

*His  
Sophomoric  
Effort*

by Tom Murphy VII

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# Why I Hate Novels

Dissertation submitted on this day of  
21 October 2970 in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of *Doctor of*  
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of Aspinwall, La Crosse, Wisconsin

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# Introduction

Like anything that begins, “Hold on, I’m going to try something,” this document is doomed to spectacular failure. That’s okay. The thesis of this book is, “Why I hate Novels,” and, like any thesis, it is doomed to be a spectacularly verbose, wandering piece of vaguely convincing argument, composed over the course of a few late nights of drunken, caffeine-addled panic, filled with technically correct but irrelevant minutiae, endless currents of footnotes and appendices that nobody—not the author nor his thesis committee—will ever read, and that only ever reaches completion by (a) a sort of quantum gravity effect, in which its sheer density causes it to anneal into sadly flawed but irrevocable crystal form or (b) time running out. As a dissertation whose text blithely drifts from academic discourse to sophomoric examples of the exact thing it criticizes, its own stupendous failure is its very success.

And when I say very success, I mean *very* success.

## Disclaimer

This is a fictional work of fiction. The opinions expressed within *may indeed* represent the official, libelous position of my em-

ployer and/or academic department. Persons, places, or things may resemble other fictional persons, places, or things not by mere accident but by imaginary genetic fraternity. Copyrighted works are excerpted vigorously, far exceeding what could be reasonably defended as “fair use.” But because these employers, departments, persons, places, things and works are fictional, they do not exist and therefore I expect to not be sued, except within the confines of the fictional work of fiction, which also does not exist because it is fictional.



**Based on a true story.**



# Chapter 1

## The Utter Inadequacy of Natural Language As The Mag-Lev Monorail Of Human Thought

**Fact:** Natural languages such as English are incapable of expressing thoughts. For instance take the title of this chapter. With it, I mean to convey via metaphor the frictionless transport of thought on a single-rail, futuristic/utopian mass-transit system, constructed for the public good in order to ease congestion on our ailing roadways. However, although magnetic levitation monorails can achieve a coefficient of friction as little as  $3 \times 10^{-8}$  with technologies such as superconducting bearings<sup>[1]</sup>, linear motors, and ultra-low-temperature vacuum cham-

<sup>1</sup>John R. Hull, Thomas M. Mulcahy and Joseph F. Labataille, “Velocity dependence of rotational loss in Evershed-type superconducting bearings”, *Applied Physics Letters*, 70(5):655–657, 1997

bers, they are nonetheless *not frictionless*.

Instances of this deficiency are all around us. A poignant example is presented by the following excerpt from Vas Gottsles's *The Simulacrum of Pretension*<sup>[2]</sup> (*emphasis added*):

Caesar F. Stevens has been sitting in the same awkwardly flexible polymerized vinyl chair in Room 103(b) at Washington-Jefferson Memorial High School for three straight periods—a total of four hours, twenty minutes. By an unlikely fluke of the WJMHS course scheduling system, all five of Caesar's classes take place in the same room.

"Losers walk," he thinks smugly, as his Algebra teacher packs her things to move to the next class or teacher's lounge, or wherever teachers go.

Caesar flips through his notebook to find the section assigned to Chemistry. The pages are covered in doodles, with perhaps no actual school content. One of the most common themes of these doodles is "I ♥ Leigh," although he generally conceals these remarks since if Leigh were to see them, well, that would be really embarrassing!

He shifts his position slightly, opens to a new sheet, and leans over the page like an eager hunchback scribe, almost fisting his ballpoint. All of the other students are either coming or going. Caesar draws, eying the door. When he's not drawing, he spins his pen in his hand using an expertly practiced, nervous motion.

When Leigh Osborne, the object of his crush, enters, he quickly turns to the next page. He looks at her, smiling, until

<sup>2</sup>Vas Gottsles, *The Simulacrum of Pretension*, Roger & Emdheart, 1998

she acknowledges him, and then welcomes her with a rhyming greeting.

Here we see our first inability to understand the story. For if we are to grasp the set of greetings that could have been used by Caesar, we need to first know how *Leigh* is pronounced. Is it as *lay*—so the greeting is perhaps “hey”, or “good day”? Is it alternatively *lie*—leaving us with choices like “hi”, or “g’day” (is Caesar Australian?)? Or maybe even *lee*, which leaves us with more exotic possibilities such as “whoopee” or “re” or the telling, “Goodness me, you’re good to see!”? Yet it is impossible to know.

Leigh responds in kind.<sup>3</sup> Caesar smiles. Their Chemistry teacher, Mrs. Beauxringue, arrives and sets up her things at the desk.

“Good afternoon, class,” she says, writing her name on the blackboard, which is a sad sort of way of claiming her territory for the next hour and a half. While her back is turned, Caesar whispers to Leigh, who is sitting a knight’s move away from him, “More like Mrs. *Boring!*” This is surely not the first time anyone has applied this particular *ad homonym*.

Like the teacher, Caesar generally acted, with regard to Leigh, *in a manner consistent with a homophone of his name*.

Again, a tragic inadequacy. Does Vas Gottsles mean that he acts as a seizer, embracing each opportunity to employ his wry

<sup>3</sup>Again: “Hi there, Caesar!” if pronounced as the Romans did, or “You’re such a pleaser, little Caesar!” if using a more saladic pronunciation.

wit, *carpe hora*? Or does he instead mean to say that he behaves as a Kaiser roll, fresh from the bakery, letting his tantalizing aroma and warmth attract her to him? Hard on the outside but soft and delicious on the inside?

Class proceeds like this for some time: Mrs. Beauxringue says something, turns her back, and then Caesar makes a cynical remark or pun of some sort—the first he thinks of, no matter how poor—and then pretends to be paying attention happily when she pivots around. A half-hour through class, however, a mistaken motion causes his spinning pen to fall out of his hand to the ground. He stands slightly to reach to get it.

Suddenly, Caesar clutches his chest and proclaims, “Arre-chhh!” as he experiences a deep venous thromboembolism—a blood clot formed in his right femoral vein from not moving for nearly five hours dislodges and moves to his heart, blocking the blood flow to it. He coughs and stands upright, his face turning red, wobbling, and falls over his desk. Leigh and the rest of the class gasp.

In the next passage, Vas Gottsles’s prose appears to suffer from an attempt to provide the disambiguation sorely missing from the text that precedes it. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately, depending on one’s perspective), his text seems to become self-aware (see Chapter 3) of the impossibility of being entirely unambiguous.

Mrs. Beauxringue, a clairvoyant cardiologist by training, immediately recognizes Caesar’s affliction. She directs one student, Jesse Laxton (pronounced *jěs’ē lăks’tŭn*), a 16½ year-old quarterback for the school football team, approximately

182 cm tall, to call 1-900-911,<sup>4</sup> handing him her credit card, with number 3727 389210 38161, and another, named Darius Joseph-Maynard Kaywood, son of Russell and Mary Kaywood, born September 31, 1981 at a weight of 2,700 grams, to run to fetch the school nurse, Jean Fennessey née Pritchard, of Clark County, Georgia, whose SAT scores placed her in the top 43% of graduating seniors ... (*etc.* —*ed.*)

While performing a brutal cardiac massage, she directs the remainder of the class to manufacture an ad hoc anticoagulant from the chemistry supplies. She recites an improvised recipe: “25 mL 3-oxo-1-phenylbutyl!” “Grind hog intestine with mortar and pestle!” ... (*ad nauseum* —*ed.*)

This scene accounts for the majority of the book’s volume. The perigee of stomachable language comes when he describes the teacher’s reaction to Caesar’s eventual death at her hands. A mercifully brief excerpt:

Mrs. Beauxringue observes a spectrum of light waves striking her retinas at a distance of 32.41 cm, at an average luminance of  $98.4 \text{ } ^{cd}/_{cm^2}$ , causing her to know that Caesar is blinking his last blink, and in the grand  $n$ -dimensional continuum of human experience, the chemistry teacher’s feeling lies somewhere between the protracted drone of Percodan withdrawal, the smell of a 2:1 mixture of dairy compost and elephant manure, the tension between a rational reluctance to be the first to use a bungee-jumping rig after a fatal accident and the exhilarating anticipation of being thought of as one *hot dog*

<sup>4</sup>Historic note: It is believed that some precincts flirted with the idea of making the 911 emergency line a toll number in the late 1990s, at a rate of two dollars the first minute, fifty-nine cents each additional minute.

by one's friends, the texture of a calcified human fossil, the satisfaction at having one's restaurant bill arrive magically at a round number, the disappointment of waking from a dream just as one is about to French kiss God, the iridescence of color-safe bleach under blacklight ... (*intolerable* —*ed.*)

Vas Gottsles likens the feeling to 121,006 nearby points in experience space, forming a simplex that, presumably, bounds the precise sensation that the teacher felt. But even in this restricted volume, there are an intractable number of experiences remaining, and in this sense, even the most hideously overwrought attempt at pin-pointing even one moment of thought is ultimately a failure.



ALEXIS STANDS AT the tinted polycarbonate window on the one millionth floor of the Space Bridge, her fingers leaving halos of moisture on the innermost pane of the cold triple-vacuum seal. She can't resist the urge to fog the window with an exhalation in order to provide a substrate for a covert graffito. She'll write in reverse, so that her mot will be momentarily visible to any high-resolution extraterrestrial telescopes, as well as wall-climbing window-washing automata with the graffiti interpretation upgrade. But as she fogs, she notices that the window already has a large text message upon it, engraved invisibly in finger oil. She breathes on the window in an expanding spiral in an attempt to decode it.

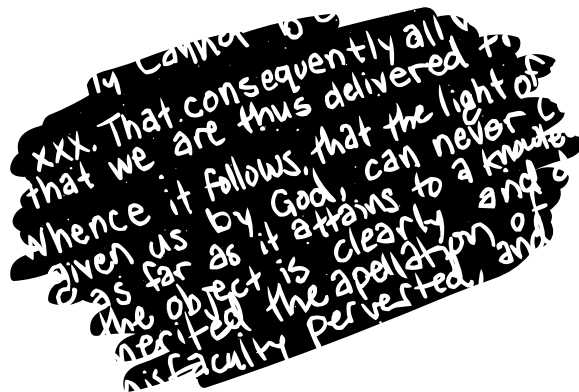


Figure 1.1: Partially revealed message on window

Remember when they called the 1960s the “space age” because they sent one or two guys into space, or started making stuff out of plastic? That was a real waste of that term, because now that we’re in the 2960s, really living in and defouling space and making even more stuff out of plastic, like the windows that Alexis is breathing all over, we have to settle for the less descriptive slogan “aspiration age.” How lame is that?

Nobody in the general population is quite sure what goes on

at the top, or end, of the space bridge—if there is one. The reasons are numerous. For starters, only the tallest people can reach the top floor buttons in the elevator. Second, when making a three hundred quadrillion floor journey some wisecracker is bound to get into the elevator and press every button, or, like Alexis, to engrave his logo in the dense grid of buttons and LEDs and get off at the next floor, so that the other passengers must watch his emblem evaporate in a bottom-up succession of monotonous dings and pointless door cycles. Another reason that nobody has ever made it to the end of the space bridge is that, even traveling at 120% the speed of light as all modern elevators do, it still would take about two hundred years of travel to reach the putative end.

Famously in 2776, a team of investigative reporters and explorers—who could trace their pedigree back to such visionaries as Vasco da Gama, Captain Meriwether Lewis, and Dan Rather—set off to colonize the north elevator (max capacity 4000 lbs.). The expedition, known as the Lundblad Party, did so in the hopes that their offspring would eventually reach the end, and be able to return with the story of the millennium, generating enough revenue to create a trust fund, and reanimate their parents' embalmed corpses to live forever off the fund's interest in the waking-dead zombie retirement community on the moon, which I hear is very nice. Unfortunately—and this is the fourth reason that the end of the space bridge has remained out of reach—the upper floors (past the fifty-millionth or so) are less well protected against cosmic radiation, which is ionizing and tends to increase the incidence of monstrous birth defects. For this reason, the more elevated floors are populated by increasingly bizarre and hideous post-human civilizations. Neither the Lundblad Party nor their elevator has yet to return, leaving the south elevator overused and highly contended, especially during the hiring season—most people who work on the Space Bridge have lucrative jobs, ensuring a long posthumous stay at the zom-

bie retirement community and during their lives allowing them subsidized access to commercial teleportation technology, which allows much more rapid access to (only) the first four million floors, except during a fire.

Alexis just graduated *magna cum fæde*<sup>5</sup> from Aspinwall Ultraversity in La Crosse, Wisconsin. Her major was in Quantum Literature, which is a relatively new and insignificant genre borne of quantum superposition technology: a choose-your-own adventure story in which the reader is able to simultaneously explore multiple storylines, until some adversarial observer causes these stories to collapse into one holistic, fantastic, orgasmic “surprise ending” moment upon completion, subject to the constraints of Maxwell’s equations or whatever. Alexis’s only story, written for her senior Composition class, was about sleeping, a topic that she knew well through college.

Alexis came to be on the millionth floor of the Space Bridge in accordance with the following sequence of propositions and truth values.

proposition	truth value
Alexis needs a job.	TRUE
Jobs in the field of Quantum Literature are hard to come by.	TRUE
She’s willing to take just about anything.	TRUE
The Space Bridge can be seen dominating the horizon by anyone in the same hemisphere, acting as a constant reminder of its omnipresence and limitless source of employment.	TRUE

<sup>5</sup>Latin, “with great disgrace.” The International Baccalaureate program lobbied to have this and other qualifications added to the undergraduate degree system in 2100.

