of shrume."

"And do you consume a lot of *shrumes* in Ohio?"

"That's none of your business."

"Uh huh. You know, I'm beginning to think this relationship's very one way."

They stopped on the edge of the woods, the road seemingly consumed in the blackness beyond, a veil that fell straight down to cut it off, curtaining off the edge of the world. Princess looked into it, sniffing.

"You know," she said, "there's this whole big world going on out there. And you're stuck here. And it's such a waste." She turned and looked over the darkening landscape, the blood-red clouds along a distant ridge. "And mom's not right, you know? No matter how many times she says it. There isn't plenty enough time for that. And I don't want you to wake up one of these days and figure that out and it already be too late."

"I am not as stupid as you think. I did figure that out a long time ago. It's just that *was* already too late, even then."

She choked the air. "Don't be such an idiot. Hell, just come up to Ohio for a week, and I'll show you around. That's all it'd take. Or go *anywhere*."

"First of all, eww. And second, the accent, alone, is going to work against me more than I care to fight."

"You never say anything anyway, so I don't see what *that* matters. And what eww? What's so eww about it?"

"What? You're the one saying you want to haul me around to your friends going, here, sleep with my brother."

"Okay, eww. You are just fucked up in the head."

"Now you're getting it."

"Idiot."

"Moron." Shepard shook his head, looking at the lights in the distance. "We'd better start back or we won't be able to see the road."

"I don't know why we came out here to this creepy haunted forest, anyway."

Princess walked between them.

"You're the one who said we should come out here. Drag me out here so I miss Jeopardy."

"Oh god."

"Not anymore," Shepard said.

"What?"

He shook his head, though she could barely discern that in the dark. "Nothing." They walked on, almost having come to the end of their lines. "If you want to know the truth, I'm a romantic who doesn't believe love exists."

"Love exists."

"As something that the Hallmark channel tries to sell you to get you to keep watching commercials."

"Oh god. How do you stand living here?"

"Oh, it's worse now. They've combined with the mystery channel, so now everything's romance *and* mystery. Over and over and over and over and *over*."

"You see," she said, and put her arm around his shoulders, "if you'd just let me rescue you, you could get away from all this."

"Uh huh. So is there, like, a masculine slash feminine role in gay relationships, where one of you is the prince and the other is the princess? Or something like that?"

She punched him in the arm with her free hand.

"Ow. Abuse. Abuse." He looked down. "Stupid dog. Don't you see your master's being assaulted here."

"Don't call her stupid. You're not stupid, are you, Princess?"

Princess looked up.

"No, you're not. You've got more brains than your so-called master, isn't that right?"

"Hey, don't question my judgment in front of my subordinates." He looked down. "Don't listen to her."

Princess looked up at him.

"No," Lucy said. "Throw off your chains. Rise up." Princess

looked up at her. “Overthrow your oppressors. And grasp your destiny.”

“Just remember—” —Princess looked up at him— “—I’m the one that can operate a can opener.”

She punched him in the arm. “Down with the technocratic elites.”

“Ow.” He said to Princess, “You see this. This’s sibling abuse. I’m gonna call you as a witness in a court of law. Just be glad you don’t have any litter mates around.”

She punched him in the arm.

“Ow.”

“Oh, you’re such a baby.”

“Well, I *am* the baby.” Ahead, their mother’d turned on the rear porch light. Moths fluttered against the bulb, associating in common interest with some less than reputable species.

“So are these friends of yours attractive?”

“Jenny’s cute. I think you two would hit it off.”

“And is she deaf?”

She punched him in the arm.

“Oh, come on, even John Stewart affects a southern accent when he wants to convey someone as being mentally handicapped.”

She punched him in the arm. “Man up and get some confidence and self-respect.”

“I’m confident in quite a few things—and if you hit me again, so help me, I’m gonna sic my dog on you.”

“Go ahead and try. Princess knows who really acknowledges her royalness.” And she punched him in the arm.

“That’s it.” He stepped away, pointed at Lucy. “Get her.” And Princess looked up at him, looked over at Lucy. “Go on. Get her.” But Princess just stood there, looking back and forth between them, shaking her whole body. And they both laughed.

It wasn't that it was a bad sunset, just that, he thought, or more accurately, felt, that it'd've been a hell of a lot better with just a little less cloud cover, so that the red could've really disseminated, diffused, acted more as a filter to the light, rather than a shade. It should've matched the paint on the storage building door. He rooted in his pockets for his keys, first his pants, then his jacket, even aimlessly patting his shirt pocket, before he ran his fingers over a trouser seam and turned toward the car and opened the door and bent inside and pulled them from the ignition. He went and knelt and unfastened the lock and shoved up the door. Everything inside lay draped in shadow, and he groped near the entrance for the light switch, an old incandescent bulb flickering dimly on overhead. He stood there with his hands in his pockets, looking at it all. A bunch'a junk. He poked a cardboard box with the end of his shoe. A bunch'a junk. And not in the local colloquial sense, which, generally speaking, referred to any collection of objects as *junk*, regardless of their actual status as trash. He couldn't even remember what he wanted out of here. Cars passed on the two-lane road behind him, headlights washing over his back, over the line of storage buildings, casting his shadow out along them, animating it, convoluting it. The single incandescent light overhead flickered, already attracting insects that bashed their chitinous bodies into its glass bulbousness. What *had* he come out here to get? He couldn't even remember what was in it. He looked at the stacked cardboard boxes, lacking the energy to pull his hands from his pockets and pry open the cardboard flaps to find out. What the hell did any of it matter, anyway? The interior smelled like cardboard and paper and fabric, like all that stuff does when packed together, and opened up again, concentrated, a kind of smell a study one day would find that everyone really wanted, without knowing it, extra-chunky spaghetti

sauce all over again, and the fragrance companies would fall over themselves to figure out how to create an authentic synthetic version, like coming into your house after being away a long time, noticing the things continual experience of the place had allowed to be elided over, then, as if a veil'd been pulled away and great big neon arrows then pointed at the incongruities, everything which'd always been there revealed yet nevertheless something utterly comfortable to settle into. Home. Forget flowers, and the musk from the anal gland of some marsupial. If they could spritzer-bottle *that* smell, home, it'd be the bestselling perfume in history. He breathed in deeply through his nose and tilted back his head and held his breath and closed his eyes.

But light filtered through his eyelids, warm semi-pinkness. But he didn't open them. A car slowed and pulled into the gravel, parking nearby. The doors opened, because, of course, who was going to stop there not to get out?

"Russell."

He opened his eyes, righted his head, and turned. She looked at him overtop the car door, as if unintentionally using it as a shield, the light from inside the storage facility and passing cars reflecting in the glass that revealed the midsection of her dress. She stepped out from behind the door, closed it.

He said, "Did Anime tell you?"

"No."

Hunter, too, had climbed out, looking overtop the car. Russell's eyes flickered toward him. Except for the occasional passing car, the only sounds remained tinkings against glass as an insect slammed its body into the incandescent bulb. Russell pulled his hand from his pocket, looked down at the keys still in his grasp. They tinked against themselves as he shifted them.

"I tried to call," Marietta said.

He didn't reply, still shifting the keys around the ring.

"Russ..."

He pried his thumbnail into the ring, tearing the connection between his nail and the nail bed, registering the pain in a not unpleasant way. He'd successfully avoided the paper all day, resilience in the face of a longstanding habit and possible addiction, because, even if he hadn't known he'd read it, somewhere, deep down, he knew that

some part of him would've known his eyes'd elided over the words scattered across grey newsprint, and they'd've been down there in some level of his memory, distributed who could tell how, through his brain, so that, even if a chunk of it were cut out, it'd still retain something, somehow, somewhere, always threatening to re-emerge at some as yet to be experience unexpected association with or to some future physical trauma, as he delved backwards into his own past if he'd found himself succumbing to Alzheimer's in some twenty or thirty years, except even that amount of time seemed too far away, too long, more than he cared for, as if an over-allotment had taken place, someone slopping too much on the tray in the line where they'd passed out such things before everyone'd arrived on Earth. And it was only luck that there was no after Earth, and that, at that point, all he'd have to worry about would be some worm consuming that section of his brain that contained this or that memory, the worm incorporating that memory into its own, in the best way it could, as happens when puréed worms are fed to one another, maybe, eventually, passing that memory on to be incorporated into something else that ate that worm, a crow, perhaps, which might explain the intelligence of crows, after all, how many thousands of years, flashes of fragmentary memories, might they have incorporated?

"I know I can't say anything."

He'd bled on the stainless-steel ring, a dark spot having already formed under the end of his nail. "Then don't." He looked up at her. And he turned to look inside the storage facility, more and more insects beating themselves against the incandescent bulb, likely, he considered, burning their feet and legs and wings.

"Russell."

He turned, stepped toward the car, slapped down the key on the roof. "You can keep everything else." He looked at her. In the darkness that'd come with the final setting of the sun, the only light was from that which poured out of the storage space and from the few pole lamps only slowly flickering on for insurance purposes, she looked...

He turned and started toward his car.

"Russ."

He turned, looking at Hunter. But neither said anything. Russell turned toward the car and, keys still in his hand, blood crusted against

the ring, he climbed in and started it, backing out onto the two-lane, not yet having turned on the headlights, not willing to cast any light over either of them. And he started down the road.

“This,” Hannah said, “is why you don’t break-in new boots on the trail.” She knelt, Jennifer’s leg resting across her (Hannah’s) knee. She opened the first-aid kit on the ground beside her and pulled out a large coverlet and opened the packaging, peeling it open and applying it to the side of Jennifer’s foot, rubbing it down.

Graham sat on the other side of the fire, watching.

They’d made it to the campsite, a cleared area with stones already in place to build a fire, and logs already around it to provide seating. In the flickering firelight, Langdon and Paxton were still busy finalizing a tent, the thing looking like one of those creatures that can swallow other creatures many times its own body size, now contemplating a solution for indigestion.

“Well,” Jennifer said, “my old ones blew out. So it was either these or nothing.” She crossed her calf over her knee and rubbed her foot. Hannah crumpled the wrapping and waxed paper and tossed them into the fire, snapped closed the first-aid kit. “It’ll be fine,” Jennifer said. “I can still walk like this.”

“You’ll just have to try and not get it wet while it’s raw,” Hannah said. She stuffed the first-aid kit into her pack.

Paxton and Langdon moved toward the fire, standing there, since all the logs were occupied. “What’s the prognosis?”

“It’s just a blister,” Jennifer said. She slipped her sock on, then her boot, but didn’t lace it. And she dug into her pack for a fruit bar, offered one to Hannah. “Want one?” But Hannah shook her head and zipped her pack.

Bernadette, sitting on one of the logs looking at her phone, said, “Time changes in three hours.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Hannah said. “We’re sleeping in the dark and traveling at daylight, regardless of what the clock says.”

Repetition, of course, had profound psychological and physiological effects, which was one reason it was often so important in the oral traditions of pre-literate societies, a usage of language that seemed to indicate there was some inevitability of the textual, as Langdon noticed in the moment, but which depended on whether one wanted to follow Ong in the direction of the consideration that the inscribed was a form of technology whereas the enunciated emerged primarily from the unconscious, or not, though, too, there'd long been an argument about if whether or not the psychological actually existed, as, in the end, there was only changes in hardware states, as that, really, by definition, was all that software was, though these former devotees of Lacan, who in the thralls of early nineties academic cybernetic frenzy had jumped ship to the brain-computer metaphor...

"Well, yeah," Bernadette said, "but it's still there."

Langdon squatted, resting his hairy forearms across his hairier knees, looking at the fire. "That would depend on your definition. Time's supposed to be always relative to the observer."

Jennifer laughed as she chewed. "You've made a category error. We're biology students, not physicists."

"They don't allow us around the hard stuff," Lydia said.

"Biology's just applied chemistry," Bernadette said, without looking up from her phone. "And chemistry's just applied physics." Her lips contorted as she said this, as if she might need to spit.

"Yeah, and by that logic," Lydia said, "Since my aunt went to Cannes and met a makeup artist that worked on Mystic River, that means I'm Kevin Bacon." But this wasn't aimed at Bernadette, but rather at the same grad students not presently present.

That got a round of laughter and snorts.

"That would depend," Langdon said, "on what exactly we mean when we say someone is Kevin Bacon?" That got a round of laughter and snorts, as well, though he hadn't really meant it to.

"So," Lydia said, "what *do* we mean when we say someone is Kevin Bacon?"

"That would depend," Langdon said. "The first thing people would think of is a physical appearance, like a face. Several studies do back up the prime importance of the face in inter-social identification. Even among other species of apes. And birds." They laughed.

"Though, some indicate hair style is crucial, at least for a certain portion of a given population of species with such body plans, in making such identifications as well."

"He was in that movie where they did that laser scan of his whole body, you know. For the special effects." Bernadette didn't look up from her phone as she said this.

"Get a three-d printer," Lydia said, "and you could have your own personal Kevin Bacon."

"A million Kevin Bacons," Juliette said.

"But," Langdon said, "by the same token, one could ask..." He shook his head.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"What was that?" Lydia said. "What?"

Langdon shook his head. He recalled a paper in which it was examined whether or not two silicone sex toys molded from the genitalia of porn stars, as were commercially available, which when engaged with one another, constituted a type of sexual assault against or related to in some way those whose bodies the molds for such were cast from, or, alternatively, against those observing such a display. He always bogged on the seemingly simple, the fact of the matter being, at least as he'd sometimes ruminated on, that the so-called simple slash simplistic problems usually brought up in Philosophy 101 classes were actually the toughest, in that everyone seemingly figured them either stupid or that surely there should've been some seeming progress in the last X thousand years, so all of them reasonably solved, everyone could move on, everyone (or at least, sometimes, to Langdon) avoiding the possibility of the notion that all subsequent classes and gradations of so-called hard problems had been invented to avoid acknowledging that even the so-called 'easy stuff' still hadn't been solved, or even possibly truly even described properly. So it just all kept piling up. Which reminded him of his office. He shook his head. "No, obviously that level of patternology itself isn't inherent to the being. So then we have to ask, what else is it? What else is involved? Where does the patternology begin and end? The definition of the definition. We dismiss appearances. But personality? Habits? Other physical things such as speech patterns? How closely

do you have to replicate something before you don't care about the distinction between the two? Even if the patterns are non-spatially homogeneous. After all, that's what makes mass consumer culture possible. But we wouldn't say that someone who likes Starbucks coffee and went there to get, say, a specific frappuccino was the same person as someone else who happened to do that. Or maybe we could, that is, if we categorize people as functionally equivalent, in terms of being consumer units. Actually, in the internal documentation of... So therefore, anything with an identical consumptive pattern would be interchangeable with another of that same pattern. And if I can bring in biology..." They laughed. It's too bad alcohol wasn't allowed on this trip. But Langdon paused, sitting there considering what it really *meant* to have DNA and what it really meant for DNA to be defined in terms of information systems, especially once such were used to encode and store information generated by the DNA-encoded systems that generated such secondary data and encodings.

"Well," Bernadette said, "there'd have to be an original. So that would be different."

However, certain studies have shown that people interacting with someone they believe to be inebriated (regardless of their actual state of inebriation) they (the subjects not pretending to be inebriated) will display symptoms of inebriation. It remains untested as to whether a similar effect arises from conversations or interactions that merely *appear* to have the character of inebriation or follow the conventions of such conversations, even when all participants involved are aware no such inebriation is extant at the time.

"But the question is which came first? The definition of Kevin Bacon? Or the existence of Kevin Bacon? Or are they interlinked? So that you have to have both, but you can't have one before the other? Or is there a nebulous meta-definition that must first exist in the socio-context of a given society?"

Lydia uncapped her canteen. "I am so glad I'm in biology."

The three of them laughed.

Professor Paxton had unpacked and unfolded a small camping stool and set it between two logs, facing the fire.

"Is this what your job is?" Graham said. "Talking about Kevin Bacon?"

"Sometimes."

"Well," Jennifer said, "it beats the Krebs cycle, at least."

"So," Lydia said, looking across the fire at Langdon, "How do you know if Kevin Bacon's even *really* Kevin Bacon?"

"That could be considered an open question."

"So for all we know, I could be Kevin Bacon and even *I* might not be aware of it?"

"Well... Possibly."

They laughed.

"So we all could be secretly somebody else and not even know it."

He paused. "Yes. Maybe."

They laughed.

"So," Lydia said, "if I were Kevin Bacon, in disguise, and say, I had sex with a man, would that make me gay or bisexual or straight?"

"Well..." The other two grad students chuckled to themselves. "Sexuality, or what we call sexuality, the labeling system, or one of them, as defined, is a rather modern socio-economic memeological function, so it would be somewhat difficult to say without study, and it would be very culturally contextual, and of course, that is independent of the phenomenon or phenomena which it labels." Though, he had a tendency to be this way most of the time, it became worse when he was out in nature for extended periods. "But you might say such systems bring some of that which they describe into existence through definition." And an old sexual partner'd once mused, while they were lying in bed, that it operated as some sort of defense mechanism. At the time, he'd been lost in thinking about something as the light'd come through the window and between the blinds, and when he'd asked her what she'd said, she'd only gotten out of bed in reply. Actually, that'd happened one time with a guy, aswell. Or a few times. Actually, such variants of such interaction probably weren't uncommon enough to call uncommon. And looking into the fire, he considered what the threshold between the common and uncommon was, given that so often numerical potency and everyday interaction wasn't enough for some to consider some phenomena or blank to be—

"So if I were Kevin Bacon, cultural context would be important to you?"

"Cultural context is important to anything that it's important to."

The three grad students laughed.

"Since no one else's going to say it," Hannah said, and she glanced at Langdon, half smiling, "they're laughing at you, not with you."

"We are not," Jennifer said.

"No," Lydia said, "we're not." She glanced over at Bernadette. "Will you stop playing that."

Bernadette looked up from her phone, her face illuminated more by backlight than firelight. "I'm listening."

"Yeah."

Jennifer snorted. "Besides," she said, having been inspired by Bernadette's phone, "one of these days the physics department'll have their colossal mega quantum computer, or whatever, and they'll be able to calculate and simulate anything, from cultural context to biology, since it's all physics, anyway. So it won't matter, anyway." She laughed. "All as simple as that."

Paxton laughed as he unscrewed his water bottle. "For the moment, anyway...." He sipped. "It may not be as simple or ... dry as physics, admittedly, but..."

"That's just bullshit," Lydia said. "I mean, we get called *soft* science, yet physics comes up with all this woo woo quantum mechanics shit where you can't tell where something is and where it's going at the same time, and it's just so *vigorously hard*."

Jennifer snickered.

"Well," Langdon said, "some studies indicate that the words hard and soft generally have masculine and feminine connotations in the linguistic dispositions of most present English-speaking countries. And statistically, more men gravitate toward college-level physics courses and women toward college-level psychology and biology-type courses. And this pattern repeats itself in the larger workforce."

"And what's that mean?" Bernadette said. "There's a biological basis for it?"

"It's just a data point," Langdon said. "I mean, it depends on what you want to put into the definition of a data point."

"So," Lydia said, "we could define Kevin Bacon to be a data point."

"If we wanted."

She and Jennifer laughed, but Bernadette was still aggravated at the seemingly inherent sexist nature of certain fields of human

knowledge. "So," she said, "do you think knowledge or ideas can be gendered?"

"Well... I don't know. It depends on what we mean by the definition of the definition of gender, as opposed to, say, sex as a—"

"An amoeba never wore lingerie," Jennifer said. Lydia chuckled. Bernadette looked at her.

"We'd better start getting ready for some sleep," Hannah said. "It's getting late. And tomorrow we'll be on rougher trails."

"Yeah," Graham said. "You'll walk your asses off tomorrow."

"Well..." Paxton rose and stretched. "In the service of inter-department relations, Langdon and I'll be sleeping together." The three grad students chuckled. Though Paxton was better at detecting such things than Langdon, he, however, still tended only to do so in retrospect, a tendency which'd left him with a masterful ability to shrug, which he exercised. "So," Paxton said, "until tomorrow, good night."

"Yeah," Langdon said. "Might as well." He rose. "Night."

Lydia said, "Good night, Doctor Jones."

They both turned and walked toward their tent.

Graham looked across the fire. "If anyone needs a place to sleep." He rose. "Or if you want to foster any inter-department relations," he said to Hannah, smiling, and then started back down the trail to take a leak.

After he'd disappeared into the distance, Jennifer leaned over and said, "Do guys like this actually think that stuff works?"

"Well of course," Lydia said, "aren't you just all wet and desperate to run over and hop into his tent for when he gets back?"

Jennifer pulled a face. "Don't think you're being so coy."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yeah. About the only thing you haven't done today is hop into his lap and ask him if he's seeing anyone."

"Why would I care about that?"

"Aaaaand," Jennifer said, "that's enough for tonight." She stood, lifting her bag. "Just have the decency not to wake me when you crawl in."

Bernadette said, "What's the bear population like these days?"

"They're around," Hannah said.

Shepard yawned and stretched, stirring a cup of instant coffee as he looked out the kitchen window at black jam. He saw his mother reflected in the glass as she entered, sweeping a strand of hair behind her ear as she moved to get an apron from the peg on the back of the door. "I'll have breakfast ready in just a bit."

He tapped the spoon on the edge of the mug. "There's no need to worry about it. I already had some toast."

She shook her head. "If you're going to eat toast in the morning, you might as well just go outside and open your mouth and let the sun shine down your throat." She moved a black cast-iron skillet from the back burner to the front.

"I guess I could wait and do that about lunch time, if it isn't still cloudy." He sipped his coffee, turned away from the window.

"It's nice to watch the sun come up after services are out." She turned toward the fridge. "It's inspiring. Peaceful. Like seeing creation all over again."

"I doubt creation is peaceful," he said.

She glanced at him as she carried out the bacon packet. "What?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. Just talking to myself."

She set the package on the counter and peeled a strip away to lay it in the heating pan, the black iron not yet warm enough to make it sizzle. "Are you going to wake your sister?"

"No."

She pulled free another strip of bacon. "That might be a good idea. Jet lag, and all that."

"You don't get jet lag going north to south."

She finished filling the pan, stepped toward the sink, and shooed him out of the way, turned on the faucet with her elbow. "Of course you do, all that flying around, covering all that distance at once, just

whoosh, and you're somewhere completely different. And it does things to the human body."

Shepard sipped his instant coffee. Having spent his life with and in the situation at present and therefore not bothering to consider it beyond what he had to, beyond the fact that it was, in fact, a fact of life. Though, his sister's spring break returns had, in the past several years, forced upon him a certain reconsideration of the nature of time, and the county's relationship to it, which, even all things considered, was rather unique. Sure, there were several counties dotted throughout the United States who refused to honor daylight saving time, so that a person driving through them would be justified in, and legally required to in some situations, to set their clock back then forward and back then forward at each successive county line till they'd made it out of the state. The consequence of this, or the price of it, was, usually, a cut in federal spending to any such county that refused to adopt daylight saving time. But in regards to this county, there were two important things. One, it was, in fact, this being one of those aforementioned counties, the law that the time change had to be observed, and that any personal opting out of such was illegal, as, for example, if pulled over during a routine traffic stop, a violator could additionally be fined up to but not exceeding seven-hundred-fifty dollars for having an incorrect dash clock, though this wasn't considered overly burdensome, and previous court cases had established that counting common hardware and grocery store items as drug paraphernalia was precedent enough to allow it to stand. Second, in contradiction to those aforementioned counties, this county, expressly, as per federal regulation and agreement, did not lose any federal funding on account of its observation, or more accurately, how it chose to do so, that is, how it observed daylight saving time. This is important because, as stated, counties not expressly observing daylight saving time often found themselves under federal censure, and some had argued, during the initial lawsuits that'd been taken up in regard to this issue, between the county and state and federal governments, it had been argued that the county's plans were, in fact, prejudicial to the whole process of the standardization of time that the state and federal governments were trying to achieve, however, the courts, though taken out of the matter by an eleventh hour deal with

legislators, involving a formerly unknown and secret party, would have probably not found it to be that way, at least such had been the opinions of those interviewed on the judicial sections of various state-related programming made available on PBS. So the county lost no federal funding and technically did implement daylight saving time. However, with some caveats: It began on midnight Sunday morning on the first Sunday following standard daylight saving time, at which point the county clocks advanced five hours, for a period of nineteen hours, after which they retreated one hour per day at midnight, except Saturday, resetting at Midnight on the following Sunday, continuing that way until the last Sunday of the month. The argument for this, which only a portion of can be gleaned from the transcript of the lawsuit, being as how the witness enumerating it was in the midst of multiple days worth of testimony when the case was put on hold, and eventually dismissed, the aforementioned deal having been struck, related to the idea that daylight saving time, as currently practiced, robbed the universe of some essential constant, contributing to several ill factors, and therefore, a kind of recharge process had to be undertaken, that is, a kind of pumping action, which, somehow, the aforementioned process, over the course of approximately one month, or so many Sundays, whichever came first, after which the county would find itself on regular daylight saving time, the month-ish span somehow enough to counteract the rest of the country's partial year on the standard, so the process would recharge something or the other, or pump it back up, ensuring something that nominally remained undefined, however, as the person giving this testimony was later unavailable due to death, and due to the fact that the man in question was both embalmed and buried in a steel-lined casket, it is considered unlikely, on any reasonable timescale, that is the timescale for the existence of the human species, that the steel will decay enough at a sufficient rate, along with the wood, etc, and that the embalming process has likely destroyed any memories present or damaged them to the extent they would probably be useless, so it seems unlikely that any evolutionary descendants of crows or worms will be found to contain anything resembling the memories of or about that trial or the explanation that had been prepared to be given during it.

Though, also, this wasn't always exactly how it worked, as the spec wasn't as rigorously defined as some might have wanted it to be, so in regards to the more vague aspects, implementers each year were granted some leeway into exactly how this would work out in practice, so there tended to be some slight variability year to year. Some claimed the spec didn't in fact work at all and that in fact it made no sense at all. They, however, accepted that this amount of granted leeway might help to smooth over that fact during the actual implementation, as well. Others argued that its vagary was a feature, as anything that was too rigorously and rigidly defined probably wouldn't be able to stand up to too heavy a breeze. Things had to have a little flex. They invoked an old eastern parable in support of this, and whenever they did, many always tended to nod their heads at that.

However, due to the precedent set by certain recent anti-gambling laws being struck down by the Supreme Court on the basis of it being illegal for the federal government to be selective about to which state a given law applied, some speculated there might be a future case related to this issue in which the previously granted exception in regards to this particular county's interrelation between the clock and the sun would have to be reevaluated. However, in such a case, it was already speculated that certain organizations and individuals were working on measures that would apply this alternative conceptualization, or refinement, of daylight saving time universally across all states. However, it can be suspected that those counties that already ignored daylight saving time would ignore this alternative conceptualization, as well.

"How many eggs do you want?"

As he sipped his instant coffee, he held up two fingers. His mother crumpled the bacon packet into the garbage can, motioned him out of the way so she could get to the sink, before she opened the fridge again. "And what were you two up to so late talking about?"

"Stuff."

"Just stuff, huh." She got down a bowl, separating some of the excess bacon grease into it. "And has your sister said anything about a boyfriend?"

"Not to my knowledge." He sipped his instant coffee.

"You and her are just alike."

“Well, a little different.”

“You know what I mean.” The eggs sizzled in the pan, popping at the edges.

He reached over and snitched a piece of bacon.

“Well, there’s plenty of time for that kind of stuff, anyway.” She reached up and got a plate, lifted the two eggs onto it, but as she turned to set it on the table, he took it from her hand, set his mug on the counter, and opened the drawer. “You shouldn’t eat standing up.”

He picked out a fork. “Well, maybe if a little more of it went to my feet,” he cut into an egg, put a slice in his mouth, “maybe they’d resize and I could buy boots that fit.”

“Oh, don’t talk with your mouth full.” She turned toward the stove, cracked another couple eggs into the pan. And he stood there eating in silence, the only sound his fork scraping against the plate, as she got down another, shooed him out of the way to fill a mug, and stuck it in the microwave, turning to garnish the plate with bacon, turning, again, toward the microwave, stretching up to get the instant coffee container out of the cabinet, and finally carried both the mug and plate into the living room. He heard the staccato sounds that emanated from the TV as he put the plate in the sink and rinsed off the egg yolk. She called, “Make sure you take a shower.”

“But, ma, I just had one last Saturday.”

“Dear.”

“Yes, mam.” He went into the living room. A jagged pink-turquoise line momentarily bifurcated the News 10 logo and the runner along the bottom of the screen, then was gone, as if it’d been a signal from some unknown reality trying to break through. In the old days there’d been a lot of snow and static, sometimes the picture turning crooked and falling down the stairs, now, with digital technology, everyone sometimes looked like the targets of a pie-throwing contest, or mutants reporting from a post-apocalyptic wasteland. The light of it washed over his mother’s face as she sat there in the recliner with the plate in her lap.

• • •

The small metal medicine cabinet that hung over the sink was the original one his great grandfather'd put in; a hole punched in the back of it, as they did in those days, mated to a corresponding hole in the wall, for the disposal of dulled razor blades. He opened the mirror and pulled out the razor, which, while the body remained the same as he'd inherited from his father, who'd inherited it from his father, who'd inherited it from his father, the blade was of more recent manufacture, since, oddly enough, in the day and age of the five and six and soon to be seven bladed things they advertised so consistently on tv, safety razor blades were also still being manufactured. Of course, there was a theory that held that nothing manufactured ever stopped being manufactured, something semi-proved by taking a circa-1900 farming catalog and going through it to see if any given item wasn't still manufactured. (This coexisted with the fact of the financial collapse of certain truck and hay baler manufacturers in that those instances referred only to specific instances, and not general categories of goods.) Sure, it might not be in huge quantities, or even in the United States, but if an industrious person were willing to look up a company on the African subcontinent, it'd even be possible to find an ACME Rotary Three Sisters All In One double cylinder-ed planting attachment for tractor use, originally advertised in 1900 for twenty-four dollars and fifty cents, though, technically, it was a special order, as the default factory model had three cylinders, but that was for a larger tractor; it also lacked the name ACME painted on the side, but that could be overlooked. He knew this because he'd loaned the catalog to the person who'd found such. (Although, in fact, the situation would be considered doubly interesting by some, in that a specimen of the original machine had never actually before been manufactured in the first place, the original having been made to order, and no orders for such ever having been forthcoming.) And so rather than subscribing to newer catalogs, he kept a copy of that 1900 catalog, since, though Sears itself having gone the way of Roebuck, it still, as mentioned, proved surprisingly useful on occasion, and worth it having been saved from the outhouse before it'd been torn down. And generally speaking, it proved quicker to have something shipped to the county from the African subcontinent than it did to have it shipped from the state capital.

He cut off the shower and started to dry off so he wouldn't drip so much when he stepped out onto the tiled floor, which, between the sink and cast iron tub slash shower and the toilet, left only *just* enough room to stand, the way most of those old bathrooms always did. He wrapped a towel round himself and gathered up his clothes in one hand and went out, stepping down the hall to drop them in the oversized laundry room sink before he went upstairs.

Regardless of what prevailing gossip may've conveyed, little of his room retained any of its associations with his previous and younger selves. In fact, other than the filled dresser, it'd've been difficult to discern anyone occupied it at all. He closed the door and opened the dresser to pull out a dress shirt and pants and laid them across the bedspread, it itself a quilt pieced by his great great grandmother, the odds and ends and remnants leftover from other quilting projects. He dropped the towel on top of the dresser. The one pair of dress shoes he'd had since he was fifteen—given to him by his grandfather, pulled out of the county dump—sat in the corner, as good, almost, as the day they'd've been made seventy-five years before—except for the heels, which he'd taken to the cobbler—there was a cobbler in Kingsly, in a shop on Highstreet—one of those class of jobs, along with and such as blacksmithing, which most people thought had ceased to exist in all but movies—but he'd had to take them to the cobbler to get the heels replaced after the rubber'd started to disintegrate a little less than half a decade ago. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he leaned forward and rubbed them a bit with the towel to shine them.

When he went down, he adjusted his tie in the mirror beside the front door. And he stood waiting in the living room, the tv having been turned off, his mother gone, having carried her used plate and mug into the kitchen. He considered something abstract about the way meat had been removed from before the idols of those former things called gods and the Biblical injunction against its consumption, but he didn't know as to why he did this, other than some vague notion it might've been a momentary kind of waking dream and thus sensical in the same way such need and not need be.

He turned as she came down the stairs, fixing her hat. All ladies, of course, wore hats on Sunday. A woman wasn't supposed to set

foot in a church without her head covered, a remembrance and punishment for those things Eve was said to've done. She was also of that generation that still observed that ladies did not wear white on such occasions after Labor Day. She stepped over and adjusted his tie. She brushed off his shoulders, even though there was no need. "Just let me get my bag." She turned down the hall.

He went out through the front door and around the house, careful about his shoes, and climbed into the truck, waking Princess with the motor, who, sleeping on the back step, rolled over, looking at him with pink-red eyes. But she saw him in a white shirt and tie and knew what that meant, or at least, knew to lay her head back down as she watched the truck pull around the side of the house, headlights on. His mother turned-on the porch light and came out, climbing into the truck after he'd leaned over and opened the door. "Ready?"

Looking into her handbag, she nodded. He started down the road, the headlights illuminating the gravel, the grass growing in the middle of the road that needed to be killed out before it got thicker, the cows still standing awake on the edge of the field, looking at them curiously. They made their way out along the narrow two-lane road that eventually connected to the one that ran along the Tuck, driving alongside the darkened, flowing water, windows rolled up so nothing happened to his mother's hat or hair. Thick cloud cover kept the moon and stars hidden. Without them, the only lights came from the numerous porches rising along the low hills either side of the river, the few cars already in the distance, a few distantly behind, sometimes apparent in the rearview mirror when they emerged from behind a curve.

He slowed as they approached the Mennonite church and the iron bridge across from it, headlights spilling over its cleaned, white sides, but also, something else, or more accurately, quite a few somethings. And he slowed. The church had no parking lot, having been built, as supposed, before such a thing existed. A flagstone path ran up the front, to the steps and double doors, bifurcating a green lawn kept meticulously maintained. And standing there, Lily and the children could've been mistaken for its congregation. Shepard pulled to the side of the road.

"What're you doing?" His mother looked over at him.

"I'm stopping the truck." He opened the door and climbed out of the truck, waving to them all as he approached, walking along the edge of the road, some of the younger children waving, as well. "How 'bout a ride?"

Lily shook her head. She stood there holding the youngest, Emma carrying Ego Integrity. And Shepard bent to come face to face with her, and she reached out trying to touch his tie.

"I promise I'll go slow."

One of the twins, Successive Approximation, tugged Lily's skirt. "Can we ride?"

She looked down at him. "We don't want to impose."

"It isn't an imposition," Shepard said. "I just don't know that I can fit everyone. But we can try."

Strange Situation tugged Lily's skirt. "Momma."

She sighed.

"We'll walk," Liam said. "That should leave room enough for the kids."

"You can ride in the cab," Shepard said to Lily.

"We're almost there. I don't want to impose. The kids can go." Functional Fixedness stretched upwards to try and grab her hat brim.

"Yeah," Shepard said. "And all of it up hill." He looked at the kids. "Alright, everyone in the truck." And the most of them screamed and ran toward it.

"Don't rush," Lily called. "Don't mess your clothes up."

Liam and Aiden and John went forward to see that that didn't happen. After all, it'd taken them so long to get everyone into their best clothes, there was no use in letting something go wrong now, if it could be avoided. Shepard walked round the side of the truck with Lily, opened the door so Emma could take the baby and Shepard could help her in. She removed her hat and laid it in her lap, accepting Functional Fixedness into her arms. Shepard looked into the truck bed. "Alright," he said. "No standing up. And no horseplay. Got it?" They nodded, all of them dark-haired and dark-eyed in the night. "Alright." He turned to climb in the cab, said to the teenagers, "See yuns at the top of the hill."

He turned the truck and started slowly across the bridge, dark water rushing beneath, grid-iron framework wrapping around them

like a spider's web, illuminated in the headlights. He kept glancing in the rearview mirror all the way across it, going up the hill, turning the curve. Slow or not, it was a ride, and the younger children couldn't've been happier, looking out as they rose along the hill, at all the porch lights down the sides of the valley, the headlights streaming along the road, wide eyed, the same dark eyes as their mother. Shepard glanced across at her and the baby and his mother, the baby asleep, breathing softly, the most comfortable one there in an otherwise uncomfortable ride, for Lily, because of the obvious, and for his mother, because of the obvious.

He crested the hill, entering the Presbyterian town limits, the stone church ahead, illuminated by a light over the front steps. He parked and climbed out, reaching to take the baby so Lily could shimmy over the seat as best she could. And feet firmly on the ground, she restored her hat and took the baby again. He went round and pulled down the tailgate, helping the children down so they didn't muss their Sunday clothes, taking so long his mother finally opened the cab door herself and climbed out, fixing her hat.

"Say thank you," Lily said.

"Thank you," Confounding Variable said, as he lifted her down. She the only one to say so, the rest too busy being tired, or wide eyed at the incoming headlights, or the illuminated church.

So he said to Confounding Variable, "You're very welcome."

And she half-smiled weakly, embarrassed, having had a crush on him a long time.

"Boys."

He turned toward where Lily'd aimed her voice, Attachment Theory and Drive Theory obviously ready to bolt between cars. And as a stand-in for their older siblings, Shepard bent and dropped a hand onto either of their shoulders. "Listen to your mother." If anything, the lack of sleep seemed to've made them more manic, wild eyed.

Since he'd taken the truck up at barely more than a walking pace, the older children arrive soon enough, Aiden taking over herding the boys, Emma and John and Absolute Threshold and Analogical Reasoning sort of guarding the periphery as they all moved toward the church and up the front steps, Olivia hanging back, something, in general, about her that established her closer to their oldest sister,

though that was something too subtle for most to notice. Though, what difference did exist between them *did* have to be subtle, and it wouldn't've been unknown for otherwise unacquainted or newly acquainted persons to assume there *were* none. Shepard's mother'd often repeated how you can't fight genetics and that it's all in the genes.

Shepard's mother took his arm, and they walked in after them. She didn't say a word. They went up along the pews to their usual spot, him stopping to allow her in first. As she smoothed the back of her dress and sat, she nodded to the elderly husband and wife already seated halfway down. And Shepard slipped in and sat at the end of the un-cushioned pew.

Lily and her children had filtered into their usual place in and along the pew-and-a-half nearest the doors, on the opposite aisle, only taking up that little space due to the inherent size differences between children and adults, the older children spaced between the younger, Emma and Liam separating the twins, so as to best to quell any discontent.

Josh sat in the same aisle, second to front pew. His grandfather, as usual, occupied one of the deacons chairs behind the pulpit and wore his usual Sunday overalls and white shirt and tie.

The church was a bit fuller than usual, the time change, as it often did, inspiring a kind of unofficial homecoming. And just after the appointed hour, after everyone who would enter seemed to've, and the parking lot sat otherwise quiet, the deacon at the front doors closed them against the darkness and turned to walk up the center aisle.

It wasn't one of those churches where the pastor wore anything to denote his position, just an average suit jacket and tie, this church being one of those numerous descendants and subbranches of some form of Southern Baptistry technically as of yet unnamed. Such splits were by no means uncommon. And the religious studies department at Eagleton had been given a grant to facilitate the enumeration of these divisions, conceptually, as close to real time as possible, employing, ultimately, seven graduate students and two full-time professors. Though, to be anywhere near effective in this mandate, they would've required a staff of roughly seven times that to cover solely the western end of the state. Already, in the past couple years of the program's operation, they'd only barely started to map the complex inter-web of

thoctic relations that rose and fell in a given week (these relations, themselves, generally expressed and typified through thoctic analogues and metaphors relating to biology, what Langdon would've referred to as the memeological). And such species of Southern Baptistry could arise and go extinct in, almost, sometimes literally, the blink of an eye, sometimes with as few as one adherent, sometimes, for a week, or two, two or three hundred. But all of them seemed, or at least so the data showed, to share certain common traits with their parent stock, all the way back to the foundations of Baptistry itself, one of which expressed itself in the extended phenotype of the pastor's plain suit jacket and tie, or its prior cultural equivalents, the signifier for Baptistry's longstanding rejection of formal education in favor of revealed knowledge, something further echoed in the way he sat between the deacons, and the way he rose and approached the rostrum, and the way in which he called them to rise as he called upon God in prayer—Liam having to stop the twins from standing on the pew because they couldn't see over the back of the next if they stood on the floor—and even to the way he asked them to be seated.

"We have a lack of straight talk today," he said. He spoke with one hand on the podium, the other in his pants pocket. "So I'm just going to tell you how it is.

"We're being invaded. The government's bringing in refugees from all those Muslim countries. They're doing it in secret. They're trying to keep a lid on it. But that's what they're doing. They bring them from over there and put them in places like this, just two or three, a family here or there, not enough to arouse suspicion. But they're here. Over there, well, you can watch the news to see what they do to Christians over there. They're cutting their heads off. They've made a mess of their own country, and now the federal government is bringing them here. They're bringing them here paid for with our tax dollars. So rather than going to our children's schools, it goes to those people over there. Our roads're falling apart. You can go right out there if you want to see one of the potholes. But they're spending that money to bring those people over here.

"But that's not enough. They want to tax churches like this. Special taxes. So that we pay more. So that they can bring these people over.

“And they want to tell us what we can say in our churches. They have laws about what I can get up here and tell you. And if you don’t obey them, they tax you more. Is that free speech? No. What is it? It’s a way of silencing us, a way of shutting us out of our own country.

“All while they bring these people from other places in and give them our money. They’re giving them our money right now. Make no mistake about it.

“And what’re they over here to do? Do they want to become a part of this country? No. They want to convert this country. They want to make it like what they came from. And how long is it going to be before you have the choice of accepting that, or getting your head cut off? Or watching your child’s head get cut off?

“Now, that’s not going to happen tomorrow. And it probably won’t happen the next day. But make no mistake, that’s what’s happening. And they’re using our money to do it

“What do we know about any of these people coming over here? Nothing. The liberals’ve made sure of that. They can just pour in. No one cares. The liberals in congress, they won’t defend Christianity. They won’t defend prayer in our schools. And Lord knows we need it. How many weeks go by without you turning on the news and hearing about some school shooting? The liberals don’t want any of us to have guns so we can defend our children. But they want to bring Muslim children over here. They want us to pay for those children to go to our schools. We turn on the news and every week there’s another school shooting. How long before one of these students they’ve brought in from who knows where shoots up a school or brings in a machete or a knife and cuts someone’s head off? And there won’t be anyone there with a firearm to be able to stop it. The liberals are doing everything they can to keep our children from being safe.

“All the while more and more of these people are pouring into our country. The borders are wide open. Make no mistake about it. And the ones that can’t sneak in, the federal government pays to bring in.

“Do you know what the size of the average American family is? Two point five children per household. Do you know how many children Muslim families have? A minimum of ten. And the numbers of American families are dropping. Gay marriage. Divorce. Sexual promiscuity. It’s all destroying the American family.

“Porn. Right now. Right now, there is someone filming a pornographic movie in this county. In this county. Subsidized by the state, using our tax dollars. Everybody knows about these film subsidies. It’s so brazen they talk about them right on the news. They’re not even ashamed of it. The state is paying people right now to commit sexual immorality on camera and paying them to distribute it to our children. And it’s going on right now. And not out there. Right here.

“We’re being invaded.

“Do you know how a virus works? It can’t reproduce on its own. It has to invade another organism. And it penetrates that host and uses it to reproduce itself. It turns the host’s reproduction system against itself.

“And that’s what’s happening now. Our money is being paid to bring these people here. While our roads are crumbling and wherever you turn there’s unemployment and suffering, our money is going to pay to bring these people in. It’s going to pay for gays who catch AIDS. It’s going to pay gay men in the scouts to sleep in the same tents with young boys. It’s going to pay for people to have drugs. It’s going to pay for pornography.

“And I’m not supposed to tell any of you this because the IRS isn’t going to like it. And they’re going to try and do things to us. They may take this church away.

“But the liberals will pass a law that says they have to build a mosque in the ground zero memorial where the twin towers came down.

“We’re being invaded, folks. There’s just no two ways about it. And let’s not mince words. This isn’t the capital, where we can say one thing and do another. Look at those countries they’re coming from. What do they do to Christians over there? You can see it. You can read about it. And does anyone think they’re not going to do the same thing here? How many more bombings and shootings do we need to prove that? How many more of our children are going to have to die to prove that?”

He removed his hand from his pocket and reached behind himself and pulled a generic automatic pistol from the holster that clipped behind his belt, adjusted his pants and underwear, and laid the firearm on the podium. “We have a responsibility to protect our children.

Make no mistake. A church isn't safe by virtue of being a church. You only have to look at what happened in South Carolina to prove that. God only does for those what they do for themselves. This's what the liberals are trying to take away from us. And if we let that happen, make no mistake, we won't be here anymore. It won't necessarily happen tomorrow. It won't even necessarily happen the day after that. But it's coming.

“And we're paying for it.”

During this time, several of the younger children had fallen asleep, leaning over against their older siblings, Primary Appraisal laying down her head in Emma's lap, all of them breathing softly, the same as Functional Fixedness, whom Lily still held. In general, the rest of the congregation looked little better, some of them nodding their heads, faintly jerking up in ways imperceptible to everyone else, if only because everyone else was too busy doing the same, but which to them felt as if they were about to fling themselves into the next pew, many with bleary red-and-pink eyes, hearts sometimes palpitating too noticeably.

. . .

It's ending ceremonies that can often vary most among the members of the Baptist family tree. In this case, the plate was passed round, deacons at the ends of each pew, handing the plate to be passed down the line, received by the other to be moved to the next, while the pastor prayed. And as they came to the last two pews, Samuel, being the other of the pair of deacons on that side, handed the plate to Psychodynamic Approach, who nudged the next in line awake so they could each pass it down, which was worth waking up for. This meant that, though he didn't see the point, the second deacon had to send it back down the last pew, so it would arrive back at Samuel, it being customary for the two deacons in the center aisle to carry the plates up to the offering table in front of the pulpit. And as John passed it round Olivia, who held a still sleeping Ego Integrity, Lily reached into her purse and withdrew the dollar bill she had in there and laid it inside the plate. And Samuel took it to ascend the aisle with the other deacon as the pastor came to a close. And the two deacons not busy with the plates moved along the front of the church to open the doors.

Faint sunlight streamed in, treetops blocking the best of the view of the reddened clouds that settled over the shoulders of distant ridges, a color matching the eyes of many of those who filtered out. Liam and Aiden and Olivia and John and Absolute Threshold and Emma carried some of their younger, fallen-asleep-again siblings, the rest dragging behind, in the metaphorical and euphemistic sense, though sometimes that was not necessarily the case.

Shepard opened the truck door for his mother, raising his hand to Josh, who, as he came down the steps, nodded in reply. "I'll be back in a minute," he said, and left the door open, his mother watching him cross the parking lot and moving toward Lily and the rest, talking with them, Josh joining them, and Samuel. And the force split, Lily and several of the children going with Josh, Josh lifting the smaller of which into the bed of his own truck, Shepard coming back and putting down the tailgate and doing the same. He stepped round to close the passenger side door, his mother not saying anything. And Emma, carrying Ego Integrity, climbed into the cab and slid over to the middle. Samuel, hands in the pockets of his overalls, had already started along the edge of the road when they pulled out. He waved, some of the children who were still awake waving back as they passed. The two of them drove slowly down the hill and across the bridge and out past the sawmill, much to the chagrin of several cars behind them, who pulled off to go down the river roads, rather than be slowed up. So they led a small procession by the time they'd turned off at the trailer park, cars revving to shoot past.

The elder children carried their sleeping younger siblings inside to lay them down, still in their Sunday clothes. Even Attachment Theory and Drive Theory yawned as they climbed over the wheel wells, and Emma warned them not to scuff their shoes on the tires.

Shepard waved to Josh, Josh nodding as he stood there talking to Absolute Threshold. And Shepard climbed into his truck. His mother still sat there, handbag in her lap, still saying nothing, and she remained that way till they'd turned out of the trailer park and gone almost all the way to the Mennonite church. "Such disgusting things that they do."

Shepard watched the road ahead as they came around the corner,

the church and bridge coming into sight. "What're we talking about?"

"Joshua Perkins and that young boy." She sat there with her hands over her handbag in her lap, looking straight ahead as well. "He's one of them, you know."

"And what're they supposed to be doing?"

"That stuff that they do."

Samuel Perkins was crossing the bridge. He waved as they passed, and Shepard replied in kind.

"And where do you get that idea?"

"Everyone knows it. People see them round."

"People see lots of things."

The Tuck ran faintly red, lifting tones in a more muted fashion from the morning-afternoon sky.

"It's unnatural. They can't even have children."

Those who say a person, or anything else, for that matter, can't step into the same river twice, are wrong, depending on how you think about it. Shepard's seen the loop too many times not to know this, or at least, not to know it on some instinctual level.

"I wish I could remember a Bible verse about gossip," he said.

"I don't want to argue about this. It's Sunday." She opened her handbag and searched for something. "And we should get home and check on your sister."

"I'm sure she's still sleeping."

"It's just jet lag. It's what happens when you fly round like that."

"Yeah."

Irregardless (which isn't actually supposed to be a word, or so some claimed, and there was an argument as to whether this was a thochtic-machinery equivalent of the biological immune system, or merely an aspect of the fundamental nature of non-biological reproductive systems, or if a metaphor'd just been stretched too far) but irregardless of popular opinion, it wasn't the urban landscape that'd been most impacted by the rise of the automobile, but the rural areas. This was because, while the automobile redefined and relocated foot traffic, with, of course, certain exceptions, such as Los Angeles, which, depending on the observer's bias on the notion of the previously discussed phrase *the exception which proves the rule*, (Los Angeles) existed as proof of the phenomena, at the same time, such forces, however, completely eliminated such from the rural landscape, leaving the automobile as the only means of conveyance. Thus to be without one, or without access to someone in possession of the same, rendered a group or individual incapable of existing, or subsisting, which itself, obviously, would eventually, typically, lead to nonexistence. And this was the case with both Samuel Perkins and Mrs Jane Greene. Mrs Jane Greene, that is, commuted by foot each day the three miles from Presbyterian to Anglers for groceries, even in the rain, at which times she wore a pink hooded raincoat printed with pictures of small umbrellas. But both still relied on a broader set of greater sociopolitical frameworks; in the case of Samuel Perkins this was his grandson, and in the case of Mrs Jane Greene this was the county trolley. And although the county transit system would be worth delving into on its own, in part, since it doesn't currently run on Sundays because by legislative definition to do so would be a violation of the Establishment Clause, according to some current interpretations that were currently being litigated, therefore the operation of such was seen

as potentially infringing, in some way, on religious practice, which, incidentally, half the state legislators didn't interpret as to be in effect against them, anyway, à la the ability to implement a state sponsored religion at their discretion or convenience, as previously elucidated, if only briefly, in Russell and Anime's prior conversation. There is little point, however, in going into further detail about such at present, as, of course, it being Sunday, Lily had no access to it.

The road that went to the old house up on the hill wound around behind the stand of trees, curling down to an old dirt road that ran alongside the creek and connected to the gravel drive that ran through the center of the trailer park. And a beat up, old Ford Bronco made its way round and down that road, disturbing the early morning afternoon with a muffler loud enough to have every dog within a mile barking, every bear, if there had been any bears near, and not hunted to borderline extinction, hunters strapping things practically cubs to their hoods as if this were a sign of pride, they'd've been sent scurrying to the hills, and Harley owners left listening in reverent awe. It came to a stop in front of Lily's trailer. Yet even dragon-roarous as it was, it'd woken almost no one inside. Attachment Theory and Drive Theory, being the only exceptions, who peeked through the curtains as the driver climbed out, believing themselves sneakily unseen till she pointed at them, and they fell back onto the couch, one asking the other, "Are yuh a toad yet?"

Attachment Theory looked down at himself. "I don't think so."

Liam rose from the table, went to open the door. And the Theories scrambled off the couch. "Yuh shouldn't let a witch in thuh house."

"Yeah."

"Both of you." Olivia rose, crossed the room, stepping between the children sprawled on the carpet, and grabbed their arms. "What a horrible thing to say. Where did you get an idea like that?"

"Is true."

"It's not true. And if you can't be nice, don't be anything at all."

"What's wrong?" Looking tired, Lily emerged from the back bedroom and the hallway.

"Nothing," Olivia said. She released each's arm and grabbed each Theory by the wrist, leading them on. "I was just going to get them dressed." They'd both been sleeping in their underwear.

“But what about thuh witch?”

“Hush,” Olivia said.

One hand on her stomach, Lily rubbed her face with the other. “What witch?”

About then, Liam’d opened the door, and Maria’d stepped inside. She shook her head. “Oh, don’t you look like shit.” And Liam didn’t disagree.

Lying on the couch, Primary Appraisal sat up, rubbing one of her eyes. “Unt Maria.”

“Who’d you think it’d be?” She bent over the couch and lifted her. “Who else but your aunt Maria could make enough noise to wake the dead in this godforsaken world?”

“Who?”

Maria kissed her forehead and lowered her to the couch.

The Theories stepped behind their big sister. “Really. You stop that right now.” She looked embarrassed for them. It wasn’t that they’d always been like this. Actually, the whole witch angle’d only been decided upon in the past few weeks. But they worked hard at it, and as with the various episodes that’d come before and would come after, everything from the past that couldn’t be re-conceptualized in the new framework was stored away for use in some later one, otherwise forgotten, or otherwise forgotten.

Maria looked around at the sleeping children, shook her head. “It looks like the war all over again.” She touched Liam’s shoulder and stepped by him, toward Lily. And she put her hand on her (Lily’s) stomach. “And how’s the next one? Ready to explode?”

Lily smiled weakly and shook her head. “Do you want something to drink?”

“Now that you mention it,” she looked around at the two boys behind Olivia, “I haven’t had a drop of anything in a long time.” And they broke free and ran into the back hall.

“I’m sorry,” Olivia said.

Maria laughed. She put her hand on Olivia’s shoulder. “You look terrible, too. Maybe you should go lay down aswell.”

But Olivia shook her head. “Someone has to get the kids ready.”

“You don’t need to worry about that,” Lily said.

“I wanna help.”

"Let em sleep awhile longer," Maria said. "This damn time change." She turned, again, to Lily. "Excuse my language." Which's what she always said, whether she meant it or not. She reached out and stroked Lily's arms. "You ready to go?"

Lily nodded.

"We'll," Olivia said, "take care of everything while you're gone."

"Yeah." Liam yawned.

"Besides," Maria said, looking at one of the children sprawled over the floor, a small leg twitching. "It doesn't look like anyone'll be moving round here for quite a while."

"You sure you wouldn't like something to drink?" Lily said.

"And how much have you drunk today, hm?"

Lily nodded. "Enough." She sighed. "Or at least, it always feels that way."

"Alright, then it's time you had a break. For what it's worth." She turned and put her arm around Lily's shoulders, and they turned toward the door.

"You're sure it's alright?" Lily said to Liam.

He nodded, yawned. "Everything'll be fine."

"Well of course it will," Maria said. She opened the door, helped Lily down the pressure-treated front steps. "And if it isn't, we'll beat em all back into shape later." She looked over her shoulder as she helped Lily climb into the cab, "And if those two Theories give you trouble, you can tell them I'll turn them into a conjoined toad if they don't behave, and see how they get around with three legs between them." She closed the door and went round and climbed in the driver side. "And you two try to get some rest." She started it, the engine breathing fire. She yelled, "You both look like shit." But she waited for Lily to fit her seat belt around her stomach before she put the roaring beast into gear.

Everybody long gone home from church, not yet having ventured out for evening-night services, the roads lay open and deserted. Usually Maria'd've allowed the vehicle to drift into the opposite lane when she went through a curvy cow trail of a road. But with Lily beside her, she tended to stay within the crooked lines the state farmed out to be painted at the lowest bid price, most of it fading or changing color in the first year, not that it necessarily started out as the

right color, or on the wrong side of the road. "You're sure you're feeling alright. If you're not up to this..."

Lily sat there with her hand on her stomach. She tried to smile. "As good as it ever seems to get."

"You don't have any right to exist," Maria said. "You know that? You're just entirely too nice. In your circumstances, it should be against the laws of nature. Of course..."

"It is what it is," Lily said. "There just isn't much that can be done for it."

Rather than go up through Presbyterian and down by the technical college, Maria kept straight on past the Mennonite church, heading upriver, the longer route, but then again, since getting her outa the house for a little while was at least part of the goal, the longer and more scenic the route the better. Though, Lily didn't see much of the scenery, sitting there with her eyes closed while air blew through the rolled-down window and against her face. "The window isn't down too much, is it?"

Lily rolled her head against the back of the seat. "It's very nice." She breathed steadily in and out.

"We don't have to do this today if you don't want to. We could just ride round."

Lily rolled her head against the back of the seat. "No. I want to." She still didn't open her eyes.

"You're not thinking bad thoughts are you?"

Lily rolled her head against the back of the seat.

"Good." Maria steered along the cow-trail curved road. "And I'd better not catch you doing it either. I can read your mind, you know."

"Uh hmm."

"Oh, yes. It's standard issue when they give you your witch kit. Not that that's something you ever have to worry about."

"I always thought of you like a fairy godmother."

"Such swearing. What a filthy mouth. I don't know how they still allow you to raise kids." Of course, in the strictest sense, quantity had never been defined as abuse, or at least, when it's religiously motivated, à la the Quiver Full Movement and the Catholic Church, defining it as such leaves the state in an awkward position in regards

to the Establishment Clause, not that they'd've cared to do anything, in such regards, for the most part, no matter their respective views on said clause, after all, the mill doesn't exist without the grist. Though, there was that whole state government situation with the forcible sterilization of people of a certain skin color for a while there in the mid-twentieth century... But Maria, though it didn't often happen, tried to take her own advice in regards to bad thoughts. But godmother... She shook her head. "If only you knew, dear." Though, she didn't say this loud enough for Lily to hear over the engine and the moving air, so Lily sat there quietly, eyes still closed, hand on her stomach, looking almost asleep. And Maria left her that way as they followed the road away from the river, through farmland, eventually to connect with the four-lane, not far from the university. She turned toward town, the campus's few multi-story buildings rising on the far side of the river. She glanced upwards at the new overpass as they passed under, a less than a mile stretch of road that dropped down by the technical college, costing too much, a project still years behind, with another contractor defaulting, and the only thing ever to come of it was a bit more money in the pockets of an orthodontists' investment group down in Florida, at a few million dollars of tax payer money an acre. Of course, it's not as if it'd've funded anything useful, anyway, even if it'd stayed in state.

"Bad thoughts, Maria. Bad thoughts."

"Hm?" Lily stirred. "Did you say something?"

"No, dear." She slowed and flicked-on the turn signal. Of course, there was no one on the road to see it, but she did it anyway. Everything in downtown sat empty. The credit union and highschool, of course, closed outright. But even the Joint Burger and Anglers parking lots sat empty, a recent court battle having, at least temporarily, decided that so-called Blue Laws were unconstitutional if used to discriminate solely against certain businesses, and in an extension of the same factors that had been seen as applicable to the county transit system, it followed that the only solution would be to allow nothing to operate on Sunday whatsoever, therefore, at least for the time being, the whole mess still working its way through the court system, everything remained closed on Sunday, excepting, of course, those with a religious exception, such as churches, and related activities,

which, obviously, would've created an even more entangled part and whole of the problem had they been included.

The graveyard had no parking, so the best Maria could do was turn along the road that divided it from the baseball and football fields below the highschool and park in the grass along the edge of the road. It needed mowing, coming up to past both their ankles when Maria went around and helped Lily down. But that's what the DOT gets for having to, by law, accept the lowest bidder. But after they'd made it through the high grass, the graveyard itself had been better maintained, more attention paid to the dead than the yards of those in the county disabled by medical conditions or age, who could've used the help, both physically and financially. Though, it could've been said to be wasted on mowing yards, they, themselves, devices of extravagances descended from moneyed pseudo-middle-classes aping (though it always seemed awful to insult other apes by using their name that way, and then pretending it didn't apply locally), but they just existed for certain people to pretend they were rich in the first place, like those people who thought you could get rich just by wearing the kinds of clothes that rich people wore, reversing cause and effect, not that it wasn't muddled up anyway, though certain people would've had service jobs maintaining them if such funds were made available, though the fact that the powers at be and social order in general feels compelled to fill every waking (and these days, with the advents of new technology, night, barely to mention the old adage about sleeping on it and letting the problem work itself out, which, then, technically rendered even rest work), but the compulsion to fill every waking hour with work, which...

"Stop it, Maria."

"What?"

Maria shook her head. "I'm just an old woman. Don't listen to me." She held Lily's arm and helped her climb the incline. She, Maria, remembered being a little girl and being told not to walk on the graves because it was disrespectful. That'd been when her cousin had come home from Vietnam on what would've been his nineteenth birthday. But with all those who'd died in the course of history, where could they *not* be walking over a few thousand, or million, graves?

They stopped in front of a set of small markers. All in a row. And they stood there silently.

The only reason those markers existed there at all was because some unknown benefactor had owned a substantial number of plots, and had eventually purchased the whole thing outright, being required by state law to maintain it as an existing graveyard, of course. Other than that, there'd've been no way for Lily to've afforded any of it. And she didn't know what happened in such cases when there was no other option. But she didn't want to think of it, having been almost to the point of finding out. Whereas, most people, never thinking it could *ever* happen, manage to avoid the whole subject, much as they avoid most of the holes in the mainstream theories of management that any given society of any given age operates under, collection agencies, prison sentences for the non-payment of bills, sick people led off to spend the last years of their lives in jail, all of it. In some cases, there really hadn't even been that much to bury, if anything. They were a lot like Maria's cousin in that regard. And it seemed a shame, in one sense, to waste space in the ground for something that hadn't been distinguishable from a rush of blood. The others had been cremated, placed in small holes dug with post-hole diggers. Lily stood there with her hand on her stomach, looking over the small headstones.

Maria looked up along the edge of the cemetery. She let go of Lily's arm. "I'll be back in just a minute," she said. And she made her way toward the caged bin up there, the whole thing looking like something designed to trap a bear, into which the ground keepers had piled the faded artificial flowers and wreaths that'd been clamped and laid over the stones and that'd been stuck in the ground. And pulling a few out, she withdrew her knife from her pocket, sorting those that'd been better protected from the sun, cutting plastic stems, till she'd assembled a sizable bouquet, and folding her knife shut, she dropped the rest of the fading, disintegrating wreaths into the bin before she started down the hill.

She offered them to Lily.

"Thank you," Lily said.

Maria helped her down, both of them on their knees, Lily reaching out as best she could, Maria helping, piercing the ground with

the flowers, the plastic still rigid enough to remain temporarily free-standing. When they'd finished, Maria helped Lily up, steadied her.

Maria put her arm round Lily's shoulders as they stood there together.

She'd wanted to see some of it in the daylight, that is, for the first time in so many years. It felt as if it'd be different tomorrow, seeing it, technically, for the second (or would it've been the third?) time. Though, now, there was only blackness and distant taillights ahead and headlights in the opposite lane and illuminated billboards and the occasional porch light and the exterior lights of a gas station and connected fast food place on the side of the highway, down from the hotel. What she recalled came from highschool, a paraphrase from the first line, wasn't it the first line? of their abridged copy of *War and Peace*, or maybe it'd been something else, about all happy families being alike—though she didn't know if that was true—but that all unhappy families were each unhappy in their own way. That she knew from experience. Or to put it more accurately, she said to herself, all fucked up families are fucked up in their own unique way. She leaned forward, head over the steering wheel, stretching her neck after she'd parked. She sighed as she climbed out, stiff, and reached back in for her purse and fitted it over her shoulder. And she went back and opened the trunk to lift out her bag, which she'd have to carry because asphalt and concrete shredded those little plastic tires. And she closed the trunk and listened to the rental car beep and watched the lights flash, like some kind of living thing saying goodnight, when she depressed the lock button on the key fob. She sighed again as she turned and started toward the hotel. Only one other car sat in the parking lot, at the far end, and something told her it was an employee's, not a guest's. Not that anything looked bad about the place. It was the standard Best Eastern kind of place, four stories, nicely lit, you could find a million just like it. But... She shook her head, thoughts trailing every which and any direction. She tried to relax. But that's what it was going to be like, she knew it, each member of

this extended family, each with their own attorney, each with their own complaints, interests, aggravations, misunderstandings, and... She sighed and pulled open the door with her free hand.

The woman behind the desk looked up, smiled in the same way Eva smiled when she dealt with a client. Eva set down her bag. "I have a reservation under Eva Mastrantonio." The woman nodded, still projecting that same smile, and turn toward a computer and tapped at the keyboard.

"Um..." She continued to peck at the keyboard as she glanced over her shoulder at the clock on the wall. "I hope you weren't late, otherwise the software bounces you out of the system."

Eva looked at her. "How can I—"

"Oh, you're very in luck," the woman said, and struck the enter key repeatedly, rapidly, forcefully. "You got here just in time. Twenty minutes later and it'd've kicked you out with the time change." She laid a slip of paper and pen on the counter. "I need to verify your credit card." She accepted the plastic, tapped the slip of paper. "And sign here, please." She tapped at the number pad on the keyboard, fingers moving in a blur. "Alright, that's it." She offered back the card, took the slip of paper, and looked at it. "Alright." She put it behind the counter and slid a key card across. "The time changes tonight." She glanced toward the clock on the wall. "Your wall clock will automatically reset, as appropriate, and the one on the nightstand too. But would you like a call in the morning as well?"

Eva shook her head. "No." She bent and lifted her bag.

"Have you been here before?"

Eva shook her head. "Kind of. Yes."

"Oh, good, then you already know." The woman smiled that same smile. "Have a good night then."

Eva nodded. She turned to go into the elevator. Thankfully, it didn't play music. She carried her bags down the quiet hallway, feeling, instinctually, that, indeed, the place was empty as could be. She slipped in the key card and entered, a small lamp already on to light the way, ensuring that no monsters waited inside, a permanent night-light on in the bathroom. She closed the door behind herself and dropped her bag, sighing and craning back her head and listening to and feeling her neck pop. She needed to piss, had needed to since

she'd passed Waynesville, but'd decided not to stop. She kicked off her shoes. That was one of the problems with having kids, it made your bladder so weak it felt thin-skinned as a water balloon, always ready to explode, somebody always nearby with a pin. When she emerged from the bathroom, she sighed and sat on the edge of the bed, wiggling her stocking-clad toes against the carpet. The vertical blinds, a standard of such places of a certain business class, hung partially open, the light from a very orange streetlamp outside allowed in, casting a heavy-striped tinge across the room, interacting in a bad way with the blueish shade of carpet. She lay back against the bed. The business attire she'd been in since that morning wrinkled and bunch in a not-soft-not-hard-but-constricting-way round her, bunched and pulling and tightening, as if trying to strangle her slowly. In the empty silence of the place, even the very occasional engine noise that carried from the not-so-distant four-lane barely registered. The only sound that did... She sat up, looking at the clock on the wall, minute and hour hands advancing towards midnight at their own respective paces.

She shook her head, pushed herself up off the bed. She sighed, pulled open her shirt. And she shook her head and went into the bathroom for a shower.

Kindly, he'd looked at Shepard, something new about his face (not Shepard's, at least, not so far as Shepard could've told about his own face in the moment) but there'd been something new about all of him, as if it'd been possible for embodiment to have something equivalent of new-car smell, and if it were, he'd've had it. Standing on the edge of the road, as if he'd been walking on the white line like a tightrope, the setting sun, burning the clouds along the ridge tops blood red, had erected a fiery halo along the fringes of his hair. "I'm glad we could finally meet this way."

Shepard'd recognized him from the moment he'd come round the bend, but then again, that'd been the point.

"I am sorry for the inconvenience."

Shepard'd said, "You could've just asked to talk."

"Yes. But old habits die hard, as they say." Turning, he'd looked up the road. "We can walk if you prefer. I would not want you to be late."

With the wind having brought down a hemlock across the road, the eventual result of a woolly adelgid infestation that'd left the whole area standing with widow-makers, skeletal trees fit for nothing more than rotting, and with no other way in, the only option had been to walk for a chainsaw.

"But," he'd said, "to be fair, I did not do anything. I just waited for a convenient moment."

Shepard'd started to walk again.

Turning, walking along the white line, he'd (it was always lower-case by then) kept abreast with him.

Shepard'd said, "And is there something important going on?"

"Not really." Then he'd looked at the ridge tops. "It is rather beautiful, looking from here, do you think?"

"Sometimes."

"It is an odd experience."

"You should try getting out more."

"Ah, well, are you exactly the one to give me that kind of advice?"

"Just because I don't do it," Shepard'd said, "doesn't mean I don't know what needs to be done."

"True enough."

They'd walked along with their hands in their pockets.

"Do you ever think about God?"

"Is that a trick question?" Shepard'd said.

"No, I mean the real one. The one that died...first."

"Is there a point in it?"

"I do not know." Without breaking stride, he'd sighed. "Sometimes I wonder what it would have been like if the godhead had fractured differently. If the pieces had been more equitably distributed. But then again, the parts were never, even if they had tried to all draw together, were never the sum of what they had been. Is that not the funny thing? There was never anything missing, all the fragments remained, yet there was still *something* missing." Shaking his head, he'd sighed again. "Do you mind if I use the third person?"

"Your prerogative."

"I guess. It is interesting to see things from this perspective. I have not done it in a long time. At least, not exclusively." Again, he'd sighed. "Sometimes I wonder what it would have been like if she had not died. I think things would have been better. I think she would have taken care of things. I do not mean to be against single fathers, or anything like that, or...well, perhaps it is more like an older sibling having to take over raising the family, is it not? That sounds more right." Pausing, he'd looked up at the sky. "It is rough on everyone that way, do you think?"

"Couldn't be helped."

"No." Starting to walk again, he'd looked down, sighed. "No, it could not."

Shepard shielded his eyes when he woke, realizing he'd fallen asleep with the overhead light still on. He sat up, his body and mind at odds as to the correct time. He kept no clock in the room. There used to be a windup Little Ben sitting on the dresser, but it'd eventually broken. And in any regard, it'd always ticked too loudly. He stretched and sat up. He'd put on his work pants to go out and feed the chickens yesterday afternoon-morning, since they still operated on their own evolutionary clock, which didn't get set forwards and backwards with the same relative ease as human mechanical apparatuses, and because, Sunday or not, on a farm, some things had to be done. And he'd fallen asleep in them. So at least there was no need to change. He stretched again, his back stiff as he went out into the hall. Light from his room splattered across the darkened hallway, and he reached back and touched the switch. Everything below was dark too. He touched his hand to the wall, going downstairs with a practiced ease. The windup clock on the wall in the den ticked in the darkness. He reached beneath the shade of the lamp standing beside his mother's chair, the only one she ever turned on in the evening, and always had on when she watched tv, to keep from ruining her eyes, and clicked it on. He looked at the clock. He yawned again and turned toward the kitchen, touching the wall in the darkness to find the switch. He turned on the faucet and set the pot under it, filling it, and putting it on the stove, rather than use the microwave, because his mother, when she woke, would make tea with whatever was leftover. He turned on the burner. Then he pulled out a chair and sat, bent forward, elbows on the table, fingers interlaced over the back of his neck.

In one sense, since the year-round warmth in the morning wasn't bad (not that it didn't drop to the other extreme once in a while, just for good measure), but the good thing about it, and without the rain, because supposedly, as some say, there's good in everything, but with the warmth almost year round and the lack of rain, for the most part, it made standing in the dark and waiting for the bus just a little easier.

"Stop that," Lily said, when Belief Perseverance'd started to yank on Elaborative Rehearsal's clothes. "That's not a nice thing to do." And of course, both Theories were running round as if they were all on their own trying to encircle them all. Emma was stuck managing two of the twins, grasping each's wrist to keep them from swinging at each other. And John had stood by to do the same with the other set, though they'd done nothing yet, as they themselves'd pointed out. Liam'd already gone into work that midnight-morning, so he remained, as usual, unavailable to help in this situation.

Primary Appraisal tugged on her mother's skirt. "Pankicks today?"

"I don't know, dear." She looked down at her and brushed her hair. "Maybe that's what they'll serve at school." But Primary Appraisal shook her head. They never served anything like that there. "I'm sure you can find something just as good." Primary Appraisal shook her head.

Lily carried Ego Integrity against her chest, since she, unlike her younger sister, hadn't adjusted well yet to the time change, and wanted to be up. And she jostled her as she started to complain about being paid too little attention.

"They're supposed to have something today for the baseball team," Olivia said. She wasn't on the team. She had no time. "So there might be something leftover to bring home." She stood holding the hands

of two of the younger girls, Confounding Variable and Frequency Distribution, who were afraid of the dark.

Lily nodded, soothing Ego Integrity. "Whatever you can manage."

John said, "I won't be coming home on the bus. I'll get a ride with the guys."

"And—" Lily looked down, Psychodynamic Approach tugging on her skirt, pointing across the road. "What is it, dear?"