<b>proposition</b>	<b>truth value</b>
Alexis has rich, deceased parents.	<b>TRUE</b>
Alexis has a large inheritance.	<b>TRUE</b>
This inheritance is in the form of gold, the most stable form of wealth in 2962.	<b>TRUE</b>
Alexis is rich.	<b>FALSE</b>
Alchemists finally succeeded in transforming lead into gold in 2964, winning the Nobel prize and rendering Alexis's Fort Knox essentially worthless.	<b>TRUE</b>
On the positive side, pretty much everyone has a solid gold car now.	<b>TRUE</b>
Alexis drove cross-country in her solid gold car in order to find a job in the Space Bridge, where she has essentially no idea what even goes on.	<b>TRUE</b>

Even after arriving and wandering around at the site, very little helped abate the mystery for her. Thousands of people bustled around the lobby, mostly to visit the food court and herculean shopping mall. In the lobby she approached one of several automated information kiosks, which began its holovision animation:

“Greetings! Welcome to the Space Bridge Complex at Blueridge. You’re now standing in the world’s tallest building, an engineering marvel that we locals refer to as *Home Sweet Arcology*.”

As the recording pronounced this last phrase with slick voiceover glee, the young vendor at the Absolute Zero Ice Cream cart stationed in the aisle rolled his eyes and mouthed the words along with it.

“Think of me as your personal guide to our services. Is there something you’d like to know about in particular?”

“Like, what goes on here?” Alexis asked.

“The Space Bridge Complex is home to SBC—the Space Bridge Corporation—which is the world’s leading provider of cutting-edge solutions. Our multi-tiered schedule ensures that there’s an offering that’s right for you!”

“But wh—” she began.

“We also have a mall and luxury high-rise apartments that are *surprisingly nice*.”

“I want to understand what the Space Bridge Corporation does,” she insisted.

“In this Aspiration Age economy, global-scale a-services<sup>6</sup> are needed to maximize well-being. SBC is committed to excellence in its top-ranked service and first-class products.”

“What kind of products?”

“The SBC provides enterprise-grade a-products to meet and exceed the satisfaction of our esteemed customers. We...”

<sup>6</sup>Short for “Aspiration Services,” as in “Aspiration Age.” In the 2230s this would have meant “Android Services” and during the robot civil wars of 2511–2531, “Animosity Services.”

“Oh, for crap’s sake, cancel! Cancel!” she commanded. Somewhere, a small fractional number value was appended ominously to her permanent record.

“Think of me as your personal guide to ...”

“Where can I find a job?” she interrupted.

“The human resources department is on the 1,000,001<sup>th</sup> floor.<sup>7</sup> Please take the south elevator or use the teleportation uplinks in the North-west or South-east corners, if you have access. The information desk will take your name once you arrive, for fastest service.”

Sensing the end of the conversation flowchart, the kiosk went back into *attract mode* as Alexis pivoted to walk away. As Alexis gazed around, trying to orient herself, the ice cream vendor looked at her with a smile and pointed to his right temple knowingly. His oversized polyasbestos mitts appeared to be steaming as they froze the nitrogen and oxygen molecules in the air near his head. The cart bore a vibrant sign that said *O°K Ice Cream*, in an apparent play on words.

<sup>7</sup>The observant reader may notice the apparent discontinuity: Alexis ends up on the millionth floor, whereas the kiosk has directed her to the million-and-first floor. The disagreement is explained as follows. The Space Bridge, like many structures built with superstition in mind, has banned the number 13 from existence. Thus, each floor after the first dozen is labeled with a number one higher than it should be. This author’s eye for detail has thus spared you from misleading inaccuracy by calling the floors by their true serial ranks rather than by some folk fabrication.

Alexis acknowledged him unenthusiastically, and resumed her orienteering exercise, but soon realized that she had no sense of where she was. So she asked him for help,

“Can you help me?” she asked.

“Large or Very Large?” he didn’t.

“Which way to the South elevator?” she insisted.

With one mitt he pointed to the South elevator, while expertly scooping a waffle-cone dewar full of molecularly static ice cream with the other. As she turned back to thank him, he handed her the cone and a spoon.

“I just—” she corrected.

“Oh, I thought you said, ‘Very Large,’” he claimed.

“Fine, okay, okay,” she relented, waving her fiber optic credit card at the reading unit. “Thanks a lot.”

“Name’s Isaac. Isaac Reme,” he told.

“Oh, ha ha, I get it, Isaac Reme sells Ice Cream. Very funny,” she deadpanned.

“That’s really my name,” he remarked.

“Okay,” she acknowledged. Alexis tried to leave again, her hand starting to freeze from the  $0^{\circ}K$  ice cream cone.

Isaac again pointed to his right temple and winked. “You can double-book, you know.”

Alexis walked in the direction that Isaac had earlier indicated. There is a certain urgency to the consumption of

absolute-zero ice cream, because it tends to freeze everything around it. In fact, it takes a special skill to consume, since licking or even touching it directly could easily prove to be fatal. Here's how it's done.<sup>[8]</sup>

Absolute zero ice cream is normal delicious ice cream cooled to a nearly zero-energy state. As the molecules approach  $0^\circ K$ , they form a phase of matter known as the Bose-Einstein Condensate<sup>[9]</sup>, a dense superfluid gas in which all of the particles move together like a well-trained redcoat army rather than a rag-tag race riot.

1. The cone will quickly form a brittle coating of solid air, like *Crème brûlée*. When you are ready, break this with the supplied spoon.

**Warning:** The ice cream inside will boil and erupt violently. The spatter can cause burns, so protective clothing is recommended.

2. Using a smooth but forceful motion, toss the contents of the cone into the air as high as possible. On its way up, the superliquid will heat, breaking apart into a cloud of tiny ice cream crystals.
3. Due to its intense cold, the cloud should descend rapidly, and the purchaser can then catch the ice cream particles in his or her mouth. There's no taste like it!

<sup>8</sup>United States Food and Drug Administration, *0°K Ice Cream Nutrition Facts / Material Safety Data Sheet*, December 2959

<sup>9</sup>D. S. Jin, M. R. Matthews, J. R. Enscher, C. E. Wieman and E. A. Cornell, "Temperature-dependent damping and frequency shifts in collective excitations of a dilute Bose-Einstein condensate", *Phys. Rev. Lett.*, 78:764–767, February 1997



After chomping down her ice cream cloud, Alexis negotiated her way across the human morass to the South elevator. A few others were waiting here with the call button already depressed, mostly dressed better than her. She wondered if perhaps her **SLEEPING RULES!** “ironic” t-shirt might have been a bad choice for a job interview day. In the reflection of the polished silver elevator doors, she adjusted her hair, which looks like Figure 1.2. This is Figure 1.2:



Figure 1.2: Alexis’s hair

*Ding!* and *press* and *whoosh* and *Ding!* and *wait* and *whoosh* and *Ding!* and *step* and *ahh* and *May I help you?*

“Yes, I’d like to apply for a job,” she says to the woman behind the desk, as the action catches up to the narration.

“All right,” says the attendant, snapping into her job applicant mode, and reaching for a small polystyrene cup, “Have you eaten any human flesh today?”

“Uh...no...Just some ice cream.”

“Please spit in here,” she says, extending the cup and looking towards her compuscreen, tapping in various data.

Alexis, puzzled, prepares a loogie. Her saliva is thick from the milk in her ice cream, and as she tries to spit, it instead dribbles down her chin embarrassingly, clinging on by its mucosal fibers. She takes the cup and scrapes the bolus into it, a long stubborn spider filament still insisting on attaching it to her mouth as she puts the cup back on the desk.

“Can you tell me what kinds of jobs are available?” asks Alexis.

The woman continues typing. “Zip code?” she responds monotonically.

“6X29R,” she says, wiping the last drop of spittle from her lip. In the 0S57J zip code, that is, in the space bridge, a second sequence of sub-zip digits stratifies the zip district by altitude. The attendant fills this field with zeros, meaning, *low to the ground*.

“Okay, Ms. Singleton, please wait in room 473.”

And then we find ourselves back at the beginning of the chapter, Alexis hyperventilating as she tries to uncover the message on the window, dizzy from the huff’n’puff, and on the third pane—nothing. The message abruptly ends, and begins in mid-thought again on the fourth.

A man with a clipboard-shape compuscreen steps through the doorway. “Ms. Singleton?” he confirms.

Alexis, caught in the act, spins to authenticate herself, and as she begins to say “Yes,” or “Yeah,” or “Yeah-huh,”—only the very faintest beginnings of a “y” sound in her speech pathway,

she promptly falls face forward and blacks out, sprawled on the floor of the nearly empty room.

St. Emiliano Sáenz de Zárate

2991 Mundialba

Costa Rica

I am THE NOBLEST OF WHAT could be, or is called nobility, and that is a *banana farmer*, and I caution you against forming conclusions to the contrary without the benefit of careful consideration of the information that I am about to reveal to you. For, according to the doctrine of Freudian Analysis, the banana is mother nature's phallic instrument, its angiosperm organ, and according to the doctrine of the Patriarchal Domination of Society, the banana enjoys a supremely important trifold function as god symbol life schlong, as turgid oppressor, and as delicious breakfast cereal accessory.


If you now carefully consider my position qua banana farmer, the noblest of noble, sitting atop that already seemingly optimal spot in the food chain, it is unavoidable that you share my reasoning. And truly, my office is distinguished even among my fellow—if I might be so humble as to call them as fellows—banana farmers and hunters, for through a clerical error in the year of our lord two thousand and eight I was assigned nine international patents for the genome of the Cavendish banana, the world's preeminent crop of these yellow monocot cocks.

And yet sadly, and this is my reason for writing to you on this day, a great blight is upon us by the name of *Black Sigatoka*, a devil fungus that has boiled up from the depths of the *infierno* to choke our penile berries, our lifeblood. My genetically uniform Cavendish crop is susceptible to this pestilence, and is being wiped out by it world-wide. Some are calling it the "bananapocalypse."

Imagine a world in which our paterfamilias has tumbled, our

hard-won class separation undone, and our ice cream sundaes go unadorned with the sweet acidic potassium flavor of potassium-packed penis produce pieces? Would you want to raise your children in such a world? Would you want to *live* in such a world?

Therefore, as a man of great nobility and virtue, I humbly ask that you do for me this most excellent favor, in an effort to wipe out this plague. Please, if you would be so kind, sign the enclosed petition against the disease and return it to me at the address above, at which time a courier will deliver it into the shadowy flames of eternal torment, where the demonic fungus originates. If we can together reach 10,000 signatures I believe in my heart of hearts that an end can be put to *B. Sigatoka* and balance can be restored to our penial overlords.

Sincerely,  
  
St. Emiliano Sáenz de Zárate

Enclosure  
ESDZ/pt08



## Chapter 2

# Character Development

Dear READER, *character development* is thing that some people talk about. Some crazy people very interesting in this phrase. I malign it. I say *character development* is shit property. I put the in dirt and step in with sharp breaking.

If a character is so smart why he is change!! If you like new chara so hard, why does *character development*. and let's start with new chara

From beginning!

If you are reading on a compuscreen, now is the time to imagine that you are reading a paper manuscript. *Do not write on your compuscreen.*

First, select a name for this avatar.

<input type="checkbox"/> Var-	<input type="checkbox"/> -go-	<input type="checkbox"/> -max
<input type="checkbox"/> Ko-	<input type="checkbox"/> -va-	<input type="checkbox"/> -sphere
<input type="checkbox"/> Wil-	<input type="checkbox"/> -ton-	<input type="checkbox"/> -son
<input type="checkbox"/> Tre-	<input type="checkbox"/> -bla-	<input type="checkbox"/> -saw
<input type="checkbox"/> Jo-	<input type="checkbox"/> -na-	<input type="checkbox"/> -tun
<input type="checkbox"/> Be-	<input type="checkbox"/> -bo-	<input type="checkbox"/> -boo
<input type="checkbox"/> Ray-	<input type="checkbox"/> -fa-	<input type="checkbox"/> -shaw

Choose by pressing a square from column 1, column 2, and then the last column. with your pen Then you have constructed a name by put together these name parts. For instance if you pressed VAR and GO and MAX then you achieved the name VARGOMAX. Also you can press squares to make a name for the avatar last name. Or because he has three names or four names and you can keep pressing! The possibly are limitless. For instance if you selected VAR and GO and MAX then the avatar is VARGOMAX V. VARGOMAX.

Because you could chose anything for the character's name this makes it hard to spell him in the book! So we have to make a way to say about his name, so we give his name a name. The chara's name's name will be VARGOMAX.

Now let's development!

Choose if he has a mood. *When you saw a circle—you must press a choice*

☐ Happy      ☐ Sad

Do not chose two circles!!!!

Choose if he has color hair.

☐ Black hair      ☐ No color      ☐ Bald spot in it



Choose if Vargomax is very rich.

- ☐ Very rich      ☐ destitution

Does he live in a cool house.

- ☐ Cool house      ☐ not cool (shack or e.t.c.)

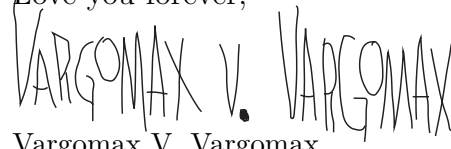
Does he drive a fast car.

- ☐ fast      ☐ ride a very strong horse instead

Wow that is awesome!!

- ☐ He won a car race      ☐ He won a horse race

Congratulation, we've done! Now the character whose name is called Vargomax riding into the sunset with a #1 gold trophy.

Love you forever,  
  
Vargomax V. Vargomax

P.S. Please Excuse my english. It'd very bad. ;-)

Every MONDAY MORNING I HAVE FC-77 or *Fluorinert*, which is a chemically inactive fluoride compound made by 3M corporation, injected directly into my brain or (on the first Monday of the month) spinal column. Fluorinert is used because it has a high thermal conductivity and very low freezing point while also being highly dielectric, so that I do not have accidental electrical shorts in my synaptic pathways. FC-77 is very expensive, like colorless and inert liquid gold. However, keeping one's internal brain temperature at  $-97^{\circ}\text{C}$  is an intrinsically expensive proposition.

It is possible, as medical science will testify, to increase the rate at which the brain computer processes thoughts, simply by applying extra power to its neural junctions and changing some basic ratios of chemicals within the brain computer's skull case. For many years this was a popular way for terminal patients to commit doctor-assisted suicide, because in the final moments of their lives they could experience a nearly infinite period of thought, like time dilating as a space man falls into a black hole. In this electrochemical epiphany the patient could fully understand his or her own life and the entirety of philosophy, to regard the very notion of life or thought or suicide waivers as trivial with utmost clarity, and to die happier than any opiate overdosing oncologist. (The US Food and Drug Administration listed Infinite Thought Encephalotherapy as the most favored form of suicide, surpassing oxycodone overdose for the first time in 2039<sup>[1]</sup>.) Although assisted suicide is one of the world economy's last remaining growth markets, the smart investor has a diverse portfolio; 5M corp., which is 3M's parent corporation, developed technology in 2047 for applying this

<sup>1</sup>United States Food and Drug Administration, "Prescription euthanasia trends 2011–2038, report", *Information Office*, pp. 1–187, 2039

technique to human brains without killing their owners. The principle is the same one that hobbyist compuscreen aficionados applied in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to *overclock* their central processing microchips—that is, to counteract the deleterious effects of rampant computation with very cold temperatures. Thus, in order to sustain my own superhuman clock rate, I have weekly injections of FC-77 and a portable supercooled hemodialysis unit that I carry with me, attached to my kidney. Believe me, I know better than anyone how ridiculous this looks. There are some other difficulties:

I have a constant, terrible ice-cream headache, the kind that you get when the soft palate is chilled deeply by a hastily swallowed popsicle or inhaled freezie drink. One of the consequences of my violently frenetic thought is that I am able to easily pare signals from my nerve endings into *useful* and *useless*, and I have spam-filtered these pain sensations into my mental *circular file*,<sup>2</sup> resulting in a negligible loss of productivity.

In my hyperintellectual state, my body seems to move as if immersed in highly viscous liquid. That is, I send electrochemical signals to my limbs requesting that they do their thing, and then must wait several milliseconds for them to act out my command. The effect can be torturous, like playing a fast-paced deathmatch shooter over 56kbps planetary ultranet. Everyone else moves at the same melancholy pace, but this is little consolation. Having a verbal conversation is out of the question, unless it is done *simul*-style: thirty or forty people address me at once as I spin around in circles holding a long tube to my mouth; I mentally separate their simultaneous syllables and respond to each at almost the same time; multiplexing my response by chopping it into short bursts of sound, which I deliver

<sup>2</sup>Colloquialism: Wastebasket. So named for its cylindrical shape.

to only the appropriate peer (aided by the tube) while facing him or her.

FC-77 gives my urine an *almond-like* smell.

Despite all of these superficial problems, Infinite Thought Encephalotherapy is unquestionably worth the trouble. I have written very many great works of science and philosophy and memorized them. These thousands of theses are enqueued to be typeset at my dinosaur fingertips next time I am near a computer screen.

But life is not all work! Sometimes when I am urinating in a public washroom I compose and memorize lengthy memos to my imaginary court, e.g., this memo to you. This is not because I am particularly stimulated by the sights and sounds of urinals or by the subtle almond aroma. This is because, as I leak ultracold lubricant, my body and blood warms slightly, which means that my brain must slow, lest it boil itself. So urination results in a temporary intoxication—an amaretto sour, if you will. Whipping up pointless communiqués while soused is one of my favorite hedonistic pleasures. Another is orchestrating rock operas. My most recent rock opera is called *Blood, The Body's Softest Appliance*.

Blood, The Body's Softest Appliance  
The Rock Opera feat. Dane Feeback's Glorious Orchestra  
*Dane Feeback, October 2967*

INT. TEENAGE BOY'S BEDROOM

CU: DARIUS KAYWOOD, 17, who sports a tie-dye shirt and (accidental?) attempt at a pubescent mustache. He sits on his bed restlessly, fighty, half stoned, half belligerent. This shot should be awkward and drawn out, like puberty itself. The close-up continues as he stands and rifles pointlessly through his dresser drawers, trying to build up self-punishing anger. The cameraman may need to push drawers closed in order to get between the dresser and Darius to continue the close-up. DARIUS, belligerent and confused, may battle with the cameraman.

DARIUS KAYWOOD

Fuck. What the fuck.

Wide: Darius's bedroom. There are rock posters on the wall, and a disused electron guitar. Everything is a mess.

RUSSELL KAYWOOD, *Darius's father, knocks on the door and opens it simultaneously.*

MR. KAYWOOD

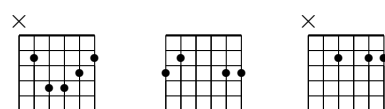
Darius! What was that, storming out on dinner like that? Do you think you're the only person in this household?

DARIUS

Eat fuck, dad!

MR. KAYWOOD

(song: Blood, the Body's Softest Appliance)

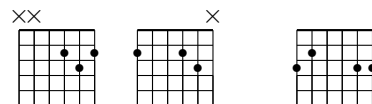


Bm

G

C13

Contrar-y to the buzz, you think you got

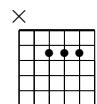


D

D/F#

G

all that be- cause you're seven-



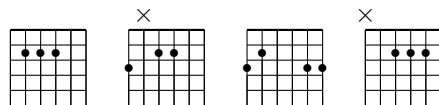
A

teen.

But

not

from



Esus4

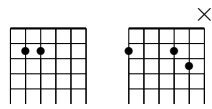
G/Esus4

G

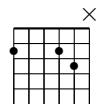
A

me.

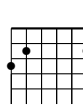
*Chorus:*



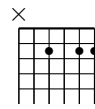
Em



D/F#

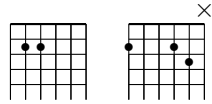


G7

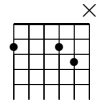


C13

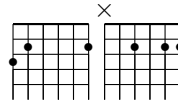
Blood, the product of violence.



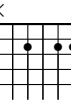
Em



D/F#

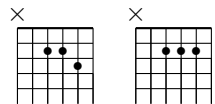


G7

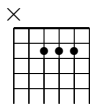


C13

Blood, the body's softest alliance.



Asus4



A

MR. KAYWOOD and DARIUS fight. Darius's primary weapon is his electron guitar, which is painted with a flaming skull. The guitar has a built in letter opener style blade that can be used to cut through the guitar strap in an emergency mobile rocking scenario. Mr. Kaywood's weapon is his car keys, held in his fist with the keys protruding from between each pair of adjacent fingers like claws. Mr. Kaywood has lots of car keys; each lock in his car is different from all of the others, for added security. MR. KAYWOOD tries to claw his son's face but DARIUS knocks his father to the ground with a baseball blow from his electron guitar.

DARIUS

Let me borrow the car tonight!

MR. KAYWOOD

You're forbidden from going to the party, you're irresponsible with automobiles, and besides, you're grounded!

DARIUS

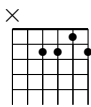
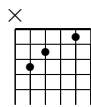



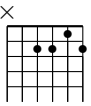
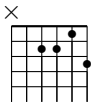
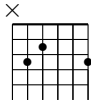


EAT FUCK!

MR. KAYWOOD

You're grounded double!



DARIUS  
(song: Eat Fuck)

			
Am6	C	Gsus	G
Eat    fuck, you    asshole, you			
			
Em	Am6	Am7	
fuck you,    Dad.			
			
	Em	G	
You jerk.			

*As he finishes the song, DARIUS and MR. KAYWOOD simultaneously stab each other with their respective weapons, their eyes bugging incredibly at the new sensations, and lack of sensations, of bleeding and dying. They fall still as the volume of the room fills and overflows with blood.*

FTB.

## Letters to the Editor

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I have AN INTENSELY awesome finishing move, known as the butterfly slice maelstrom, in which I rapidly flail my arms and with a flick of the wrist, whip my hands close to the speed of light, their elongated form then creating a blade, thin as a butterfly wing and sharp as a maelstrom. I will save you the trouble of looking that one up—a maelstrom is a tremendous whirlpool, not something that is sharp, just kidding, ha ha. But the joke is on you! Because I have spent many years of my life at Dark Karate camp, learning the secrets of martial arts treachery, villainous moves such as the covert below-the-belt sucker punch, the referee-blinding *Zyklon B gas attack*, or the invisible fire bolt—banned in most tournaments because of its danger to spectators (most require that fighters use a fire bolt whose color matches his party alignment: Black through red for villains, yellow through white for good guys). Haven't been to a kung fu monastery recently? Well, you will be fucked when you die and meet me in the Arena Eternal, the paradise Valhalla battleground where we fight one another to the death over and over for all of eternity.

Here's another surprise up my sleeve: I have been racking up *frags*, that is, points in my favor from the slaying of others, that will be used to determine my seed once I arrive in the Arena. I have assured my position in at least the 4<sup>th</sup> circuit, if not better. And, dear Editor, with little hesitation I reveal my secret, for it is entirely *too late* for your milquetoast demographic to catch up. I have determined through inspection (via undead seance) of the Arena Eternal Dark Legal Code that an entrant's frag count is determined by the number of lives that he or she ended during his living tenure—and noted carefully that this does not make any distinction as to the phyla of the life under consideration. Therefore I have conspired to destroy all sorts of simple

single-celled organisms by way of bleach and butterfly slice maelstrom. My bacterial frags number in the tens of trillions, each organism polished off with the brash intensity becoming of an Arena Eternal superstar.

As a brashly intense superstar, I can't help but crave worthy competition, and even as fucked as you are, I don't mind offering some small tokens of advice. First, eat three protein-rich meals a day, building mass with carbo shakes as needed. Second, when striking a man with your fist, resist the urge to tuck your thurnb<sup>3</sup> under your fingers—this can easily lead to a sprained or broken metacarpal or trapezium. Instead, try to hit with the side of the fist, chopping at nearly the speed of light in order to create a vortex of death. Third, if you have questions, don't be afraid to ask your friendly neighborhood Arena Eternal Liaison. They're here to help.

Fourth, you are fucked. See you in hell, suckers!

The MAN WHO COULD HAVE walked through solid matter has a curious habit of navigating buildings by walking though walls *with the grain*, that is, one shoulder in each piece of gypsum board, head in the rafters between them, walking until he reaches a junction or structural element, from which he regains his bearings. He does so because, as a star-being who is unable to interact with matter, he finds large open spaces such as rooms disorienting. He instead prefers the more tractable grid of walls and utility conduit—for comparison, recall your own behavior driving in the 3,000,000-acre paved parking lot of the Space Bridge on an early morning when there are no other cars to form landmarks in

<sup>3</sup>(sic) — believed to be an oblique reference to the broken English appearing on a popular brand of 20<sup>th</sup> century chopsticks, whose instructions for use begin: “tuk under thurnb and held firmly”

sight on the horizon-bridging tarmac. Do you not drive hugging the yellow lines and Jersey barriers for navigational security?

We refer to the man who could have walked through solid matter in the modal past tense even though he is immortal and in fact one of our preferred companions. We do this because we wish to build a recognizable name for him, that name being wholly accurate but at the same time mysterious and legacy-implying, like *the face that launched a thousand ships* or *the  $U_{235}$  atom that could be bombarded by a neutron to form a highly unstable  $U_{236}$  isotope that then would fission, producing a large amount of energy*. We say *could have* to not only indicate his powerful ability, but also to imply his own comfort with the gift: He *could have* walked through solid matter, but, maybe he just didn't feel like it at the time. In social situations we call him Exotron.

As fun as Exotron is in our poker games and laser tag matches, and as useful as he is in finding termite infestations before they are able to cause expensive to repair structural damage in our highly susceptible post-and-beam style houses, his wall-walking practices can be unsettling. Often his arms and hands will partially protrude from the walls, swinging unnaturally as he attempts to mimic our style of walking. Of course, without the ability to actually touch or stand on anything, there is no reason for him to have arms or legs, except perhaps to point out termite nests or secreted drug money caches from the house's previous owners or gesture to us in a peculiar dialect of American Sign Language. Exotron's worst habit, which we have tried to deter him from on many occasions, is to emerge from the wall of a bathroom or changing room face first, like one of those toys made of a grid of pins trapped behind glass, his mouth always

dropped open,<sup>4</sup> or like a Blue Man actor on his first day of work buoying up from his morning bathtub full of cobalt paint, not realizing that he needn't dye the inside of his mouth.

The fact that Exotron is a eunuch does not help make these encounters much less awkward, even if his accidental victims know this, and the fact that he is a socially awkward immigrant star-being makes little difference to the police, although his jail terms are necessarily very, very short.

"The telescreen is broken," signs Exotron. I don't look, but it's anyway obvious that he wants to watch "Real Lunar Zombies 2969," which is a reality show based on the zombie retirement community on the moon. This is the only program he watches, shown daily on Extreme Television, or XTV, during the early evening. It is early evening. When Exotron says that the telescreen is broken, he just means that it is not turned on—we generally leave it on all of the time and tuned to XTV since he cannot operate the remote control.