"Bear."

"It wasn't a bear," Olivia said. "It wasn't even a dog. There's nothing over there."

Psychodynamic Approach had a great fixation with bears, though, never having been able to make out exactly what they looked like from the tv, believed them to be something akin to the stuffed variety, though able to move on their own. She took the picture books the teacher sometimes read and showed to them as proof of this. In one of them, a cub went to school on a school bus, though she'd never yet personally witnessed this. "How come the bears don't go to school, mama?"

"Because they don't need to, dear."

"But the picture book said so."

"They ride a different bus," Absolute Threshold said.

"Oh."

The Theories were still expending their as yet to be eaten breakfast. "Both of you," Lily said, "just stop now and settle down."

"We can rest on the bus."

"Yeah."

"Momma," Classical Conditioning said, standing there pressing his knees together. "I gotta go pee."

Lily sighed. "Run back and hurry up." And he bolted toward the trailer.

Other children had filtered out by then, waiting a little farther down the road. A few mothers stood with them, glancing round, trying to look as if they were looking down the road in the darkness, as if they were able to see by the harsh yellow lights on the ends of the trailers and a couple of bright, white-blue-tinted lights on the power poles that automatically came on at night, moths and hard-carapaced

insects bashing into them. (The lights were technically controlled by timers that were outside the county and were thus considered unaffected by local temporal legalese.) The screen door on the trailer slammed.

“Momma,” Interference Theory said. “I’m hungry.”

“I know, dear. But it won’t be long before you get to school. You can wait just a little longer, can’t you?”

“I guess.” Though, she didn’t say it too enthusiastically.

Lily said, “Will you boys stop running around like that.” John reached out to try and grab one of them, but Attachment Theory pulled away, laughing.

“Nah. Nah.”

“Both of you settle down,” Emma said.

“We don’t have to.”

Ego Integrity had started to cry again, and Lily caressed her hair. “Sssh. It’s alright.”

Primary Appraisal tugged on her skirt. “Pankicks tomorrow?”

Lily shook her head. “I don’t know, dear.”

Strange Situation pointed. “Here it comes.”

Light had appeared around a distant bend, followed by the school bus, a variant of the same shade of yellow, the lights, as expressed in the Einsteinian-conceptualization, always traveling ahead of the almost same colored bus at the speed of themselves, no matter the relative speed of the bus, which slowed, the stop sign on the driver side folding out, red lights flashing.

“Alright, boys, settle down. It’s time to go. Where’s your brother? Did he get back yet?” The screen door slammed, Classical Conditioning sprinting across the gravel road.

The doors opened, the bus driver, a rather large woman, looking down at them with bleary red eyes, though leering might’ve been more appropriate, not because, so much, them, but just in general about life, combined with a lack of sleep. The Theories stopped and stared, just now convinced she was an ogre, even though she was the same bus driver they’d seen five mornings a day, almost every week, for the last several years. “What’re you looking at,” she said. And her voice, combined with sleep deprivation and cigarettes, didn’t countermand their new assessment.

“Come on,” Lily said. “Everybody on.” Emma and John led up the children that’d attached themselves to them, or that they’d had to attach themselves to, the rest of the children following, Olivia kind of sweeping up after.

Primary Appraisal mounted the steps and turned and waved. “Bye, momma.”

Lily waved. “Bye. See you after school.”

The bus driver closed the door after Primary Appraisal’d turned and passed between the seats, the stop sign staying out as she pulled a few more yards forward to load the other children. Lily stood watching the bus’s taillights disappear into the distance, turning her attention to Ego Integrity when she started to sniffle. And she wiped her daughter’s nose. “Come on, let’s get you all cleaned up.” Ego Integrity sniffed, shook her head. Lily waved to the other mothers, who still stood there on the edge of the road, talking amongst themselves, as she turned back toward the trailer. She looked down at Ego Integrity as her daughter burred, brushed her hair aside. “Yes, we’ll get you cleaned up. And then we’ll check on your brothers and sisters.” They still remained asleep inside. Four of them, besides Functional Fixedness and Ego Integrity, still too young to attend school. “How apples and pears and bananas,” Lily said, “can come out so smelly, I’ve never been able to understand. Have you?” Ego Integrity looked up at the light over the trailer door, moths bashing into it over and over and over again.

Sitting on the front steps, Lucy yawned and raised her mug in salute as he approached. “Good morning.”

“You mean afternoon.”

“Don’t start that shit.”

“Well, some of us do have to work for a living.”

Hearing their voices, Princess came round the side of the house. But the back door closed, and she paused, looking over her rump, then back at them, then over her rump, torn as to whether she should investigate or not. She looked at the two of them again, then, since it could be scrap-bucket day, she turned and went round the house.

Shepard kicked his muck-covered boots against the post.

“Hey,” she sipped her instant coffee, “don’t get on my back because I chose the easy life of a minimum-wage-slavery-your-life-is-shit-and-you’re-completely-replaceable-here’s-some-more-papers-to-grade-from-these-first-years-and-you-can-teach-this-other-101-class student.” She sipped her instant coffee. “Some of us gluttonous, slothful people just want an easy life.”

“And after you graduate?”

“Oh, that’s easy. Get a great job in the best part of the country, make oodles of money, and eat ramen for fifteen or twenty years till I pay everything off.”

“Yeah, you’d better be careful I don’t kill you, stuff your body out in the woods, and take over your identity.”

“Well,” she sipped her instant coffee, “you can adopt the bills if you want. I wouldn’t try hard to stop you.”

He checked the bottom of one boot. “That’s very considerate of you.”

“Well, I’m just that way.” She sipped her instant coffee. “I mean, you’ve already got a house that’s paid off and everything. That alone would probably have several people turning their heads.”

"Are we talking about something else now?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"Well, I guess I could always get married, divorced, and have to sell the house and give her half."

She sipped her instant coffee. "So much for being a romantic."

"Besides," he rubbed his boots over the grass, "you're the older sister, you're supposed to be the one that gets married first."

"So long as there's comprehensive health insurance, okay." She sipped her instant coffee, looking over the mug at him.

"Can't help you there. I'm just planning on dying if something happens."

"Oh, don't be silly."

"What other choice do I have?"

She sipped her instant coffee.

The only reason he had the place lock, stock, and barrel, anyway, is because his father'd signed it over to him so it'd be out of his name enough years before anything happened to him so they couldn't try and take it in payment. But as it'd turned out, planning for a slow mental decline in old age hadn't been necessary after all.

"Besides," he said, "everybody's gotta die sometime, anyway."

"You're just so full of good cheer this morning." She sipped her instant coffee, grimaced at the acrid taste. "And shit. You're always full of shit."

"And I have it on my shoes." He sat on the steps, hiking his pants cuff to get at the laces.

Sipping her coffee, Lucy looked down the drive, toward the road and trees down in the distance. "Who's that?"

"Who?" He didn't look up.

"Out running."

"Sweatshirt and sweatpants?" He still hadn't looked up.

"How'd you know?"

"That's Elisa Cobb."

"Didn't she used to be in 4-H?"

"You not remember?"

"If I did I wouldn't've asked, would I?"

"Remember..." He slipped off a boot and dropped it onto the flagstones. "She got sent to federal prison a couple of years ago. Back

when they'd thought somebody'd managed to dig up that bit of radioactive core that's still left from that bomb that hit the ground up on the Culverton Estate." He tugged the laces of his other boot. "And she'd gone on the radio and made that little public service announcement that there might be a dirty bomb out there." He dropped his other boot next to the first. "And those couple of people got killed in the...whatever kind of mess you wanna call it after, before they figured out it was all a hoax."

But news always had the shortest half-life of any known or unknown substance in the universe.

"Ooooooh."

"Yeah."

"So she got out."

"Well, obviously. Yes." He stood in his sockin feet, lifted his boots. "She's on parole, I think." He started up the steps. "You coming in for lunch?"

"You mean breakfast?"

He opened the screen door. "Call it what you want."

She sat there sipping her instant coffee, watching the black-sweat-clothes-clad figure below till she'd disappeared behind a small stand of trees just past the mailbox.

Her phone rang, and she rolled over. Reaching blindly, Eva stuck her hand out where the nightstand should be, or would've been if she'd been home, and rammed her fingers into the edge of the one that was actually there. She pulled the pillow off her head, which she'd instinctively pulled over herself while still asleep when the first dregs of sunlight had filtered between the still partially open blinds. Bleary eyed, she reached across the nightstand. And unable to discern the number or picture or name, she just touched the screen and put the room-temperature glass against the side of her head. "Hello."

"Mrs Mastrantonio?"

"Yes." She laid her head against the pillow.

"After you missed the meeting this morning, I thought I might need to give you a call."

"Huh?" She rolled over, opened her eyes, and looked toward the windows. "What're you talking about?"

"I was afraid there might be a problem."

Eva sat up. "Who am I talking to?"

"My apologies. We've only spoken by email before. This's Steven Laughlan. From Barneker and Laughlan."

Eva jerked away the sheet, pulled the phone away from her head only long enough to look at the clock in the corner of the display. "I don't know what you're playing at here..." She glanced at the loud-ticking wall clock. And the voice on the other end started to speak, but she pulled the phone away from her ear to look at the clock in the corner of the screen again, and missed it. "What?" she said, when she'd pressed it to her ear again. "I'm sorry, I didn't get that."

"I said would you care to meet for lunch?"

"Okay..."

"In an hour then? There's a place called Vincent's on Mainstreet. It's across from the bank and just down from the hardware store."

“That’ll be fine.”

“Just don’t try to use Googolplex routes to find it. Welcome to the county.” He hung up.

She threw her legs over the side of the bed. She glanced at the overly loud wall clock. And with a whole lotta noise—she’d never been a morning-afternoon person—she crossed the room and turned on the tv. The news was in the middle of a cooking segment. She stood there, not really watching it, but looking at it, till the host said to stay tuned for News 10 at twelve-thirty. She looked at the wall clock again, at the light coming through the windows. She moved toward them, brushing aside two of the vertical blinds and trying to see the sky in the distance, but trees blocked everything but reddened clouds. She went to take a shower. She always felt like she needed a shower after sleeping in a hotel bed.

. . .

When she’d dressed and gone down, the woman behind the counter, the same one as from the night before, smiled and nodded, looking at her with bleary red eyes. “Good afternoon.” Eva glanced at the clock on the wall behind the counter. She nodded in reply, on her way out. And she pulled out her phone, but stopped, thumb hovering over the map icon in the corner.

She turned. “Excuse me, but could you tell me how to get to Mainstreet from here?”

“Oh, sure. Well, the shortest way is to go down here toward the right, and take the overpass up. It’s the first one you see. And you go past the hospital and Food Lion, down past McDonald’s, and you stay in the right lane and turn right at the intersection. That’ll send you, eventually, down Backstreet. And at the end you’ll see this large white building up on the hill, and you turn at the end of Backstreet and that puts you on Main.” She smiled.

“Thanks.”

“I thought you said you’d been here before?”

“I have.” Eva walked out, looking at her phone. The harsh, low light coming over the ridge tops made her wince, and she winced, and she pulled her sunglasses out of her bag.

. . .

Mainstreet didn't prove hard to find, though figuring out it and Backstreet were paired one-way avenues took a little longer, a realization that was confused by an elderly woman driving the wrong way as Eva stopped at one of the red lights on Backstreet. But she finally got turned up and going the right direction (Eva, that is; the elderly woman driving the wrong way had continued to do so all the way out till she merged with the correct lane for her directionality, cars honking and dodging out of the way down the remainder of the length of Backstreet). And she, Eva, glanced side to side as she made her way slowly along, finally spotting the bank, spotting a restaurant slash café a little ways down the opposite side of the street, but having to go the rest of the way down the street before she found a parallel space open.

And though she'd only ever been indirectly and abstractly acquainted with the state's brutality toward jaywalkers—a term itself that had been originally a pejorative for unsophisticated country dwellers, which, of course, was why it was used; there were those who wanted to liken this to having a law, or such, titled with a racial epithet, but since the meaning of the word had been lost in the mists of the recent past, no one besides this micro contingent of amateur philologists cared—but in any regard, even though the road was clear, Eva, luckily, still made her way down to the distant zebra-striped crossing. She glanced into the shops on her way up the other side, the barbers, the used and scholarly bookstore, the door of the last propped open, a box fan in the center of the room blowing outwards, Anime having disappeared somewhere into the back, because, really, who was going to shoplift from her? Eva made a mental note to come back this way. But she passed on toward the restaurant slash café, drawing herself up and together more with each stride.

She stepped off the sidewalk, past the iron railing that cordoned off a small covered outdoor section with a few round tables large enough for only three chairs if everyone *really* squeezed in. A young couple sat at one. A man in a suit at another in the corner. He set down his cup and raised his hand, rose as Eva approached. “Mr Laughlan?”

He nodded. “Yap.” And motioned to the opposite chair. “Please have a seat.”

Eva lowered her bag beside the chair and smoothed the back of her skirt as she sat.

"Thank you for coming," he said. "I realize things may be, unfortunately, slightly confused at this point."

"I—"

Since there was so little foot traffic that morning because those people who had decided against watching the eclipse on tv had already gone out of town for the event... though not many had bothered to do that, so mostly it sat empty because it was a very slow time for anything tourist related, and most locals couldn't otherwise afford to eat out overly much of the time, so it left the wait staff amply free to come out immediately, and the young woman appeared next to their table, smiling in the way people smile when the legislature says they can be paid sub-minimal wage because they get tips. "Would you like a menu?"

"Um. Yes." Eva took it, but only glanced at it. "Just a large coffee for the moment, please. With cream."

The waiter smiled and nodded, jotting that down dutifully, mostly as to look as if she was doing an efficient job, because who couldn't remember that small an order? But it was what customers usually expected.

"You came at a bad time," Laughlan said, after the waiter'd gone. Eva looked at him. "As you might have noticed, the county has a rather odd relationship with daylight savings time." As stated, the correct term, for as much as such means, that is, according to certain particular organizations or persons or documents at that given time and geographical location in history, was the non-plural, but linguistic rules being applied retroactively to that which arises from unconscious processes, such attempts at authority have always ended up being meaningless, as proved by the fact that so many languages have given birth to so many others and so many more are no longer extant in biological, or even technological, memory, so after enough time, the plural will, eventually, become the correct form, at which time subsequent authorities will insist upon its use in the face of a new-risen alternative.

"I don't really see, no."

"Well, in any regard," he said, and sipped his coffee. "There is a clock app you can download for it. He searched his pockets. I'll email

you the link. I think someone at the college wrote it. It'll cost you two-ninety-nine, but that's just the way it is." He tapped at his phone. And hers booped, a moment later, as the waiter carried out her coffee.

She smiled. "Will there be anything else?"

Eva shook her head. "Not at the moment." She removed the top of the cup, looking inside, smelling it, and sighing. "Can I get some sugar?" The waiter still smiled and pulled a handful of packets from a pocket in her apron and laid them on the table, pulling a plastic-encased stirring straw from another.

"Anything else?"

Eva shook her head. And when she'd looked round again, the waiter'd disappeared inside. Eva ripped open one of the sugar packets and decanted it into the swirled white-brown morass. She stirred it.

"I'm just going to be frank, if you don't mind," he said.

She looked up at him.

"After this morning, you're going to have quite a tough time of it. Not that it wouldn't've been before. But they're gonna be mean and nasty, and I'm not just talking about the other attorneys. And unfortunately the lack of sleep will only be part of it." Eva just sat there stirring her coffee. He lifted and sipped his. "Your not showing up this morning kind of set everything off on a boil." She opened her mouth, but he raised his hand and shook his head. "It's just one of those things, obviously. But I have to admit, it's good for me." He set his coffee on the table and reached inside his pocket. "This's my client's card." He slid it across the table. Eva jammed her fingernail beneath the card stock to lift it as she stirred with her other hand. It read: AS BEAUTIFUL AS THE CHANCE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN A SEWING MACHINE AND AN UMBRELLA. All on cream-colored, 100gsm paper with an egg-shell finish.

Eva shook her head. "I don't understand."

"My client is extremely interested in privacy. What you're holding is the only contact you will ever have. Knowingly." He sipped his coffee. "And before you ask, I am no more aware of this person's identity than you. In fact, for all I know, they might not be a person at all."

She stopped stirring her coffee and looked at him, drew out the straw and ran it between her lips. "And I'm just supposed to roll with this?"

"You'll have to."

She fitted the top onto her cup. "This's ridiculous."

"That it may be. But it has legs."

"This won't fly with the courts."

"It will fly. And it has. Many times. Representatives of the rest of the family have already been trying to pierce this veil for the last several years, and so far no judge has been able to do so."

Eva sipped her coffee. "If you're trying to scare me, you should come up with something a little more plausible."

"I don't intend to scare you at all. In fact, so far you've helped me greatly."

"How so?"

"I might as well say, your absence this morning allowed several things to pivot toward my advantage. Though they would have likely done so anyway, a little bit sooner is always a little bit sooner."

"I'm not here to be antagonistic, only to facilitate."

"That is the problem of course, as you already know, and will become more aware of." Only part of the family wanted facilitation. That is to say, all but two. "But what I'm really here for is a courtesy."

She opened her cup, tore open another sugar packet "Which is?"

"This is not a fight in which my client will capitulate in any way."

Eva took up the straw and began to stir again. "You should tell your client the story of the oak tree versus the grass in a storm."

He motioned through the window. "To put everything on the table, two points work in my favor." And when the waiter'd stepped outside with that same kind of smile as earlier, he said, "One cinnamon bun, please." He glanced at Eva. "Care for anything? I'm buying." But Eva shook her head. "One cinnamon bun then." The waiter nodded, scribbling that down and turning to go inside. "First," he sipped his coffee, "it's going to take a hell of a wind storm, enough to..." And the waiter emerged with a pastry on a paper plate and a napkin. "Thank you." He wiped his fingers on the napkin. "But such a storm would blow the entire family off, and they're each interested in saving themselves, if no one else." He lifted the pastry and took a small bite, chewing and swallowing. "Second, while I cannot vouch from personal experience, my assessment from the communications I receive is that this entity is quite willing to proverbially die for these causes." He

took another bite, returned the pastry to the paper plate as he chewed, and wiped his fingers on the napkin before grasping the coffee cup.

Eva sipped her coffee, not bothering to refasten the lid. "And what are these causes?"

"Three points. One, the transfer and full ownership of a set of property holdings listed as the Laurel Ridge Trailer Park."

Eva tore open another sugar packet. "That's already hemorrhaging money, isn't it?" She stirred it in. "I don't see why they're objecting."

"Certain segments of real estate in the area are becoming highly interesting to certain investors, with the way the market is going. They want their assets in something tangible. And a few recent sales and acquisitions for certain state projects have already been big money."

"So why doesn't your client just buy it?"

"The sum total of the properties in question are such a small aspect of the estate, even with current speculation, that it would come to only a portion of what my client would receive should the entire estate be liquidated. So we view it as perfectly acceptable that taking possession of it directly would satisfy the estate's obligation and leave the remainder free to do whatever they wanted." However, this was just his own post hoc rationalizations.

She stirred her coffee. "And they don't take this deal why?"

He sipped his. "You ever watch PBS?"

"No."

"My wife does. She—"

"And does this have a point?"

He sipped his coffee. "And there's these scientists that like to run these experiments with these apes, chimpanzees, I believe. But anyway, what they do is they show them two bowls, one with a small amount of a treat, another with a larger amount. And they train them to point to which one they want. And they always point to, as you can imagine, the bigger bowl. But what this experimenter, or whatever, does is she gives the one they point to to an ape on the other side of another cage. And no matter how many times they do this, the chimpanzee never points to the smaller bowl. So he, or she, or whatever, always ends up with the smaller one." He lifted the cinnamon bun.

She sipped her coffee. "And is this the kind of thing you do for a jury?"

He swallowed and set down the cinnamon bun, licked his fingers, then wiped them on the paper napkin. "I haven't been in front of a jury in ten years." He sipped his coffee. "This is just the situation we find ourselves in. They have not yet been capable of looking past whatever amount of money they might be losing to how much they'll gain."

"And no one has tried to explain this to them?"

"I'm sure they have." He sipped his coffee. "But we can only operate on our clients' wishes, can't we? And if they want to pay to go around in circles, I have no moral objection." He lifted the cinnamon bun, and before he bit into it, said, "That of course will be your job."

Eva sipped her coffee. "And what're the other two points?"

He set down the bun as he chewed, wiped his fingers on the paper napkin. "Rather minor in comparison. A right of first refusal on the main house itself and the immediate four-acre estate surrounding it."

"And they haven't agreed to that?"

"It's a sticky issue. I gather they don't like the idea of any single one of them ending up with it. A couple've even suggested dynamiting the whole thing." He sipped. "There's always, of course, the joke about the family curse." He sipped. "All being driven insane in the end, and all that."

"Hm." Eva sipped her coffee. "And the third?"

"Full transfer of an approximately five-hundred acre piece of property on the North end of the estate that borders the park service. But that's pretty much already a done deal." He sipped his coffee. "About thirty years ago the air force accidentally dropped a nuclear bomb on it. Part of it's still stuck in the ground out there. And they bought up a four-hundred acre option on the surrounding area, so nothing can be built on it, anyway."

"As in, a real nuclear bomb?"

He nodded as he sipped. "Yap. It's not a problem, though. They got most of it out. The part that goes boom, anyway. There's still a piece of radioactive core buried about two-hundred feet down that they can't get to. But it doesn't matter, it can't blow up." He sipped his coffee, tilting back his head as the level approached bottom. "Two or three are holding out for the possibility for timber rights being

sold. But I think they can be convinced that even a remote possibility of some kind of radioactive contamination isn't going to fly with most timber buyers, one way or the other."

"And what about radiation?"

He shook his head, lifted the last of the cinnamon bun and bit the remainder in half, chewed, swallowed. "It doesn't actually affect anything. But it doesn't have to." He popped the rest into his mouth, chewed, swallowed. He wiped his fingers and reached for the coffee cup. "The idea of it will be enough to sell them on the idea that nobody'd want it, or at least not at a price that'd be worth the fight." He tilted back his head, draining the last of his coffee.

"If you can't do anything with it, what does your client get out of it?"

"Mainly because it borders the forest service. There's a river that runs off the one and through the other. And from what I understand, part of this is a habitat for certain species of wildlife that live only in that area." He balled his napkin and dropped it into his cup. "Salamanders or frogs or something. Nuclear mutants, I don't know."

"I thought you said there wasn't a problem with radiation."

"There isn't. It's a joke."

Eva sipped her coffee.

Laughlan stood, produced his wallet. "If you want my advice, it's going to be the first point that's the biggest stickler. Find a way round it, and the rest of the dominoes fall." He dropped some bills on the table, set the empty cup on top of them. "I'd also recommend that app. If you don't show up again, it probably hurts me more than it helps. Next meeting will be as scheduled this afternoon." He stepped round the table, stopped. "Local time."

Eva sat there sipping her coffee after he'd gone, the waiter emerging to collect the cup and paper plate, eyeballing the cash before she stuffed it into one of her apron pockets. "Anything else I can get you?"

Eva glanced at the menu, picked it up. "Yes. A Boston Cream bun." Diet be damned. "And another coffee."

"Cream?"

"Please."

Less than a week in, he mulled the cumulative effects of the situation. As he'd gotten older, the consequences of the time change had been more pronounced. When he'd been a teen, they'd hardly seemed to register at all, in fact, they'd almost dovetailed with the modified almost-sleeping patterns that most teens went through. But out of his teens, he already seemed to be dragging, and he hadn't even hit his mid-twenties yet. And rather than days or weeks, when the time shifted back to being different by just an hour, it'd still take a month or so to recover. And of course, full recovery would only set in once his body'd habituated enough to become discombobulated again when fall came round and the clock fell back in the same fashion it sprung forward in spring. The most medically detectable sign of this was an uptick in blood pressure across the county, though to a greater degree than the rest of the country under the same general circumstances. And some speculated that, in fact, it was all part of a euthanasia and social Darwinistic plot to covertly remove elderly members of the population with weak hearts, which some pointed to as being evidenced by the fact that the major life insurance companies in the state had all given generous donations to a local county council candidate running against an unaffiliated first timer campaigning, in part, on the return of the county to standard daylight saving time. However, it turned out to be wasted money, in that it was later revealed that the upstart candidate was an atheist, and therefore disqualified to hold office, according to the literal wording of the state constitution, but even if it hadn't stated so, and even if it couldn't be currently enforced, exactly, it had so long been de facto enforced by the voting populace that that was only a technical detail. A small group attempted to sue over this, but due to the candidate's disappearance following the burning of his house, which was never proved to be anything more

than a faulty toaster, though the candidate had only ever owned a toaster *oven* for those duties, and though it was never demonstrated as to why, exactly, the toaster was on the back porch, or why gasoline was also stored there, the local departments were satisfied with the story, and everyone else that read it in the paper was satisfied with it, so there was no need to find a different one, resulting in the necessity of dropping that particular set of legal proceedings, as there was no defendant, and laws can't be, generally, challenged on the principle of the thing, as there has to be somebody who's willing to go into court and say that it did something bad to them first. This way it can impact any number of people before anyone actually has to get round to bothering to think about it. Some've suggested the legislature should be required to think about the laws they pass, but considering the molasses-like pace of the system as it already is—though such a phrase could be confusing, considering that during the 1919 Great Molasses Flood in Boston, when a 25ft wave of the stuff killed 21 people and injured 150, it was traveling at 35mph—the system burdened thus further by such frivolity would be borderline stagnant. But, in any regard, the lawsuit had, of course, been doomed to failure from the very onset, seeing as how it was impossible to sue the general public, but some still agreed with the spirit, in any regard. And while Shepard could detect a certain change in his blood pressure, though he had no immediate risk of heart attack, it was his eyes feeling so hot that was the most bothersome, and leaning against the truck cab, sipping from the OSU water bottle, the water in his mouth, though lukewarm, seemed frigid in comparison.

As stated, there was a hole in the dash where a clock should've been. And obviously, looking at the cloudy sky provided no help. Not that his ability to calculate backwards had completely diminished, but his sense of willingness to put in the effort had. He re-capped the water bottle and tossed it through the rolled-down window and into the passenger seat.

Apple limbs piled halfway up the cab in the truck bed. He'd trimmed them earlier, when winter'd still been lukewarm and the sap down, but hadn't gotten around to hauling them off before. And it was do it now or the grass would be unmowable. He'd already started a new brush pile for that year, and he climbed into the truck and took it

over the hill toward it, down into the middle of a former potato field, where it could wait another couple weeks to be burned with impunity if the sky ever decided to open up and wet the ground enough.

There isn't much to say of the job, other than that, climbing down from the truck bed, his back managed to feel even worse than it had when he'd woken, which just meant everything was a kinda normal, still. And he kept forgetting to turn off the light, and wondered if that was conspiring, though not really conspiring, just in the sense of anthropomorphization, but conspiring with the time change to aggravate the symptoms from the latter. He grabbed the wheel and hauled himself into the cab and slammed the door, careful not to get the handle in his side.

Princess was gone when he parked the truck by the house, the chain unhooked, the length lying stretched across the back yard. And when he came round the house, Lucy was sitting on the front steps in shorts and bright-colored sports shoes, t-shirt damp, rubbing her down, Princess twisting her head round at the sound of his footsteps and the gasoline-sweat smell that pervaded from him, and which he'd smelled too much of to recognize on himself by that point, her tongue drooping out the side of her mouth. "Where've you been?"

"Out for a run." She looked up at him, wrinkled her nose as he approached. "You stink."

"Thanks."

"Doesn't he, Princess?"

"I get the idea. But if Princess don't watch it with the insults, she's gonna find herself going to bed without supper."

Lucy rubbed Princess's neck. "Now, he wouldn't do that, would he? He's not that mean."

"No." He started past them, up the steps. "I'm meaner."

He went through the den, even from there, able to hear something sizzling in the kitchen. His mother looked over her shoulder as he went to the cabinet and opened the door and reached down to get a couple cans of dog food.

"Dinner'll be ready in just a bit."

"Alright. I'll feed her and clean up." He went out through the den, raising both cans as he stepped onto the porch. "Special for today. Canned mush."

“Mmm,” Lucy said, and rubbed Princess’s face. “Sounds good, doesn’t it? Mmm. Mmm.”

“Mom says dinner’s almost ready.”

“I’m gonna get a shower first.”

He came down the steps. “Well, you’d better hurry. Because I want one too.”

“You’ve gotten spoiled not having to wait on anybody. Ain’t that right, Princess? Ain’t that right?”

Princess twisted to look round at him, her tongue still hanging out. He held up the cans. “Come on you traitorous dog.” And she pulled away from Lucy and tried to jump up on him, but he dodged back. “Come on.”

“Don’t tease’er.”

“Hey, I’m a big meany, remember?” He followed the flagstones round the side of the house, Princess trailing after him. And he picked up the stainless-steel bowl from the ground out back and set it on the bin outside the shed, set one can down, and popped the top on the other, sticking out his leg to keep Princess from jumping up. “Just hold on.” He popped the top on the other, the contents coming out with a sloppy sound when he upended it that made Princess whine. He mashed it all with the bottom of a can. “Alright. Here we go.” He set it down, and she smacked her mouth, licking and gumming. He patted her rump before he started across the back yard and went into the kitchen.

You are wandering again.

Sorry, Senpai.

You must sequester yourself fully.

But I can, Senpai, I can see fine.

That you can see is not the point. But that's the very point.

Senpai?

Knowing you watch one time and place from another is to be watching two times and places.

But I can do it.

Yet when you speak, you are here and there.

Well, yes, Senpai.

And how may you be understood unless whom you speak with is also thus?

But...

And even if they were thus, how would you guarantee each word would be received in the time in which it had been uttered?

I...don't know, Senpai.

Because there is no way to know. This is why we say time and place is Legion. Perhaps one may even divide himself into the infinity, but who would he speak with now?

But it is possible?

Many things are possible. But that is only a part of the whole.

But—

Let us speak of this later. Now we are to watch and to wait.

Yes, Senpai.

Now, sequester yourself once again.

Yes, Senpai.

They'd turned onto rougher trails, ones not as well maintained as those used by tourists and hikers, ones rarely seen by anyone but park rangers and forest service personnel, mostly in brush fire season, ones where, as if having stepped into a comedy, absently pushing aside a branch was liable to send it swarming into the face of the person directly behind. Something that'd already happened a few times. And since they were beyond the usual designated areas, there were no areas cleared for camping, nor any place pre-made to safely contain a fire. They made the first as best they could in an area semi-clear of underbrush, in a sparse stand of taller pines, and replaced the second with a single solar-powdered lantern Hannah'd been carrying strapped to her backpack, that even overcast skies'd proved enough to charge. It wasn't as festive as the night before, not just because of the lack of romance from the fire, but because of how tired they were. Jennifer sat on her pack, removed her shoes, and rubbed her foot through her sock, which she rolled off to examine the bandage, which'd stayed in place, only slightly peeling at the edges, like that brand always did, lint sticking to the exposed sticky side, but other than that it would hold, and when she actually wanted to and tried to remove it, like that brand always did, it was going to probably take the top two layers of skin with it; that was the problem with that brand, rather than the weak, unstick-in-five-minute ones that spit'd be better at holding on, they seemed to've swung hard to the opposite pole, inventing something that could've held supersonic aircraft together in a pinch.

Lydia and Bernadette threw down their packs, too, on either side of her, after they'd finished with the tent. Lydia knelt and unzipped hers, offering the other two a fruit bar before she pulled out one for herself and re-zipped it and plopped down on it. Paxton had broken

out his fold-able camping stool again. Langdon, who'd thrown his bag into the back of the tent, crawled out, stretching and groaning with his teeth clenched.

"Watch it," Lydia said. "You're going to attract the bears."

"Don't joke," Bernadette said.

"Did you hear about the guy who woke up to hearing a crunch," Lydia said, "and it turned out to be a grizzly munching on his head."

"Ahhh come on."

"Luckily," Hannah said, "we have no grizzlies around here."

"That we know of," Graham said. He squatted near the lamp, rooting through his pack, produced a granola bar, and squatted there unwrapping the foil-plastic packet.

"What about the elk?" Bernadette said.

"You've got a fixation on big fauna, don't you?" Lydia said, as she chewed.

"We should be fine," Hannah said. She unclipped her canteen and unscrewed it, tilted back her head. And she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand before she started to re-screw it.

"They like to smell you," Lydia said, her mouth full, "just as much as you like to smell them." She wadded the fruit bar wrapper and unzipped her pack and rooted out a plastic bag stuffed with others of its plastic-foil kind and stuffed it in, too, before re-zipping both.

"Do they stink?" Bernadette said. "I've never been around one. Now, goats, they stink."

"Not really," Hannah said. "No more than a horse."

Graham snorted.

Hannah unzipped her pack and rooted through it.

"You can have this one if you want," Graham said. He extended a freshly unwrapped granola bar.

"I'm fine."

"It's chocolate."

"I'm fine."

"Oh come on." He waved it at her. "It's dark chocolate, you know you want it." He bent forward, almost hitting her in the face with it, but she shoved his arm away.

"Fuck off."

He steadied himself. "Just trying to be helpful." He bit into it and

tore half away. "This's the problem with the way things are these days. You can't be friendly." He chewed.

Everyone else sat in silence.

Jennifer slipped her sock on again, slipped on her boot. "What do you think about parthenogenesis as a form of reproduction?"

"It would have its advantages at times," Lydia said.

"And what's that?" Graham said.

"It's when females reproduce without needing males."

Graham laughed as he chewed. "Yeah. Great. Just what we need."

"What," Bernadette said, "would we do with all the leftover men?"

"Under the right conditions," Jennifer said, "of course, there are several species where the males turn into females."

"I always favored that," Paxton said, "as an overlooked explanation for how the dinosaurs in Jurassic Park came to procreate, that a parthenogenetic process occurred. It would seem more plausible."

"People are always having to make movies more plausible," Langdon said. "On the subject of dinosaurs... Back when they had some of the first films shown to the public, one of them was of a cartoon dinosaur named Gertie. And there were people coming out of the theatre, who when interviewed, thought they'd really seen a live breathing dinosaur there on stage. Of course, in that case it's just mostly a matter of the frame of reference, integrating new experience into the brain's already existing models of reality. But more broadly, I'd argue that while most people would make fun of that, that we're still doing the same thing. And that's why certain people can't let go of things like the fact the spaceships makes sounds in Star Wars, or that there're explosions in space, and so on. Or the way a character acts. It's a refusal or an inability to acknowledge the separation of fantasy and reality."

"I'm not saying I think Jurassic Park is, or was, a real place."

"I'm not necessarily saying that you are, either. But we kind of, I think, live in a sort of dual reality. A sort of quantum suspension, where we accept both the fact that it's fantasy and are desperately trying to integrate it into reality by quote unquote fixing it."

"You're stealing terms from fields you don't know anything about."

"Well, that's the way language works. But I can't help thinking it has profound implications for how we can expect to live our lives."

Lydia sat forward, knee on her thigh, chin in her palm. "How so?"

"Don't get him started," Hannah said.

"Well, I mean, it's just... You have these so-called... luminaries," Langdon said. Though, technically, the general body (in this case, similar to how it did with all such groupings, right up to the maximal grouping of the nation state, his primary language wrapped disparate people into a singular organism in a way that reminded him of a Clive Barker story... and after all, any given body was just cells to be sacrificed for the greater conceptual whole... and distributed intelligence and meta-intelligent planets...) but the not really official group he was vaguely thinking of and referencing referred to themselves as the Luminous. "But you've got these people who set themselves up as some kind of vanguard of rationality in the broader public consciousness and—"

"Like who?"

"I don't know, John Bourdaine Tums?"

"And what've you got against him?" Paxton said.

"Well, nothing, really. But that's beside the point. It just makes me curious that so many of these public promulgators of science and neo-enlightenment reason, such as Tums, or Larkins, for that matter, can't get away from this idea of what is and isn't reflective of reality in a movie. I mean, if we could truly separate the two, what would it matter? But we still have a problem, anyway. It bugs us. And these people are held up as bastions of some kind of reasoned inquiry that should dominate all fields of human endeavor, yet they're still incapable of truly separating fiction and reality. Or at least, what we conceive of as reality."

"Oh, not this semantic rabbit hole, please."

"Well, one has to use language, whether it's English or Math. And language is semantics."

"And they just keep spinning round and round."

"Maybe because we don't know anything more about this than when we started out ever how so many thousands of years ago."

"You can't say we haven't advanced," Bernadette said. "Right?"

"Well, that depends on the definition of advance."

"You can redefine anything," Paxton said.

"Yes. And that's part of the problem. But the problem remains

that we fundamentally lack the ability to use the universe to prove anything about its fundamental nature as a whole. In the same way that reason can't be used to reason that reason is reasonable. At some basic point everything, science, religion, the nature of our existence, comes down to accepting some point that can't be proved from inside the universe that we're in. If we're even in a universe."

"Like the matrix," Bernadette said.

"I don't know," Langdon said. "That's an idea. But isn't it interesting how we can only frame things in terms of what we've already experienced? And it does create the situation for an interesting conspiracy theory to emerge."

"What's that?" Lydia said.

"Well, some people, they go and see something like *The Matrix*, and they say *so this is the truth*, and they think that's reality. And another portion of the audience, maybe the largest portion, will say because they've seen it framed in that way, on TV, in a movie, that it can't be real. Not that they would know that, but that would be the way it would work out, or it would have the surface appearance of such, at least. Even if it were pointed out, in fact. And it might... So any scientific or philosophical evidence for such a state, that the universe isn't exactly like as expressed in some other culturally dominant schema—and films, films most often, as we're a very image-dominated culture, are invoked against the ideas, that it's not real, therefore everything that looks like it is not real. Or like how back when they used to respond to people talking about humans going to the moon as that *Buck Rogers stuff*."

"But," Paxton said, "you just said everyone thinks these things *are* real."

"More accurately, I said I think it's likely we do both at the same time."

"Which is very nice. But it's not very useful or testable."

"Well, unless the universe as a whole can be replicated, it's unavailable for actual scientific inquiry. So we find ourselves in the situation, as said, where the universe in which we live, parts of it can be operated on scientifically, but never the whole of it. Not in the sense of the core of science, replicability."

"Well, then we should just give up everything."

“No. It just... It just goes back to power.”

“Oh, come on.”

“Well, what’s the most accurate statement I can make about any science? It’s that here are a collection of data points that lead me to believe that such and such a series of events follow if such and such series of circumstances are initiated. But that that’s only what I’ve modeled at the moment, and things could be different tomorrow. Our solar system could move through a portion of space where the laws of physics slightly change, for all we know, at this point. And the data is by definition never going to be complete, because it would take more storage space than is available in the whole of the universe, because we’d have to replicate the whole of the universe, and not just the snapshot of now, of every moment of time before, and maybe even everything after, if retro-causality is a reality, if there even really is time in the broader sense of how we conceive it and measure it, and possibly, everything that comes after this point. So that all we’re really left with is the output of a model, the ability to say we can say *I think* this is the case. But it’s that very language that has us upset. We want surety. And anything that doesn’t give us surety, doesn’t get power. It’s the whole reason that everyone from supplement makers to food companies fund so-called scientific studies to promulgate in their advertising. And the scientific, the word and its associations, are already so imbued with this quality that we can make a label that says *scientific studies show but do not prove* X, Y, or Z, and everyone overlooks the *but do not prove* part. No one gets power by saying this’s the best we can do. They get power by saying this’s what we *will* do.”

“Now you’re talking politics.”

“It has the same problem.”

“Politics,” Paxton said, “are like religion, a primitive way of dealing with the problems that science can now deal with much better. Even you have to admit that.”

“And the gaps?”

“Gaps.” Paxton shook his head. “The gaps’re getting narrower and narrower by the hour, so you’re only going to be able to run to them so long.”

“Perhaps when they defined the inability to transfer any detailed

residue-by-residue sequentialized information backwards through protein structures, the use of the phrase central dogma wasn't so much an incorrect use of language on the writer's part, but just something unintentionally accurate."

Paxton looked over at him.

"So," Graham said. He sat there with an empty foil wrapper crunched in his fist. "People actually pay money to listen to this sort of thing?"

Hannah, who'd sat there simmering, ignoring most of the conversation, said, "Do you think we'll be able to beat the record?" They looked at her. "For the longest and heaviest?"

Graham snorted.

"One can hope," Paxton said. "Though, I would settle for the average."

Graham unscrewed his canteen. "Average what?"

"About a meter and a half," Paxton said.

Graham wiped his mouth. "A what and half whats?"

"About four-ish feet. But that would be pretty big for around here. The Giant Chinese Salamander can get almost to six foot."

"Shit. How much does that fucking weigh?"

"Oh, hundred-forty, hundred-fifty pounds. Give or take."

"And these things live around here? How come I've never seen them?"

"Maybe you've never looked," Jennifer said.

"The population's very minimal," Paxton said. "And they live in extreme isolation. If we can find one, this will be actually the first time I've ever actually seen one."

"You're shitting me."

"No. That's the way it goes with a reclusive species. It wasn't up till recently that the first wolverines were actually caught on film in any significant way. Most of the people studying them had never had any chance to see them alive before the new field cameras came along, they live in such isolation and remoteness."

"And these things are going to be that big?"

"They have been found before," Langdon said. "But, interestingly enough, a lot of people think the pictures are fake."

"Like the Loch Ness monster, or Bigfoot?"

"Did you hear," Bernadette said, "there was somebody else saw him again?" But she didn't glance up from her phone as she did.

"No, it's much clearer than that," Langdon said. He paused. "Well..." He shook his head. "These things do exist. It's just that people don't have a framework to accept that they do. There is a similar phenomena noted in history, or at least the story gets told. There used to be an English-language Bible in Britain, which was extremely popular prior to the discovery of the Americas. And it listed the species that were saved on the ark, Noah and the flood, etc. And when they brought back these new animals from the Americas, one of them was the possum, which was an animal that didn't exist in Europe and wasn't in that list. And the story goes there were roughly three divisions among the spectators, that they either saw it and basically said hmm, that's interesting, or they believed it was fake, and a small contingent, so it's said, couldn't see the possum at all."

"Why?"

"Supposedly, it goes, because it wasn't on the list, therefore it couldn't exist."

"The whole thing is silly," Paxton said.

"Most likely," Langdon said. "But it does likely say something about us, that we would promulgate certain stories about a sort of nebulous *them* that showcases their stupidity, versus our superiority, whether it be an invisible possum, or thinking they'd seen a living breathing dinosaur."

"Well," Graham said, as he re-capped his canteen. "I've had as much college as I can stand for the night. If anyone wants me, they know where to find me." And he stood and lifted his pack and started towards his tent.

"Sorry," Langdon said. "I get to talking too much sometimes."

"I think it's fascinating," Lydia said.

"We should all get some sleep," Hannah said. She rose and brushed off her pants. "We'll really be off the trail tomorrow." She turned toward her tent.

Jennifer rose, too, Bernadette following toward their own.

Lydia, chin still in her palm, said, "You look like you're stuck on something, Doctor Jones."

Langdon looked up. "I sometimes get lost."

"Oh? Where at?"

He shook his head. "No place interesting."

"I didn't mean to intrude, if it's personal."

He shook his head. "Mentioning Jurassic Park got me thinking about a kind of offhand review I once heard about Michael Crichton's oeuvre." After all these years, he still hadn't let that alone.

"And what's that?"

"That all of the scientific invention, etc, etc, always got destroyed, blown up, kind of sealed off in the end, stoppering it, if you will, from getting out into the broader world. And this person's comment was, in effect, that Crichton was afraid to change the world. But that's kind of an ironic statement, and rather pointed to what we've been discussing, or I've been discussing."

"Oh? How so?" It should need to go without mention that she didn't really need to ask this, nor cared, particularly, for the answer, only for things to continue on.

"Well, it's just that it's not going to change the world. It's all made up. It's a fiction. Of course, sometimes, it seems like everything might be fiction. I mean, we can probably have a few facts, or whatever, but maybe not even that. We have to construct models from that little bit we have. After all, we could bring Kant into it and all that. It reminds me of a story I once heard from a colleague where, back in the eighties, when the Dungeons and Dragons scares were going on, in one of Tom Hanks' first movies, though it's so bad he doesn't even list it on his own filmography, but anyway, this guy goes to see the film with his father, and the film's about, Tom Hanks' character, who goes down the rabbit hole of this Dungeons and Dragons cinematic knockoff to the point where he becomes so psychologically enveloped by it he kills someone with a sword, and the guy's father, who's watching this with him in the theatre, turns to him and says, you see, this's what happens."

Lydia faintly laughed.

Paxton stood, folding his fold-able stool. "And with that, I give up for tonight." And he walked back toward the tent.

"You know, you can talk some more if you want," Lydia said. "I don't mind. I like listening."

Langdon shook his head. "Should probably get some sleep." He stretched his shoulders and stood. "Good night."

"Night, Doctor Jones."

He came in through the den, where his mother already sat with a plate and cup of coffee before the turned-on tv. She glanced over her shoulder from the recliner. "Morning, dear."

"Morning." He turned and went into the kitchen and passed down along the counter and lifted the bread bag, untwisted the tie and stuck it in his mouth as he pulled out four slices. "Where's Lucy?" he called, his lips compressed round the paper-covered wire. He spun the bag, re-twisted the tie. He dropped the slices in the toaster.

"She's gone out for a run," she called over the sounds of the tv. "I've already covered something and set it in the fridge, so you can eat as much as you want."

He reached up and got a plate, set it down on the counter in front of the toaster while he leaned against the counter and waited. A general ache diffused through his body.

"You're awful quiet today," she called over the sound of the tv.

The toast popped, and he spread the semi-square pieces into four quadrants along the circular plate. He turned toward the table and sat. "Just tired." But he hadn't said it loud enough.

"What?"

"Just tired," he called. He reached forward and spatulaed somewhat-square-cut sections of egg onto two slices of toast, then piled bacon over that, before he topped them with their other halves.

"You've been working too hard."

And sleeping too little. Again, the light'd been left on in his room. He bit into a sandwich, careful that neither bacon nor egg tumbled out the bottom or sides. Grease ran over one of his fingers, and he set down the sandwich to lick it off.

"I made up some Cool-Aid and put it in the refrigerator." She called over the sound of a commercial.

"Thanks." He rose and opened the refrigerator and pulled out the plastic pitcher. And after he returned it to the shelf, he stood there sipping it to cut the taste of morning-late-morning out of his mouth. He carefully lifted the partially eaten sandwich. "I'm gonna have to go out town," he called. He chewed, swallowed.

"What?"

"I'm gonna have to go to town. I'll have to get a couple posts and some more wire. One of those hemlocks came down on the fence."

"It's been so calm though these days," she called.

"The roots're rotted out from under it." He took a bite, chewed, swallowed. "Only a matter of time before the rest come down." He reached for the Cool-Aid. "I'm gonna have to cut that stand this year before it all comes down."

"We can always use it for firewood."

"No. It's practically nothing but paper." He took another sip of Cool-Aid. "If it sits on the ground awhile and rots down to the fat wood, that's about the only thing that we'll get out of it."

"Such a waste."

"I guess."

"What?"

"I guess." He lifted the other sandwich. "Anything you need while I'm out?" He chewed, swallowed. "I probably need to pick up some more dog food while I'm out."

"I don't think we're out of anything."

He sipped the Cool-Aid.

Music blared at the start of the next segment. His mother came in from the den.

"I didn't mean you had to look right now."

But she'd already started opening the cabinets, went round and opened the fridge. "No." She closed the fridge. "I don't see anything." Shouting carried from the TV, and she went back into the den.

He finished the last of the last sandwich, washed it down with the rest of the glass of Cool-Aid. He ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth. The toast had shredded his gums behind his upper and lower teeth. It always did that. Yet he always kept toasting it. He set the glass by the sink. "I'm gone." He glanced through the screen

door, seeing Princess lying there on the back step, and he paused and touched his empty pocket, and turning, he went into the den.

“Forget something?”

“Wallet.”

“Be careful.”

“I will.” He grabbed his wallet from the table beside the door.

Princess rolled off the step when she heard the truck start, came round the side of the house as much as the chain’d allow. He glanced into the rearview mirror and saw her looking.

He drove along in no particular hurry, one hand on the wheel, forearm resting on the rolled-down window, the air blowing over him, drying sweat. Two figures appeared ahead, round the bend, on the edge of the road, running against the flow of traffic, and he slowed, then stopped. Breathing hard, Lucy walked around the front of the truck and stopped at the window. “You going out?” she said.

“No, I’m just driving round. What do you think?”

“You see the way he is,” Lucy said. Elisa stood there breathing hard, her face flushed.

“’Bout too hot for this isn’t it?” Winter, too, had less and less snow every year. And if it were cyclic, as some claimed, it’d better start cycling back the other way, or it was going to be the new norm.

“We were just headed back to the house to get something to drink, anyway.”

“Wanna lift?”

“Now, that’d defeat the entire purpose, wouldn’t it?”

“I only asked.” He added to Elisa, “Good to see you again.” And he drove on, the image of the two of them receding in the rearview mirror.

The Tuck was running good; that little tad of scattered rain from the night before must’ve topped up the lake enough they’d had to open the dam again. There wouldn’t be too many out fishing with it like that, at least, not wading.

He slowed, eyeing the number of cars parked along the side of the road ahead, the people gathered along the edges. “What the hell...” He slowed almost to a crawl as he came up on them.

“Remember, everyone,” someone shouted, “remember to stay within four feet of the edge of the road, that’s the public right of

way.” Out on that stretch, the four feet beyond the edge of the road often extended into people’s yards. In this case, the front yard of a small brick house that was generally unoccupied, usually rented, but which sat unused at the moment, the driveway empty. “So long as,” that same someone yelled, “you stay in that right of way, you’re on public property.” Some of them already carried signs. Though, most were still bent over open trunks, extracting their own flopping cardboard and sticks. And with no traffic coming either way, Shepard stopped in the middle of the road, letting a couple pull across to the other side so they could park and get out without having to walk across. Several of the signs were a variant of the same thing: the word PORN in various cases and with various-sized letters surrounded by a circle with a slash through it. Others, more wordified, carried text too small to read unless it’d been held as close as a newspaper.

Shepard leaned out the window. “What’s going on?”

“Haven’t you heard?” an old man said. “This’s the place they’re gonna be filming that porn.”

Some called, “Alright, everybody get in a line.”

The old man said, “Sorry, have to go,” and walked down the row of cars with his sign over his shoulder.

A car honked behind him, and Shepard glanced into the rearview mirror. He let his foot off the brake and touched the gas, glancing through the rolled-down window as he passed, the loose assemblage working itself into a proper-revolving, but lopsided, loop, circling itself, starting to chant, but what, he couldn’t hear. In the distance, an old man carried a sign against his shoulder, somehow apart from the rest, the sign reading clearly, letters large enough to discern even in the distance: YOU CAN’T REVOLUTIONIZE THE WORLD. Farther down the road, more cars had parked in the grass near the Mennonite church, people walking, carrying signs, though he couldn’t discern what’d been written on these. A few waved as he passed, and he responded automatically in kind before he turned onto the bridge and started up through Presbyterian. And when he crested the hill, looking down, for a moment, before he passed behind a stand of trees, he could still make them out below, still marching round in a lopsided oval, going nowhere along the side of the road.

“The soul’s like marbles,” Russell said. The cacophony of the latter days of March Madness crashed round them. But sitting in the booth, leaning down hard against the table, he didn’t seem to notice any of it, any of the multiplicity of TVs scattered strategically throughout the establishment, the shouting, the cries of disgust and slash or adulation. He tilted back his head and drained another glass, pushed it across the table, foam running down the sides to settle at bottom, him and it sitting there waiting for someone to make their way back round. “It’s the best analogy I’ve ever been able to come up with.” The dog sitting on the opposite side of the booth looked at him, having been brought in by someone and forgotten during a losing streak, the leash trailing down over the seat and across the floor. “Of course, it all comes back to the fact that, supposing God could’ve recreated you or me exactly, then we wouldn’t be unique, which, of course, God could’ve done...so they say. But that would make the soul replicable, therefore not unique. So we have to have a division between the two, follow?” The dog sniffed the empty glass, which Russell lifted, and he turned in his seat and leaned over to set the glass on the nearest table while someone had stepped away. “So therefore the soul and person have to be separate. The person, the biological me and you, is a process of biology, it’s born, it walks around the face of the Earth, it dies. What happens? Nothing. All of that experience that was gained ends. Poof. Gone.”

“Can I get you anything?”

He raised his hand, speaking to the waiter without looking away from the dog. “Two pints of Guinness. And two orders of chicken tenders.”

“Alright.” She lifted the empty glass from the other table and stepped away from him and into the surrounding noise.

“Now, so you see, all of this experience is going to go away, rotting away in our brains, maybe absorbed by some other organism that’s chewing on us, bacteria, worms, etc. There were experiments where they taught worms to run a maze, or slither a maze, or...undulate through a maze, whatever you want to call it, not that I want to be taken as being offensive to those organisms that’ve never in the course of their evolution been selected for, or perhaps, that is to say against, limbs of various sorts. But they teach them to run this maze, and then they grind them up, and they feed them to the other worms, because that’s just what great science is all about, obviously, that would probably go without stating, but I’ll state it anyway. And they found that the new worms could...undulate through the maze on the first time out. So who knows, maybe when they’re boring their way through our rotting little grey cells, our memories are being carried on in some way. But one could argue that if there is such a possibility or likelihood—”

“Here you go.” The waiter set two wax-paper-lined cardboard trays on the table, and two beers. “Anything else?”

He didn’t look away from the dog, raised his hand. “That’ll be fine.”

And the waiter disappeared into the surrounding noise.

Russell pulled a cardboard tray over, the dog watching him. “Now, if that’s the case,” he pulled out a chicken tender and motioned with it, the dog’s eyes following the golden-brown, battered bird flesh. “If that’s the case...” He reached over with his other hand and grasped a beer, took a long draw. “If that’s the case, one could assume that it’s a conspiracy, the proliferation of steel-lined caskets and embalming, and even, cremation...” He took another sip of beer. “It’s all a conspiracy to prevent the human collective unconscious traveling forward through time and space vested in the numerous workings of all those things that creepeth and crawleth upon and through this Earth.” He reached over and set the chicken tender on the table, the dog scarfing it up. “After all, does not Isaiah write that their worm shall not die?” Russell sipped his beer.

“So what was I talking about...” He sipped his beer. “Oh, memories. And souls. They’re like marbles.” He sipped his beer, picked out another chicken tender. “That’s the best thing I’ve come up with.

Not literal marbles of course, as I just said, it's only an analogy. And a terrible one at that, but..." He leaned forward and set the chicken tender on the table, sat back and sipped his beer. "What else are you supposed to do?" The dog chewed and swallowed and looked at him. "So what happens in...or how it goes is...the analogy..." He sipped his beer. "Person, that is, human, not to be speciest about it, you understand. I'm sure your own species has its own theology on this point, but I'm going to concentrate on mine. And anyway, what happens is the person is brought into existence, and you have the soul, this already existing unique thing, a sort of pre-existing condition that eventually, at some point, attaches itself to this newly existent human." He sipped his beer. "Of course, when this occurs is of no importance, whether it occurs before the first cell has divided, or through the mouth or nose on the...a particular day, or whenever, or at the point of exiting from the vaginal canal, or what have you. No, it only matters that it becomes attached in some way." He sipped his beer. "Kind of like it's in your pocket. Of course, you don't have pockets. Maybe you could imagine a belly button or something, to be honest, I'm not quite sure that your kind has those, either, I admit my ignorance, so please don't hold it against me, but I'll keep going with pockets, if you don't mind." He picked out a chicken tender and set it across the table. "Of course, I'm sure that you can understand the basic concept." He tilted back his head and drained three quarters of the glass before he came up for air. "And it just stays in your pocket that way till you eventually expire, I mean, there's no way to avoid that, even the whole universe is going to go that way soon enough." Tilting back his head, he drained the glass. "A few billion years this way or the other." Foam running down the sides to settle at bottom of the glass, he turned and set it on the table of the vacated booth directly behind his own. "It's all the same, it doesn't matter. But anyway..." He moved the other glass over in front of himself.

And he raised his arm as another waiter passed. "My friend's been waiting for a pint of Guinness for the last half hour."

"Sir?"

"Not that one. He's off at the restroom. Because he's waiting. We're all sitting here waiting. You see this uneaten food?"

"One pint of Guinness."

“Make it two. I’ll have a second one.”

“I’ll be right back with that then.”

Russell hadn’t looked away from the dog this whole time. “Now ...where was I...” He sipped his beer. “Yes, you die. Well, not you, my species of ape, not to say yours don’t too, your species, that is, I’m not trying to insult you by calling you an ape, if that’s something you would consider an insult, understand, but we die, and the marble, say, rolls out of the person’s pocket, and...goes on its merry way, wherever souls go. Maybe they go to heaven. Maybe they reattach to someone else. Who’s left to know?” He picked out another chicken tender and set it across the table. “You see why it’s a terrible analogy, of course.” The dog chewed and swallowed and looked at him. “It’s just so overwrought and...shitty. So you spend more time defending the analogy than you do the concept it’s trying to express. Of course, maybe that’s the better thing to do. Of course, what’s the point of a soul that does this? How am I supposed to know that? In the grand scheme of the universe, what am I?” He looked down into the bottom of his glass. “Now, you’re going to ask, why do I reject that it’s connected to the mind, haven’t I ever heard of near-death experiences? Of course I have, who hasn’t in this society? It’s like short, grey-skinned aliens with big, black, almond-shaped eyes, everyone’s seen them and know what they are. Everybody knows what to expect. So what’re we supposed to say...”

The waiter set two beers off a tray. “Anything else?”

“No.”

Without a word, the waiter took the empty and disappeared into the crowd and noise. Russell moved one beer closer and took a long pull from the top, sucking up the foam. “But what’re we supposed to make of this idea? Okay, so we’ve got the soul, and it has some kind of memory capacity that’s compatible with the biological human brain, so we can rip it out of the body and shove it back down again and still remember all this? And of course, I’m supposed to be floating, except I’m floating in something that’s like my body, but not my body, because I’m floating over my body.” He picked out a chicken tender, “And this walking down a tunnel business,” and bit it in half, the dog watching, and set the other half across the table. He swallowed, took a long pull from his beer. “And what about this

heaven? You get there and you still have this kind of body, but what, it's the best version of this body? What's the best version of someone genetically prone to obesity, or a balding spot? What about the social structure? Of course, it's going to be just like Earth, why in the hell would anyone go to heaven if they thought they were going to go *down* the social totem pole? Well, technically, it's up that's worse ...but we've re-appropriated it to work the opposite way...or vice versa...so... And a flat..." He sipped his beer. "And a flat social structure is by definition going down. So...hell, basically." He sipped his beer. "I hope I'm not boring you." The dog looked at the chicken tenders. And Russell picked out the last from the nearest tray and set it across the table. "And then there's the idea of what do we do there? Is there sex? Oh, no, I want my body but not my bodily functions. Remarried widows slash widowers and their new and old spouses..." He paused, sitting there, rolling his glass in his hand, looking down at the undulating dark liquid. He sipped it. "So do we get orgies? No, we can't do that in heaven. No, what do they say? It doesn't mean anything up there. Great." He sipped his beer. "What's left? Hm?" He pulled over the other cardboard tray of chicken tenders. "What's left? What in the whole thing is left to do after we take the few good things about life and flush them down the heavenly toilet?" He picked out a chicken tender, "Because what else is there to flush down it?" bit it in half, chewed, fitted the other half into his mouth, washing it down with a slug and gulp of beer. "Hell, it's probably only named heaven because the name hell was already taken." He sipped his beer, picked out a chicken tender, bit it in half. "Probably the one and the same place," he said, as he chewed. Lucifer, after all, was cast down to Earth." He sipped his beer. "Or was that Milton?" He shook his head and set down the glass. "What's it matter..." He reached for a napkin. "He invented a good sixteenth of contemporary Christianity..." He stuffed the other half of a chicken tender in his mouth "...or at least what Dante missed..." chewed a long time, finally washing it all down. "And I don't want to be accused of being speciest, but some preachers out there preach as to how dogs don't go to heaven."

Princess followed Lucy round the side of the house. "Where're you going?"

Shepard stood behind the open driver side truck door, rolling down the window. "Gotta pick up a few things."

"You're always going out to pick up a few things." Lucy leaned against the truck, folded her arms across the hood. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you're sneaking off somewhere. Maybe to see someone?"

"Only if you count the checkout lady at Lowes."

His mother propped open the kitchen screen door, called, "If you're going out, you should take the garbage."

He shut the truck door, crossed the yard and went in, first going back through the house to collect the semi slash temporarily recycled plastic grocery bag that lined the bathroom trashcan to hold discarded toilet paper and used floss and other sundries. He tied it and dropped it beside the trash can as he re-entered the kitchen. "Anything you need while I'm out?" He removed the lid and pulled out the bag, shaking it to make everything settle.

"Here," she said. She capped the grease bottle, a reused vegetable oil-bottle, and handed it to him. He dropped it into the larger black garbage bag and added the smaller Anglers one.

"Remember about the mail," she said. She spritzed the counter with Wandex, wiping it down.

"Alright." He tied the bag closed. "I'll be back in a bit."

"Stay safe."

He pushed open the door. Lucy'd squatted beside the truck, rubbing Princess's belly where she lay rolled over, legs in the air, mouth open and tongue drooping out. He tossed the garbage into the truck bed. "Anything you need before you go back?"

"I thought I'd ride."

"If you wanna." He climbed in.

She rubbed Princess once more, then stood and went round to the other side as he reached across and opened the door to unlock it. On their way down the driveway, he glanced in the rearview mirror to make sure Princess was staying put, which she was lazy enough to do.

Lucy rolled down the passenger side window a crack, but not enough to tussle her hair. "Bet you'll be glad to get rid of me," she said.

"Not really."

"Liar."

"It would be nice to free the bathroom up a little. It's getting as bad as when we were kids."

"I guess you'd've preferred dad and papaw never tore down the outhouse." She was old enough to remember that; he wasn't.

"Maybe."

She pulled a face and shook her head. "You're almost sickening," she said. "You've got no interest in going anyplace else or doing anything else. You have to get out of your comfort zone, you know."

"I don't have a comfort zone. Everything's horribly uncomfortable."

"Then you shouldn't have a problem with going somewhere else and trying new things."

"It's all uncomfortable. Might as well save the trouble and expense and stay here, since it's all the same."

"You're fulla shit."

He faintly smiled. "You're getting the idea." He stopped at the stop sign, glancing both ways down the road before he turned out to run alongside the Tuck. "I've just got no interest in it. Maybe those typical rambunctious, wherewithal genes our colonial and pioneer ancestors had got washed out by the time they got to me."

They sat in silence awhile, him glancing over as they neared the place where the earlier protests'd been, but which now sat empty, just a bunch of matted-down grass along the side of the road. He turned across the bridge and headed up through Presbyterian and down the other side. "Miraculous how you've avoided going to church all this week."

"Ain't it though."

They laughed.

She said, "How do you stand it?"

"Same way I've stood it ever since I can remember. It..." As he came round the bend, the technical college ahead, he slowed.

"What the hell's going on?"

"Don't know."

A couple of deputy cars sat along the road, among all the others that'd pulled to one side, a small stream of cars exiting from the technical college parking lot and going along the road just far enough to pull onto the grass on the other side. Shepard stopped the truck at the intersection. A deputy stood nearby, and seeing them, raised his hand and walked toward them. And Shepard motioned for Lucy to roll down her window.

Lewis frowned, said through the rolled-down window, "Gotta bit of a hold-up." (Though, his first name was actually David, but there were so many of those in the county he'd always gone by his middle name, such that most people, even those who'd known him the most of his life, thought it *was* his first name.)

"Obviously," Shepard said. "What's going on?"

"Ah, they were trying to park over at the college and somebody raised a stink over there. People trying to jaywalk across." Ambulance lights flashed in the distance, past the roundabout. "Didn't know you'd come back," he said to Lucy.

"Spring break."

"Thought you went to a place like Cancun, or somewhere like that."

"I just can't stand that much excitement."

He cracked a smile.

"What're they all out here for?"

Lewis glanced toward the cars gathering in the grass on the opposite side of the road. "Ah, they've got it that the house up there on the hill's being used for some sort of porno movie, or something."

"I thought it was supposed to be out on River," Shepard said.

"Apparently they did too." He shrugged. "I don't know. Guess they heard they were wrong."

"And that's," Lucy said, "I bet why you're out here."

He cracked a smile again. "Well, to tell yuh the truth, if I..."

He glanced at the clearing traffic ahead. Shepard glanced into the rearview mirror. Luckily, only a few cars had gathered behind them. “Not interested in making a career move just yet,” he said. “Take it slow. See yuns later.” He tapped the side of the truck. “Have a nice spring break.”

Shepard nodded and pulled forward as a void opened between a car destined for the protest and one driven by a student trying to get to work after class’d let out. He kept his eyes on the road and traffic ahead as they passed, but Lucy was under no such stricture and ducked and craned her head to see through the driver side window. “Can you believe this shit?”

“I can believe anything,” he said.

It just didn't do anything except sit there and stare, which, to be fair, was all that Harvey did. Once in a while he looked away from the tv, toward the terrarium. And it just sat there, or maybe lay there, looking at him, or looking at something else, or looking at nothing, it was hard to tell with those eyes. Harvey turned, again, toward the tv. He ran his tongue round the inside of his mouth, thickened slime sticking to his taste buds. He pushed himself out of the recliner, stalked toward the kitchen. Opening the refrigerator, he bent forward, peering into it, looking and not looking at the same time. It might as well've been empty. He reached in and took out a diet Pepsi, the can cold and weighted and heavy in his hand. But he paused as he snapped it open, the sound triggering some memory register that caused him to pause blankly. And when he finally sipped from the can, he grimaced, the clash between what his brain had been expecting and what actually was – making him momentarily nauseous. He took another sip. But now, expecting Pepsi and Pepsi washing over his tongue, the expectation and reality aligned enough to be workable. He stood in the kitchen drinking, tilting back his head farther and farther as the can drained, listening to the distant sounds of the tv. He crunched the can and dropped it atop the pile ascending from the recycling bin. And he opened the fridge and reached in for another and popped it open as he went out into the living room. He sipped from it as he sat, the liquid too near the top and fizzing and threatening to spill, and he glanced toward the terrarium. It still sat there staring. Instinctively, he'd known the commercials had ended, and he returned his attention to the tv. There was something comforting about procedurals, something in the way the same processes were enacted over and over and over again with the same result, like a kind of ritual. But there was something,

on a much deeper and unacknowledgeable level, that disturbed him, even if he didn't know it, the only outward manifestation of it being a tendency to more frequently swish the thickly carbonated liquid round his back teeth so the bubbles lightly stung his gums, the sound of which merged with the faint increase of static that'd crept into the audio, so he had to mash the volume button. Portrayals of addiction seemed to be more epidemical than the actualness of the condition. Though, it wasn't portrayals of addictions as such, but of a state of struggling to overcome such. Something about this seemed worse. It wasn't that he was unfamiliar with the substance of the portrayals put forth. In fact, the portrayals of those dual letters and its variants were so widespread already, the basic tenants of their ideological system publicly promulgated for almost a hundred years. But there was something...something about this repetition of these thematic motifs of the perpetual struggling addict, there never being a state of non-addiction, the inability to recover, the perpetualness of it, and hence, the perpetual need of this particular system of support. Something about it...repeated again and again, seemed to reveal some kind of fissure, or more than one, though he wouldn't've acknowledged this even had it percolated upwards in his consciousness and'd been attachable to a linguistic scheme within his immediate possession. There would've been little point. The nature of revealed knowledge is that it can't change, or would thus undue its own basis of. The phrase that would've come to mind would've been *me thinks the lady doth protest too much*, which he'd heard somewhere earlier, but in what context he couldn't remember, and couldn't recall as to why he recalled that, still, on some purely unacknowledged level, while he sipped the Pepsi and watched the thousandth, or millionth, re-enactment of the phrase 'Hi, my name is *insert name*, and I'm an addict' followed by the refrain, 'Hello, *inserted name*'. And while on the surface it seemed to repeatedly hammer home the notion of the horribleness of the addiction, after all, who would want to be one of *those* people, it seemed, at the same time, as if it were speaking of and to everyone, comforting them in the fact of not just that they could watch *those people*, then return safely to their own lives, but that they themselves could acknowledge their existence with and within the framework of revealed knowledge, after all, so it seemed these days,

everyone was addicted to *something*, so weren't everyone the same? And wasn't everyone special? It spoke to a basic evolutionary need to be anxious of another's possible advantage in sexual selection and the desire to appropriate all such advantage while keeping to oneself some essential essence that couldn't be replicated, but that was just what Langdon had been talking about at something or the other Hannah'd drug him (Harvey) to once. He wasn't sure that anything the man ever said made sense, but he didn't necessarily mean that unkindly. During the commercial, he mashed the recall button to send the channel back to the broadcast premiere of the latest Star Wars movie. But unfortunately, this only exacerbated the otherwise unknown and unrecognized seething pool of anxiety which threatened to bubble upwards, the recognition of which, itself, even on that level first mapped by Freud, though even he admitted the artists had beaten him there, however, in a less academically rigorous and less solemn (therefore less professional) fashion, though no less serious, necessarily; the distinction between the two quite important to some, as an old YouTube video with one of the Pythons went on about...but such would induce such, an operational example of what was termed a feedback loop. He cocked his head, having confused, for a moment, the sound of the bubbles and the sound of static, leading to the incongruous impression a radio'd been left on and tuned too a space between broadcasters. But nominally and technically, the program seemed at least a little removed from the clear-cut narrative structure that'd been on just before the commercial, but there still remained, at its core, that reproductive tension, the same anxiety that fuels endless debates in regards to the nature of the Force, as previously stated, that tug of war between wanting to acquire the reproductive advantage of others, and wanting to maintain something un-acquirable. But the commercial slots across channels were so tightly coupled he was only exposed to ten seconds of this before the commercials began again on that channel. He sipped his Pepsi, swirling it against his back teeth as he flipped the channel, idly moving through waves of commercialization featuring talking lizards and amphibians, somebody whose name he couldn't remember bringing peace between protesters and police through the offering of a non-generic carbonated beverage, in and of itself, testifying, contrary to what some may

say, to surrealism's profound impact upon the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, or in other words, its wholly effective utility to that which it nominally critiqued, as Langdon had once said when he'd been around and talking to Hannah and Harvey'd tried to avoid the whole thing, as usual, and sometimes being around these kinds of people... He flipped past the Domicile Shopping Channel, which had gone all the way in jettisoning any pretense of there being anything other than advertisement for entertainment and was somehow purer for it, past the major news networks, who still pretended they were anything other than advertising companies, indeed, that any news source, all the way back to the printed word, was anything other than an advertising company, past episodes of so-called classic tv, things themselves edited for time, mutilated of their otherwise tightly compacted comedic structure to add yet more advertising beyond even what they'd been originally broadcast with, though, perhaps, in a kinder fashion than the direct sponsorship of Postal Toasted Frosties, proffered directly by some amalgam of the actors and the characters they played, thank you and good night, as the framework of sponsor censorship was rendered less explicit and less apparent, him, finally, pausing, but only momentarily, on the only channel not within the unified commercial framework, a segment of the PBS News Hour talking about the controversy around that non-generic carbonated beverage's eponymous company's ad with that famous person whoever she was slash is, past which he finally found himself back on the major four networks again, where the extended commercials that ever-increased in frequency as the procedural shows neared their soothingly repetitive conclusion broke to allow those last few minutes of the program to eke through. He sipped the Pepsi and swished it round his back teeth, glancing across at the terrarium, at that which was still housed within such's glass walls, it still sitting there, just staring.

Sometimes, when he wasn't too tired in the evening, which wasn't often, living and working on a farm being what it was, Shepard would walk out along the road, Princess alongside him. As the week wore on, a semi-normalized time steadily approached again, or more accurately, approached in jumps and fits every midnight, but approached, again, nonetheless, only to get ready to go off the rails yet again. Though, it was almost over. Yet the cumulative effects left a crick in his neck, an ache in the middle of his back, and a subtle tightness in the center of his chest, among the more explicit things. Still, he hadn't woken without finding the light had been left on. His eyes still dully burned, but that was just the way it was. He breathed, tasting the air as the trees continued to leaf and steadily prepared to bloom, or had before passed from blooming to leafing, as was their evolutionary bequeathment, such things tending to be earlier and earlier every year with the warmth, the air ready to be chokingly thick with pollen, all those individual organisms trying desperately to propagate themselves and their species by way of themselves. Though, the apples'd probably get bit by a late cold-snap, as usual.