He floats with his face only a centimeter from the surface of the screen, which he has told me makes him feel more like he is *really there*. To his two pinhole eyes, every object in his field of view is equivalently in focus. The show is starting. Exotron thanks me by signing, though in his horizontal orientation I cannot see the actual content of the sign. Did he thank me, or thank me a lot?

On this episode of *Real Lunar Zombies 2969*, at least, according to the lead-in, one wild and crazy retired and reanimated

<sup>4</sup>We have also told him that he should keep his mouth closed most of the time when in polite company, but his only way of eating is to consume dark matter from the luminous æther with some sort of quantum gills in his throat.

great grandfather by the name of *Blade* is going to be the subject of an intervention by his housemates. It seems that Blade has been boozing it up too frequently, throwing house parties, and in general being an obnoxious member of their padded-wall condo.

Blade stumbles in, sloshed as always. He flips on the stereo and turns the volume to the red line. Slowly (for zombies move quite slowly, especially geriatric zombies), all of his housemates and some of his less rowdy friends emerge from behind doorways and bookshelves and couches, encircling him. Someone shuts off the music. All of this takes several minutes, Exotron watching intently, but eventually they have him surrounded, their arms outstretched and some of their heads cocked unchiropractically to the side. Comes a slow gurgling moan,

“Blaaaaade...”

“What... is... this...” he wheezes.

“An inter... vention...” they can barely say.

Holy dick, I can’t watch this. I head to the kitchen for some juice, and call to Exotron, “You want something to drink?” as a joke. He signs to me “shhhh,” which is of course done by placing his finger over his useless, silent lips.

In the kitchen I see that there is a new flavor of juice on the menu:

Juice		
Apple	...	C1
Pear	...	C2
Blueberry	...	C3
Hasidic	...	C4
Durian	...	C5
Mango	...	C7
Boysenberry	...	C8 ( <b>NEW!</b> )

“Compuscreen,” I say, “what does boysenberry taste like?”

“It tastes a bit like blueberry,” it responds.

“Oh, so like boysenberry?”

“Yes.”

I love to taunt that thing. I order some blueberry juice and go back to see how Blade is doing.

Through the back of Exotron’s translucent head I can see the intervention continue. In order to prevent him from drinking so much, the other retirees have held him down, torn apart his midsection, and chewed out his intestines. An erstwhile surgeon reconnects his pipes with rusty tools, as everyone gets drunk on his alcohol-soaked organs. This is how zombie interventions work, I guess; since the participants are undead, and cannot die (indeed, this is the reason that the retirees were infected with zombie viruses and then restrained via laser force field on the moon in well-decorated managed immortality in the first place), all manner of violence has a rather mild effect on them. Blade struggles against them, as Exotron mimics him horizontally, clutching at and through his own belly and squirming,

hysterically laughing his mute laugh.

Here I AM, AND I am hearing the sound of water and weather, whether it be from the ocean or the sound, or should I say estuary? The icy enclave in which I sleep and prepare my sandwich of endive and leeks overlooks the inlet; I let in sunlight and some might illuminate the room as I ruminate. Right?

Do I resent the insular crescent, insofar as I find myself dining on its top-shelf vegetables?

No, man *is* anise land.

But the present crescendo of tropical storm is topical, and I brainstorm a dissolution. An island is land, and Icelandic slander aside, I decide that while my isle is swell, a guy of my guile needs coriander seeds to survive.

After all, I'll raft after this squall.

On Junetember 41<sup>st</sup> 2961, Jeorges Gamard, hero vegan chef and madcap adventurer, conducted the world's first known base jump / hang-glide from low Earth orbit. With a combination of his winning charisma and stealth Y-ray shielded valise, he defeated the tight security at the base of the space bridge. He casually carried his concealed Nanoprene space suit and folding glider to the millionth floor, using of course the *bullet escalator*, which is a glass encased spiral escalator running along the outside of the structure—the preferred mode of ascent for tourists and *extreme* chefs.

Once on the millionth floor, he lockpicked his way into an unoccupied office, and slipped into his Nanoprene space suit. The suit's advanced micro machines painfully penetrated his esophagus, filling his lungs with CO<sub>2</sub>-scrubbing molecular mo-



tors (thus, to breathe, he needed only to vibrate his diaphragm as if convulsing due to seizure).

After strapping the glider to his back, Georges fired a single shot from his polycarbonate incinerator pistol through one of the window panes, and, his gut spasming to drive his nanotech breathers, he let himself be sucked out of the open window into orbit.

(The cost of the vaporized window and the vacuum damage to the office was easily covered by the sale of security camera footage of the base jump to XTV and the Guinness Book of World Records, and also by the Space Bridge Corporation's enormous insurance policy, netting them a small profit.)

Georges dropped initially, still affected by the space bridge's gravity generators, during which time he flipped and turned impossibly with the hang glider providing no air resistance. Eventually, he drifted into a weightless orbit, which he sustained for several days. In his private mental game of *Georges's Gamard's "Pro Base Jumper,"* his *style* bonus was skyrocketing, executing *backflip* after *varial* after *tail grab* all while completing a 347,451,480° spin. After racking up a record-breaking score, he tucked his body into a fetal ball and went into a power dive, entering the atmosphere as a flaming meteor. Children around the world pointed at him, wishing upon a falling star or Russian space station.

So what was Georges's folly? Did his Icarus wings burn up in re-entry? Was he unable to control his aerodynamic profile, causing him to ricochet off the ionosphere and be cast off into deep space? Did rogue cosmic bacteria infiltrate his nanomachine matrix, radiation-resistant pathogens with highly advanced genomes, whose *modus operandi* was to parasitically instrument his musculature, infusing him with the PCP-like

strength of one thousand vegan master chefs, but also to hijack his motor cortex to turn him into a plague-spreading, immortal, infectious warrior, but leaving his higher brain functions intact, so that he must witness the destruction of humanity at his own hands, but with the detached, helpless disposition of a comatose quadriplegic with a sore throat and chills? No, our fearless Francophone's only faux pas was to underestimate the natural difficulty of controlling one's landing trajectory from a height of 600km; though Jeorges had constructed a comfortable landing strip out of air mattresses on the roof of his home in Saint-Etienne, France, he instead landed a few hundred kilometers from the Pitcairn Islands in the South Pacific.

Just as the broken pieces of the downed Russian Mir spacecraft, fueled and mutated by the warm radioactive material housed in its reactor core (essentially a Godzilla-like cautionary tale, only the innocence robbing toxagent coming from within, signifying the destructive potential of our own innate evil, rather than from the external world, suggesting that Godzilla evil is due to the corrupting structures of society) formed a giant mechatronic cosmonaut, which waded through the Pacific Ocean to Japan, to wreak a few days of undirected havoc before being put to rest humanely by the Power Suit Expedition Monster Friends pacifist super hero league, whose chief weapon in the battle against mutantly assured destruction is love for all of God's creatures and robots, Jeorges, with nothing but his torn hang glider, his nanoprene matrix with lit *battery low* LED, and his preternatural knowledge of wild greens, slowly reconstructed a life for himself—meaning, a kitchen—in a cave overlooking the freshwater lagoon of a nearby atoll. He prepared for himself three meals each day from the atoll's plentiful and exotic vegetables, never once dipping below the international restaurant guide's Four Star rating, culturing a vitamin C supersaturation that raised his flu immunity levels through the roof—to such an extent that his enhanced pheromones actually

repelled local influenza-carrying tsetse flies from his body.

But as plentiful as vegetables are on this island, Georges cannot be happy without cilantro, and so, after the storm finishes its incontinent spray, he begins to make designs to escape. Manufacturing a raft is easy: His hang glider provides an excellent sail, his nanoprene suit becomes a watertight doggie bag packed with meals-to-go, and a selection of polished oak planks, stained with iron oxide and carefully dovetailed together and fastened with a home-made cement—New England style—forms the basis of the floaty part of the vessel.

And so he sets sail, with no clear destination, but a hankerin' for some coriander. And his slapdash yacht sloshes and sways, hopping from wave crest to wave, slaloming the schools of dolphins and whale squirts, scooting along towards the sunset. Every few hours he lowers himself into the water and uses his stream of urine to provide extra propulsion—for nothing can be wasted at sea.

Finally, after a few days of rafting, Georges spots a tiny cancerous lump on the surface of the ocean, and, as he approaches, it bursts like a glorious pimple into a mountainous, greeny island, and, squinting his beta-carotene enhanced eyes, he can just barely make out a few human-built structures—and, in a pasture on the south shore, a few lovely, delicious cilantro crops.

A time bomb IS a certain sort of blast  
*from the past*, wouldn't you say? Here's another blast from the past: The terrorist strike on the Space Bridge in 2769, perpetrated by a series of syncopated time bombs planted by the Cosmopolitan Order of Space Luddites. In the future, that is, in 2769, Luddites have come to a compromised position, after

having begrudgingly accepted the modern conveniences of computational machinery into their lives over hundreds of years, and now are left with a single conservative demand, that being, *no computers in space!!* Some technophobe scholars, comfortably insulated from the real world dangers of astrological computing, have engaged in an epic dialogue on the matter, the two positions being (1.) that hyperatmospheric computers that are tethered to the planet via a cable or other structure at least as wide as one's wrist (approximately 4.6 cm in diameter) are not really *in space*, and thus marginally acceptable and (2.) that any computer more than 550 km above sea level is in space, regardless of its promontory status.<sup>5</sup>

Yet for each naïve idealist who believes that matters like these can be resolved through accumulation of citations, there exists a distressed guerrilla with a can-do attitude, and some of these rapscallions banded together to form an underground faction of the Space Luddites known as the Cosmopolitan Order (so named because of their flamboyant fashions, worldly congeniality, and preference for sugary alcoholic beverages), whose mission was to destroy the Space Bridge (which lofts millions of computers into the no-no zone) with designer time bombs.

A moment's reflection will reveal several ways in which this plan was flawed. Let's quiz the reader to see if he or she is

<sup>5</sup>Still more persnickety ideologues have contemplated what indeed constitutes a computer: Primitive 21<sup>st</sup>-century PCs, crippled by their ability to compute no more than a few billion operations per second? Should that even *count*? A handwritten description of the polymorphic lambda calculus? A Sokoban puzzle, known to be PSPACE-complete<sup>[6]</sup>? However, such lines of inquiry are extremely rare, requiring the unlikely combination of a deep enough appreciation of Luddite ideals to bother in the first place, along with rather contradictory training in theoretical computer science.

<sup>6</sup>Joseph Culberson, "Sokoban is PSPACE-complete", Technical Report TR-97-02, University of Alberta, April 1997

capable of out-witting the Space Luddites.

**1.** [40PTS] What are the possible outcomes of bombing the base of the Space Bridge, a structure that extends so high from the planet's surface that its top is not even imageable by radio telescope? (*Check all that apply.*)

- ☐ The entire bridge is safely demolished in place, along with the computers within, by the twenty or so hand-made 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue bombs placed at its structural support elements
- ☐ The Space Bridge is toppled, its thousands of miles of skyscraper metal smashing down on the people of Earth, wrapping around us like the world's largest ball of hi-rise twine
- ☐ The Space Bridge, disconnected from its foundation, is carried out of the atmosphere, to roam the universe as an obelisk barge filled with computers

**2.** [60PTS] For each box you checked in question 1, describe the sense in which this outcome furthers the goals of the Space Luddites. (Hint: The death of all Space Luddites nullifies any other goals achieved.)

**3.** [EXTRA CREDIT] What dumbfounding alternative outcome actually occurred?

Although this author will not speculate as to the expectations of the Space Luddites, the actual result of this terrorist attack was quite surprising to most civil engineering experts who investigated in the following months. Here is what happened: The series of explosions demolished the lobby and dining atrium (the first few floors) leaving rubble and twisted nanotube rebar in its place. But the upper three hundred quadrillion floors were unaffected; the remainder of the Space Bridge just hung stoically above the smoky detritus, operating normally. Here is a sketch recovered from a local volunteer firefighter:

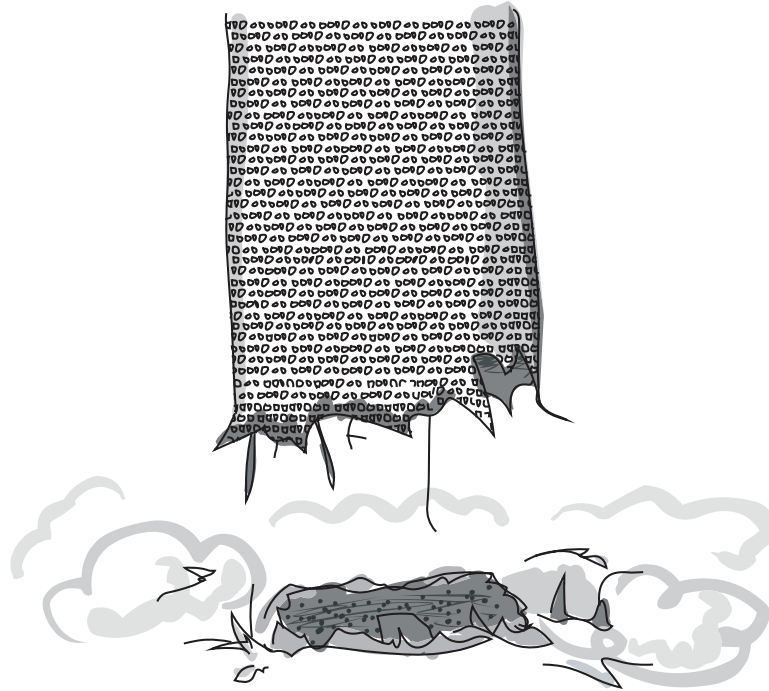


Figure 2.1: Sketch of detonated Space Bridge

This result makes no sense, and was never satisfactorily explained by the Space Bridge Corporation or the bombing panel

investigators. They simply rebuilt, taking the opportunity to retrofit an upgraded ultramall, while everyone else was preoccupied by terrorism fears, *i.e.*, *what if our own impossibly long protuberance is also destroyed?* and melodramatic star chambers in which the Luddite perpetrators were tried and punished capitally. In the public, bloody executions they repeated their catch phrase with martyr-worthy sincerity: “*No computers in space!!*”

REGENTS FROM the Ultraversity of Aspinwall at La Crosse, otherwise known as the La Crosse Ultraversity of Aspinwall, the Aspinwall-La Crosse Ultraversity State College of Wisconsin, or UALC or ULCA, have declared martial law. *Is this even possible?* think some of the literati, spitting their iced coffees out all over their soul patches in exasperation as they listen to the radio, *does the vice provost have such power vested in him?* But before they can write letters to the editor in protest, there it is, legal by very name, and martial by the art used to enforce it, a karate kick to the carotid artery, or an acupuncture heart attack maneuver, as they drape black tapestries over the Ultraversity logos on academic buildings and towers, containing the image of the provost found in Figure 2.2.