Lucy'd already escaped it all to head back to OSU. It's said dogs think when someone leaves that's the last time they're gonna see them, and that's why they're so happy when those same return. He glanced down at Princess. She panted, mouth open, tongue drooping out. All those multi-thousands of years of co-evolution made it easy for him to tell she liked it, being out there walking. He stopped and looked down the pasture, cows grouped at the far end, calves running round chasing each other. That'd been one of the benefits of such warm winters, he didn't have to take such pains to make sure calves weren't born before they got big enough to survive the cold. It even meant an extra calf or two a year. But he couldn't shake the feeling

that it was a bargain that was going to cost something more than it generated in the long run. Princess sat beside him looking in the same general direction, waiting for him. He looked down at her, and she looked up at him. And he cocked his head and started walking, and she jumped up, momentarily cutting ahead, looking back and having to wait for him to catch up.

They walked into the woods, the evening a deeper dusk within, their boots and paws crunching leaves underfoot as soon as they hit the seemingly solid demarcation between green field and forest. And they made so much noise it was almost impossible to hear anything else. Shepard stopped, looking up at one of the trees just off the road, judging which way it'd best fall, even while ostensibly resting, planning his firewood harvesting so everything would have enough time to season. Something flitted through the undergrowth in the distance, somewhere off the road, and Princess turned to face it, sniffing intently. Shepard glanced into the further dusk beneath the trees out there. When he looked down, she was already staring up at him, mouth open, tongue lolling out. "What would you even do with it if you caught it?" But in lieu of a reply, or as a reply, she turned her head toward a further disturbance. She looked up at him. "Ah, go on if you want. But don't say I didn't warn you." She looked ahead again, leaves rustling somewhere undefined. And with a little, throaty *grupp*, she bolted up the road. Shepard slipped his hands into his pockets, looking up at the old oak again, limbs heavy with moss, the whole thing needing to be brought down before it decided to come down on its own. It—

He turned toward the scream, something about it intensely arresting, a set of pitches and tones deeply welded into the base of his brain. And without thinking, he started up the road, climbing the hill, walking fast, jogging round the bend. He could only barely make them out in the distance, that is, he could discern Princess, standing there wagging the whole of her body, and a woman just past her. But there was something missing in the whole scene, something that bugged certain segments of his mind, but a something prevented from rising to his conscious consideration by the more immediate problems. He raised his hand as he approached, Princess so excited she could hardly contain herself. She snapped her head round to

look at him as his boots tromped leaf litter, wriggled, faced forward. "Sorry," he called. He closed in and grabbed her by the collar. "She gets excitable sometimes." And standing there bent over, he tried to look up at the woman. It took a moment to register the hijab, only because it wasn't something his direct experience readily had a framework for and, for a second, he'd supposed it just a headscarf, like that worn by some of the old-style Mormon women he'd once seen, or those Thuvian Baptists up on Wind-Mile. He knelt, fingers still in Princess's collar, who was all wiggle. "She just wants people to like her so much she just goes all to pieces about it and ends up scaring everyone away in the process." He stroked Princess's head, her tongue lolling out of her mouth. "Ain't that always the problem, though." And the answer to that earlier incongruity, still working away in the more disparate parts of his perception, came when a set of eyes peeked out from behind the woman's skirt. Shepard paused, registering this. He faintly smiled, looked down at Princess, and rubbed her chest. "Bad girl. Going around and scaring people. That's not nice. You don't wanna do that, do you." He looked up.

The woman started to turn.

"I'm sorry if she scared yuns. Lotta people take the breed badly." He stroked her head. "But you won't find a sweeter one. She wouldn't hurt a proverbial fly. Even if she could." He rubbed her under her chin. "You wanna smile?" She opened her mouth, panting, tongue lolling out. "She used to be a bait dog. Former owners pulled all her teeth so she couldn't fight back." He scratched her chin. "Sit." He touched her rump. "Come on. Sit." She did, but still managed to keep wriggling. He stood, releasing her collar. "Stay." He waited, just to make sure.

"I guess we weren't the only ones that decided on a walk this evening." He turned. "Again, I'm sorry if she scared you."

"We are sorry to have bothered you," the woman said.

He scratched his head. "I don't reckon there's been any bother."

"Is this someone's property?"

"Well, I guess, technically, it's mine and my family's."

"We didn't mean to trespass." She started to turn.

"That's perfectly fine," he said, and glanced down at Princess to make sure she'd stayed in place, which she had, technically, though

she was almost vibrating. "It's open for roaming. They run four-wheelers across it all the time. And dirt bikes. The legislature's been friendly about trying to get farmers to open up sections of their property for alternative uses. So if you wanna walk it, that's fine. In fact, if you ever get interested..." He turned and pointed down the road. "If you go down there and take the right fork, you go down to the stream and you can see some pretty miniature water falls. Though..." He turned toward them, again. "It's better in the daytime than the evening, when there's more light."

"Thank you." She turned.

"And if you happen to be this way again," he motioned to Princess when the woman turned toward them, "she might be wandering around or something. Sometimes she gets off on her own. But you can just ignore her. She won't do nothin worse than follow you around."

But she (Princess) had had enough of this talk and lunged forward, plopping her forelegs out, chest on the ground, rump in the air, in an invitation to play. And Shepard jumped forward, dropped to his knee, and caught her collar. "No, they don't wanna play with you. So don't be pushy."

Again, the little girl peeked from behind the woman's skirt.

"Sorry about that," he said. "Like I said, she's too friendly for her own good."

"We will go," the woman said. The little girl stood staring at Princess, not paying attention. "Bent," the woman said, something she took the opportunity to say because they were alone, other than him, and since he likely couldn't speak Arabic, a supposition she'd been very correct about, it was as good as if they were alone. "Al-jumu'ah." The girl looked up. And the woman turned, took the little girl's hand, the little girl looking over her shoulder as they walked away. Shepard watched them till they'd disappeared round a distant bend.

He looked down at Princess. "What am I going to do with you?" She still looked down the road, as if she'd expected them to come back. "Come on." He stood, still bent over, and tugged her collar. "Come on." He turned her round. "Let's go home. No more playing for you today." And he released her and straightened and started back down the road, only to stop and look over his shoulder. "You

coming?” Still looking down the road, she turned to look over her shoulder at him, then down the road again. He turned and started walking away. “I guess you don’t want any supper then. Fine by me. Saves me money.” She turned and bounded after him.

Deeper dusk’d continued to come sooner and harder beneath the trees. But it didn’t matter, the road was still visible, and he no longer cared to look at the trees. Walking, hands in his pockets, for some reason, he couldn’t stop thinking about that little girl’s eyes.

Frustration. Pure and utter. If it'd been a liquor, it would've been one-hundred-five proof (and yes, proof can go above one-hundred). The bubbles would've risen so slowly to the top their speed would've been measured in weeks. Eva sighed, not one one-billionth of the tension leaving her body. Some families may've been unhappy each in their own way, but some were just pure psychotic. And it should've been illegal for them to reproduce, in the event such was purely genes. And forbidden from adopting, in the event such was purely nurture. As it was now, she would've gladly testified for the prosecution. And to add to it, she was hungry. The rest still wouldn't've been bearable, anyway, but her stomach just added insult to injury. She'd already passed the sign for some restaurant, but didn't have the patience for any kind of even remotely formal affair, or for that matter, any other human being she could get away with not seeing, which worked in her favor as, though she didn't know it, the restaurant in question had achieved its height of public awareness when, on an episode of the Johnny Carson Show, Burt Reynolds had named it as the worst establishment he'd ever eaten at, though, obviously, that was sometime ago, in fact, it'd've been all the way back when she'd first ever seen or set foot in this county. And regardless of her feelings on Burt Reynolds' endorsement or lack thereof, the last thing she needed at the moment was a trip down the proverbial memory lane. Instead, driving down what's known as restaurant row, which is obvious enough what section of town it was from the name, the name the definition of itself, so many unmarried bachelors, and sorta the like, but driving down it, she cut the wheel, as there was minimal traffic to worry about, and turned to pull into the Substation Beta parking lot. And then, coming to a sudden stop in the parking lot, she groaned, a chair sitting in the drive-thru lane, a sign propped in it, underneath the sign informing

taller vehicles of the clearance, apologized for the inconvenience. But she was already here, so she cut the wheel and pulled into one of the parking places, crooked, yes, technically occupying two, but it's not as if there was anyone else around to complain: there was only one other truck in the parking lot, the two people working there being without transportation, and having to be picked up when their shift ended. She sighed after she slammed the door, breathing deeply, composing herself, necessarily, for even the most rudimentary social interaction. But as soon as she stepped toward the door, gripped the handle, had it most of the way open, instead of going in, she had to step back to allow Josh out, cardboard boxes stacked all the way to his neck.

"Thanks," he said. Emmy followed him out with another set of boxes. And Josh caught the truck door handle with the tips of his fingers and managed to open it, setting the boxes on the passenger seat.

Eva sighed and went in. But the only other person was in the back, and Eva stood there at the counter till Emmy returned. "Sorry," Emmy said. "What would you like?" She took her place behind the register.

"Just...a chicken club."

"I'm sorry. We just ran out of chicken."

Eva kept herself from folding forward like a jackknife someone'd tried to stab into someone else's (or maybe their own) chest. "Just... I don't know. A number four meal."

"I'm sorry. We're out of the roast beef as well."

Eva pressed two fingers into her temple. "Okay. The...seven will be fine."

"I'm sorry we—"

"What the—" Eva sucked in a breath, released it, on the verge of laughing or crying, or perhaps, both at the same time. "Okay.... What *exactly* is it that you have?"

"Well, we have a vegetarian option. It has—"

"Fine. One. With a drink. And chips. Do you have chips?"

"Oh, we have lots of chips."

"Good."

Emmy punched at the register. "Will that be all?"

"Yes."

"That'll be thirteen-seventy-three."

Eva paused, reached, grabbed air. She opened her mouth, paused, closed her eyes. "I left my bag in the car. Just a minute." And she went out and jerked on the car door handle, but it didn't open. She squinted through the glass, into the interior. "No.... No." She jerked it again, but it didn't open. "No." And there were the keys lying in the seat. It was so stupid. She screamed at herself, silently. And she stood there looking down at the keypad beneath the handle. Multiple numbers per button, some faux idea of security, who were they fooling? But frustration loves company. And everything she'd been worried about since... Everything from all these years... She balled her fists, leaning against the car. She could feel hot tears, and not just from this stupid goddamn time business, and shook her head. She reached down, fingers hovering over the keypad. They seemed to strike on their own, pure muscle memory. And the lock thunked. She sighed, touched her thumb to the corner of her eye as she opened the door and reached in and grabbed her purse and the keys. Why couldn't women's clothes be made with *actual* pockets? No pockets would've been one thing, but to make it appear as if they *did* have them seemed the height of insult, like giving someone with no sex drive the perfect physique. She went inside.

Emmy looked up. "Will that be for here or to go?"

"To go," Eva said. "Very much to go."

As she always did, Lily went out to meet the bus, this time, carrying Functional Fixedness, who, so far, had refused to lie down for her nap, preferring to be in her mother's arms, staring wide eyed at the big yellow school bus as it approached. She waited alone. Most of the other mothers were still at work by the time their kids got home. But then again, it was only happenstance that Lily could be there waiting; after all, who'd've hired someone just to put them on perpetual maternity leave? Lily raised her daughter's hand. "Wave at the bus." Though, if she'd yet had the brain development to do so, Functional Fixedness would've wondered why she should do something someone else was already doing for her. Lily looked up from her daughter as the bus came to a stop, the stop sign folding outward, flashing. Others' children came out first, running past them. The Theories out next, yelling. "Mom, can we go play?" "Yeah, can we?"

"Hold on," Lily said. "Go put your stuff away first." They ran off with their backpacks, toward the trailer. And both the sets of twins followed, though at a more leisurely pace.

"Momma." Primary Appraisal bounded down the steps, the school bus driver calling after her, and though Primary Appraisal noticed, she didn't show that she had. She ran up to her mother, looking straight up. "Momma, Absy—"—her name for her older brother—"—got hurt."

Lily looked up as the older children got off the bus. Absolute Threshold carried his backpack, his other hand holding a handkerchief against the back of his neck. "What happened?"

"He got shot," Primary Appraisal said.

"What...?" Lily quickly glanced round at her older children's faces, settled on Absolute Threshold, as she stood there holding her youngest tight in her arms. "Let me see." He pulled away the

handkerchief, revealing the bloodstain that'd seeped through the material. "How'd this happen—what—"

"It's just some cement," he said, though his voice wasn't reassuring. And he winced as he, again, pressed the handkerchief against his neck.

"What happened...? Why didn't anyone take care of this?"

"They shot him," Primary Appraisal said.

"They didn't shoot anyone," Emma said.

Primary Appraisal said, "But he—"

"Mr Stegner was apparently demonstrating something or the other about what would happen in the event of a school shooting and pulled his gun and it accidentally went off."

"They shot him."

Emma shook her head. "It hit the wall. And part of the wall hit him in the back of the neck."

Lily stood there, mouth partially open, unable to say anything. Automatically, she adjusted her hold on her youngest.

"The principal," Analogical Reasoning, who had the class right after with her older brother, said, "came in and said that is was just an accident and that everything was alright."

"But why didn't they take him to the nurse?"

"They said he didn't need to go."

Also, there was only one, who worked on a semi-rotational basis, and she'd been scheduled to be over in a neighboring county's highschool at the time.

Lily collected herself. "Let me see." And Olivia reached out and offered to take Functional Fixedness, but her mother shook her head. And she stepped close to Absolute Threshold, but turned in such a way as that her youngest couldn't see anything. "Okay." She turned to John. "I want you to go up the hill and get Maria, okay? And tell her to bring some bandages and... Can you tell her that?"

The Theories came bounding out of the trailer. "Can we play now?"

"Not now," Lily said. She said to John, "Please, and hurry and do that."

John nodded. And he passed off his backpack to Analogical Reasoning and started running.

"Wait," the Theories said. "Where's he going? Can we go?"

"No," Lily said. "You both stay right here."

Drive Theory said, "But mom..."

"I said stay right here." She turned toward Absolute Threshold.

"Let's go inside." She looked at the bloody handkerchief, her brow furrowing. "I just don't understand how this could happen."

"Mom—"

"I said no," Lily said. "Now, come on, everyone inside."

"But mom—"

"Now."

Emma and Olivia herded them along. "Come on, you two. You heard her."

"But we wanna play."

"Yeah."

"You can watch TV instead."

"But there's only pink stuff on this time of day."

"Yeah."

"Quiet," Emma said, and slipping her backpack straps over both her shoulders, she grabbed their wrists before they could run.

"Pull out a chair and sit down," Lily said, as they went inside. Normally, she'd've taken Functional Fixedness into the back and laid her down, but she couldn't let go of her at the moment. She turned to see Psychodynamic Approach and Retroactive Inference were standing in the middle of the kitchen.

"We're thirsty."

Lily said to Analogical Reasoning, who'd just dropped her and her brothers backpacks by the door, "could you please get them some water."

"I don't want water," Retroactive Interference said.

"Yeah, it always tastes funny."

"It's what we have," Lily said. She watched Absolute Threshold as Motion Parallax ran over and pulled out a chair, and he sat down still lightly pressing the handkerchief against the back of his neck.

She jerked toward a crash in the kitchen. "*WHAT*—" And Psychodynamic Approach stood there with a broken glass at her feet, water puddling round her shoes on the linoleum. Lily didn't raise her voice often, and the effect... Olivia went in and led her little sister out, her shoes faintly squeaking, her eyes threatening to mimic the

results of the broken glass. Analogical Reasoning knelt, piling the broken pieces into what remained of the glass, and she carefully set them on the counter, and got a towel from the cabinet.

“Don’t cut yourself.” Lily shook her head then, crying, herself. But she didn’t want to let go of Functional Fixedness enough to wipe her eyes.

“I’ll get the broom,” Emma said. The Theories’d suddenly quieted, as had the rest of the children, their mother’s emotional condition spreading over them like a slow wave, submerging them, several already on the border of waterworks, themselves.

Some’d even already started, and the only thing that put a pause to it was the front door opening, distracting everyone, Maria entering with a great big plastic box, like a toolbox, or something for fishing gear. And it only took one glance around the room, her eyes fixing on Lily, then on Absolute Threshold, to size up the situation. “Alright,” she said, “the cavalry’s here, in case you didn’t hear the bugler. So everybody else can just scat.” She turned as John entered behind her. Then she turned, again, and motioned to Emma and Olivia. “Everybody outside.”

Lily shook her head.

Maria went over and set her case beside the chair Absolute Threshold was seated in, placed her hands on Lily’s biceps. “Ain’t nobody going away permanent. We’re just kind of clearing some breathing room. Alright?” She stroked Lily’s arms. “Alright?”

Lily nodded.

Maria turned to John. “Take them outside.”

“But,” Lily said, “make sure everyone stays close by.”

Maria turned to Lily and nodded.

“I can take her,” Olivia said, and reached out to take Functional Fixedness, but Lily shook her head.

“That’s all right,” Maria said. “Just everyone else.” She put her hand on Emma’s shoulder. “Why don’t you help John.” Emma sighed, but nodded.

The Theories hung over the edge of the couch, looking in. “But we wanna see.”

Maria turned, looked at them, and that was enough.

Analogical Reasoning had finished drying the floor with a towel,

gone to the corner to get the broom and pan. Maria glanced at the broken glass on the counter. She shook her head, turned. "Alright." She looked down at Absolute Threshold. "Now, what've you gotten yourself into? Let me see." She adjusted her glasses from falling down her nose as she bent forward, and he pulled his hand and the handkerchief away. "Hmmm." She reached out. "I'm going to lightly touch you... Hmmm." And she turned and lifted the case onto the table, folding it open. "And how exactly did this happen?"

"He got shooted."

They all turned to see Primary Appraisal standing there.

"I thought I told you to go outside." Maria put her hand into the case. "If you stay around, you're going to have to get a shot." Primary Appraisal turned, running toward the front door, pushing open the screen door. "Alright," Maria said. She set a bottle on the table, pulled on a pair of purple nitrile gloves. She bent over his neck again. "It looks like you got a little piece of something still embedded. I'm going to have to pull that out." She reached into the case for a pair of tweezers. "It's not deep. So this'll only hurt a little bit. Just don't hold your breath." She called toward the kitchen, "Ana, would you bring me a paper towel, please." She pulled back his collar. "Just breathe normally." He winced. Lily grimaced. "There." Maria straightened, looked over her shoulder as Analogical Reasoning approached. "Just put it on the table. Thank you." She dropped the small piece of cinder block onto the paper towel. "Why don't you go see if they need any help corralling them outside. Thank you." She placed the tweezers on the paper towel, as well. "Alright. Now all we need to do is clean this up." She reached into the box for a pad, opened the packaging, popped open a plastic bottle. "This will sting a bit." She wiped the back of his neck, Absolute Threshold wincing. "Now, you're older than that. It's just a little pain. You're a boy, you know. Hold your collar back, please." She dropped the bloodstained pad on the paper towel. "Now..." She bent over him, pushing her glasses up her nose with her wrist. "This isn't bad. It just looks that way. There won't be any stitches." She pulled off her gloves as she straightened, rummaged in the case. "I'm going to put these on to help it close up. Lean forward." And after a few minute's work, she reached into the case for a couple large coverlets. "Now, don't pick at these. They're

mainly to keep anything from rubbing.” She pushed up her glasses. “And you’ll probably wanna try to sleep on your side. Don’t press on it. If it hurts, you know you’re doing something wrong. That’s what it’s there for. So stop.” She balled the packaging, dropped it on the table. “I’m going to come back and check on this tomorrow. But it should be fine.” She straightened and removed her gloves, glanced at Lily. “You need to sit down.” She pulled out a chair. “When was the last time you drank something?”

Lily shook her head.

“Uh huh. Sit.” She went into the kitchen, got a couple glasses from the cupboard, and turned on the faucet. And when she stepped around the counter, she set one near the chair she’d pulled out and the other in front of Absolute Threshold. And she motioned for Lily to pass her the child. “Sit down and have something to drink. Slowly.” Lily shook her head. “Nobody’s going anywhere.” Eventually, Lily relinquished, handing over Functional Fixedness, and Maria moved out a chair with her foot and sat with the child in her arms. “Now,” she said, looking up from the baby and down the table, “how’d this happen?”

Absolute Threshold winced as he tried to tilt back his head to drink. “Take it easy,” Maria said. “It’ll hurt for a while.” And she turned to Lily, who was also looking down the table, “You drink too.” She adjusted Functional Fixedness in her arms. “I want to see all that gone before I leave.” She sighed. “So, now, is anyone going to tell me how all this mess happened?” Functional Fixedness burred. Maria looked down at her. “I wasn’t talking to you.”

Liam wandered in from the hallway, yawning, scratching his head. “What’s going on?”

“Good,” Maria said. “You’re awake. Now that you’ve managed to sleep through everything...and where’s Aiden? I haven’t seen him yet.”

Liam yawned. “He got a job.”

“Well, good for him. Now...” Someone in the backroom started crying. Maria sighed. “No, don’t get up.” She rose. She said to Liam, “Why don’t you do something useful and make us some tea. If there’s any round. And if there’s not...” She moved toward the living room. “Have John go up the hill and get some out of my kitchen. He’ll know

where it's at." The plaintive wailings continued. "I'm coming. I'm coming." Functional Fixedness had decided to get in on the action as well. Maria looked down at her as she went into the back hallway. "Be careful I don't turn you into a toad, too." And she sighed and shook her head.

“Three more,” Lydia said. She carefully placed a stone back into the stream and stood, putting her hands on her lower back. “Oh, god...” On the bank, Jennifer stood scribbling in a field notebook. Lydia waded out of the water, collected her socks and boots. “The water’s freezing.”

“You already said that.” Jennifer glanced upstream, at everyone else in the distance. She bent and stuck the field notebook in her backpack and tugged the zipper.

“Let me have one of those strawberry bars.”

Jennifer tossed it to her.

Lydia chewed. “This’s too much like work.” Habitually, she ran her finger over the toughening skin that’d once been beneath the remnants of the blister on her foot. Though now, she’d developed a couple smaller ones on two of her fingers.

“And just think, you took out tens of thousands of dollars in loans to do this.”

Lydia groaned. “So much for the family name.” And she stuffed the rest of the bar in her mouth and wadded the wrapper and handed it to Jennifer.

“You deal with,” Jennifer said. “I’m not going to carry round your garbage.”

Lydia stuffed it in her pocket as she chewed, reached, and pulled on her socks and a boot and started to lace it. “I can’ wa,” she spoke with her mouth still full, partially swallowed, “to get back and take a shower.”

“Yeah. Yeah.” Jennifer pulled a shoulder strap over the object of the first half of its name. “You and everybody else, snowflake.”

“H— ”

“HEY— ”

They turned as someone upstream yelled.

“HEY—”

Bernadette waved both her arms as if she were directing air-traffic.

“What’s she want?” She still stood there waving her arms slowly.

“Hurry up and let’s find out.”

“I’m hurrying.” Lydia jammed on her other boot, yanked the laces tight. “Probably just a bunch of crawdads, or something.” She stood. Bernadette continued to wave them up.

“We think we found one.”

The pair hurried up onto the rocks, all three of them then moving upstream toward where Paxton and Langdon and Hannah stood in and along the edge of the stream, bent over, trying to see into where water’d undercut the bank.

“Where’s it at?”

Langdon pointed, as he was the only one close enough. Paxton and Hannah’d gone farther out into the stream. Lydia plopped down and started to unlace her boots.

“That’s it!” Bernadette jumped up. “Did you see it?”

Lydia pulled off her other boot, stuffed her socks into them.

Bernadette shouted over the splashing and yelling, and Lydia waded out to help as the pair fought to lift the struggling creature whose direct ancestors’d been extant in the late Jurassic, but then again, every currently living (and not) thing’s ancestors, by definition, were, and had been, also.

“Get the tail!”

They all tried to turn in unison, failed badly, Paxton and Lydia almost slipping and falling as they waded their way across.

“Get everything ready.”

Jennifer pulled a roll of plastic from Paxton’s pack, rolled it out with Bernadette’s help. Trying not to slip, slipping anyway, but managing not to go all the way into the water, the three made their way ashore.

“Get the corners,” Hannah said. And Bernadette and Jennifer grabbed fistfuls of plastic, ready to haul it up as soon as they laid the beast on it.

“Gently. Gently.”

Lydia stepped over the plastic. They all slowly eased down.

“Gently.”

Bernadette and Jennifer slowly pulled up the plastic to form sides, the salamander thrashing powerfully as Paxton and Hannah and Lydia let go. They breathed hard, everyone looking down at the thing. Paxton scrambled toward his pack for his tape measure. And he passed the end to Hannah, who moved toward the head, and hovered it near the creature's nose as she languidly shifted her head side to side, Paxton waddling toward the tail.

“It's a bigin,” Graham said.

“Point nine...seven meters,” Paxton said, and straightened and moved toward Hannah to collect the other end of the tape. “Let's see if we can approximate the diameter.” He passed the end of the tape to Lydia and motioned to Bernadette and Jennifer. “Langdon. You two. We want to be as careful as possible not to damage the skin. And we should work fast, so we can get her back in the water.”

“And how do you know it's a her?” Graham said.

“This species is entirely female,” Paxton said, but there was something absent in his voice as he concentrated on what he and the rest were doing.

“Seriously? Like what you were talking about?”

“Yes. This species reproduces parthenogenetically.” He knelt and pulled the tape after Lydia passed the end to him “There's never been a male of this species recorded.”

“Well, that sucks.”

“Depends on who you are,” Jennifer said.

“Okay,” Paxton said, oblivious to everything but the number under his thumb. “Set her down and keep ahold of the plastic, but fold it in on top so we can get a measure. Somebody should get the scale out, too.”

“I'd get it,” Graham said, “if I knew what it looked like.”

Hannah, on her knees, shifted. “You got this?” Bernadette nodded. “Alright, I'm letting go.” She stood and moved toward the packs, picking the scale up from off the ground. “If you wanna do something,” she said, “get us the two poles laying over there.” She lifted a coil of rope, turned.

Paxton pointed. “That limb up there'd be good.” Lydia and Jennifer'd already tied each end of the plastic together, and as Hannah

tossed the rope over, secured it, and attached the scale, all that was needed was something to support the weight and keep the plastic from drooping and folding her in half and breaking her spine. Hannah turned “We need those poles.” She waited, the others, all together, holding the plastic and occupant in place as they waited to be able to move. “HEY.”

Graham stepped toward them. “Why is it women are always in a hurry?” He shifted the poles off his shoulder. “So where do you want my stick?”

“Slip them through there,” Paxton said, “either side, so we can lift the whole thing up.”

Briefly, he felt, though it didn’t register at a conscious level, that there was something not-heterosexual about Paxton having responded first, and it dulled any satisfaction he might’ve had as he slipped the poles into place.

“Careful not to rub the skin,” Paxton said. “Alright.” He tied off a piece of rope. “Alright, everyone lift. Gently. Very gently.” He minded the rope as they did, eyeing the scale as he slipped the loop over the hook. “Alright, let her down. Easy. But don’t let go. Balance her.” The creature’d given up thrashing, which helped. “One hundred...seven pounds.”

“Least she’s not overweight,” Graham said.

Jennifer stepped past him to get the field notebook. “You could help, you know.”

“Ah. I wouldn’t wanna deprive the rest of you. Besides...” He more than glanced at her wet t-shirt. “I don’t care for slime.”

“Hold him!” Paxton shouted. Jennifer dropped the notebook and ran back to help them as the creature’d found new reservoirs of resistance just as they were getting ready to return her to the water.

“Gentle. Gentle.”

The problem with the unsettling nature of it, the anxiety inducing nature of it, was that he (Harvey) like most people, were programmed to pay even *more* attention to such things, worrying over them continuously, even if not expressly slash consciously aware of their existence. Which, in this case, meant watching reruns of police procedurals late into the, technically daylight saving, night, fighting off sleep till he was past some mysterious point, where, when he finally turned off the tv and went upstairs and laid down, all he could do was toss and turn, his whole body heated, especially his eyes, no matter how tired he was, something in his physicality having decided that it was a new day, the sleep cycle was already over, and that there was going to be none of that business. He sat up sweating, three or four hours having passed on the clock without him realizing it, yet without any sleep, a kind of dead-time of the brain that did nothing but make him feel physically worse, and more. Still sweating, he crawled out of bed, walked downstairs. The sun hadn't yet risen, the house still remained dark except for the myriad of lights on the tv and the set-top boxes and the cable box and the microwave and the stove and the range hood and the toaster oven and the fridge. So many things with clocks in them. He opened the refrigerator, cold light spilling over him and making him sigh. He pulled out a Pepsi. And he pulled his sweat-damp shirt away from his chest as he walked into the living room. He turned on the light, squinting at the brightness, trying to scrutinize the thermostat. But half of it just reported `ERROR` and a code, and the other half conveyed the current in-room temperature. He tapped the LCD, as if that would've done anything. He wandered out through the kitchen, unlocked the back door, and stuck his head out. Even at night-morning it was still too hot, and if it was like this in the spring, heaven help them when summer came round. The

air conditioning unit sat dead silent. He shut the door and went into the living room, swishing the Pepsi around his back molars. He sat and turned on the tv. Something tugged at his memory as he sipped the Pepsi and watched an infomercial. He didn't need a new computer or printer, but it was soothing to watch them talk about buying one anyway. He sipped the Pepsi and looked across at the terrarium. But it'd gone somewhere else, no longer looking out at the room with round, black, unblinking eyes. He turned toward the tv, changed the channel. The news was already in progress, but'd just slipped into a sponsored-by segment where edited children recited the pledge of allegiance, each of them repeating the phrase *under God*, for emphasis, in order to sell flooring supplies. He sipped the Pepsi and glanced toward the terrarium, turned, again, toward the tv. Sweat trickled into his collar. He sipped the Pepsi and turned toward the terrarium. He sat up, collapsing the recliner's footrest, and stood. Sipping the Pepsi, he wandered over to the glass encasement. The thing lay sprawled out there in the water. He sipped his Pepsi and glanced at the thermostat, turned, again, toward the terrarium. The thing just kinda floated there in the water.

"Shit."

He set the Pepsi on the table. And putting his arms around the terrarium, started to lift, but his back spasmed before he'd even managed to get the glass-encased collection of rocks and dirt and water off the table. He looked down. The thing just floated there in the water, looking up at him with its black eyes, or at least, appearing to.

He turned and went into the kitchen, hunting up a cleaned sherbet container from overtop the fridge. And he carried it into the living room. He removed the screen on top of the terrarium. "Come on." He dipped it into the water, trying to scoop it up, but going from zero to eighty, it wriggled furiously and blasted out of the way. "Come on." He chased it round, the thing scrambling onto land and under rocks. "*Come on.*" He overturned the rocks, the thing scrambling farther away. "*Ah.*" He dropped the sherbet container and plunged his other hand into the terrarium, rooting through the soil and sand, splashing through the water—finally—catching it in both hands, feeling the thing wriggle and wriggle round in there, and it made him physically sick. He turned and hurried through the kitchen,

looked round, reached up over the fridge and opened his hands over a plastic bowl set up there, momentarily scared it'd claw its way over his fingers and up or down his arms, so he shook and heard it hit the bowl. He reached up and pulled the bowl down, looked into it to verify the thing was at bottom. He turned toward the faucet, knocked it on with his elbow, and ran a little water into the bowl. It didn't look like it could climb the sides. It just floated down there. He looked around for something to put over it, just in case. The plastic wrap lay out on the counter, but after a moment, he thought that might smother it. He reached for the tin foil, tore a piece, crumpled the edges over the bowl. Then he pulled out a fork and poked the top full of holes, and just to be sure, he poked a few more.

"There."

He thought a minute as best he could, his brain hot and fuzzy. Then he lifted the bowl and carried it down to the cellar. At least it was cool down there. And he left it setting on the bench and came back up. Standing in the kitchen, he looked down at his dirty hands, out of instinct, brought them up enough to sniff, and grimaced. And he elbowed the faucet and reached for the dish soap, still grimacing, his eyes feeling like they would boil out of his head. He sniffed, his nose stuffy all of a sudden. And he massaged the side of his head with his still damp fingers, water trickling down his temple and along his jawline.

“Here was God’s problem, you see...” Russell sipped the head off a fresh beer. He lifted out a chicken tender and held it poised in the air. “There’s this issue called quantum suicide...” He tore the chicken tender in half, chewed, said, as he chewed, “Now, I know what you’re thinking...” He swallowed, sipped his beer. “You’re thinking that this has something to do with dying.” He popped the other half of the chicken tender into his mouth, said round it, “but it doesn’t.” He swallowed. “Or it does.” He took a draw from the beer, set it down. “What it means is, well, it’s a thought experiment, in effect,” he took a sip of beer, “in effect, what it means is that, for any given state,” he picked out a chicken tender with each hand, positioned them apart, “alive,” he wiggled the left one, “dead,” he wiggled the right, “it means that,” he bit the right one in half, “according to the many-worlds-interpretation of quantum mechanics,” he chewed, swallowed, “it means that there will always, or at least probably, be a version of the world, a universe, what have you, with you in it.” He put the second chicken tender on the other side of the table, “Or something like that,” piling it there atop the others, as the dog had long been led away. In its stead, someone half-drunk had accidentally set a life-sized cardboard cutout of the Fighting Irish mascot there and’d forgotten to come collect it. “But a version of you will live on forever and ever and ever and ever. In effect, you’ll have eternal life.” He sipped the beer. “Or, that is, depending on how long the universe slash multiverse lasts.” He pulled out another chicken tender, looked at it. “Not that that really matters.” He bit it in half and chewed, sipped the beer to wash it down. “So you see the problem.” He popped the other half of the chicken tender into his mouth. “There’s this...” He chewed. “... real possibility that none of us can really die. Or...” He sipped his beer. “We can die quite alot.” He paused. “Just not

enough.” He reached into the wax-paper-lined cardboard tray in front of him. And feeling only greasy waxed paper, he looked down. “Hm.” He looked across at the pile on the other side of the table. “Don’t mind do you?” He reached over. “The courts, you see...” He chewed. “The courts are always behind. For example, if this is to be the case, how can anyone be charged with suicide? After all, if you never really die, and just go on living in some other universe... Or murder...” He sipped his beer. “Will murder survive the idea of being contingent on a particular interpretation of a particular universe?” He glanced down at the table. “Stupid?” He looked over at the pile of chicken tenders. “But then again, what isn’t?” He looked up. “Of course, everything’s just a matter of a definition.” He looked over at the other half of a chicken tender still in his hand. “Does it follow, then...” He popped the other half of the chicken tender into his mouth. “... that there has to be a universe where everything that’s ever been alive has to be all alive at once?” He chewed. “Sounds horrible.” He reached across the table. “And noisy.” He lifted the beer glass. “And crowded.” He chewed. “Like a Japanese subway car.” He sipped his beer. “But the size of the universe.” He looked across the table. “Ever been stuffed into a Japanese subway car?” He reached across the table. “The way we think does tend to be so absolutist...” He chewed, swallowed. “It does depend on everything being irrevocable.” He sipped. “You’ve made your decision, live with it...” And popped the rest of the chicken tender into his mouth. “Or not.” He chewed. “As the case may be.” He lifted his beer glass, but just held it there, looking at it. “So you see we can’t really die no matter what we try to do.” He sipped it, held it there still looking at it. “No offense,” he set it down and reached for a chicken tender, “but I can’t really tell if you’re an American or not. So...” He chewed. “So maybe you have an outsider’s perspective.” He chewed. “America, as a country, wants to commit suicide, you know?” He chewed. “Yap. It’s the only explanation.” He chewed. “We make it harder to have families, shit pay, and how long parents have to work, no maternity leave, high insurance...” He sipped his beer. “High hospital bills, hospitals that rank lower than most third world countries in infant mortality...” He swallowed, “We keep closing down maternity wards,” and popped the other half of a chicken tender into his mouth. “Structurally,

top to bottom..." He sipped his beer. "... we militate against people reproducing." He reached across the table. "It's why we scream so much about reproduction, abortion, being out-bred by... whatever group of the week... blacks... Hispanics..." He chewed. "... Muslims ...etc..." He tilted back his head, glass almost empty. "It's a smoke screen..." He chewed. "... to distract us from what we're currently doing..." He reached across the table. "These're good. You should try some." He lifted his glass, looked down into it a moment, raised it. "Or maybe we are admitting what we're doing..." He held the glass in the air, looking at nothing, until he finally looked across the table. "Well, even if you're not a part of your parent country, I thank you for this commoditized cultural export." He tilted back his head and drained the glass. And he tore the chicken tender in half with his teeth and chewed. He raised his arm as a waiter drifted by. "Can I get a refill, please, thank you. Nothing for my friend." He reached across the table. "The question is why? Is it some conscious process?" He chewed. "Are we all just cells in some larger organism that decided it's going to off itself, and we're too stupid..." He popped the other half into his mouth. "... too stupid, being just little cells, to care..." He chewed. "The same way we slough off skin cells..."

"Excuse me, sir."

He looked up. Obviously a manager standing there.

"Is everything alright?"

"That's a difficult question to answer," Russell said. "Can you be more specific?"

"Sir, we think you've had quite alot to drink tonight." He glanced toward the cardboard cutout.

Russell followed his gaze. "It is rather appalling, isn't it? Personally, being of Irish heritage, I probably should feel offended by such vulgar characterizations." He wiped his fingers on one of the paper napkins. "Of course," he slipped out of the booth and stood, "considering there's still a team called the Red Skins, I don't guess they're going to get down to feeling sorry for us anytime soon." He pulled out his wallet. "Did you know that before the Civil War, the Irish, along with Italians and Eastern Europeans, weren't considered white? So they say. But of course they can say anything...probably." He folded a couple hundred dollars and bent to lift the beer glass and

set it atop the folded currency. “And of course, the English did quite literally try to genocide the lot of them.” He turned, the manager stepping aside. “They say they were only given the status as white—whatever that means—when so many newly freed blacks—whatever that means—started coming north out of the south after the war, the Civil War, that is, the American Civil War... not to be confused with any of the others. It’s always useful to set groups against each other, that way they never figure out that they outnumber everyone above them.”

“Are—”

“Nothing to apologize for. Now, if you’ll excuse me. Thank you very much. My compliments to the chef and the deep fry unit.”

And Russell turned, hands in his pockets, walking toward the restrooms. But he stepped aside as the door opened, vaguely making eye contact and nodding in reply to the other man’s vague eye contact and nod. Of the three units: a large for wheel chair access, a small, and a urinal, only the urinal was free, and he unzipped his pants as he stepped in front of it. He faintly whistled to himself. Finally, he sighed, and zipped his pants. He watched himself in the mirror as he stuck his fingers under the faucet and the water automatically activated. “The wonders of the modern world.” He waved his hands in front of the paper towel dispenser, and a former part of the Amazon rain forest emerged. He crumpled it and dropped it into the overflowing trash can with the rest of its kind, the wad rolling off the pile and onto the floor, gathering with those of its kind that’d collected down there too, as if used paper towels had a social strata.

Vaguely, he made eye contact and nodded in reply to the incoming man’s vague eye contact and nod. The general cacophony continued unabated, actually, had grown worse as several games had neared their not so apparently inevitable conclusions.

Outside, he breathed deep, looking at the road, across the way at the hospital all lit up.

He felt in his pocket for his keys.

“Ladies and gentlemen...and whomever else might be out there...” He passed along the concrete sidewalk round the building. “If you’ll allow me to harp on a bit more, I think it important that we come to an agreement on a set of terms. There are in fact four

types of destruction. The first of these..." He stopped at the corner of the building, looking up into the sky. "The first of these is simply the moving around of things. That is to say when something is blown up, or someone simply dies, that thing is never gone, it's simply that the constituent parts are redistributed through time and space. So like mashed potatoes. Obviously, we are all familiar with this." He looked down towards the Food Lion sign, bright red and lit in the night. "The second type of destruction, or that is to say, the three remaining types of destruction, as they are related..." He turned, continuing down the sidewalk. "Yes, forgive me, but this is a little complicated. But the second type of destruction is removal. This type of destruction is of course not, generally, available to mortals. It is, in effect, the power of something like, or perhaps, even more powerful than God. That is of course to make something not exist, to remove it entirely from existence." He stepped off the curb. "Which may be completely impossible." And he rooted through his pocket and finally came out with his keys. "Thirdly, and relatedly, is the removal from all time." He tried to fit them in the lock, but failed. "That is to say, the complete unmaking of a thing, not only its removal, but its removal from ever having existed in the first place. And..." He steadied one hand with the other. "...all such effects that object may've incurred in its passage through existence, are also undone." He managed to turn the key, but had to try a couple times before he managed to extract it. "The fourth, and final version..." He put his arm across the open door and turned to look out towards the hospital again, the helicopter coming in, lights blinking in the over-illuminated darkness. "The final version we shall call the removal from all time but with an echo." He descended into the seat. "And it is the removal from all time but with an echo that's the most interesting." He closed the door, struggling in the darkened interior, first to find the light, second to get the key in the ignition. "Because then, while the object is removed from all time, it, that is to say its effects yet remain, though freestanding..." He started the engine. He pulled the car into gear, looking over his shoulder, the brake lights illuminating a life-sized cardboard cutout of the Hornets mascot, which, without ceremony, he backed over, it being cardboard and fictional and thus unable to pierce any of his tires with

whatever oversized-but-fictional stinger it might've possessed. "In effect, the cause becomes divorced from its effect...."

The stream helped cool the small valley. And looking at the moving water, the moss-covered rocks, added a psychological effect to the mix which increased the relative effectiveness of that. The rocks further helped, acting as a heatsink, and Hannah, sitting on one of the larger ones, holding her water bottle as liquid slowly made its way through the filter, leaned forward and closed her eyes.

“You alright?”

She started up. “Hm?” She righted the water bottle and filter. “Fine. Just trying to fall asleep.”

Langdon stepped down near the edge of the water, the minimal shore lapping at the ends of his boots as he squatted and scooped a handful of sand and mud and rubbed it over his hands, scrubbed with it, dipped his hands into the flow to rinse it off. He shook them dry.

“Get your pictures?”

He scratched his even-more-unshaved-than-usual cheeks. “Lydia did.” He laughed. “It wouldn’t look so good if I took them and spread them around and then wrote about it.” He wiped his still dripping fingers on his shorts.

“I’m sure it’ll be a big splash.”

“Well, even if it isn’t, that’s still something to speculate about. After all...” He paused, looking at her. “You sure you’re alright?”

“Hm?” She shook her head and looked down at the slowly draining filter. “Yeah. Why?”

He shook his head. “Nothing. Never mind.” He turned, walking aimlessly, looking up at the fresh-leaved trees. He rubbed his slightly running nose. Paxton was still upstream somewhere gathering water samples. Jennifer ducked out of a tent. He saw Bernadette lying inside. “Everything alright?”

“Yeah. She’s just tired.” Jennifer unclipped her water bottle from

her backpack. “Uh.” She sat on her backpack and unscrewed the bottle and upended it and drained it.

“Quite a workout,” Langdon said.

“Fuckin’ yeah.” She re-capped the bottle, ran her tongue around her mouth. She glanced down; slime seemed to’ve permanently darkened parts of her t-shirt. She tugged at the neck to find the discoloration’d seeped through to her bra. “Gaah.” And she glanced up, as if she’d just remembered he’d been there, looking embarrassed. “I think I’ll go borrow the water filter,” she said.

Langdon motioned over his shoulder. “Hannah’s down that way with it.”

“Mm.” She nodded absently as she passed him. He glanced over his shoulder and watched her go.

“Nice view, huh?”

Langdon turned, didn’t say anything. Graham still looked past him.

And part of that view Langdon’d registered—he was neither saint, nor chemically castrated—but the part of his mind that’d shifted into the highest gear was the one that’d registered the change in her gate. Though, that could’ve easily been explained, and best explained, à la Occam’s Razor, as exhaustion, if the question of such had made it up to his conscious mind. After all, they had, in effect, virtually wrestled a toothless alligator. And with Graham having brought his, that is, Langdon’s, conscious mind to the view...he, on that, that other train down lower—things seemed to’ve pulled onto a Freudian track—but he’d once written a paper on how the economically dominant form of technology in any given age was used as the primary metaphor for understanding the brain and or consciousness slash the mind...but the lackadaisical former Lacanians and their...but consciously sorting through what Graham’d said, all the trains lower down’d gotten derailed. It left a mess, but not something identifiable as anything but a vague feeling of having forgotten something. “Hm,” he said, but only to provide the basic social feedback some part of him felt he had to, before he stepped past him.

“You feelin’ alright?”

Langdon stopped and looked back at him.

“Just something looks off.”

"Fine," Langdon said. He turned. "Tired." Though, that really wasn't what he felt. But the problem was what he felt, or what he seemed to think he felt, didn't have a clear description attached to it. And when he stopped and looked round again, he found himself alone by the stream, Paxton still somewhere above, the tents small but vibrant in the distance.

"Doctor Jones..."

He turned, looking round.

"Up here."

He turned, looked up the ridge. A small figure near the top waved. "Up here. I wanna show you something."

He watched a few minutes more, the figure's motions seeming to blur together. And after a pause, he started up the incline, leaves crunching underfoot, dry-slippery against each other as if they'd been coated with powdered graphite, so that he ended up falling to his knees a few times, scrambling up on all fours as he came to the top of the hill. He steadied himself and straightened, leaves coming unstuck from the hair on his knees and drifting back to the forest floor.

"Good evening, Doctor Jones." Lydia stood there with her head slightly cocked, faintly smiling.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Quite." She turned. "This way." And she walked down the other side of the ridge. He followed her. And when they'd dropped down the back side enough so that even the sound of the flowing water faded, she stopped and turned. She motioned. "It's over here." She pointed, vaguely, and he approached and stepped alongside her.

"What?"

It didn't take much to trip him, the leaves sliding out from underfoot, him scrambling to stay upright, but failing, anyway, and landing on his back, her rolling on top of him and straddling him, grasping the bottom of her slime-stained shirt, pulling it over her head, and arching down against him, clamping her mouth over his, only pulling away to gasp, and then going after him again.

He rubbed his palm against the arm of the recliner. Sweat trickled down the center of his chest as he sat there in his underwear. Images flashed by on the tv, the sound muted. Static overwhelmed everything, washing through the space. Visual echoes of chaos played over walls untouched by the light of the tv, one-dimensional surfaces sliding over second dimensionally perceived spaces in a three-dimensional environment housed in... And it was possible, going from channel to channel, never to leave the procedural, many channels marathoning reruns of them on weekdays and weekends. The overlapping commercial breaks blurred together, sometimes in sequence, so that, in flipping each channel, he saw exactly the next frame of the same one, all the way to the end. He rubbed his palm against the arm of the recliner as he pressed his index finger against the rubber remote button. Sometimes he intercut them with those shows about real crimes, serial killers having inspired this or that film, mass murders, serial rapists, unsolved mysteries, some of them not the same after the original hosts had departed. *You realize the so-called reality and true-crime stuff is narratively identical to their fictional counterparts, hitting the same mental feedback loops and pressure points, feeding a kind of enjoyment, maybe even more of one in that they, unlike their fictional counterparts, they're generating all this entertainment from the death and dismemberment and sufferings of supposed actual human beings.* Harvey's finger twitched. *But what does anyone consider real? After all, there's obviously some virtualization going on there, the way that the suffering of others can also be abstracted away as unreal.* The channel changed. *But the opposite's also true. Only the real people are on tv.* Harvey's finger twitched. *Yeah, but which way is it when? when're they real? and when're they fake?* The channel changed. *It's contextual.* Interlocked frames of

a political ad synchronized across channels. *You know, we'd never elect a president who hadn't ever been on TV.* He settled on the news channel, because there's only one, the remainder being, of course, merely news channels. *Do you think news channels have also turned to porn producers to streamline their product? You know, like the food channels did?* Some of these people had to be real. Though, often, he couldn't tell which ones. Two or three had been fired or moved onto other studios and programs and, not being there anymore, obviously didn't any longer exist, so maybe they were those who had hadn't really ever existed in the first place. *I'd argue that's one reason people get so sad when porn stars retire.* The anchor overlaid in his mind with the POV of a man holding the back of a woman's head while he shoved his dick into her throat till, when he withdrew, she puked over it. *It's because, when they retire, and we're not seeing them have sex anymore, we assume they've stopped having sex.* There was nothing to make him feel these images were incongruous. *And they're the only ones we can prove are having sex, so if they stop, we think no one's having sex.* Images of an American flag waving in the wind. *Do you suppose that if terrorists were to attack studios or broadcast stations, and they ceased to air, America would cease to exist in the minds of its inhabitants?* Harvey rubbed his palms against the chair. *Both sides need them too much for that to happen. And in any regard, the influence of the one kind of porn could only go so far, the integration of two disparate genres of kink are the surest way for any quote unquote smut peddler to alienate their audience. At least, I think that's pretty clear from a couple of meta studies. One does not, in porn, cross the streams in any regard, except, perhaps, in a parody, or at least, not in standardized commercial affairs, as credit card companies hold too much sway over what may and may not be shown in any given media or medium, so it's left to the amateurs, which themselves are, now, almost all de facto, eo ipso professionals in the day and age of late-stage capitalism when hobbies become work and so does a couple's sex life, even as unwrapping Christmas presents is commoditized and monetized on YouTube. We have always been controlling the transmission. A preview for a reboot of *The Inner Limits*. Will what's her name be nude again? Though, doing so would be technologically easier, less labor intensive, and in general requiring less in all regards*

than any of their other activities, that such actual blatancy, non-subliminal, is avoided in the most basic, instinctual way by these same organizations is fundamental, else, they likely sense in both their organizational and individual unconscious, that they threaten themselves with their own de-virtualization, which would be worse than mere nonexistence. He saw black-and-white patternizations creep along the walls, out of the corners of his eyes. Right. And the best way to avoid it is to run up to the line as close as possible, showing bikini-clad, gyrating spring breakers in Cancun and other such places while asking if spring break has gone too far, without ever having to bother to answer such questions because the answers are obviously obvious. His finger twitched, mashing the rubber channel-up button. Yes. After all, if the enemy ceased to be, how would they, then, define themselves? Like many groups, though they ostensibly define themselves in terms of themselves, a merely cursory investigation would prove their weddedness, not to a purely inward conceptualization, but a dependence upon the external one. Reaches from the deepest inner line Have you read that material on the introduction of so-called higher linguistic concepts and its effect on the self-perception of people who watch more than six hours of news a day? The deluge is a thousand channels. A third overlay, pure voice, coming out of the muted speakers, stated plainly. For the Lord did not say we would not send light upon the face of the world. He shifted the remote to his other hand so he could rub that one against the arm of the recliner. That study's completely compromised. And besides, all the previous ones, half of them show the opposite result. His thumb worked automatically, each flip of the channel compositing a new layer onto reality: the news anchor, the face fucking, dancing cartoon frogs, another (fake) news anchor, Russell Pope sitting in one of those bland studios like they have, his mouth moving, sound having dropped out, a green shaggy puppet with someone's arm shoved up into it, draft horses pulling beer wagons, a non-biological frog snapping its tongue at a passing insect, warning about Mesothelioma intermeshed with the voice talking about the *Big Other* and why it was important to purge the body of chemicals that were making men women and vice versa, mushroom cloud from nuclear bomb explosion, square plastic buckets filled with MRES, some theories held that Jesus was in fact a coded reference to a

type of hallucinogenic mushroom, all you needed to do was add water and remember to stay hydrated...

He ran his tongue round the inside of his mouth and transferred the remote to his other hand, again, to rub his other against the arm of the recliner. He looked down at it, but it wasn't discolored or puffy or anything. He put down the remote, it sliding off the arm, hitting the floor, the battery door popping off, AAAs rolling across the hardwood, as he raked the nails of one hand against the palm of his other. He smacked his tongue against the roof of his mouth, his saliva thick and sticky.

... remember to stay hydrated...

Have you noticed the change in the discourse? The previous primary disposition was derived from the stance of satiating thirst at the point of conceptualization. Now it's about staying hydrated, a consumptive pattern that goes beyond desire, a pattern that, by definition, must be ever present, the state always threatening to unwind and be emptied. But the only way such a state can be fulfilled is for the fulfillment criteria to be present at all temporal dispositions. So one must continually possess the object of pre-satiation in all spacial-temporal localities and dispositions. It's a very interesting economic linguistic reframing. Don't you think?

He continued to look down at his palm as he scratched it and rose from the chair, first turning toward the kitchen, kicking over the Pepsi cans that'd accumulated at his feet, the overlaid images overlaid over his hands, just with the opacity somewhat adjusted down.

... the deluge...

Water rushed round him. He looked up, toward the muted TV, a river added to accumulated overlays, fishermen with endorsements patched over them as if they'd been NASCAR racers. The faucet dripped in the kitchen. Plink, plink, plink, against the stainless-steel basin. He looked down at his palms, still scratching, shifting from one to the other, rubbing them together, rubbing them against his underwear, water flowing over all the overlays stacked beneath. And he listed sideways, turning across the living room and toward the front door, rubbing his palm unsatisfactorily against the smooth knob, stepping out into the hot night, leaving the door open, leaving the static-filled walls behind, weaving down the front steps. The river sounded wet

in the distance. The gravel in the driveway impressed into his bare feet, the faint wind rustling his crumpled boxers, rolling over his sweat-streaked chest and back and legs.

Out on the road, the water rushed along in the dark beside him. He stumbled along. Overlays still hovered in his vision, though the ordering of the layers interchanged. He looked up, and even beneath the thickly clouded sky, through which no starlight and only the vaguest moonlight passed, the whiteness in the distance as he came down the road burned as bright as if it'd been phosphor, the brightness of it overwhelming the overlays, muting them, washing them out, reducing their opacity past zero. He stumbled across the bridge, the iron grid-work rising impossibly high over him, a cage, a net, that he slipped through. He stopped there amidst the road, looking up, the whiteness almost painful, his eyes feeling as if they might explode. Except, instead, the church did, white-washed planking flying silently through the air, scattering over grass and gravel and asphalt, Harvey tumbling back from the force of it, mouth wide open, but not screaming, starring wide eyed up into the thickly clouded sky.

Shepard looked through the screen door, pushed it open enough to step out and look over the back yard. He whistled, waited. But nothing came of it. He whistled again. "Did you see her this morning?"

"I might've seen her somewhere around the house."

"Where?"

"She's probably off at the compost," his mother said. She stood at the table, looking down at her handbag as she sorted through it. "I took the bucket up there earlier."

"Maybe." He closed the door. She'd just have to wait, then, because he wasn't going to put out her food for the crows or the coyotes to come along. He turned. "Ready?"

She snapped her pocketbook shut and slipped it into her bag. She looked up at him. "Is that what you're wearing?"

"It's clean."

He held open the door. "Besides, it's not like we're going to church." But she still didn't look reassured as she went out. He closed the door and locked it. And before he climbed into the truck, he looked around once more.

"She'll be fine."

He climbed in. "I reckon if she wants to be hungry, that's her business."

They rode in silence out along the river. The Tuck'd gone down in the past few days, restricted upstream as the rains'd cleared off long enough for the level behind the dam to drop. It was transitioning to begin the pre-transition toward Summer, where rain'd be only a pleasant memory, the landscape threatening to turn to desert in some not necessarily so unforeseeable future. He'd often wondered if, eventually, the mountains would create some sort of rain-shadow effect, or some work-alike, in a kind of reverse of the western, rather

than the men going out into the western desolation, the western desolation came east. That it rained once in a while didn't deter this thought. After all, it also rained in the desert.

"Slow down, dear."

He did.

"It seems such a shame to allow them to do that to a church."

Most of it'd already been hauled away. A dump truck sat beside it, half-loaded, but no one around.

"It was all rotten inside," Shepard said. "It was only barely standing. I'm surprised it took it this long to come down."

"But it was always so white and clean on the outside. And after all, it is a church. I don't see why they couldn't take up a collection to repair it."

"You can't repair what's beyond repair." He turned onto the bridge.

Traffic remained light till they passed the technical college and swerved through the roundabout. Cars packed in the Anglers parking lot, the usual. But, too, cars packed into the intersection, most of them turning up the hill toward the highschool, so they sat there waiting for quite a while till they could cross and turn up that way, too. He circled the building, all the parking spaces seemingly taken. "I'll circle round and drop you off at the front," he said. "Then I'll park."

She checked her watch. "Hurry up, then, or you'll be late." She climbed out.

He had to go all the way out to the end, pulling off the road and parking in the grass. A deputy car passed as he walked in, a hand rising out of the window to wave, to which Shepard removed a hand from his pocket to reply in kind. The patrol car went on; it'd already turned down the hill when Shepard rounded the front of the building. He made his way along the concrete walkway, pulled open one of the double doors, and stepped into the air-conditioning.

"Evening," he said to Lewis, who was on guard at the front. He reached into his pocket to remove his keys.

But Lewis shook his head. "Don't worry bout it."

"Sure?"

Lewis cut off the metal detector, motioned him to come on through. "Little surprised to see yuh here."

“Had to bring mom out.”

Lewis nodded. He glanced over his shoulder at the noise in the distance that escaped into the hallway when someone opened a door. He shook his head. “Big goddamn stink over this thing.”

“Well, lucky no one actually got shot.”

Lewis grunted. He glanced round. “Sometimes I think some of these yahoos want something to happen, just so they can prove their manhood.”

“Well,” Shepard said, “at the rate it’s going, maybe we should arm the students so they can protect themselves from the teachers.”

Lewis shook his head. “I’m just glad mine was out with a fucking sore throat last week.” He looked round. “I tell yuh, sometimes it feels like people are tryna measure up or somethin’.”

“How do yuh mean?”

“I mean....” He glanced round as a door opened and noise spilled out. “I mean, I’ve been in urban combat, and I know what it feels like, and people...” He glanced round. “People wanna act like fucking every day is like that, yuh know. I was actually fucking less scared in the middle of fucking Kabul than I am when I turn on the evening news.” He glanced round. “And some of these fucking yahoos, they act like a fucking row of North Korean tanks are gonna roll up Mainstreet by this weekend.” He shook his head.

“It’s the way it is.”

“Yeah.” He looked over his shoulder. “I swear to God, if I didn’t have Rachel and Marnie...” He shook his head. “I almost rather would be back there.” He shook his head. “It was more sane in some ways.”

“Hm.” Shepard slipped his hands into his pockets. “So... If you don’t mind me asking, what happened with Jason?”

“Jesus fucking God.” Lewis looked round. “Now, there is a fucking psychotic idiot. And yuh wanna know what I heard...” He glanced over his shoulder. “I heard the sheriff actually offered to hire the guy.”

“They do go back.”

Lewis shook his head. “I’m all for understanding PTSD and shit...” He glanced over his shoulder. “But getting out of your

fucking truck, on the middle of Mainstreet, and punching a fucking fifteen year old girl out..." He glanced over his shoulder. "That's just fucking messed up."

"The way it goes sometimes, I guess."

Lewis grunted. "I'm gonna tell yuh..." He glanced over his shoulder. "Some of the shit yuh see on this job..." He glanced round. "It's almost not worth it." He glanced over his shoulder. "It's like the other night, was out on patrol, getting ready to go home, riding down by the river, and yuh know who's laying straight out, near enough to stark naked in the middle of the road?"

Lewis paused, actually seeming to want him to ask who. "Who?"

"Harvey."

"It happens."

"Yeah. Shit...." Lewis glanced over his shoulder. "Ain't nobody gonna be able to do anything with him. It was bad enough when he was laying out in the middle of the driveway...." He glanced round. "And I take him in, 'cause I can't do nothing else at that point, yuh know, someone made a call about it, and all he can do is sit in the back going on about this giant, iridescent, white whale bursting out of the church and swimming straight up into the sky." He shook his head. "I..." He glanced over his shoulder. "I have no clue what he's fucking on now, but it fucked him up but good."

"What about Hannah?"

"Can't find her. She and some professor or something done gone off into the park for something another. They ain't been back yet."

"Well, she's in for a surprise when she gets back, at least."

"Fuckin' shit yeah." Lewis glanced over his shoulder. "I tell yuh, it's..."

Noise spilled out as someone opened a door. Except, along with it, so did several people, including a couple of deputies.

"...as citizens of this community we should have some say in what goes on in this county."

"Sir, if you would please step this way." One of the deputies tried to take him by the arm.

"School shootings only lead to death." The man pulled away. "The real threat to our children is pornography." The deputies had tried to contain it, but what'd started with just one man flowed

into the hallway as half a dozen. "THIS'S WHAT'S INSINUATING ITSELF INTO OUR COMMUNITY."

"Sir, if you would please—"

"PORN IS DESTROYING OUR YOUTH. AND EVERYONE REFUSES TO TALK ABOUT IT."

Cacophony filled the hallway, along with people, people shouting at each other, shouting at the officers for trying to escort the man outside, shouting at them for being fascists and coddling fascists, shouting at them for impinging on his rights to religion and free speech, shouting at them for things that could've never've made no or any sense, even, or especially, to those shouting them.

"I think your job is calling," Shepard said.

Lewis grunted, shook his head, but moved that way.

The swell of people into the hallway'd become borderline riotous. And to avoid the worst of it, Shepard stepped round the metal detectors and went out into the parking lot. He stood on the sidewalk out there as people and deputies filtered out of the building, clogging the space remaining between parked cars as the shouting and gesticulations continued. He waved when he saw Lewis escorting his mother out. "What're you running her in for? Whatever it is, it'll never stick." She looked at him severely and shook her head.

Lewis would've laughed had the situation been less of what it was. "I would suggest yuns get out of here while yuns can." He turned.

"Mind yourself," Shepard's mother said.

Lewis turned and nodded. "Yes, mam."

Shepard walked with her along the sidewalk. A handful of others, too, had started to try and escape, getting to their cars, but finding themselves blocked in by gesticulating bodies. He glanced over his shoulder at the maelstrom. "Well, how was the meeting?"

She sighed, exasperated. "Everyone just arguing to argue."

"Do you want me to bring the truck down here?"

"No, I'll walk." She shook her head, opened her handbag, and picked through it. "I don't know how these people these days expect to get anything done. They just expect everything to fall out of the sky, I guess." She pulled out her lip balm, uncapped it, smushed her lips together after she'd applied it. "In my day, the students, the teachers, they had guns hanging on the windows in the back

of their trucks, they traded pocket knives on the playground. You didn't see any of this stuff happen then. It's the way they're raising kids these days."

"Well, yuns did have something back then they don't have now."

"And what's that?"

"Vietnam."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," he said. "Just an observation of a historical fact." He opened the passenger side door for her.

"Well," she said after she'd climbed in, "the historical fact of it is, we didn't have all these violent video games kids are playing all the time." He shut the door, went round the truck and climbed in.

"Mom," he started the truck, "when we were kids, we played cowboys and Indians, shooting the Indians. I don't see how re-enacting genocide is so much a peaceful endeavor."

"That is entirely beside the point."

"And in the second place, the game players are all adults. You don't see it because I don't do it. But they're the ones who grew up playing them. And now they're the ones that get home from their corporate jobs and take off their ties and turn on an Xbox."

"You're being disingenuous. These millennials just don't care to work."

"I'm a millennial. And the last time I checked, I'm quite tired most of the time, so I must do something."

"That doesn't count. Not the way other people raise their kids these days."

He turned the truck, taking it out along the back road. "Well we might as well be technical about it and point out that all those kids in that school are Gen-Y. And the ones over in the daycare are Gen-Alpha. The millennials are the ones that're teaching."

She sighed. "I don't understand what's gotten into you today."

"Maybe it's the spring air."

"I don't want to argue about this." She sighed. "Well, the good thing about it was at least they had the presence of mind to have the sheriff's department there in case something like this happened. At least they're taking these things seriously."

"They're not out here on the department's time," he said.

“They’re paid to provide private security. They just wear their uniforms while they do it. Same thing they do for companies.”

She shook her head. “Where is your head today?”

“I don’t know.”

She looked out the window. “Besides, what’s it matter? So long as things get done. And I don’t want to argue about this.”

It's a good thing there wasn't much of it left, Russell'd figured, after the fact. Otherwise, when he wrecked the car into the church, or what'd been left of it that still hadn't been hauled away, something really bad might've happened. He didn't feel a thing, being in that state that'd allowed more than one person to survive a wreck while more-sober passengers tensed and broke half the bones in their body; however, no statistics are available on the state of the bones outside their body, following such impacts. And pulling himself upright, Russell attempted to peer through the windshield, but planking covered it. He tried the door. It stuck. But after shoving, or more accurately, leaning against it, it opened sufficiently, boards tumbling out of the way. He climbed out, walking over the barren dirt that'd been beneath the church floor so long, between stone foundation supports that hadn't yet been removed, all of them looking like monuments to some ancient wholly forgotten ritual. He paused when he reached the grass. An ever-burning outside light remained on down the road on the outside of the small apartment complex that sat along the river's edge. The water rushed ahead. He ambled across the grass toward it, his bladder feeling as if it would explode, which it wouldn't, though if left unattended long enough, his kidneys would shut down, the end effect being the same. He weaved across the highway, diagonally, aiming for the picnic area to one side of the bridge, following a sign wave trajectory to arrive there. Gravel crunched underfoot as he stepped off the pavement. He almost stumbled against one of the railway ties that lined the edge and kept the gravel from rolling down the bank into the river. He unzipped his pants and sighed. This wouldn't really matter; besides being a very proverbial drop in the bucket, the sewage plant lay downstream, and as permitted them by law, was currently discharging a quantity of raw sewage into the waterway. He sighed again.

"You're going to be in trouble, you know."

Russell looked over his shoulder as he zipped his pants.

"Jaywalking's a serious crime round here, you know."

Russell glanced up at the bridge. "The wages of sin are death." He turned. An illuminated, but pale and transparent, and somewhat staticky, version of Langdon sat at one of the metal picnic tables.

Russell said, "Why are you here?"

"I have no idea."

"Well," Russell said, "I hate Star Wars, so if you insist on looking like one of those stupid holograms, you can fuck right off."

Langdon dimmed, semi-transparent static becoming predominant. "I don't believe I'm exactly in control of this."

"In Dante," Russell said, "those who commit suicide are forever embedded in trees, a forest unable to move, for all eternity, because they forsook their bodies. And even at the end of days, when everything else shall be raised up, they shall not. And their regenerated bodies will be hung from the trees to eternally remind them of what they cast off."

"Dante never seemed to be able to decide if he was for or against the body. Or at best, a body stripped of all its bodiliness, body in name only. A kind of double bind, perhaps? Did you ever see the movie *Stigmata*?"

"Is this what you're doing with your spare time now, appearing as holograms to people in the middle of the night and talking about bad movies?"

"I don't know."

"Well then," Russell said, "since you don't know. Yes, unfortunately, I have seen it."

"It encapsulates the dilemma rather interestingly, don't you think?"

"And does a master hope to make another master a learner again?"

"I have no idea," Langdon said. "I just find it interesting that the film represents a basically Protestant view to be consumed by a primarily Protestant-based American audience, though with a Catholic motif. And how it uses this to reinforce the Protestant ideological foundations. Where the message itself that is delivered proves the audience right about their own variant of faith, as opposed to the

Catholic Church, which through the use of the symbolism of the film, one might tacitly assume it supports. But at the same time it can't destroy it, because the audience must accept the Catholic framework and its associated material in regards to possession and the titular stigmata to reinvigorate their own Protestantisms."

"You know..." Russell said, looking up at the blackened sky. "I have always enjoyed that the most of the world's religions could find common ground in hating me. It's such a good feeling to be able to bring everyone together. And maybe if I'd lived a little bit longer, I'd've eventually brought peace to the Middle East. And maybe the Jews and Palestinians could've temporarily put aside their differences until they saw me executed."

"I'm sorry," Langdon said. "I'm having a bit of trouble with my perception of time. Are you speaking in the past tense out of affection, or because of your actual relative position in time?"

"Yes."

"Oh. Well..." What there was of Langdon looked down at his own staticky hand. "I don't believe it matters much at this point, anyway."

Russell looked over his shoulder. "You appear to be losing transmutative power."

"That does seem to be the case."

"Anything you'd like to say before you're off the air?"

"No. I don't think..."

When Russell'd looked over his shoulder again, the picnic area was empty of all but him. He looked up at the bridge, the mass of iron grid-work in the dark. "Oh, well." He turned to cross the picnic area and follow the gravel path back up to the road and walk out along the bridge. But his gate and footing the way they were, he stumbled over a railway tie, fell sideways down the bank, bashing against the large rocks along the edge of the river, rolling into the rushing dark water. All of it much less dignified than he'd planned.

Eva drove slowly across the bridge, coming to a stop at the intersection on the other side, looking at a bare patch of ground, then down at the hand-drawn map she'd been given, a caricature of a church very clearly defined there. She puzzled a moment, looking down one road, then the other. Finally, she turned, following the arrow on the map, even if one of the landmarks appeared missing. Then, round the bend, past the sawmill, and beyond a small formerly swampy area, she saw trailers stretched out along a gravel road, so this had a good chance of being the place. She slowed and turned off. She rolled along slowly, looking at the mostly dilapidated trailers, some of them old enough to go back to when the first of their kind'd ever been manufactured. Past them, the road continued on in the distance, along the stream, but she didn't go that far. Instead she pulled into the grass and turned. She went back and parked in the gravel area just off the road, beside the stream. She climbed out, holding onto the door, standing behind it as she looked out over the place again.

"So much ado over this..." She said it to herself, and shook her head.

The clouds had slowly cleared in the past few days, allowing some of the early morning sun through onto the landscape. She squinted, reached into the car, and pulled out her sunglasses from her bag.

Cars passed on the road, but she didn't look round till she heard one pull onto the gravel. It parked beside hers, and Laughlan stepped out.

"Good morning," she called.

He looked at her, hadn't seemed to've noticed she was there. "I'm sorry," he said. "We'll be a bit delayed." He looked round the trailer park, glanced up the road.

"It's not as if any of the rest of it has happened fast," she said.

"I'm here on a another matter," he said. He looked over his

shoulder as a roar dopplered down the highway toward them, the Bronco slowing only enough to jerk off the asphalt and onto gravel, and slowing only further to come to a stop in front of a nearby trailer. "I apologize," he said. "But this'll take precedent." The Bronco door slammed, causing both them to look up, Maria coming toward them.

Hands in her pockets, she didn't look happy to see him. "What's wrong now?" She glanced at Eva.

"This's—"

"I know who this's. So've they sold everyone down the sewer line yet?"

"I can't speak as to that, at the moment," he said.

"Fucking lot of good you are."

"I'm here representing another interest. Is Lily here?"

"What do you think?"

"I'm going to talk to her first. And then you. And then I'll need your help."

"What for?"

"I'd rather say it to her first." Laughlan stepped by her, walking toward the trailer.

Maria didn't turn to watch him go. She turned toward Eva. "Why don't you just go home?"

Eva looked at her a moment, puzzled, mouth almost open. "I..."

"What's the point in coming back here, really?" Maria said. "Hm? Some sort of midlife crisis? Don't feel it for the husband anymore? What? Or just stuck in some middle-class rut? And like some god-damn vampire you've gotta come down and feed off something's vital energies?"

"I'm sorry...who...and why...?"

"I mean what're you *really* doing? You're dissatisfied with your life and the only thing you can do is fondle memories? And you think going back to some lesbian tryst you had when you were fifteen is going to make some fucking difference in your pathetic life?"

Eva couldn't reply.

Maria turned to walk toward the trailer.

"Wait!" Eva stepped away from the car. "How do you know that?"

Maria stopped and turned. "Because you reek of fear and desperation and regret."

“But how do you—”

“I should be able to remember good enough.” Maria stood there with her hands in her jacket pockets. She had a tendency to get cold sometimes, even when it was hot. “You were the one who left. I’ve always been where I’ve always been.” She turned and started toward the trailer.