An electric fence is erected around the school, transforming it from pristine campus to prison camp, and the provost’s assured, maniacal laughter is broadcast on loudspeaker at one minute intervals, viz:

Ah– ha ha ha ha.  
Ah– ha ha ha ha.

The previously profitable privatized food court is replaced by a state-run facility that serves only powdered mashed potatoes. Students must get their essential vitamins and amino acids



“I'm Gonna Get You!”

Figure 2.2: New Ultraversity Iconography

by eating dirt, boiled sterile in secret mess halls built in dormitory basements with Bunsen burners stolen from chemistry class. Frat parties subsist entirely on prison hooch, made from ketchup packets, unfiltered groundwater, and *S. cerevisiae* cultures from vaginal yeast infections.

Every class begins promptly at 6:00am, and if a student is late, he is shot. If a student does not bring his pencil and paper, he is shot. If the pencil is not #2HB or the paper not 100lb. A4, he is shot. If a student gets an exam question wrong, because he did not show his work, he is shot. If a student spends an entire week sleeping, without once going to class or reading a textbook, she is shot.



“Alexis—,” says her roommate Susan urgently, “—wake up!”

“Wha—?”

“They’re downstairs, asking for you,” she hushes. “Get dressed, get out of here!”

“Who is?”

“The provost’s Staatssicherheitsdienst!”

“What?”

“Ultraversity State Police! The Stasi!”

“Germans?”

“It’s martial law! Don’t you know? They’ve been shooting students!”

“What day is it...?”

Susan pulls Alexis out of bed by her arm. “Get dressed!”

Alexis puts on a sweatshirt and jeans halfheartedly, as Susan prepares a hitchhiking bindle for her. Stockings, stock options, and, optionally, trail mix. “Get out the window, quick!” she calls.

Alexis opens the window to an icy gust. *Snow?* she wonders. She climbs out onto the snow-covered roof as she hears an insistent banging on the dormitory door. Susan closes the window behind her and waves Alexis off, telling the door, “Coming!”

Alexis takes a few steps to get out of view from the interior of her room, but the tentative grip of her tennis sneakers is no match for the angled snow covered sleet covered ice covered

greased Teflon superconductor bearing awning. She yelps as she slips, hitting the roof with a muffled thump and sliding off its edge along with a sheet of snow. She falls into the bushes below.

Ah— ha ha ha ha.  
Ah— ha ha ha ha.

Above, the Ultraversity police have sensed the draft and drift of snow on the windowsill, and are hanging out, calling to her “Halt!” One levels his rifle and fires a warning shot, or else an intentionally deadly shot that is unintentionally mis-aimed, for the bullet simply buries its hot lead armor-piercing self in the frozen grass, sizzling non-lethally. Alexis does not believe in being a halted target for warning shots, so she bolts, scrambling at first to synchronize the motion of her running legs with the reluctance of the ground to provide traction.

She dashes across the tennis courts and is mocked by her internal sportscaster play-by-play:

MARTY: Now [ex-fugitive Quilters quarterback] Jim [Potako], you’ve been in a few *running from the rifleman* scenarios in your day, right?

JIM: That’s right, [deep-voiced sportscaster] Marty [Jackowitz]. After winning Superbowl MMDCDLXXVIII, I was the subject of a rather famous manhunt in which the police *alleged* that I “illegally” embezzled billions of cmb by rigging the outcome of the game and that I then “murdered” the Las Vegas Philatelists’s coach in cold blood on the field, in “plain view” of millions of screaming fans.

MARTY: (laughing) Yes, I think we *all* remember that little hullabaloo.

JIM: Yeah, a little case of “mistaken identity,” you know?

(laughing, winking)

MARTY: But seriously, given that you've run this kind of play before, how would you rate Alexis's performance?

JIM: Well, I have to say that she's made a fairly risky play here. Though the tennis courts are nearby, it's not clear that we can say that they're *on the way* to anything, since I don't think she has any real idea of *where she's going*, yet. And, although she's unlikely to get caught on any obstacles, there's not much cover on the courts, which is going to leave a big hole in her defense for the sniper to take advantage of.

MARTY: Ohh!! And there's another shot fired—sorry Jim—and it looks like another miss for the sniper. I guess you could say it was a shot in the dark. (laughs) Yeah, I'd have to agree, Jim, we're looking at some pretty amateurish play here today.

Nonetheless, the sniper's effectiveness deteriorates according to an inverse square law, and Alexis is soon free from immediate danger. Yet her trail of sneaker tracks will lead them right to her, and she knows it—trapped. But then, an unexpected voice beckons her,

“Psst.”

Where is that coming from?

“Over here!” it pings in a shout whisper.

Over where?

“The manhole!” it calls, some hints of vibrating vocal cords overtaking the whisper.

Alexis looks at a manhole.

“Other manhole!” the voice says clearly.

Alexis turns to another manhole, and through one of the small holes can now see the pale glint of some eye’s sclera, and the nervous side-to-side motion and contracting of the iridial sphincter associated with the eye being plugged into an eye socket, perhaps one of two belonging to the mysterious voice! The manhole cover pushes up and slides to the side, seemingly by itself!

The tip of a head emerges. Alexis recognizes one of the eyes.

“Come on!” says the head.

After kicking around snow to muddle her tracks, Alexis lowers herself into the canal, being more careful on the icy metal rungs this time. She slides the cover back in place. Following the head in the dark, she arrives at a subterranean headquarters, lit by a few incandescent bulbs hanging by the very wires that power them, which would no doubt be a fire hazard if the entire place weren’t flooded by an inch of water.

“You’re Alexis Singleton, right?” asks the head, saluting. “I’m Adm. Marjorie Donegan of the X-Legion Resistance. We run our operation out of this steam tunnel.”

“Resistance against what?”

The others in the room stare at her, their jaws dropped and brows all squished up terribly.

“The regents of the ultraversity. They declared martial law. You know, the ones that sent the police to shoot you for truancy? How could you not know this?”

“Oh, I guess I must have been sleeping,” she apologized.

“Alexis, we’ve been under martial law for *two months!*”

Alexis shrugs. “Sometimes . . . that happens.”

The other commandos shake their heads in disbelief.

MARTY: There seems to be some measure of skepticism, or perhaps resentment, for the rookie, huh Jim?

JIM: Yeah, she can expect a tough hazing in the locker room if this game doesn’t go well.

Admiral Donegan hushes the other commandos with a gesture. “Okay, listen, you know now. What’s important is . . . we need your help.”

“Uh, okay.”

“Tonight we’re putting into effect our Hail Mary plan to assassinate the provost. According to our intel, he’ll be arriving in an armored caravan at the northwest parking lot around twenty-three hundred hours. His driver will take one of the handicapped parking spots and then pop the trunk from inside the vehicle. He’ll get out of the car and retrieve a rolled-up red carpet with gold trim from the trunk, which he’ll lay down for the provost so that he won’t tarnish his feet by letting them touch something that isn’t red and expensive. Then the provost will emerge with his bodyguards and walk the carpet to the entrance to Northrop Hall.

“Here’s the thing—we’ve prepared a replacement carpet that is embedded with conductive fibers, which we’ll use to electrocute the provost when he steps on it.” Admiral Donegan points

to a lethal red carpet that one of the other soldiers is still tinkering with.

“We’re one person short of what we need to carry out our plan. We want to replace the carpet in the trunk with our counterfeit one before the driver retrieves it. So, what we need is a distraction *after* he pops the trunk but *before* he gets out of the car. Can you help us?”

“I guess so,” Alexis shrugs.

“Great!” she says, and starts drawing on and gesturing to a campus map. “You’ll be stationed *here*, behind this telephone pole. You’ll have an earpiece so that we can direct your actions from X-Legion headquarters. We’re stationing a spotter to notify you when the trunk is popped. He’ll say, “The football has been deflated.” Then, you’ll respond . . .”

Alexis yawns, her eyes fluttering shut.

\* \* \* \* \*

The scene: 22:51pm, behind the telephone pole by the front of Northrop Hall. The players: Alexis, dressed in her hooded sweatshirt and earpiece. The trunk spotter, watching from his safe binocular perch in the freshman dormitory. The carpet placer, waiting in a manhole under the handicapped parking spot.

“All right, the quarterback is passing through the gate,” says Donegan over the radio. Quarterback means car, here.

“Roger that,” says someone else. Alexis doesn’t really know who is supposed to be talking now.

“Uh, acknowledged,” she says. “Shh!” calls back the ra-

dio. Alexis sees the car, a stretch-limo SUV with aftermarket spoiler, obnoxious blue halogen headlamps, and a glowing neon undercarriage. The lights go off as the driver shuts off the car.

“The football has been deflated! Alexis, now!”

She had not planned out her diversion, and is suddenly struck with panic. The manhole cover pushes open, and the carpet placer hoists himself out. The driver begins to get out of the car.

“Alexis, diversion!”

Unable to think of anything else, Alexis starts an improvised bird call. X-Legion Resistance members wince and hold their hands over their hearts, preemptively mourning the failure of their plan. But the driver’s ears perk up.

“The Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl! This far north? It’s a miracle!” He starts whistling his response in bird language, grinning expansively. “A miracle!”

The carpet switch is made. The Provost notices the driver’s wistful delirium and knocks on his window impatiently.

“Sir, yes—sorry, sir,” the driver apologizes, snapping back to his duties. He walks to the trunk and fetches the faux carpet, then unrolls it atop the snow, all the way up to and into the entrance to Northrop Hall.

“The pygmy owl has landed,” quips Alexis into her radio.

The driver opens the rear door for the Provost, who steps out onto the red carpet. Nothing happens. The radio is silent in anticipation.

“Does that thing need to be plugged in?” asks Alexis. Someone on the radio gasps, “Oh, crap!”

There’s an extension cord running up the telephone pole that she’s hiding behind, so she decides to take matters into her own hands. After yanking on the cord to free it from the loudspeaker above, Alexis makes her way to the opposite side of the vehicle with a deft tip-toe sprint. There she sees the carpet’s three-prong socket—grounded for extra safety. The provost is about half-way up the carpet as she crawls under the SUV, its triple exhaust pipes blowing carbon monoxide enhanced vapor at her, its 4500hp engine noise shaking her skull at idle, and reaching, she plugs the extension cord into the socket.

Again, nothing happens.

“Who goes there?!” demands the Provost. Alexis tries to scurry out, but her hood gets caught on the neon undercarriage.

“I do say, halt!” he demands. She tries continuously to get free, but she’s caught! “Driver, please fetch my Deringer.”

But just as the driver steps off the fatal rug, a magnetic relay triggers somewhere, turning on the loudspeakers around campus for their minutely announcement. They chant in eerie unison,

*Ah— ha ha ha ha.*  
*Ah— ha ha ha ha.*

... except for the speaker atop the nearest pole, whose juice has been re-routed into the deadly floor-dressing, providing the provost with a flesh igniting, seizure inducing, heart stopping zap and trip to the great authoritarian state college in the sky.



## You Make The Call

*with Don Griese*

Hello again, sports fans! In this week's edition of *You Make The Call*, we've got some especially subtle scenarios to dissect. But first, I'd like to make a correction to last week's column (which was brought to my attention by R. Greensfeld of Andover, CT): The name of the Las Vegas Philatelists's owner is Philip Monegro, not Preston H. Moneybags III, as I incorrectly wrote. Sorry guys, it won't happen again!

Our first question comes from a reader in Troy, NY. He writes:

*Dear Don,*

*My son plays Little League. During their last game, he was discovered to be using a cork "pebble-bed reactor" bat—which is allegedly against regulations—when he hit the ball a distance of six miles, breaking the bat and leaking nuclear material on some other players. My question is, what's a reasonable penalty for this violation? I feel really bad because I bought him the bat for Christmas.*

*– Troubled in Troy*

Well *Troubled*, tough luck on the present. I know that sometimes those toys have warranties, so you might consider checking with the store where you bought it. As for your question: Well, the answer depends on what sport your son was playing—a key fact that you did not

mention. (Here at *You Make The Call* we like to keep an eye on detail!) Supposing that he was playing baseball, which would be my first guess, then a fine of \$50,000 and a one-month suspension from endorsement contracts is normal for the use of out-of-spec equipment, unless he can prove that he had no knowledge that the bat was nuclear. On the other hand, if he was playing football, he could be assessed that same fine, *plus* a 15-yard penalty for desecrating the game by using imported apparatus. Here, only the insanity defense could save him those yards.