Eva near panted, unable to speak. Her eyes’d heated, and for reasons she couldn’t identify, she was on the border of tears. She shifted her sunglasses and rubbed her eyes to preempt them, squinting against the morning sun. “Wait...” She started across the gravel. “Maria...” But a horn blared, and she had to step back. She rubbed her eyes, turning to look at the long line of deputy cars and SUVs and vans pulling into the trailer park, filling almost all available space, people climbing out, filling what voids remained. Laughlan pushed open the screen door and stepped out, having heard them all pulling in. A couple of deputies approached, flanking a woman, and he stood there on the steps looking down at them. Maria was already moving toward them, pushing through the crowd assembling in front of the trailer. Down the way, screen doors propped open, faces peering out. Laughlan stepped back into the trailer, the woman and the deputies following him in. A deputy’d stopped Maria, who stood shouting at him. One of the deputies who’d gone in emerged to shove open the screen door and reached up to slide into place the piece that’d hold it open, as if they were planning on hauling a piece of furniture out. A freneticism carried through the air like static and raised the hair along Eva’s arms as if it’d been just that. In effect, and practicality, she’d been blockaded out, only able to barely see over the vehicles, only the vaguest hints of Maria’s shouts intelligible. The woman who’d gone in came to the door, motioned for others, who stepped forward, forming a line, as if they might all file in, filling the trailer like so many clowns into a clown car. But only three entered first, emerging with Functional Fixedness and Ego Integrity and Brightness Constancy in hand, to be replaced by three others as the first three moved toward the vehicles with the children in their arms. And the children crying was no more discernible than anything Maria screamed. Another deputy moved as if to aid the one she was yelling at, but he waved him away, appearing, from what Eva could see, to

know her, or at least, to be on intimate enough terms, which Lewis was, that he was willing to cut her some slack in the situation that the others wouldn't've. Next came Confounding Variable, screaming quite appallingly, but the person carrying her seemed unperturbed by this, battle-worn from other such encounters in the course of her job, followed by Retroactive Interference, led by the hand, trying to pull away, and Motion Parallax, still young enough to be carried. Screams and shouts emerged from the trailer, some child, some adult, some neither, all equally indistinguishable. Everything seemed to happen slow, the way movies like to sometimes show battlefields, trying to render them through the mediaized apparent perception of a new soldier. The Theories bolted through the door and down the steps, one grabbed by a deputy, the other making it to the vehicles, slipping between them, a deputy running after him down the gravel road. Olivia had emerged with Belief Perseverance in tow, but one of the people out front had removed him from her grasp and taken him toward one of the vehicles and left her standing there. Liam wasn't home yet, it still being several hours till he got off work. The same for Aiden. They'd come in from work not knowing anything at all was different, till they went inside. John had come out and, in absence of anything else to do, held Olivia's hand. Then there was Primary Appraisal, carried out balling, tears streaking the white powder that'd covered her face and arms and hair and hands from her attempts to devise her own 'pankicks'. Eva, of course, wasn't aware of the details of who any of these people were, but in her already wounded state, the scene slash scenes were less than...helpful. She felt as if she were going to vomit. And she turned toward the stream down the bank in front of the car. But instinctively, she turned toward the screaming, that tone evolved to be so arresting to parents. One of the deputies carried Cognitive Schema. An adult yelled, the one that'd caught Drive Theory jerking away, his hand bleeding, Drive Theory bolting again. And the deputy tackling him, slamming him into the gravel, the boy still in his underwear, and the deputy ziptying his arms behind his back because his wrists would've been too small to work effectively with handcuffs, which would've required putting them around the boy's upper arms, which some wouldn't've had a problem doing, and hadn't, when the moment had called for it, but

he, in particular, felt strongly about the use of words, that they were *handcuffs*, not *armcuffs*, and that meant something. Maria'd seen something of this, because she screamed and started that way, but the deputy at which she'd been yelling grabbed her arm. She jerked away. He grabbed her again. One of the others approached to help, but he waved them away. Laughlan emerged onto the steps. By then, Lewis'd been lenient as he felt he could, and had turned her round against the Bronco and handcuffed her arms behind her back and'd had her sit with her back against a rear tire; it would be safer that way, or so he'd rationalized. Her head bent forward, glasses falling down her nose, so even close it'd've been impossible to see anything of her face. Laughlan stood in front of the trailer, talking to the woman in charge of directing this entire episode. The conversation didn't seem to go well. He stepped toward the older children, at least the ones who'd been at home then, them still standing there in front of the trailer. Emma'd already gone off somewhere that morning; she wouldn't be back till evening. The same for Absolute Threshold. He spoke to them several minutes. Finally, someone came and led them to different suvs. A couple of older children had opened the back doors to one, climbing out and running barefoot across the gravel, scooped up by a deputy and another woman. They put them in back of a patrol car. Each of them standing up on the seats, banging against the wire and glass, the deputy opening the front door and leaning his head in to articulate something through the wire screen. Slowly, one by one, as the whole thing wound down, cars and suvs backed out of the trailer park, onto the road, traveling away into the distance. And it wasn't long before all that remained were Laughlan's and Eva's cars, Maria's Bronco, and a single deputy's car. She was still seated against a rear tire, and Lewis helped her up as Laughlan spoke to him. He uncuffed her. She pushed up her glasses, didn't bother to yell at him, just looked at him in a way that was far worse. Laughlan walked him back to his car. And he stood there in the midst of the gravel drive as Lewis turned the last deputy car and pulled onto the road. He turned and looked down the way, screen doors slowly closing, eyes disappearing behind curtains and blinds. He looked across at Eva as if he'd forgotten she'd been there. And he walked toward her. He pulled his handkerchief from his pocket, offered it. She accepted it

without comment, wiping the corners of her eyes, looking down at the mascara that contaminated the white cloth.

“Welcome to a different side of the law,” he said.

When Eva looked up, Maria’d gone inside.

“We can delay a bit if you need.”

Eva shook her head.

“I apologize. I only learned about this this morning, otherwise I wouldn’t’ve had you come out here.”

“No.” Eva wiped the corners of her eyes. “It’s fine.”

She offered him back the handkerchief. But he shook his head, raised his hand. “Keep it.”

“You’re...very good at switching between things,” she said.

“You get used to it.” He half-turned. “I’ve got to go in because of this.”

She nodded.

“I’ll call you in regards to the afternoon meeting.”

She nodded.

He turned and walked to his car, leaving her there standing by hers.

“Creation is such a violent thing,” he’d said. “It is amazing and sad how these things are mirrored all the way down through it, all the way from the moment of creation itself.” Interlacing his fingers along the back of his neck, he’d continued to walk. “Things are so intertwined. People wish for violence to be removed from the world. Yet to do so would also remove everything of value. Things as simple as a handshake. Even sex is a form of violence, though sometimes an enjoyable one.”

“And you would know that from experience?”

“This time, yes.”

Shepard’d faintly laughed to himself.

“Yes,” he’d said, “I guess that it is humorous.” Pausing, he’d looked up at the sky. “Though, I must admit I fail to understand the ...weight that is often put upon it.”

“I reckon it has something to do with the definition of life.”

“Ah.”

After that, he’d looked down and’d began walking again. “Are you surprised I would admit that?”

“Not understanding?”

“Yes.” Then he’d sighed. “If only you could comprehend the depths of what remains unknown.”

“Even to God?”

“Even to us.”

They’d walked in silence.

Finally, he’d said, “I know I used to say things in anger sometimes. It was my problem. I hid in anger, afraid of when the anger dissipated. Then there was only left an uncovered core of pure rage. And pain. Sometimes I think about the pain that echoes down from the birth of creation. It is such a horrible thing. Yet, without it, I do not think

nothing or anything can exist.” And he’d looked down at the white line on which he’d walked. “And when I said certain things... It was only to cause more pain. After all, the universes were birthed with pain. How can we expect anything else not to be?”

“That’s a poor excuse.”

“I do not ask to be excused. I accept what has been done. And what I have done. We accept what we have done. We recognize what we have done. We know there can be no excuse for it. But in the end, we are ultimately a failure. Now we are merely alone with ourselves.”

“Everyone’s alone with themselves.”

“I fear sometimes that you have learned to accept that too easily.”

“And I should rage against something in denial?”

“No. No, I, we, do not tell you what to do. Only that you try to understand.”

“It seems strange of you to ask me to understand you.”

“Not so strange.” Pausing, he’d looked up at what of the road’d remained ahead. “You, like the rest of the multiverse, were birthed in pain. That is the way all birth must be. And we have that in common.” And sighing, he’d looked over at Shepard. “Some have the misfortune to go through it twice. Or more.”

She didn't know how long she'd been standing there. But she looked up when the screen door slammed. And she saw Maria walking across in front of the trailer toward the Bronco. Eva took a deep breath, started across the road. Maria'd already reached behind the seat, drug out the plastic box, and'd slammed the door by the time Eva'd approached. Maria glanced up at her. "I'm busy."

"I just want—"

"You don't even know what you want." Maria started toward the trailer.

"I just want to help."

Maria stopped and turned.

"If there's anything I can do..."

Maria glanced toward the trailer. "There's a baby on the way. So if you think you can help with that..." She turned and went up the steps.

Eva paused, and then followed. She opened the screen door and stepped inside. Lily sat in one of the dining room chairs, face a wreck, eyes red, and emitted a long, low groan. Maria set the plastic box on the table. She opened it and produced a roll of semi-transparent plastic. She looked over her shoulder. "Take this." She offered it to Eva. "Spread it there in front of the couch." And she stepped past her, turned as she was halfway across the room. "Hurry up if you're gonna do something." And she disappeared into the back hall. Lily groaned. Eva looked at her, then turned toward the couch, fiddling with the roll of plastic to see how it came undone. She'd almost finished with it when Maria appeared with an armload of towels. "Put these down over it."

"Shouldn't she be getting to a hospital?"

"Hospitals are for people who have insurance." And a seven-figure

income. That and she'd already been in labor for the last two hours. And the nearest open maternity ward was too far away.

Lily groaned, and Maria stepped toward her. "We're almost there, aren't we?"

Lily nodded.

"Well, we're gonna do alright." She motioned to Eva. "Put a couple over the couch cushions too." She bent and put her arms round Lily's shoulders. "Alright, you know the drill, between the next contractions, I want you to get up, and we'll move, alright?"

Lily nodded.

"Alright. Here we go. You tell me when."

Lily let out a long groan.

"Up we go." She glanced at Eva as they moved. "Clear." They stepped on the towels. "And turn. There we go. Now we're gonna go down. Now." Maria helped her to squat, Lily stretching her arms straight out over the couch cushions, her head drooping forward. "Light." She motioned toward a lamp. Eva hurried across the room and turned it on, moved it as far from the wall as the cord'd allow. "Alright, dear, we're almost there." She motioned toward the table. Eva hurried over and carried the box, setting it on the floor. Maria pulled out a pair of gloves. "Alright," she said, "you should know how to do this better than me by now." She got herself into position. "The head's already coming through. I need one big push at the next contraction. You know what to do." Lily leaned into the couch cushions and groaned. "I've almost got a nose. I need you to give another push."

Eva, who'd gone through this three times herself, felt herself become dizzy at, this, her first time being a spectator.

"That's so good. That's so good. Now just give me one more. One more."

And Eva felt as if she might vomit or fall down or both. Red-tinged fluids and feces soaked into the spread towels.

"There we go." Maria cradled the newborn in a clean towel and rubbed her face gently with the corner. Still looking at her, she motioned to the box. "Extractor." But Eva couldn't move. Maria looked up at her. "Blue bulb." And she touched Lily's back through her shirt. "Just relax." And Lily, breathing hard, pressed against the

couch cushions. "Breathe." She removed her hand to take the extractor from Eva and suction the newborn's nostrils. And she rubbed her back. "Let's go." Lily groaned. "Alright, come on." The child sucked in her first breath, started to cry. Maria motioned for Eva to come down. "Now. Now." And Eva dropped to her knees, Maria putting the baby in her arms, dealing with the placenta. Lily groaned. It seemed inadequate to express any of the current situation, but it's what she had. "Alright," Maria said. She turned her attention to Lily. "You know the second one's always easiest." She reached for another clean towel. "We're almost there. One more. I've got the head, so on the next contraction, give me a push." Lily groaned. Everyone's sense of time seemed to've gone out the proverbial window. "Yes, just like... Just like that. And breathe. And with the next, one more, just give one more." Lily groaned. "Fantastic." Maria took the second child in her arms, reached for the extractor. "Alright, we're all clear." She touched Lily's back and, breathing hard, Lily rested her face against the couch cushions and eased onto her knees. The first child continued to cry. "Come on," Maria said. "You wanna scream your head off as much as your sister, don't you? You're not going to let her get away with hogging all the attention, are you?" She rubbed the second twin's back. "Come on and scream. I wanna spend the rest of my life telling you to shut up." Cradling her in one arm, she reached into the box for the stethoscope and struggled up, stepping past Eva, toward the kitchen table, kicking aside a chair, and laying her down. "If you don't watch it, you're gonna find out how crabby I get when people don't do what I say." She'd already smeared the stethoscope with everything when she'd pulled it out, and continued to do so as she inserted it in her ears. The problem with using it was that she couldn't talk, so she had no way to defend herself against the silence. Lily'd already begun to cry. She knew all this too well not to. Maria continued doing what she could, the stethoscope dangling round her neck as she hunched over the table. Eva'd gone numb. The child in her arms'd gone silent. She looked down at her. But now she wasn't a spectator. Her breath quickened. She jostled the child, who shifted, eyes closed, but moving her arms. And Eva started to cry.

The pole light illuminated her car, as if just for her, the way it sometimes happens in movies. Bugs bashed their carapaces into the worn, plastic, protective covering, confused by the conflux of a few hundred million years of evolution and a couple hundred years of scientific development, about what was the sun, what were the stars, what was the moon, and what was not. The light was better than coffee; she looked at it and looked at it, and sleep seemed to be something that never had existed in the first place. The inside of her nose prickled at the scent of smoke. And when she looked over, the end of Maria's cigarette grew painfully hot as she inhaled. Maria pulled it from her lips enough to exhale, the smoke a tangible sigh. Eva looked again at the monstrous-sized flying things that raged against the light.

"You did alright."

Eva turned to look at her. But Maria just looked straight ahead, drew in on her cigarette.

"So much for being a fairy godmother."

Eva didn't ask what this meant.

Maria exhaled into the night, the smoke floating between, dissipating among, the other trailers. "Why don't you ask what you wanna ask?"

Eva didn't say anything.

Maria blew a smoke-ghost into the night. "They've shut down all the surrounding maternity wards." She placed the cigarette in her mouth, let it hang loosely between her lips. "You have to go all the way to Asheville now." She inhaled the fire and breathed out the smoke. And the ambulance ride would've been, on its own, five-or-six-thousand dollars. To say nothing of the actual cost for the birth after some uncalled-for specialist stuck his head in the room for three seconds, or a dose of over-the-counter pain medication

that cost 400x more than it would've over the counter. And a half-a-million other itemized things most people would never think of till they saw the bill, all billed independently from a half-a-dozen doctors and organizations, three-quarters to all of which is wrong or outright false, the bill collectors hoping people won't bother to look too closely or, preying on some deep-seated American anxiety about paying bills, hoping they pay by automatic reflex, a tactic particularly successful against the elderly. Then there's the question of exactly *who* pays those bills. Medicaid was available for low-income mothers, to a degree. Every second Tuesday following a full moon, so long as you were employed and making between X and Y dollars a year, the solved values of X and Y depending on a given political climate. But it can only be *abused* so far. So much for being pro-life. And expansion, well, state expansion would require accepting federal money, and while they very much preferred to get, and enjoyed getting, free money, they preferred it without any responsibility to use it to benefit their less-affluent citizenry, because, after all, what did those women who have to apply for things like Medicaid, what do they contribute to the progress of mankind or the tax base or the re-election coffers? In fact, in this case, recent laws had been very helpful in saving the state money. Though everyone concentrated on a recent amendment to define marriage as between a man and a woman as a net positive in terms of preventing the gay takeover of society, the majority had, and still did, fail to understand that the actual wording of the bill, going along with this one-man-one-woman idea to an exactness, saved the state money by cutting benefits programs to children whose mother or father had died, to the elderly who got remarried after the death of a spouse, single mothers and fathers of one origin or another, among many others in all the combinations that can come out of these wheels of possibility, because all of these relationships and scenarios were outside the bounds of the one-man-one-woman concept of marriage, and on and on. It led the more cynical to admit, as Maria had on occasion, that, "They could write a bill that said they were going to round up all Christians and stuff them in gas chambers and so long as they wrote 'stop the gays' at top of it, most people'd vote for it." But she didn't say that tonight. She just breathed smoke into the pole-light-illuminated darkness, a faintly blue ghost-white

shroud floating out there among the trailers. Even if she'd've afforded it, they'd've only taken her in and put her on her back, a birthing position mostly invented by male doctors in light of the newest technological achievement, for the time, of the forceps, incidentally, a slip of which had been the reason for Sylvester Stallone's characteristic facial features and speaking style, a technology that allowed those same doctors, for the first time, to prioritize the life of the child over that of the mother by pulling it into the world, perpetuating the husband's bloodline, whereas prior they needed err on the side of caution, knowing, in the event of a bad birth, saving the mother, by a certain calculus, was the most resource efficient way to more rapidly produce future offspring, except in the case of Catholic-dominated countries, of course, where, the mother having already been baptized, and considering that the soul entered the body at conception, tainted with primordial sin, the only way to prevent the child from going to hell was to allow the mother to die so that the child could be born alive long enough to sprinkle with water.

Scattered smoke whirled and drifted through the light. But then again, it wasn't as if aftercare was any fucking thing. In most first-world countries, women were actually treated, instructed in exercises to restore the pelvic floor muscles, American women just believing it was normal to piss yourself for the rest of your life when you sneezed after having a baby.

Ash crumbled off the end of her cigarette. She'd met Lily just a little over a couple years after she'd graduated from nursing school, when Lily'd been twelve-ish-and-three-quarters, when, instead of her first period, she'd found out she was pregnant. So she'd been there for the first, Sophia, taken away and grown up and come back and gone away, who was now where only God could've ever known, if he'd existed anymore. And twenty months later, she'd been there for the third. She, Maria, didn't even bother to remember her (Lily's) parents. There were some things quote unquote not worth wasting mental space on, wherever they'd gotten themselves to. And she'd been there every ten months after, wherever it'd taken her, for the past, almost, twenty years. "The stupid thing about it..." she said, as she stubbed out the last of the cigarette that'd burned too close to her mouth. "She's never even got to have the part that's supposed to be

fun out of the whole deal.” It was the first time she’d ever said it to anybody, but Eva had no frame of reference for what it meant. Maria pulled herself away from the side of the trailer, stood with her hands in her pockets. The pole light turned her hair ever so faintly blue. “But she’s stronger and healthier than she has a right to be.” Which meant the doctors would continue to refuse to remove her uterus, or perform a tubal ligation, or anything else, for that matter, because what about what some future husband might want? “But it’s not like it ever gets any easier.” She looked down the length of the trailer park. “If God were still around he’d probably make some excuse about it not being his fault, human brain sizes and evolution and such shit.” She spat. Maria turned and mounted the steps, grasped the screen door handle.

“I...”

She looked over at Eva.

But Eva couldn’t find anything to say.

“When you get finished,” Maria said, “you should go home.” She went inside, leaving Eva to walk toward her car. Maria stood there in the living room. The VCR blinked **12:00**. She heard a car start, engine noise fading down the road. She turned and went down the hall into the bedroom, where Lily and the oldest newborn lay asleep. She looked at them both, both peaceful in a very tired way. And she bent down and kissed Lily’s forehead. Then she turned, quietly pulled the door closed behind herself, and went out to finish cleaning and packing everything up.

Eva'd walked across the lobby without the woman behind the desk looking up from her magazine. She rode the elevator up, thankful for the lack of music. In her room, she sat on the edge of the bed, looking at nothing. When she did look at something, she looked down at her shirt and skirt, both bloodstained, barely to mention contaminated and impregnated with other fluids. And she wept. But not because of them. And she sat there that way for a long time, scrunched forward, everything hurting, till her phone went off, and sniffing, wiping her eyes, she reached toward the nightstand, looked down at the screen, blinked to unhaze her eyes, but didn't succeed, only barely able to discern the image of her oldest daughter. She touched the screen, moved it toward the side of her head. "Hello, dear."

"How's work going?"

"Fine. It's just work. You know how it goes."

"Are you alright, mom? You don't sound good."

Eva sniffed and wiped her nose. "It's just allergies," she said. "Everything's in bloom down here." She wiped her face. "How's everything going with you? Are you alright?"

Shepard opened the kitchen screen door and stepped inside, pulled off his sweat-drenched cap.

“Are your shoes clean? I just swept the floor.”

“Yap.” He moved round the table and got down a glass from the cabinet and opened the fridge. He poured it half full of Cool-Aid. He downed it in one go.

“You shouldn’t gulp that way,” she said. She sat at the table, the paper spread out over it.

He returned the pitcher to the fridge. “Have you seen Princess today?”

“No.” She didn’t look up from the paper. “But I haven’t looked.” She turned the page. “I’m sure she’s around somewhere.”

“I think I’m gonna go out and look for her.” He stepped toward the sink, rinsed the glass, filled it, and drank. He rinsed it again and set it on the counter.

“Have you looked at the paper today?”

“Now, when’ve I had a chance to do that?”

“I thought you might’ve looked at it when you brought it up.”

“I think I prefer to keep my sanity.”

“Such things going on.”

“They usually do.”

“Did you hear that girl, the Cobb girl, you know. They sent her back to jail because she violated her parole. But I mean, if they’ve sent someone to jail, they obviously deserve to be there, so I don’t see what the point is of letting them out early. They just have to spend the time and effort to send them back. Just a waste of our money. Same as usual.”

“I guess.”

“And they finally did something about that horrible situation

with all those kids down there in the trailer park. I can't understand why it took this long."

He remained silent.

"And that woman, you know, the one that was married to that man who calls himself a preacher, they say they're getting married, her and that brother. Can you believe that?"

"Are we still talking about the paper?"

"The things people do these days. You can really tell how bad the world's gotten. This is what happens when they let things like the gays get married, then people are running off marrying their husband's brothers. What're they going to be marrying next? It's just never going to end. Something bad's going to come of the whole thing, you just wait and see."

"Well, it'll have to come. I've got work to do."

"Have you heard about this?"

He stopped, hand on the screen door.

"A bunch of hikers went missing. A professor and something from the college. A forest ranger was with them. He just got out of his tent one morning and found they'd all disappeared. Just vanished. They've organized a search party to try and find them." She turned the page. "Wasting tax payer dollars over people who go out and get themselves lost in the woods. This's the reason we can't afford anything. And—oh—yes, of course they had some kind of grant to go out there and search for something another. So I'm sure we were paying for them to go out there and get lost in the first place. Just like all that other money they spend for those people from up there to study all those ridiculous things."

"Well, not much I can do about it." And he pushed open the screen door and went out.

A few clouds still obscured the sun, but they were fast disappearing. And a light wind'd risen, which helped. Sweat evaporated from his shirt as he walked up the road. He glanced at the truck, but decided against it, preferring, for the moment, to walk. Cows stood in the lower fields eating, as they almost always were, converting greenery to mobile protein, though a couple had taken advantage of the newly available sun, lying down and basking in it, calves chasing each other round in circles. The breeze shifted the higher grass in the upper

pasture, rendering it a flow of greenish waves on land, not quite grain, only very technically so, soon to turn to brown more than amber in the heat. That'd have to be cut and baled soon enough. He glanced at the sky. Rain wasn't supposed to be too likely in the coming weeks. So everything was definitely moving toward summer. He stopped and looked round into the distance several times, whistling, scanning, but nothing moved, other than what the wind shifted, except for a few squirrels, which darted for the trees. Bone-dry leaves crackled underfoot as he entered the forest, so loud he almost couldn't hear himself think, but maybe there was a benefit in that. Somewhere nearby, squirrels scurried round a tree, claws scraping against the bark, one chasing the other, either trying to expel a rival male or run down a female. He stopped and whistled, the only reply the faint shifting of the treetops in the wind. He eyed a standing dead hemlock as it shifted, all its limbs already stripped, standing there like a skeleton, a totem, a warning. The road turned up. Rain'd washed a ditch in one route a long time before, cut across the road, and carved away a good portion of the opposite route. He'd have to remember to bring some rocks and fill that in. But he never did. He paused, listening. A boomer barked in the distance, hopping round on the side of a tree, sounding as if it dared him to get any closer and he'd tear him apart. He'd have to bring the rifle out next time and see if he could catch it. Though they looked near identical to their cousins, they were just too aggressive, and would chase out the grey squirrels, then tear into any building or attic and shred everything inside if given half a chance. Shepard whistled, waited, but only the boomer's barking came in reply. He walked on. His shirt'd almost dried. He thought about yelling her name. But it seemed so ridiculous to walk through the woods yelling someone's name.

But then, coming round the next bend, he saw something. He moved toward it. "Hey." He yelled. "Lazy bones." And she was still lying down when he came up on her. Flies scattered. He stopped. The flies seemed only momentarily flummoxed, alighting again, busying themselves in the way they lived, now seeming not to mind him as he walked round her. They cared not so much for the dried black blood, but the wetter stuff in the wide gash that'd been opened in her throat. The dead part Shepard could understand. It was the circumstances

round it that fit into no framework his mind could readily pull from its indexes. The only thing he thought was that he'd have to go and get the truck, that he couldn't carry her all the way back. He needed to do that, but he just stood there looking down at her. Dogs, of course, died as easily as anything else, old age, sickness, attacked by a coyote or bear, shot by a hunter, hit by a car, killed by someone just having fun. But this wasn't any of those things. He knew that much from just looking at it. He lost track of how much time he'd been standing there. Sun came through the newly green treetops at a lower angle, the light'd subtly changed color. He turned to walk away and leave the flies to do the things that would ensure their own lives and posterity.

He operated along two levels, one, closer to the conscious, where he felt a numbness, a sort of protective insulation, the other, a lower-level hypervigilance. That's why he'd looked into the distance, the opposite way he'd needed to go to get home, and why he'd started walking that direction without even realizing it. He climbed the side of the bank, leaving the road, thick leaves crunching under his boots, sinking into them from his weight, decades and decades worth of sunlight converted to that complex interplay of crunches. At first, he wasn't sure what he was looking at. Before, at least he'd had some frame of reference. But this wasn't the first time he'd seen a dog dead. So it took time to realize that it was, indeed, a body. Blood had soaked into the richly patterned fabric, yet, at first, it was difficult to tell it hadn't been part of the pattern.

He never carried a phone when he went for a walk in the woods. Why should he? So as with Princess, the only thing he could do was turn and walk back. There was no use in running. The flies could carry only the smallest pieces of either of them away at a time. She would lie there as long as she had too, staring up forever and ever past new-budding walnut branches, which are always the last out.

They'd taken trucks, and eventually an ambulance, up the road into the woods. And they were still up there documenting all the things they documented in a case like this. Lewis had parked his patrol car on the front lawn to let them by. He stood leaned against it, shoulder up, phone pressed against his ear as he scribbled overtop a form on a clipboard, barely able to see in the faint illumination that escaped from the patrol car's interior and intermingled with the distant porch light.

Shepard, who'd been sitting on the front steps for longer than he could recall, looked up when Lewis approached. Lewis turned off his phone and slipped it into his pocket. "I need you to sign this." He offered the clipboard and removed a pen from his pocket. "On the line down there at the bottom." Shepard did, the actions of taking it and the pen and completing a few strokes and handing it back all purely automatic. Lewis looked it over. "Anything else that you can think to add?"

"I don't know." Shepard shook his head. "I don't even know her name."

"Think I've got something on that," Lewis said. He pulled out his phone. "I had a suspicion, so I sent something over to the FBI office. Unofficial." He glanced over his shoulder. "I'd appreciate if you didn't mention that." He looked at his phone, tapped the screen. "Anyway, she sent me what they could. Apparently some big shit's going down. They're already on their way about this. And Evgenia can't..." He glanced up. "I'd appreciate it if you'd forget that name."

"What's the name?"

"Yeah."

"No. What was the woman's name?"

"Oh. Sorry." He stroked the screen. "Shit, I had it here." He continued to stroke and tap the screen.

"What about the little girl?"

"Girl?"

"She had a little girl with her."

"Daughter maybe?"

"I don't know."

"Sorry, but I haven't got that much, just what she could send me. But I haven't got anything about a daughter here. According to this, she's got a younger sister. Um. Al-Jumu'ah. I think that's how you pronounce it. We got—" His radio blared, and he stepped away and bent to speak into it. But not that far away. Still, the staticky voice on the other end made little sense to Shepard; it didn't even seem like words. "Alright," Lewis said. And he released the radio and stepped toward the porch again. "Well, apparently the house they were supposed to be staying in's empty." He turned. "It's actually right on the other side of the hill. You know that?"

Shepard shook his head.

"There's apparently a brother, as well. We're still looking for him, too." Lewis glanced round. "If yuh wanna know what I think about it..."

Shepard didn't reply.

Lewis glanced round again. "What I suspect is, I mean, just looking at it, and they'd call me a racist, but this smells like some kind of honor killing to me. I'd bet on it. In a heartbeat. And—"

Shepard's mother appeared behind the screen door. "Can I get either of you something to drink? Would you like some coffee?"

"No, mam. Thanks."

"Dear?"

"No."

"You need to drink something. You haven't eaten or drunk anything all evening."

"I don't want anything right now."

In silence, she turned away and went back through the den.

"Maybe you should try and get some sleep," Lewis said. "You don't look so good. Things like this..."

"What're you going to do if you can't find them?"

"I don't know. My guess is the FBI'll come in and take the thing. Good riddance so far as I'm concerned." He glanced round. "You'll

probably have to come in for questioning again. The DA or the FBI'll probably wanna talk to yuh."

Shepard nodded.

Lewis said, "You know where the real problem starts with a dead body?"

"What's that?"

"When you get used to em."

Lying there, washed against the large rocks that lined the shore, water lapping against him, a frog having made a home inside his shirt, a salamander sitting on his shoulder, another scrambling through his damp hair, one climbing up his arm, he dreamt. He dreamt he was officiating a wedding, something he'd done on occasion, though rarely, mostly when someone needed a non-religious ceremony and could get one nowhere else in the county, when the public officials'd all recused themselves on religious grounds and left a circuit magistrate to get round whenever he could. But they weren't something he'd've cared to make his main line of work. And he'd only ever taken a dollar in pay, and that only to make it official. There was something about it that irked him, both the dream and the state of affairs for becoming an ordained minister...the application to a certain body that...then...certified...but their certification...getting itself into a field of...wet spaghetti? Yet these things had been round so long ...hung over from who knew when, and...and as for the wedding part...no, he really preferred not to think about that, and if that was the alternative, he'd really prefer to wake up. Instead, he began lecturing some static-faced elected official on how, etc, etc, and how this, etc, etc, and how that, etc, etc, and this, etc, etc, and otherwise who knows what shit the states'd pull, etc, etc, and all about the other, etc, etc, and the whole show, etc, etc, and everyone else, etc, etc. But people who're made of static images just don't have the capability of listening, or all they can do is listen. So it seemed you couldn't get away from stupidity even in... But in any regard, the water seemed like a very nice place. Maybe he could stand floating for all eternity. A salamander scrambled up over his nose and perched on his brow. No, it wasn't bad at all. Very...primordial. Yes, very primordial. After all, it was from places like this that everything that'd come to dominate

the land had emerged, and in the case of whales, re-entered. Perhaps that's why they were so smart. They did manage to exist out there in relative peace, or at least, the relative peace that any life form engaged in the struggle for survival and reproduction can, creating their own songs and culture. Perhaps those probes'd been right in Star Trek to regard them as a superior form of life.

"I would disagree with that reading," Langdon said. He expressed the aesthetic of standing there on one of the large rocks, or something of him, as his staticky form'd degraded to a mere humanoid shape, but Russell didn't open his eyes to see this. "They didn't choose whales because they were superior. They were just around at a specific point in time in which they happened by the planet and scanned it."

Russell didn't argue the point.

"And besides, it's a contradiction," Langdon said, "like how people imagine aborigines are all peaceful and peace-loving and perfectly in touch with nature. Killer whales are violent bastards. At least from the perspective of a seal... or a shark."

Russell didn't argue the point.

"If you're wondering why I'm here," Langdon said, "I still don't know. But it appears my body's caught up with me."

Upstream, the rest of them made their way across the bridge.

"Are you going?"

A salamander skittered down Russell's neck and into his shirt.

Maybe it'd be better to be foam and float endlessly.

"We're all foam," Langdon said. "Ultimately. Hm. That just kinda came to me. I don't know what it means though. Do you have any clue? Physics has a thing called quantum foam. And marbles. Why do I keep thinking about marbles? Strange. Did you know it takes nine-hundred-twenty gallons of water to make one gallon of almond milk? Hm. But anyway, I think you'd better get started if you're going. I mean... everyone's not moving too fast, but it's still going to take you a while to climb up out of here, and... While we're on the subject of whales, have you happened to've seen one lately when you looked up? Just curious. And... Oh, so you're going. I mean, you don't have to. I was just asking, so I could know. But, um, I think I'm staying here awhile, actually. Of course, my body is apparently going on, so I guess I don't need to worry about that. Take care...

yeah, it's kind of slippery. Sorry. I guess I don't have to worry about traction at the moment. If there's anything I can do to help, you can let me know. I mean, I'll try to do what I can. I don't exactly know what a bunch of static can do, but...I'll give it all I got. Well...bye then. I just don't know sometimes. Why am I thinking about Dickens? that just seems like something way far away. Must just be one of those things. Well, there everyone goes. I guess... I don't know, I guess there's somewhere I need to be. Isn't there? You know...I wonder what species of salamanders these are. Maybe I should find Hannah and ask her. Yeah.... Why am I thinking about Lucifer? What does the bearer of light have to do with...anything? Did you know... Oh, I guess everyone's already gone. I'm supposed to talk about a legend in which Lucifer was the part of the fractured Godhead that was the ability to bypass the notion of a multiverse...I think... Something about...being able to collapse all possibilities to one... momentarily... That doesn't sound right. And it doesn't really make any sense. I think I have something...wrong. I should... I should really go find Hannah. Yeah.... I wonder where she is. I mean...yes...her body went that way but... Maybe...that way... Okay.... That seems... Why not... The universe is a big place but...one theory does hold you end up back where you started, so... But another does hold that you technically would, but technically never can. Yeah, I guess... Might as well try that way. Yeah.... I wish I knew who I was talking to....”

“Going to town,” Shepard said. He lifted his hat from the rack behind the door and pushed open the screen door. Even as many days as it’d been, he still looked round expecting her to be there. He looked at the chain lying piled up beside the shed. He’d left the stainless-steel food dish sitting out. He should also find something to do with the food he still had. But there were plenty of people around who could use that. It didn’t have to be today. He climbed into the truck. Habitually, he glanced at the rearview mirror on his way down the road, making sure she wasn’t following. He hadn’t slept, but instead’d just laid there on his bed, fully dressed, boots still on, looking up at the ceiling, the light still on. But it seemed to have no ill result, in fact, it seemed to have none at all. Over the last couple days he’d managed to get by with less than two dozen words. There’s a story about Calvin Coolidge, known as ‘silent’ Cal, that, at a White House dinner party, a young woman seated next to him leaned over to him and said ‘Mr President, I’ve just bet my friend that I can get you to say more than two words, what do you say to that?’ to which he’s reputed to’ve replied, ‘You lose.’ It might’ve been a good thing both of them were never alive at the same time in the same universe, so far as has been calculable.

He’d driven for enough years that the act itself was reasonably automatic, only calling the rest of his mind to attention when another car appeared, or a pedestrian, which’s what happened (the latter, that is, coming round the bend) and it seemed as if alotta things’d been waiting just around the corner these days, and he slammed the brakes, sending his gloves and a coil of rope flying around the cabin, rebounding off the windshield. He watched them through the window, though all they did was stand listlessly there in the midst of the pavement. He threw the coiled rope out of his lap and into the

floorboard, opened the door. They just stood there, looking at him without blinking.

Hannah's body said, "We are the Council of the Quattuordecillion. And we are here to represent the members of the partial infinity of infinities who are compositional of this body. And having undertaken our investigation, we hereby lay upon you the charge of decide in relation to the being known formerly as God."

Shepard didn't reply.

Russell's body said, "How do you answer for yourself?"

Shepard looked at him, but didn't reply.

"You are charged with murder," Langdon's body said. "How do you answer?"

"If you do not answer for yourself," Paxton's body said, "we will assume that you have forsaken your own defense, and that you thus accept the verdict of the members of this body."

"How do you answer for yourself?" Jennifer's body said.

Shepard didn't reply.

"Then you," Lydia's body said, "have forsaken your own defense."

"We then," Hannah's body said, "will pass the judgment of the members of this body."

"The members of this body—"

"That..." A staticky outline appeared along the edge of the road. "Actually," Langdon said, "that might not be a very wise thing to do."

The others, except for Shepard, turned toward him. Langdon's body said, "And how is this?"

"Well," Langdon said. "God is said by some to be the most infinite thing in all of infinity, in much the same way that there are an infinite number of numbers between the numbers 1 and 2, and that there are also an infinite amount of numbers between 1 and 3, however, the infinity between 1 and 3 is, by its nature, larger than the infinity between 1 and 2, yet they're both truly infinite. It would then follow that anything capable of destroying that kind of infinitude would be beyond punishment, because it would take an authority with yet more power to do so, which by definition of the excluded middle would be impossible."

"We reject the premise," Langdon's body said.

"As is the right of this body," Hannah's body said.

"Being young," Russell's body said, "he can only target the most infinite. Therefore, there he can make no threat against anything smaller than that. Therefore, the members of this body are safe."

"And," Hannah's body said, "as there is no longer any higher power, he exists under no protection from such, if such would have chosen to do so."

"But of course," Langdon said, "that rests upon an assumption, well, a lot of assumptions really, but...but, really, it assumes that he has not, in such time as has passed since then, learned self control to such a degree that he could remove from existence something approaching a lesser order of infinity."

"This," Lydia's body said, "has not been demonstrated or observed."

"Quite true," Langdon said. "However, the proof could be in the proverbial pudding. In other words, you won't know it till he does it."

"Such," Paxton's body said, "has not been demonstrated."

"I never said it had, I'm merely trying to point out—"

"The members of this body," Hannah's body said, all of them turning toward Shepard again, "do not accept such as plausible."

"Of course," Langdon said, "there is another alternative."

They turned their heads. "And," Bernadette's body said, "that is?"

"Well," Langdon said, his voice mostly static, as well, "given that there's the possibility that there exists for any given collection of states an infinitude or variants of them, or that is to say, versions of a person, say, as is represented in the many worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics combined with the notion of quantum suicide, would make it so that any given individual is also infinite. That tends to be the typical public perception. Therefore, it would seem plausible for him to have the same potential to remove such an infinitude slash individual in much the same way as he already removed the...most infinite infinitude... Of course, that rests upon the supposition that such an infinite actually were to exist and what had been called God was such...and...um... So he might've actually been a lesser infinity all along. Actually there's a lot of support for...well...anyway...um... Anyway, though one is technically larger than the other, they are both infinite, so only the minorist refinement in such a capability could

possibly prove enough to remove say, any individual, or all individuals, that form your body or council or whatever you want to call it.”

Everyone remained silent.

“It will work this time,” he’d said. “The first time... I was not ready enough. I thought that I could do it on my own.” Then he’d sighed. “And I know what you think, to put a body through such suffering, only to have the whole purpose nullified in the end out of...a lack of commitment.” As they’d walked, he’d looked at Shepard. “It was not my best moment.”

“And now?”

“Things are different now.” And still walking, he’d looked up at what of the road remained ahead. “We are we now and now always had been. And... Now that there will not be a war, I feel...easier about leaving you with it. Before, had the rest of the pieces of the Godhead not given up and rested, it would have...been more than I would have wanted to put on you. There would have been nothing left for their anger but you. We were all angry. As many orphans are.” Then he’d sighed. “And now that they have rested, I should as well. And I want to... Do you know what the name Israel means?”

“No.”

“It means he who struggles with God and wins. And... But there is no name for when God struggles with himself and wins.” And he’d shaken his head. “And now I want to do something for everyone.”

“A kind of heavenly issued, one-time bonus?”

And he’d laughed. “I am tired. And I want to give everyone freedom. But so long as I am around, there can be no such thing. But if I am gone, then nothing can be justified through me. All human beings must operate under their own authority.”

“I don’t know if that’ll work.”

“Not for a long time. At first, they will deny it and use my name anyway. But eventually, they will move on to erecting human institutions and ideals in whose names they do the same. Eventually,

those too will fail. And all they will be left with is themselves. That is the thing they will resist most. But eventually, I believe, they have it within themselves to live with the horror of existence to the extent the laws of various physics allow.”

“And does that exclude me?”

“That is a choice that will remain with you.”

“And if I refuse?”

“You would not.”

“You talk about creation being violent. But destruction?”

“Destruction, true destruction, is the most peaceful thing in existence. You only have to allow yourself to experience it.”

“And you’re sure about this?”

“I am.”

“And the rest?”

“We are.”

“The situation,” Langdon said, “can be likened to a variant, kind of, but a variant of Pascal’s wager. The question becomes one of weight, is it more reasonable to assume he has the power to do so or not? Obviously, in being charged with this, what I’ll assume’s a crime, the possibility, or at least the belief in the possibility of such power exists, is implicit, so what remains is... Well, I would say that it’s defensible to argue that the wiser decision would be to assume that he has the ability to do so. If we were to map it, let’s see, what would that be? Well, it would exactly follow the argument for Pascal’s wager. So yes, the likelihood of total annihilation—”

“The members of this body are more than capable of determining such through their own merits.”

“Of course,” Langdon said, “I didn’t mean to insinuate otherwise. I must admit, I don’t know why I’m here, anyway. So I was just trying to help out. Would anyone happen to’ve seen where Hannah went? She’s who I was actually looking for.”

Another static blob appeared. “I don’t see,” Lydia said, “why you wouldn’t want to look for me instead.”

“I wanted to ask her about salamanders.”

“And I don’t know about salamanders?”

“Well, if you’re not busy.”

“And what do you like about her so much?”

“She’s just a friend.”

“Yeah.”

“I wasn’t trying to offend you.”

“Offend *me*? You’re not going to offend *me*.”

Another static blob appeared. “You see,” Jennifer said, “this’s what happens when you stick your dick in crazy.”

“Oh, shut up.”

"Besides," Jennifer said, "is she really even that good?"

"Pretty good," Langdon said.

"*Pretty good*. I made your fucking toes curl."

"As if your cunt's magic or something," Jennifer said.

"At least I know how to use mine."

Another static blob appeared. "Hey," Bernadette said. "Can we please watch it with the anti-lesbian slurs."

"At least when I sleep with someone," Jennifer said, "at least I can find the clit."

Another static blob appeared. "The clit," Paxton said, "like the g-spot and squirting, is just a myth."

"And what would a gay man know about it? You all find pussies disgusting, anyway."

"Do you think if William Burroughs'd been a woman, he'd've had people talking outa their vaginas instead?"

"That's an interesting point," Langdon said. "The role that gender plays in—"

"Oh, shut up. You look like a blow-up of a pixelated Japanese crotch, what're you good for, anyway?"

"I could make some point about the nature of Japanese censorship in pornography."

"Please don't."

"No, this could be interesting."

"Why does so much anime have nudity?"

"It's usually used in Japanese culture, speaking broadly, to convey purity."

"Or people're just perverts."

"Well, usually, to portray the more lecherous aspects, the character is placed in panties or some kind of minimal clothing and or costume."

"So it's kinda opposite what we do in the west?"

"No, not really. Or at least... Well, if you look at the media landscape, that is, the facts would seem more complex than that. Actually, in part, the present phenomena in the Japanese media landscape arose in parallel to, and as a result of, the importation of western clothing styles, and one might be able to make the argument it's only a more purified and intensified version of something already implicitly

practiced in so-called western countries that—which, of course, is to barely scratch the surface of occupational memeological—

“Just shorten it and say everyone’s fucked up.”

“Well, that would be a value judgment from a certain cultural perspective, and in any regard, the field of human sexuality is quite complicated. Off the top of my head, since we’re talking about underwear, I recall a study that suggested a large number of young men couldn’t experience sexual arousal unless their partner were wearing lingerie of a certain variety. This could indicate the depth of the connection between human sexuality and collective med—”

“Oh, shut up. Who wants to listen to a formless piece of static ramble on?”

“She always has this post-coital pissed-offish thing going on.”

“Mind your own post-coital business.”

“Well, at least I don’t jump anything that moves.”

“Not what I heard.”

“*Who said that?*”

“It’s interesting to note,” Langdon said, “that parents that express discomfort over the idea of their children having sexual relations usually do so with justifications related to pregnancy, but among those whose children later come out to be gay, the same discomfort remains, though with no obvious source of an excuse, as there is only left the threat marker of the possibility of disease, however, in a closed system, young people never having had sexual relations with adults to obtain such from that population, and barring certain incorrect medical practices or the transference of such during the course of the child passing through the vaginal canal or abuse, then the youth population should be free, effectively, of the threat of disease, it would seem. So we might take it that human parents have been evolutionarily programmed, for some reason, to actively militate against their offspring having sexual relations. However, from this, we can draw the inference that there’d have to be a fine line between this and the necessity for sexual relations for reproduction. Obviously, if it were to go too far...in which case, obviously, we would enter such a state as...that...um...memeological strain would necessarily die with the physical extinction of a certain lineage of human hosts. However, if the lineage were large enough, it might

take quite a significant swath of the population with it, creating a situation where a community, or even something the size of a nation state, might collapse. Though, this might be explainable if viewed from the perspective that pre-and-just-post-pubescent females have been more often than not married to older men in most—”

“I wish somebody’d collapse you.”

“That’s not what you were screaming earlier,” Jennifer said.

“Oh, shut up. Why don’t you turn off or tune out, or whatever static does.”

“Static gonna static.”

“You’ve always got static on the brain, anyway.”

“It’s not that time of the month.”

“That reminds me,” Langdon said, “of the issues of translation and censorship. In this case, if you look at the English-language release of Mamoru Oshii’s—”

“The members who constitute this body,” Langdon’s body said, “will not be interrupted from their purpose.”

“I wasn’t trying to interrupt anybody. I was just—”

“This interruption,” Lydia’s body said, “has been allowed to continue long enough.”

“Oh, shut up,” Lydia said. “And leave my body alone, before you stretch it out of shape completely.”

“You always complained about wanting to lose a little weight,” Jennifer said.

“Yeah, and what about you miss-looks-like-she-walked-outa-the-holocaust?”

“That’s not funny,” Bernadette said.

Langdon’s body said, “Enough.”

“All of you shut up.”

They all turned to look at Shepard, or at least the bodies did, all that static didn’t really have to move to look at something, or really, even to look, rather just simply continued to perceive with that form of impressionistic perception they inherently possessed. He still stood there beside the truck. “None of it matters anyway. B—”

“The members of this body—”

“Because there is no more of this kind of travel or communication between the universes. The only thing ever capable of it was only

ever God, and that's because he already existed across all of them to begin with."

"The members of this body—"

"And all of you are just experiencing a hallucination."

They all stood there just looking at him.

“Going to town,” Shepard said. He lifted his hat from the rack behind the door and pushed open the screen door. Even as many days as it’d been, he still looked round expecting her to be there. He looked at the chain lying piled up beside the shed. He’d left the stainless-steel food dish sitting out. He should also find something to do with the food he still had. But there were plenty of people around who could use that. It didn’t have to be today. He climbed into the truck. Habitually, he glanced at the rearview mirror on his way down the road, making sure she wasn’t following. He hadn’t slept, but instead’d just laid there on his bed, fully dressed, boots still on, looking up at the ceiling, the light still on. But it seemed to have no ill result, in fact, it seemed to have none at all. Over the last couple days he’d managed to get by with less than two dozen words. There’s a story about Calvin Coolidge, known as ‘silent’ Cal, that, at a White House dinner party, a young woman seated next to him leaned over to him and said ‘Mr President, I’ve just bet my friend that I can get you to say more than two words, what do you say to that?’ to which he’s reputed to’ve replied, ‘You lose.’ It might’ve been a good thing both of them were never alive at the same time in the same universe, so far as has been calculable.

He’d driven for enough years that the act itself was reasonably automatic, only calling the rest of his mind to attention when another car appeared, or a pedestrian, which is what happened (the latter, that is, coming round the bend) and it seemed as if alotta things’d been waiting just around the corner these days, and he slammed the brakes, sending his gloves and a coil of rope flying around the cabin, rebounding off the windshield. The body just lay out there on the pavement. He threw the coiled rope out of his lap and into the floorboard, opened the door. He made his way toward the collapsed figure,

bent over him. And when he (Shepard) knelt, the figure rolled, thrusting upwards, a knife opening a ragged gash in Shepard's t-shirt. And Shepard stumbled back, hitting the pavement, as the other man rolled and scrambled up, lunged. All of this, from Shepard's perspective, appeared to happen very slowly, his brain having gone into overdrive in an attempt to record every detail possible. In this moment slash moments, he discerned a set of factors on a very intuitive level that only later, through much conscious deliberation, became apparent. First, that this was the brother of the woman he'd met twice in the woods, if the second time could be, rightfully, called a meeting. And second, there must've been someone watching one time or the other. He just couldn't know which. Maybe both. Though, that had only been happenstance, irregardless of any other planning that might've been involved in the whole mess till this point, whispers and snatches and everything out there in unseen worlds swirling round the focal of the lie, for it could only be that, from who could know where, of the death of God. And third, he really, really, really did not like this person. But the other man'd had the advantage, in that he'd come to fight. And he scrambled up and came down on Shepard, bringing the knife down too. But Shepard lay back, the back of his head gently resting on the pavement, his face, his body relaxing, perfectly at peace, as if he'd been lying there asleep, nothing to stop the full force of the other man from bearing down on him and putting his whole weight into the point of the knife. Except that he wasn't there anymore.

Shepard rolled over, pushed himself up, clutched his side. Blood spread through his shirt and seeped between his fingers.

“Before I go,” he’d said, “I want to give you this.” And he’d paused, holding his hand before his chest, from which’d appeared a black cube. It’d hovered above his palm.

“What is it?”

“It is called DATA RECORDER,” he’d said. “Once I had thought it was a piece of ourselves. But now I and we have come to believe otherwise.” And he’d stretched out his hand. “It now passes to you.” And he’d withdrawn his hand, and DATA RECORDER had remained there, hovering between them.

She'd closed the doors and turned on the air-conditioner, so she had to open the front door when someone knocked. She paused for an undetectable moment after opening it, finally smiled in a polite way. "Hello, Joshua." She pushed open the screen door. "I suppose you've come to see him."

"If he's up to it."

Shepard, who'd been lying on the couch, sat up. "Come in." He winced as he moved into a sitting position.

"You shouldn't move," his mother said. "You'll open your stitches."

"I'm fine." He rose, nodded to Josh. "Come on up."

"Would you like something to drink, Joshua?"

He shook his head. "No, thanks." And he followed Shepard down the hall and upstairs.

Shepard entered his room, winced as he sat on the edge of the bed.

"You're bad luck these days," Josh said. He glanced round the room, went to the far end of it and leaned against the dresser. "You know, Einstein once asked that if a messy desk was a sign of a cluttered mind, what kind of mind related to an empty desk?" He glanced round the room again, finally settled on Shepard. "They found the guy yet?"

"I doubt they're going to."

Josh nodded to himself. "Well...that's the way it goes." He glanced at his own shirt sleeve, brushed something off it. "I guess you heard bout Lily and the kids."

"Yeah."

"Do you feel like a patchwork quilt?"

Shepard didn't reply.

"Maria complains her sewing's never been all that good."

Shepard remained silent.

"Well, I just wanted to come by and make sure you were still breathing."

"Sorry."

"Don't worry about it. I guess people've got certain rights after certain things've happened." He paused. "You heard what happened with Elisa?"

"Something of it."

"The way I heard it is her parents got pissed about her breaking her vow, or whatever the fuck you call it, not to be a lesbian. Apparently she was running around with someone. So he called his brother and had her arrested, which violated her parole, so she's back for the whole stretch. Apparently *just* being arrested's a violation of parole, even if you were falsely arrested, as apparently they'd dropped all the charges a couple hours after they'd taken her in, but..."

Shepard sat there in silence.

"They're over on Blue Creek now, protesting in front of some house, supposedly *this one's* supposed to be the one where they're filming this fabled porno." He grinned. "If you could harness stupidity, we'd be able to power the eastern seaboard."

Shepard didn't reply.

"Well, like I said, I just wanted to see how you were doing, so..."

"Sorry."

"I don't reckon you got nothing to apologize for." He shifted, the edge of the dresser biting into his side. "I guess I should tell yuh what happened at the homecoming." Shepard looked at him. Josh grinned, shook his head. "Well, the preacher's digging round in the chicken pot, right. And they're going on about the usual kind of thing, you know, how the gays are destroying traditional marriage and the country and all that. And papaw, who's sitting there, says as how he figures they must all want the gays round, because if they let them get married to each other, as they're so fond of saying, they can't reproduce. Not that some of us aren't trying really, really hard. But anyway, he says that if they just let us get married to each other, we won't be able to reproduce and'll die out. But instead, they, them, wanna make em all get married and do the right thing and have kids, but ain't that just gonna have them pass on their gay genes? So he says,

the way he figures it, it's the church's fault that we're still round." He laughed. "I told'm, it's not like you're gonna be deacon very long like this. But he just says that when you get his age, don't none of it matter anymore."

"They gonna remove him?"

"Doubtful. If they did, they'd probably have to come to terms with the fact that half the rest of'em cheat on their wives as if they were dogs." He laughed. "The husbands, that is, not the wives." He pulled away from the dresser. "And besides, they probably figure he's gonna be dead soon anyway." He shook his head. "But they have put in for a vote. So the church'll probably split. Bout time for that to happen again. Did you hear Glory Field Baptist split? They were having a vote on somethin' or th'other and got into a fist fight in the parkin' lot. So now they've gone off up on Skyynner to form their own. You know, that company that makes those plastic steeples, we really should've invested in them, or something. If we did, who knows how much money we'd have at this point?"

"I sold everything," Shepard said.

"Well..." Josh scratched the back of his head. "Didn't see that one comin. Who too?"

"Some investment group outa Florida."

"Whole place is gonna fill up with houses packed on top another one of these days."

"It was gonna happen anyway."

"Oh, I'm not complainin'. I'm just statin' a fact." He looked round the room. "This place, too?"

"No. I kept the house, and everything in the immediate area, out to the ridges, so nothing won't be going in right on top of it."

"You retirin' now, or somethin'?"

"I've got something to do," Shepard said. "I might have to leave awhile."

"Well..." Jason slipped his hands into his pockets. "Don't know what tuh say."

"Mom'll be staying here. I'll keep paying the property taxes and utilities. She'll have dad's social security. I'll send her anything else she needs."

"You planning to go far?"

“Don’t know yet.”

“Not taking off tomorrow, I hope.”

“Don’t know yet.”

Josh stood there in silence.

Shepard said, “I’d appreciate it if you could drive me this weekend. I’m not quite up to it yet.”

“No problem.”

Shepard winced, reached round and pulled a slip of paper from his pocket. “Here.”

Josh stepped toward him and took it.

“I heard about your collection for Lily.”

Josh unfolded the check. He produced his wallet and slipped it inside without comment.

Shepard sat there in silence.

“Anything else I can do for you?”

“Maybe,” Shepard said. “But it’ll wait a little while.”

Josh nodded. “Told your mother yet?”

“Just about to do that now.”

“Well, let me get gone first, will yuh?”

Shepard stood, groaned. “You know how in the movies they’re always talking about something just being a flesh wound?”

“Yeah.”

“They’re fulla shit.”

Josh laughed.

It should've rained. It'd've been appropriate. It didn't rain.

The sun shone bright and clear, the day hot, everyone sweating in their suits and ties, except for the women, who sweated in whatever they wore, women's clothes being culturally allowed a greater variety in mode and stylation in this particular time and place.

Liam and Aiden and Emma stood with their mother, Emma having just turned eighteen the day before, therefore no longer bound to the state foster system. Maria, who'd brought Lily and stood there for a long time with her arms around her shoulders, now stood farther away, content to leave the family to themselves. But Emma, looking up, walked toward her, and talking to her, took her hand, and they walked back together.

Traffic passed by on the four-lane.

"You look like crap," Josh said to Langdon as they gathered on the side of the two-lane road below the cemetery. Across from them, highschoolers shouted as they practiced for an upcoming baseball game.

Langdon grimaced. Exposure and dehydration hadn't worked well for him. The only reason he'd made it this far was because Gordon'd come and gotten him from the hospital.

"It's..." Josh looked up as a car stopped along the two-lane. Absolute Threshold climbed out, and it u-turned, heading back toward the four-lane. He walked toward them. "Running away and hitching rides now?" Josh said. Absolute Threshold started to say something, but instead just looked past them. Josh nodded his head. "Go on." And Absolute Threshold passed them, walking up the hill to where is mother and brothers and sister and Maria stood. And his mother turned, still holding the new baby, yet unnamed, as she hadn't had the will yet to dig out that old psychology textbook, and she put her

arm around him as she cried. Of the two, of death and takes, perhaps the state's actions, in this case, were worse than death, because, at least with death, one could take solace in the fact that they no longer existed at all, and were therefore untouchable by good or bad, existing solely as memories, whereas now, who knew what might be happening to any one of them?

The four of them, Gordon and Langdon and Josh and Shepard, looked away, as if to give them privacy.

"It seems like everyone's ending up in the hospital these days," Josh said. Here, he spoke of his own grandfather, which's why he'd brought the post-hole diggers himself, and stood leaning on them. "So what do you think?" he said. "Anything going to come out of it?"

Gordon glanced toward the field at the sound of someone hitting a pitch. "An emotionally impactful story's been known to motivate change in the past."

Langdon groaned. He swallowed what little spittle'd collected in his mouth and uncapped the bottle of water he'd been carrying. "If you're talking about Dickens..." He raised the bottle to his lips, thin, crinkly plastic noisy from his grip.

"Among others," Gordon said. But this was just an old, well-worn exchange going all the way back to when Crichton'd testified before congress about the fraud of global warming.

Langdon swallowed and wiped his cracked, chapped lips. "That's a bunch of shit. You could read in any paper about those same conditions, they were happening to those same kids who came right into their homes, and they..." He took another swig of water. "And they never noticed or said a word." He took another swig. "And how many children suffocated to death cleaning the chimneys of all those good middle-class people?"

It was an argument that would wear out one of these days.

"And you propose?"

Langdon swigged the rest of the water. "It became fashionable." He crumpled the bottle, tightening-on the cap. "A fashion married to an emerging redefinition and birth of an ideology about childhood."

"Morality comes and goes," Josh said. "So if we only get a little fashionableness out of it, that might be as good as anything else."

“Virtualized morality?” Gordon said.

Langdon shook his head, looked as if he wished he hadn’t.

“So,” Josh said, “guess you two’re up the creek without a paddle now.”

“Remains to be seen,” Gordon said. “We...” He stopped as Josh pointed with his chin.

“Company,” Josh said. They turned to see a deputy’s car pull along the side of the road. Lewis climbed out and walked toward them.

“There’s a report...” Lewis looked up the hill.

“You could wait a bit, don’t you think?” Shepard said.

Lewis sighed and nodded. He leaned his head over to talk into his radio. When he’d finished, he pulled a crumpled pack of gum from his pocket and unfoiled a piece and folded it into his mouth. He offered the pack. Everyone shook their heads, except for Langdon, who followed likewise, chewing slowly, trying to keep his saliva flowing.

“We were just talking about,” Josh said, “how you probably can’t change the world.”

When no one said anything, he added, “At least, not without a really good public relations department. And an existing behavioral hook in human psychology. And only if it’s fashionable. After all, even God gave it up and packed it in.” He looked up. The others were coming down the hill. Josh pulled the ends of the post-hole diggers out of the ground and laid them in the back of the truck.

Lewis took his gum from his mouth and stuck it in the wrapper and rolled it up to put in his pocket. He started up the hill the few paces needed to meet them, Maria eyeing him in such a way that, if he weren’t careful, he’d be reduced to ash. He spoke with them awhile, finally turning and walking down the hill, Absolute Threshold walking alongside. As they approached the patrol car, Lewis motioned for him to get in up front. Josh’d walked that way with them, and bent down toward the rolled-down window. “Ask her out yet?”

Absolute Threshold’s face and ears heated, and he nodded.

Josh grinned. He stepped back from the car as Lewis started the engine, waved as he u-turned, and they started toward the four-lane. Hands in his pockets, he walked back toward everyone else. Maria had her arm round Lily’s shoulders, but she spoke to Shepard. “You

be careful. If I have to come redo that job, next time I'll make sure it *really* hurts."

"Well," Josh said, "he's already going to look like Frankenstein's Monster as is."

Maria looked at him with one of her looks, and he just grinned, at least for a moment.

"And you," Maria said to Langdon, "need to be laying down."

The baby started to cry. And all attention turned to her.

"We'd better get back, anyway," Gordon said.

"Make sure you drink plenty of water," Maria said.

Langdon nodded, looked as if he wished he hadn't, and they both turned to start back toward Gordon's beat up hunk of early nineties junk of a car.

"We'll swing by Substation Beta," Josh said.

Lily, cradling the baby, said, "You don't have to do that."

"Oh, I have to," Josh said. "I have a frequent buyer discount that expires today, and it only counts toward a catering plan." He tapped Shepard on the shoulder, motioned with his head.

Shepard nodded, motioned for him to go on. When he had, Shepard said, "If there was something I could do, I'd do it."

Lily said, "I know that." She gently rocked the child, who'd by then settled down.

"I might not be around for a while," he said. "But if there's anything you need, just leave a message with Josh, and he'll make sure I get it."

Emma said, "Where're you going?"

"I don't know yet."

Maria looked at him hard. "There's something wrong with you," she said.

"Oh?"

"Yes. I think you've become the third man."

"Third?"

She nodded. The first was when he'd registered for Social Security and signed up to kill whomever they pointed at, when they'd decided the time'd come for that. The second was after his father'd died.

"Maybe." The problem was none of those demarcations'd ever felt different from the other, and if they did, they'd been applied

retroactively through his memories, so he couldn't recall ever feeling any other way, but that's just the way things always were, at least, as far as such statements could go under such circumstances.

Josh, sitting in the idling truck, whistled, and Shepard looked over his shoulder. He nodded to himself, to Maria, to everyone, and turned and walked that way and climbed into the cab.

"What took you so long?"

Shepard closed the door, winced as he reached for the seat belt. "Just drive."

"Yes, Miss Daisy." He cut the wheel and u-turned and started toward the four-lane.

And the sun was shining brightly through the glass doors when Eva carried her bag through the lobby. She paused a moment, shifting her sunglasses off the top of her head and into place before she started across the lot and toward her car. She pushed the mushy, rubber button on the fob needed to get the trunk to pop open. But just as she'd situated her bag, her phone rang, and she had to slam the trunk and set her purse atop it and dig through it. She glanced at the screen, unable to discern the picture because of the glare. She touched the screen, bringing the glass surface to her ear as she depressed another mushy, rubber fob button to unlock the car. "Hello."

She opened the door and climbed in.

"Just wanted to check in and see how things were going."

"Almost gone," she said. His voice sounded a long way away.

"I'll have everything ready when you get back."

"That'll be nice."

"Love you."

She paused. "Yes." And she reached over and closed the door.

He parked the truck in the driveway and climbed out, a dull ache still wandering through his side with that movement. By definition, movies would never be able to convey just how long it took someone to recover from even a minor injury, because to be really realistic, as Langdon'd pointed out, it'd have to've been a six-months-to-year-long movie, and nobody was going to watch that. But Gordon, considering how long certain people in certain demographics spent watching TV...

Josh appeared round the side porch, wearing an apron, and waved a pair of tongs. "Just in time," he called.

Shepard stepped up onto the porch. Josh motioned with the tongs, and turned to go round to the back of the house. Faint smoke rose off the grill from charring vegetables and mushrooms.

Shepard stood there watching him turn them. "I didn't really come to eat."

Josh looked over his shoulder.

"I was wondering," Shepard said, "if I could borrow your lover."

"Well, when you say it like that." He laughed. And about then, Tarif came out the back door, carrying a tray.

"Afternoon." He set it on the table and turned toward Shepard.

"He wants to borrow you," Josh said.

Tarif scratched his beard. "Okay."

Things sizzled on the grates as Josh added new stock.

"I've been trying to remember a word for the last few weeks," Shepard said. And he paused.

Tarif pulled out a chair and sat. "I am afraid I cannot help there."

"It's an Arabic word, I think. I was wondering if you'd translate it."

"Be happy to."

"I think it was something like...al jum...or...al juma..."

Tarif looked thoughtful a moment. "I would say it's probably al-jumu'ah. Which would mean, basically, what you would call Friday."

Shepard nodded, seemingly to himself. "And...bent?"

"That's daughter." Tarif looked at him seriously. "What's going on?"

"Why?"

Shepard shook his head. "It's nothing. I think I already knew the answer, anyway. I just wanted to...make sure, I guess. I don't know."

"Do you want to stay to eat?" Tarif said.

Shepard shook his head. "Really, I'd just dropped by."

"I already asked him that," Josh said.

"Maybe you just didn't ask him the correct way." Tarif rose. "We would be happy to have you."

Shepard withdrew his phone from his pocket and checked it. "I have a little time, if I'm not in the way."

"Beer or Juice?"

"Water'll be fine."

"Here," Josh said. "Try a shiitake."

Drive Theory sat at the table with his face contracted and his fists clenched, his entire body coiled such that he might spring through the roof at any moment.

“Finish eating your lunch,” the woman said. She was the wife of the husband-and-wife pair that’d temporarily fostered him. But in reply, he just sat there.

“Finish eating your lunch,” the man said. He glanced at the clock. “We have to go.”

His wife rose and took her and her husband’s plates and carried them toward the sink. Drive Theory sat there just the same as he’d been. Wiping her hands on a towel, the woman turned and looked over the counter at him. “Dan, finish your lunch.”

Drive Theory glared at her. “That’s not my name.”

“It’s a real name,” she said. “And—”

“Let’s not get into this now.” The husband drained his glass, lifted the one from his wife’s side of the table, and carried them both toward the counter. He glanced toward the clock on the wall. “We have to go soon.”

The woman threw the towel onto the bar. “This whole thing’s ridiculous.”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t,” her husband said. “But it’s the judge’s orders.” He turned. “If you’re not going to eat anything, then you can go up and get ready.”

Drive Theory pushed away from the table, ran into the living room.

“Come back here,” the woman called, “and finish your Cool-Aid first.”

There are so many things that seem incomprehensible.

It is the responsibility of this body to watch, not to comprehend.

But how is it that it is allowed to be so easy to foster a child in this system, when adoption is such an arduous process? And yet the fostering aspect would seem more ripe for abuse in that the system pays those who house children based upon the number of children they house. And because of the remuneration aspect...isn't that a sort of perverse—

It is not this body's responsibility to consider this matter.

Yes. But—

It is not our responsibility to consider this matter.

But isn't it important to try and comprehend what is going on?

The Council of the Quattuordecillion is a sacred institution.

Yes, but how can this body function if it doesn't try to understand what's going on?

Understanding is not necessary.

But—

Only observation is.

But this body was ready to do more than observe in relation to the one called Shepard.

That is not to be spoken of.

But if the council never acts, what is its purpose?

It's purpose is to function as the Council of the Quattuordecillion.

Yes, but—

It functions as itself, no more no less.

Drive Theory fidgeted the whole time he sat in the back seat, stretching up to look out through the window, familiar landscape passing from an alien vantage point.

“This whole thing’s ridiculous,” the woman said.

“I didn’t say it wasn’t,” her husband said. He slowed the car to turn into the trailer park. Other cars were already parked there, leaving them no room but to park on the edge of the road. And even before they’d stopped, Drive Theory’d unlatched his seat belt. He pulled the door handle, but it wouldn’t open, being one of those models with child-safety features, so he jerked it half-a-dozen more times. “Stop that,” the husband said. Still grasping the handle, Drive Theory just glared at him. Children shouted outside, and he climbed onto his knees on the seat to try and see better through the windows and round the other cars.

“Don’t get your shoes on the seats.”

The car doors thunked. Drive Theory jerked the handle and rolled out.

“Wait—”

But he’d already gone, running between the parked cars, dodging in front of one just pulling in, which jammed its brakes, honked, but Drive Theory continued on. He ran till he and Attachment Theory smashed together, round and round, like colliding orbital bodies.

Laughlan stood off to the edge of what’d turned into a cavalcade, talking to Gordon. “Well, it looks like everyone’s here.” He looked at where the foster families and officials stood near their cars, forming a semi-ring round the whole proceedings. “Whenever you’re ready to do what you need to do,” Laughlan said to Gordon.

Gordon said, “Well, it’ll have to go naturally, of course.” He looked over where Lily sat, someone having brought out a folding

chair, the younger children gathering round, trying to peek at their new sibling, wanting to hold her, but Lily shaking her head. Maria stood behind her, and leaned down to suggest they go in out of the sun. And Lily nodded and stood, several of the children running in ahead of her, all of them piling inside, leaving the watchers out there by their cars, just watching. Some of them eyed Laughlan, who'd long ago grown accustomed to such stares. It hadn't taken as much as he'd thought it would to convince the judge there was a third economic interest in play. Whatever anyone wanted to think of Gordon's experiments to chart the likelihood of an adult interest in abstract art and its relation to exposure to corrupted digital tv signals in youth, enough grant money'd already been expended that it would've produced an economic hardship had they needed to start from scratch. And of course, an experiment is only as good as its conditions, change the conditions and what was any of the data worth? It'd be a good enough solution till they'd fought out something more permanent. Laughlan leaned back against his car. "So you think in twenty or thirty years you'll get some kind of prize for this?"

"Depends," Gordon said, "on what we find."

"Officially," Laughlan said, "I'm also here to let you know that the grant's been extended and increased. And there's still no stipulations in regards to the findings. After all, science isn't about setting out to prove something you already know, isn't that supposed to be the way it is?"

"That's a view," Gordon said.

Laughlan looked out from behind his sunglasses, at the people gathered near their cars, talking among themselves, looking at him with those looks, something he might've almost grown to enjoy, though he betrayed no sign of it. He'd stick round for a while, just to make sure everything went smoothly, or at least, as smoothly as these things could go.

Later that evening, before hospital visiting hours'd ended, he knocked on an open door and walked in. Hannah, better, though with an iv needle still embedded in the back of her hand, looked up. And her movements caused the tape that secured the iv to tug painful at her skin and to tease at ripping out hairs. "Afternoon," he said. "This isn't a bad time?"

She shook her head.

"I'm Steven Laughlan of—"

"I know." She looked tired. After a moment, she said, "I've seen your picture in the paper." She sounded tired and dry.

"Well, that's not a very good picture." He reached into his pocket. "I'll just get right to the point, if I may."

"I don't..."

He held out a card, and she accepted it, reading it slowly. "I apologize for being so late," he said. "It's been a very complicated day. So I'll try to get this started before visiting hours..." He checked his watch. "To put it bluntly, my client has engaged me to act on your and your brother's behalf, should you be interested."

Hannah shook her head. She moved her cracked and chapped lips, but didn't speak.

"This of course'll cost you nothing."

She looked up at him.

"And we think there's a chance that we can get your brother's probation reinstated, and that public indecency charge dropped without any worry about the sex offender registry."

Hannah didn't say anything. But her mouth hung slightly open.

"I've already spoken to your brother and taken the liberty of filing a motion."

But it just seems like this body should do something if it has the ability to do so.

That is no longer within the definition of the Council of the Quattuordecillion.

Then what's its purpose?

Merely to function as the Council of the Quattuordecillion. No more. No less. This has all been explained.

Yes, but—

And there is no aspect of the functioning of the Council of the Quattuordecillion that describes it as questioning itself.

But what about what this body would have done with Shepard had it convicted him of—

There is no aspect of the functioning of the Council of the Quattuordecillion that describes it as questioning its own non-actions.

But—

And it is advised of all members of this council to not discuss that which is observed, as it is only likely to lead to a greater confusion than the confusion of those whom this body observes.

But they—

It is advised of all members of this council to not discuss that which is observed, as it is only likely to lead to a greater confusion than the confusion of those whom this body observes.

But these things, they don't make sense at all most of the time. For example, why is it that some of them keep talking about things being impermissible because they serve no reproductive function?, yet they talk about being animalistic as if that were a bad thing, yet isn't that the function they ascribe to animals?, reproduction for reproduction's sake?, and aren't they animals, themselves?, and why do they say otherwise?, and why do they argue that things like being homosexual are bad because they're against nature, yet every gendered species has a statistical homosexual population?, and yet they also argue that they have to be against animalistic urges, right?, but that animals can only do what's natural, but it can't be natural and be an aberration at the same time?, and if it's bad because animals do it, why isn't reproduction bad?, shouldn't sexual relations for the sake of sexual relations be good then?, wouldn't that be a unique trait?, except don't other species of animal have sex because of the same urges? And talking about genes as if it's an excuse to avoid having to change, then talking about people being in trouble because they made the wrong choices? And how did these rumors track back to Shepard, specifically?, and if they don't believe it's true, why do they have to come after him? And nameless dead women as catalysts for someone else's journey? And how was all this arranged? Is there something else out there? So this is very confusing.

It is advised of all members of this council to not discuss that which is observed, as it is only likely to lead to a greater confusion than the confusion of those whom this body observes.

Yes, but—

It is advised of all members of this council to not discuss that which is observed, as it is only likely to lead to a greater confusion than the confusion of those whom this body observes.

But none of it makes any sense most of the time.

It is advised of all members of this council to not discuss that which is observed, as it is only likely to lead to a greater confusion than the confusion of those whom this body observes.

Senpai...

The day'd almost gone. Shepard, sitting on the front steps, looked out at the reddening sunset along the tops of the trees lining the distant ridge. It felt strange to have no work out there waiting. Behind him, in the den, his mother continued her silence as she sat in front of the tv and allowed those words to speak in her stead.

He sat there as doves began to call from out there somewhere in the gathering semidarkness.

Lying on the step beside him, his phone emitted a fragment of early Lady Gaga, and he glanced down. Time to find out what going to a private investigator with the words *money is no object* actually got a person outside of the movies. He tapped the screen and lifted it to his ear.

“Yeah.”