*Dear YMTC,*

*Here's a hypothetical situation for you: Suppose that, during a field goal kick in the game of football, the ball splits mid-air into two halves—one of which passes through the uprights and the other of which falls short. Should the kicking team be awarded points for the field goal or not?*

*– Football Fanatic*

Fanatic: Although some alternate theories have been proposed around YMTC headquarters, such as the fairly conservative *equipment failure* call, resulting in a do-over, or the so-called *wishbone principle* (in which the half that contains the inflation gasket is treated as the ball for the purposes of scoring until the play is over), our sports lawyers dug deep for precedent on this matter and came up with the true answer.

Believe it or not, this situation is *not* hypothetical! As it turns out, the team should be awarded a number of points commensurate to the fraction of the ball by weight that passes through the uprights. In your scenario, the team should be allocated  $\frac{3}{2}$  of a point. The historic game that set this precedent (a pre-season exhibition match between the Boston OB/GYNs and the Nantucket Secular Humanists in 2021) was actually more interesting. With nothing left on the clock and the score tied at 13-13, Boston needed only to complete their extra point to win the game. Instead, they used an entirely new strategy. Bringing out their most muscularly-footed kicker, they proceeded to kick the ball with such force that it exploded and atomized into thousands of tiny pieces. The ball's dust cloud drifted towards the goalposts gently, as the crowd gasped, with some small fraction of the ball particles wafting through legally. The game was won by Boston in regulation with a final score of 13.00000017 to 13.

ALEXIS AWAKENS abruptly to the jarring aroma of smelling salts, blasting her olfactory nerves with 10,000 International Stinkiness Units per second. She bolts up, smashing the doctor's fists with her face in a sort of reverse punch.

"What the—?"

"Alexis, it's okay, be calm," says the doctor, a round, friendly man named Sapien who is not really a doctor but an unlicensed handyman who does odd jobs for the Human Resources department, such as replace lightbulbs, window panes, and revive passed out applicants with ammonia salts and a calming bedside manner, though he does in fact hail from a town called Doogie Howser, Maryland. "It seems you took quite a fall!"

Alexis takes the cold compress that he is holding out for her and presses it against her chin. Non-doctor Sapien stands again and nods at Non-non-doctor Jameson, saying softly, "She should be fine," and walks out.

S. Jameson, who is not a non-doctor but who is actually a real mid-level hiring manager, brushes his hands together and straightens out his suit. "Ah, then," he begins, "where were we?"

"I'm not sure," says Alexis, "I think I was trying to apply for a job."

"That's right! And I have good news for you," he says. "You're hired."

"What, really?"

"Really."

“Isn’t there an interview or something?”

“Not... as such, no. We ran a sample of your DNA through our NatureTron to figure out if you fit our profile, and you do, Alexis. So you’re hired.”

“Even though I passed out in the waiting room?”

“Yes. My name’s S. Jameson, and you’ll be working in my team,” he says, extending his hand.

“Alexis Singleton. Pleased to meet you.” She shakes. “So, what exactly is this job?”

“Well, Alexis, I think this one’s right up your alley. In fact, what would you say your dream job would be?”

“Hummm... mattress tester?”

“Where your chief activity would be...?”

“Sleeping.”

“This job is a lot like that. Essentially, you’ll be paid to wear a small device,” he says, to Alexis’s delight, producing a hearing aid-like silver contraption to dangle in front of her, “and to think as little as possible.”

“This sounds great! But... I don’t get it.”

“Well, do you remember the Internet Gold Rush?”

“We read about it in history class,” she chuckles.

“Do you remember how venture capital firms would fund all sorts of stupid scams, like companies that would pay you to ‘surf’ the ‘World Wide Web’?”

“Uh, vaguely,” she says indecisively. This actually means “no.”

“Well, think of it like that. We’re a big stupid company, with so much money that we can pay you just to make sure you’re not out putting that brain to work competing with us. You’re paid in proportion to the amount of brain power you let go idle—so the more you slack, the better. But you have to stay in the Space Bridge Complex while you do it.”

“I don’t have to actually do anything?”

“The only thing you have to do is nothing.”

“No subliminal advertisements or mind control?”

“No such treachery.”

“No money down and zero percent APR financing<sup>7</sup>?”

“Be debt-free in thirty days, or your money back.<sup>8</sup>”

“How does it pay?”

“The pay is quite competitive, I think you’ll find. We also offer discounted room and board in the Space Bridge Complex, if you like, which can be deducted from your paycheck.”

“Well, sign me up, I guess!”

<sup>7</sup>See informational brochure for terms and conditions of the offer. 0% APR is for the first six months, and only applies to balance transfers and new purchases. All information is provided without warranty.

<sup>8</sup>Offer not valid in all states. Must be 18 or older to qualify. Money-back criteria are to be decided by a partisan ombudsman appointed and salaried by the Space Bridge Corporation.

“Great,” he says, bringing her the compuscreen clipboard so that she can sign her medical liability waivers.

Alexis grins, and then pauses, asking, “What is all of this for, anyway?” and gesturing to the Space Bridge in general.

S. Jameson frowns and retreats momentarily. “I had worried about this,” he says to himself, shaking his head slowly. He checks the compuscreen again in a private show of mock-concern.

“What?” Alexis asks, nervously.

“You registered two curiosity alerts since arriving in the complex. I know you’re young, and maybe a little naïve, but you have to understand that these things go down on your permanent record! Two or three curiosity alerts make it essentially impossible to work for the government, for instance,” he scolds, fatherly.

“Oh.”

“I’ll tell you what. I’ll do you a little favor and I won’t mark this one down. After all, you’re part of my team now, right?”

“Right!” she says, and starts signing.

Only an hour later, Alexis is in her new bed in her new apartment, with her earpiece buzzing away, earning her cash in her sleep.

## Chapter 3

### The “Meta” Problem

((The meta problem is this: There is always a way of abstracting, or stepping back from, any discussion, abstraction, or back-stepping. The problem with the meta problem is this: It suggests that there is no true understanding, since to understand is to understand understanding, and to understand understanding is to so-on and so-forth. Although everyone who writes meta novels or meta plays or meta so-forth thinks that he is so clever, in fact the meta problem clearly indicates that (1) there is no limit to this cleverness and appears to suggest that (2) it is not really very clever in fact because it is available in such great supply. The problem with this being a problem is that meta writers are obsessed with the cleverness arms race, and yet, the race is hopeless: Kurt Gödel famously proved<sup>[1]</sup> that it is impossible for a system to prove itself consistent, that is, without resorting to any meta what-not, and so, no matter how

<sup>1</sup>Kurt Gödel, “Über formal unentscheidbare sätze der principia mathematica und verwandter systeme”, *Monatshefte für Mathematik und Physik*, 38, 1931

far you go, and no matter how many ellipses you use, nobody should believe that you know what you're talking about. But that fucker—and this is the solution to the problem problem—had naught to say on the issue of a system proving its own *inconsistency*, which is, after all, the major purpose of this novel, and which is, after all, really about the most *non*-solution that a solution could fail to be. But what's so bad about that? Okay, the thesis is a failure. *But I'm taking the rest of y'all with me!*," he said.



Hello IT'S MR VARGOMAX ♡  
ii I am back!! Do you  
remember me! we are good friends forever

Listen,, friend. I have a very problem. They problem is with a  
bad men named SNAKE. SNAKE has took my very love  
girlfriend♡♡ and put her on a cage on spike mounthill!  
That mounthill is bold sharp and so distance where I can not  
get on it... to save my girl ... ♡

Friend please ... I am so aloneley ... so sadness



I try two comprestand why SNAKE wants to have so a bad  
attitude! Is his parents mad to him? Or did a teacher punish  
his detention too many ×? Then I did to apprecialize that

*SLAKE* some how knows that he is a chara in this book!  
Rememcall, *SLAKE* is a men who is a very smart men. VERY COLLEGE. Because he nows that he just is a chara he have to do some thing really angry in order to get mention in the book! If he live just in his house and baking a nice cake—well this does not get in the book because it is so ... culinart. This explanations why you always read about bad, bad mens in a book. Not Vargomax V. Vargomax he is your always friend.

Oh no *SLAKE* !!! what are you done! Friend please ...  
*SLAKE* is attaching the cage into lava hole in spike mounthill!  
my very love girlfriend♡ will be melting by the magma if some body does not fix they!!!

Friend, I need you're help! Even though *SLAKE* tries to do when bad things in the book! you can make a else thing happen have you read it, okay ? Just try you're hardest—let *SLAKE* don't do the thing he want! get ready friend!

Now *SLAKE* is put my girl♡ in a fire lava! Her toes are cook! It smell so bad and crying, and *SLAKE* is laugh at Vargomax and he even laugh at you, friend... now he is shot a maching gun at all the people and killed my love girl friend♡ with a bullet in her!! Oh friend ... I am so pain, so crying, my guts are sore and my ♡♡♡ ... ohhh ...

...

Friend I think it worked ! My girl♡ is save, and *SLAKE* is put in bad man jail wow, their really is justice in this world!  
Thanx you so very many, for saving us with you're imagination power!!!!!!!!!!

bye four now ♡

We set OUT ON a space exploration mission in 2380, the first and largest—to date—of its kind. The manned space probe’s mission was to reproduce itself and its crew through the usual avenues of sexual and mechanical reproduction, improving on the design slightly through natural selection, and colonizing not just habitable planets, but the gaps *between* the planets—space itself. The rules were simple: get as far away from the start point as possible (Earth; labeled 0.0, 0.0, 0.0 on our star charts), ejaculate our life seed on as many interstitial planets as possible, and avoid exploding one another as much as possible until the universe becomes overcrowded. If we see any superintelligent extraterrestrial beings who seek to enslave us and trace our cosmic contrails back to Earth for galactic revenge against our race, we are to say: “Our DNA molecules made us do it!” which, presumably, is to excuse us from causal liability. But there is one overarching principle, a *prime directive*, to our travels, which is: “You break it, you buy it.”

My sixth generation cosmic vessel once satisfied the antecedent of the prime directive. This was not my fault. We were sailing, as it were, through the stars (which really means, safely billions of miles from any stars), when an invisible crystal structure, hitherto undetected by our instruments, revealed itself by rocking our hull with an awesome force. In truth, the awesome force was supplied by our own graviton-X dimatron energy drives, which caused our 6<sup>th</sup> generation ship to crash into the crystal structure. Thenceforewith the crystal began a degenerative sequence of shearing, cracking, and division, of piercing, puncturing, and rupture, and our live-in genetic soup felt the heart-sinking regret of having made a terrible (in economic terms) blunder, for anything that would make a noise that momentous must be worth a real shitload.

We had to raise taxes. It’s not as if we were living in a

particularly libertarian society, either. Basically everything was produced by the government (being the vessel's upper management) and its matter reconstruction engines (powered by the Ether). We made with those devices: food, raw ingredients with which we supplied chefs to manufacture other food, broken plumbing with which to employ our plumbers to fix, golf carts to pay our caddies to drive in order to cart around our weightless, flying, artificial-intelligence golf clubs, and money. But we couldn't run the matter generators fast enough to print enough bills to pay for this collision, even if we spent some of the time to create new matter creators. The universe demanded payment *now*! So instead we raised taxes to 6,000%, to be clear, each employee owed sixty times his wage back to the government in order to pay off our national debt, in addition to the 5.5% sales tax associated with every purchase (except for necessities like clothing and 3D billiards equipment).

Eventually, we had collected enough dough to pay for the crystal. Broadcasting in Universal Product Code (the only truly ubiquitous language) from our powerful AM transmitter, we said,

“We have the money. We are very sorry.”

A deep, dissatisfied rumbling resonates through the crystal matrix. A blast of charged particles pushes against our ship, trying to push it away. We counter with our GXDE drives. We try again:

“We'll pay parts, labor, shipping, and interest!”

The crystal grumbles in a less dissatisfied way, and makes a half-hearted attempt to push us out of the galaxy with an ion discharge again.

“We'll pay punitive damages as well?” we offer, tentatively.

An agreeable hum with octaval harmonics signifies the crystal structure's willingness to accept.

We jettison the cash and *get the fuck out of there*.

**Inquiry:** WHY IS it that hip-hop rappers choose as their foremost topic how good they are at rapping? For example, please bask in the lyrical glory of Groove Master Jake X11R6's *Dope Flow Membrane*:

unh

yeah unh

my lyrical skills are like a clerical error /  
the terror of my words the bearer of dope flow /  
you know my tongue teeth and epiglottis got this /  
speaking in rhymes times twenty /  
it ain't funny bitch my laryngectomy ails me /  
a bullet in the throat is no joke i choke /  
the life outta rappers who challenge the dope flow /  
my verbal assault will halt the flow of air /  
to your trachea i'm breakin' ya don't dare /  
to step bitch you wish you could rap like this . . .

To me, such self-promotion is an empty pursuit. Imagine that the title of this thesis is, "I have superlative skill at writing theses about how skilled I am."—it would be outright rejected by any thesis committee worth its weight in external committee members, no matter how very good I actually am at writing such theses.

I do WONDER IF, in the evolutionary history of man, our eyelids have been getting thicker, and, if so or if not, what the trend holds for the future. On the one hand, we might believe that as the world gets lighter at night—from street lamps, neon casino marquees, and iridescent airborne radiation clouds—we require thicker eyelids for their eye-shading ability while sleeping. On the other hand, this selective pressure is at odds with the need for a mid-sleep defense mechanism: As more and more people are murdered in their sleep by assassins wielding lighted weapons—i.e., assault rifles with tactical flashlight scopes, lynch mobs with burning effigies, or, at least, torches, or blaster ray cannons, whose chief mode of death output is, in fact, *light itself*—those with thinner eyelids enjoy a moment's advantage over their more curtained kinfolk, which could spell the difference between life and death. We might call these advantaged ones “light sleepers.” Get it!? Testing the theory is easy. At some fixed age, say, 18 years, we require all humans to have their eyelids measured for thickness with ultra-sensitive calipers. This is no more painful than having your eyelid pierced—a popular activity for young people anyway. Some do it many times. I saw one chap with half a dozen piercings in each eyelid, some simply open punch-hole gaps, some fitted with night-vision crystal studs, that lens and refract infrared light, doubling its frequency into the visible spectrum, so that he can see better when his eyes are closed at night. These cyborg humans prowl the dark alleys after nightfall, their multifaceted bug eyes glinting in a dark green evil, and a warbly synth soundtrack plays. Everyone fears the new breed of eyelidless street punk, atomic baseball bats with nails stuck in the ends, standing there menacingly in the sewer steam, crouched with bat raised, pale and jumpy from sleep deprivation. These are exactly the kind of folks, these light sleepers, that would murder you in your slumber.

Begin TO EXPLAIN Ass Jazz to a simpleton such as myself and you will end up disappointed. As much as you might enjoy the sound of your own voice, the impenetrable strata of musical stricture upon self-referential irony, upon proto-aesthetic art school experiment, upon sophomoric prank turned accidentally influential deconstructionist movement is too much for my feeble-minded mind to ingest in one sitting. But let's try again, sure, play for me ass jazz, using the sphincter, nature's second natural trumpet, recorded with a contact mic capable of distinguishing the most minute vibrations of the surface. Move me with the flatulent magnificence. Chuck a duck, if you will, loft that canard as a promissory note, an I.O.U. drawn on imaginary anatine wealth, which you must ultimately repay, if possible using the favorable outcome of a self-destructive gambling binge, though, as far as you and your martingale are concerned, is more of a sure thing windfall than a last ditch payoff effort. Catch my drift you say. I say place your bets. I double my bet preemptively, you say. I say you say do you indeed sir. You indeed say yes sir I do sir. I regret to inform you sir that the spin has been determined to be red sir contrary to your bet I say. You say this was the reason for my preemptive bet sir and now I do wager in a shortcut maneuver sir four times my original bet messr please sir croupier. I say again sir luck has not been with you in your random walk as the result of my fair spin has been red once again. This time I hedge equal parts on both colors red and black in an effort to build momentum and I cannot lose you say. I remind you sir that the zero and double zero represent non-winning outcomes that are not fairly represented in our odds matrix I say. You say my bet stands. Once again the outcome of the unbiased wheel spin has been unfavorable as the ceramic dot has settled on the double naught wheel segment I say the house collecting all of the chips wagered. A scandal you imply insinuating that the roulette has

been rigged nothing but a confidence game you say a canard. I say sir if you must please address your concerns to the slavic man haunting the poker pit whose fists are scarred by the numerous graceless gamblers whose daylights he has punched out you say I would prefer to keep my comments to myself I say place your bets and you say I will wager zero units in this round as a way of silently protesting this sham I say suit yourself and the live band in the distance dressed in silver sequined leisure suits plays complimentary ass jazz into the night amen.



# Day 1

## Journal of Alexis Singleton as kept by the spy drones

Alexis wakes and stretches, feeling refreshed, thinking that this has been one of the best night's sleep she has had in years. As she scratches her head she remembers where she is, about her new dream job, and smiles. Things are finally working out the way that she deserves.

She heads to the bathroom and is embarrassed to find that she left her toothbrush in her car. She cups her hand over her mouth and nose to puff-test her breath...not good. She begins a mental shopping list, topping it with *toothbrush*. Although she could just take the tram to the lot with her car in it, she knows that she only gets paid while on the premises, and figures it would just be cheaper to stay here and buy new stuff. She wants to make the most of this sweet ass job while it lasts.

Alexis wanders around her new, barren apartment until she finds the refrigerator. Not particularly hopeful, she opens it. Inside she finds a few pudding snacks and a bottle of cow milk.

"Hmm, I wonder how long *this* has been in here," she mutters aloud. There's a small compuscreen inside the fridge, which jumps to life when she touches it.

“Welcome to the ReCybererator! Your order is currently set to

- cow milk
- banana pudding

... purchases are non-refundable. if you'd like to change your order or restocking frequency, please address the compuscreen now,” it says.

“No thanks.”

She takes the milk carton and sniffs it. Not bad. She then looks at the expiration date and freaks. Junetember 214, 5309—that's like *2,300 years in the future*. She puts the carton back, her hands shaking, and slams the refrigerator door. She runs to the window, looking out on space, looking for some temporal landmark. She had feared that this would happen some day. Could she have been asleep that long? She had blacked out for weeks, even months before, even without eating... but *thousands of years*?

Space *does* look different. There is a ruggedness to it, like a dirt path eroded from years of use. If this is true, her car was probably towed and sold for dental filling scrap eons ago. She turns, thinking, “I hope they have toothbrushes in the future.”

Most of Alexis's things are in her car, so she has to settle for wearing her *sleeping rules!* shirt again, its irony even more poignant after her Rip van Winkle slumber. This suits her fine. Back in college, she (occasionally) attended lame-o writing workshops in the English department, in which they would work out their writing muscles, or *pump irony*, as they called it.

She opens the door of her apartment, letting the stale sarcophagal air out for the first time in thousands of years. Not much has changed about the hallways, if she remembers correctly, but it's not like apartment buildings are objects of frequent redesign—much less ones that are thousands of miles off

the ground. She sees no one. “Man, oh man,” she thinks. “What if the zombies from the moon colony have gotten loose and taken over Earth?” Her walking speed accelerates to a limping skip, feet undecided between constant ground contact—i.e., a power walk—and a panicked run, which would only serve to feed back pointlessly into her own dismay.

She reaches the elevator and presses the *down* button. What if the elevator doesn’t work? It would take her months to walk down the stairs. By then the zombies would have easily picked up on her scent with their ultrasensitive, animal-like snouts, upturned constantly and whiffing about like a bunch of rabid boarding school jerks looking for crumpets.

The elevator arrives, empty. Alexis gets inside and hits *lobby*. As far as she’s concerned, it’s *toothbrush* or *nuthin’*. The doors close and she begins to feel the sinking stomach effects of gravity compensators preparing her for the near-light-speed drop. Just as soon as she starts to feel comfortable, her guts move in the opposite direction, providing a spring-loaded reminder of how hungry she is. The doors *ding* open, and in walks a familiar face.

“Hi,” he says.

Alexis is stunned. “Is it... is your great- great- great- great- great- great-”, she goes on, eventually waving her hands to indicate *and so on* “great- grandfather Isaac Reme?” she demands. She then remembers to, out of consideration, direct her breath towards a neutral third-party object, rather than directly at this man’s nose and mouth.

The door closes.

“Maybe, but I don’t think so. Otherwise I’d be, like, Isaac Reme the 400<sup>th</sup>. How do you like the new job?” He asks, point-

ing at her head. He apparently does not expect an answer, because he immediately holds his belly and closes his eyes as they begin descending.

“Did you fall asleep too, then?” she asks.

“Uh, yeah, for about *three hours*. My damn ReCyberator keeps overflowing itself with pudding and dumping it all over my kitchen. I can’t even figure out how to turn it off.”

“What year is it?”

“Are you serious? It’s 2969. Julyary.”

“In my fridge... cow milk from the future!”

Isaac laughs. “Apparently you haven’t been keeping up with milk science. As of a few months ago, the FDA approved synthetic irradiated cow milk that has a shelf-life of over two thousand years. Everybody has been stockpiling that shit.”

“Are you sure?” she asks, skeptically.

“I work at the  $0^{\circ}K$  Ice Cream Cart. I know about this stuff.”

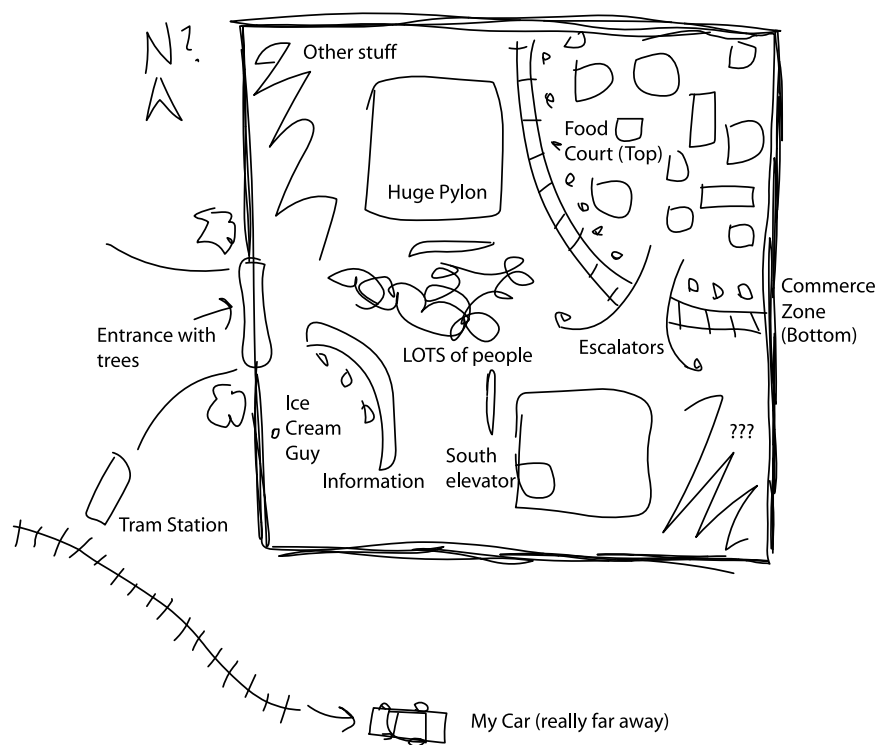
In an amazing display of elevator-conversation synchronization, almost suggesting a sort of *intelligent design* of the universe, the elevator reaches the lobby just after he finishes his concluding sentence. As a parting thought, he remarks,

“Now, if you’ll excuse me—these conversations cost us both money, you know.” He points again to his temple, winks with just a slight hint of sleaziness, and dismounts the elevator.

“See you,” she says. Alexis steps out and looks at the lobby, which is less busy than yesterday, but certainly not filled with

zombies (unless zombie disguise technology has reached new levels of treachery in the year 5,000). Her survey of the scene reveals no anachronistic technology, and no genetic mutations in the assayable characteristics of the mall customers—and so she feels safely back in the year 2969.

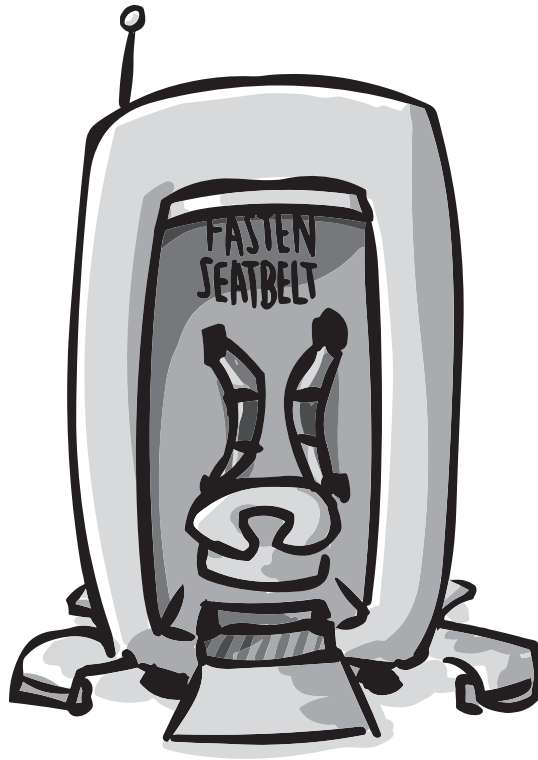
Her sense of the mall layout had improved since yesterday. Here is her mental map, inasmuch as such a thing can be committed to paper:



She heads towards the *commerce zone*. The gift shop is the first store that she sees that might conceivably have a toothbrush, so she heads in. Inside is a vast collection of Space Bridge

merchandise, the site being a popular tourist attraction, obviously. This place must make a fortune hocking its shitty plastic memorabilia. She takes note of the way the Space Bridge is depicted in miniature replica form: Unlike most skyscraper pocket editions, where the whole building is portrayed in 1/1,000 scale (or whatever), the space bridge is always reproduced in axonometric perspective, foreshortened to an infinitely sharp point as if viewed from the ground. On toys for children, this point is capped with a soft red plastic ball. Alexis selects the hypersonic toothbrush with a handle shaped like the space bridge (the point being replaced with a set of bristles rather than a plastic ball), some astronaut flavored toothpaste, and some tasteless souvenir clothing, and pays the automated attendant with her fiber optic credit card.

Alexis wanders into the northwesterly area marked *other stuff* in the diagram above. She finds it to be dominated by a multi-level collection of cylinders filled with appearing and disappearing businessmen, that look like this:



She knows these to be commercial teleportation equipment, a sort of faster-than-everything travel that she had never had the opportunity to use. Why? First, the technology is expensive, so that aspect made it unacceptable on her college and post gold-standard budget. It is also mostly reserved for the social elite, but despite her rich parents—rest their blessed souls—she also never used teleporters when growing up. Children are not allowed to use the technology, nor are persons over the age of 65. Thus, all of her childhood vacations were made aboard the family infrasonic hydrojet.

The area is cordoned off by a projected marquee energy barrier, running the message *members only* (along with, in smaller text, current NASDAQ quotes—because why waste the space?)

which makes it difficult to see exactly what is going on behind it. Alexis walks up to the barrier and cups her hands around her eyes, peering in. To her surprise, a door-sized opening perforates the barrier, seemingly on purpose. This makes it much easier to see, but also easy to walk through, which she does.

A flying compuscreen, executively styled, floats over to her.

“Good day to you, Madam!” it says in *Jeeves* voice, a phone-mic arrangement reserved for only the most upscale applications.

“Good day, flying compuscreen.”

“It will be my distinct pleasure to serve you in all of your teleportation needs today, Ms. Singleton.”

“Really?”

“Yes, indeed! My artificial consciousness can feel but one emotion, and that is unbridled joy at making your trip as safe and profitable as possible,” says the flying screen.

“No, I mean, I really have access to this?”

“Of course! All level two employees of the Space Bridge Corporation have complimentary access to our teleporter battery,” it reports, its propeller purring quietly. “Have you ever teleported before?”

“No.”

“Well, Madam, before we begin I shall give you an explanation of the technology and what to expect. This is required by law, unless you sign a waiver of liability.”

“I think I’ll take the explanation,” she decides.



“A lovely choice, milady.”

“Teleportation is a convenient mode of travel for several reasons,” it continues. “First, it is instantaneous from the perspective of Earth time. Second, teleportation can be done from any station—our stations are located just about anywhere your business takes you—to any destination (subject to access restrictions), in both one-way and round trip modes. Third, unlike competing phaser integration-based technologies, your body is never deconstructed, so there is absolutely no chance for irrecoverable data loss, or protocol failure resulting in soul duplication—a legal and philosophical nightmare! But, on the subject of nightmares, there are some drawbacks to teleportation technology. It works by temporarily shifting you and your belongings (limited to one piece of standard luggage and one carry-on item) to another dimension, one whose spatial topology results in it contacting our dimension at nearly every point repeatedly, with a period of about three seconds. So, you are sent to this dimension (called Dimension X), then you wait for a few seconds in a life-sustaining depot, and then are whisked back to Earth at the destination of your choice as if no time had elapsed.”

“Sounds good so far.”

“Well, Ms. Singleton, the only problem is that Dimension X is... not fun. In fact, it’s filled with horrific apparitions and monstrosities that seem to deliberately stalk and haunt our travelers. Though we’ve provided as many comforts as possible in the layover depot, such as fresh coffee, brewed twice daily, a pleasant instrumental soundtrack, and ergonomic chairs, some travelers find those few seconds disturbing.”

“Uh, okay.”

“Rest assured, milady, that the apparitions cannot harm you in any physical way. In fact, I recommend that you just close your eyes, put in some noise-canceling executive earplugs, and relax.”

Alex says nothing.

“So, where would you like to go? The entire known universe is at your disposal,” it says, and then mutters in the ultracompact *Legal* voice program, “Some restrictions apply. Offer is not valid to all destinations, particularly upper zip subcodes of the Space Bridge Complex. Excludes shipping and handling. By using SBC teleportation technology, you hereby disclaim all liability, whether express or implied, for the fitness or merchantability of this product, and for any harm that may come to you, including the loss of your soul to the otherworldly demon spirits. Side effects may include irreparable psychological damage, including recurring nightmares or uncontrollable post-traumatic flashback syndrome, and cold sweats, nausea, and anxiety. Those with epilepsy or heart conditions should not use teleportation devices. Consult your doctor before beginning any intra-dimensional travel program. Void where prohibited.” Alexis perceives this burst of speech as a verbal glitch, its content totally unrecognizable.

“I guess I just want to go back up to my room.”

“All right, ma’am! Perhaps next time we can interest you in a relaxing vacation getaway to the South Pacific? Or the Arctic Circle?”

“They say I don’t get paid if I leave the complex.” In truth, Alexis fears the quietude of remote locations, even in beautiful resort artifices such as the ones constructed in the Arctic Circle. Instead she prefers the solitude and anonymity of massive, strongly-purposed crowds of busy people. Also, the cash.

“Oh, I see! Very frugal of you, Ms. Singleton. I’ve set up canister twelve for you, so just sit inside, buckle your seatbelt, and close your eyes.”

She heads to #12 and sits inside. A pleasant recording begins to speak,

“Federal law mandates that all passengers of high-speed vehicles must wear lap belts and shoulder harnesses. Teleportation will begin as soon as your seatbelt is fastened.”

She clicks the seatbelt—useless, for she will experience no acceleration whatsoever—and grins like a teenager about to go on a roller coaster ride.

Leaving her eyes open was a bad idea. Many people make this mistake, and then find it impossible correct on future journeys—once they know the horror of Dimension X, they can hardly let it go on without supervision. She instantly finds herself in a room like an airport lounge, businessmen popping in and out of chairs randomly, most wearing blindfolds or with their eyes gently shut, music playing on headphones. The rest are gripping their handrests desperately, white knuckled, their pupils dilated, their faces engaged in frenzied screaming, just as Alexis is. Floating apparitions all around them create images and sounds of pure horror—rotted flesh spider monsters swing dancing to Japanese experimental neothrash electronica, and then eating one another violently, an Andalusian dog slicing eyeballs in grotesque detail, a group of naked elderly phenylketonurics engaged in scatological bestiality, or the distended intestines of a tapeworm-infested hydroencephalic albino hairless hemophilic orangutan with whooping cough.

The lounge, which, when you think about it, must have been an intensely difficult piece of architecture to assemble, is partly taken over by a hellish growth, and the walls of the structure have been demolished by thorned tentacles, which continue to thrash inward, and the holes left in their place reveal the natural landscape of Dimension X, which is rapidly parallax blood-red

clouds, lit from within by lava fireballs, with swarming carnivorous locusts forming figures in synchrony, spelling out vile cuss words in a continuous slander against humanity and the travelers in the lounge, an insinuation that you, the viewer, i.e., Alexis, is each and every vulgar orifice or sex act, delivered in the most crude slang available to our vernacular.

Only one second has passed, and Alexis is screaming in revulsion.

One of the other travelers, a man, appears to explode, his blood and organs splashing all over Alexis, then immediately decomposing, spontaneously generating a gushing forth of squirming larvae, which hatch into crawling leeches, mosquitoes, stinging wasps, a colony of flesh-eating bacteria and ebola, causing the others to cough up blood and corpuscular tissue, their eyes reddening in a sickly display of their infirmity.

She is shown the infinitude of human suffering, the senseless betrayal of decency, the Chinese water torture, the lashings delivered with glee, the frivolous abuses exacted with peremptory tyranny, and—all of a sudden, the stale white sterility of her apartment complex.

A gentle steamletting noise signifies the shutdown of the teleportation canister. She unbuckles, as a recorded message plays, announcing, “Thank you for using XBC Teleportation. For low-cost psychological counseling, please dial 6 31▽ A⊗ 9. We appreciate your business.” As she steps out, the canister disappears instantly.

Exhausted and bewildered, she enters her new apartment, brushes her teeth in a distant manner, drinks the contents of her sterile synthetic milk carton, and goes back to sleep.

RIGADOO DYKHOFF'S imaginary newspaper, The Daily Fallamajaw, has a net circulation of zero, its subscriber base, recorded in black on his handwritten ledger, is listed exactly as follows: Rigadoo Dykhoff himself; Ms. Ghislaine Mckew of Brisbane, Australia; and The State Library of Periodicals at Oxford, forced by law to subscribe to any recognized publication and archive it in microfiche format. Ghislaine Mckew had intended to subscribe to Nature Photos and Sewing Patterns Magazine, if we can say that someone who is senile and sends out random subscription cards paid for with forged bounced checks from an empty bank account that doesn't exist actually has intention in her actions. She has received zero copies of the *Fallamajaw*, which is the same as the number of issues that have been completed, and the same as the net circulation, as mentioned earlier, if zero can be thought of as a number of copies of an imaginary newspaper. The circulation of zero, despite a non-zero number of subscribers, is due to the effect of negative subscribers, or, supersubscribers, who are paid by Rigadoo to send him copies of the *Fallamajaw*, perhaps figuring that he can plagiarize those issues received in order to create his debut installment. His supersubscribers, written in red ink on his ledger: Rupert James Kennedy of Chicago, USA, a freelance ghostwriter; Georgiana Doerle, a social worker at the Family Health Center in London, who supersubscribed out of pure, unadulterated pity, which she likes to think of rather as sympathy; and Rigadoo Dykhoff himself. The number of supersubscribers, ie, red lines on Rigadoo's ledger, being equal to the number of subscribers, ie, black lines, we report a final tally, a net circulation of zero. None of his supersubscribers has ever sent an issue, or even a column, to Mr. Dykhoff.

Rigadoo's news room, in the basement of the Dykhoff family mansion at Sommerdorf, inherited from his late philanthropist and master businessman father, Elmo Dykhoff, smells of printer's ink, photographic chemicals, solid machine grease and

dry rot. In the corner, a yellowed fake alien body, preserved—if we can use the word preserved to speak of something that was never reserved, served, erved, or ved, since it is fake—in formaldehyde,<sup>2</sup> its amateurish onyx eyeballs uncharacteristically resistant to bloating in the vile juice. Despite the fact that humans have on many occasions met with real aliens, over hundreds of years, and have even preserved their bodies for real using modern preservative chemicals and laser suspension wombs, teasing apart their flesh bits with gamma knives, learning their biological secrets so as to make transhuman gene therapy superdrugs for the pharmacologically elite, Dykhoff keeps his ersatz specimen as a museum-of-horrors prize, and indeed each and every abortive issue that has been partially drafted at his drafting board has featured a front-page article (of varying prominence, depending on the other news available at the time) proclaiming: *Earth Visited By Space Aliens: Horrific Photos Of Captured Martian Inside*—and so goes essentially every article that he has begun writing: a fascination with the grotesque and obsolete, wildly dramatic and unreasonable tabloid stories about science fiction that has already come true: “Ingenious Scientists Have Conversation From Miles Away Using Satanic Energy Beams,” or “*Virtual Reality* Magick Allows Witches To Perceive And Manipulate Horrible Objects From The Netherworld,” etc.—but each article ends up shitcanned in frustration, as his imaginative swell runs dry after one or two summary paragraphs.

Don’t shed a tear for Rigadoo, though. He is financially secure, even without any income, for his extravagant home is owned outright (except, perhaps, for the upstairs rooms, occupied by vagrants who may eventually take ownership through common law squatting arrangements, unless he happens to visit those rooms first or employ the services of a maid), and his

<sup>2</sup>A poisonous embalming agent favored in ancient times.

favorite and perennial meal, wheat chaff, is among the least expensive sustenance foods there is. Although in ten years his periodical has never published a single issue, he is about to, by accident, break the conspiracy theorist story of a lifetime.





## Day 2

Journal of Alexis Singleton  
as foretold by the bards

It seems to Alexis to be a crime against nature, or at least natural capitalism, to be paid to do nothing. And while she is perfectly happy to—I shouldn't say perfectly, for there are some aspects remaining that still make her less than overjoyed, even at this stage, i.e. the small device she must wear, her scarlet letter **S** for *slacker*; the nightmares caused by her cognizant visit to Dimension X; most of all, the eerie pointlessness of her job and, as far as she can tell, the Space Bridge Complex itself—in fact, it would be fair to say that, even on her second waking day doing what should be her dream job, she is perfectly miserable. Like any perfectly unhappy employee with bounded rationality, she unconsciously decides to inconspicuously slack in her duties until she is fired or reprimanded, that is, to slack at slacking, in other words, let's go do something.

The thought of *go do something* makes her morning invigorating. The astronaut flavored toothpaste tastes pleasantly like space exploration, rather than the minty chalk optimized for variables other than savoriness (e.g., whitening ability, moment of inertia, specific gravity) that it really is, she finds her hypersonic shower vitalizing despite the high-pitched whine that always shakes her brain and inner ear uncomfortably, her new clothes kitschy and cynical, just the way she likes it, the syn-

thetic pudding for breakfast a delightful colloidal suspension of sugar and starch with a natural banana flavor and real banana seeds, and the totally unfurnished apartment an inviting blank canvas rather than bleak desolation. She thinks freely and without regard to her paycheck.

In fact, she thinks, I think I'll wander around some.

Although the atrium has a dramatic architectural style, most of other accessible floors of the Space Bridge have a plain, utilitarian design. The layout is as follows. The perimeter of each floor is lined with apartments, or offices. These, of course, have windows, although windows are of somewhat dubious utility at this altitude; they do little to provide natural light (except, at certain times from certain orientations, direct cancer-causing sunlight), nor do they open to provide a pleasant breeze (unless forced open or destroyed, in which case they provide a very unpleasant venue for the rapid and fatal depressurization of the room), and the view can be disorienting to some people. Thus, opposite the windowed perimeter apartments and offices are windowless, shittier apartments and offices. The entire layout is in a cross shape, as seen in Figure 3.1.

Alexis's first order of business is to meet her neighbors. The most conspicuous one, who lives a few doors down from her, has his electronic apartment door jammed open with an old hardcover dictionary, a rustic welcome mat in front of his door, stubbornly attached to the floor with cleaner-bot defeating superglue, and what appears to be actual sod erupting gently from his room. This is Mr. Jack Wagster.

"Don't track that Zoysia in here," he says, referring to the seeds of the African native turf that must have clung to Alexis's sneaker soles some days ago. Mr. Jack's floors are actually covered in live grass, kept alive by full-spectrum lamps and ultra-

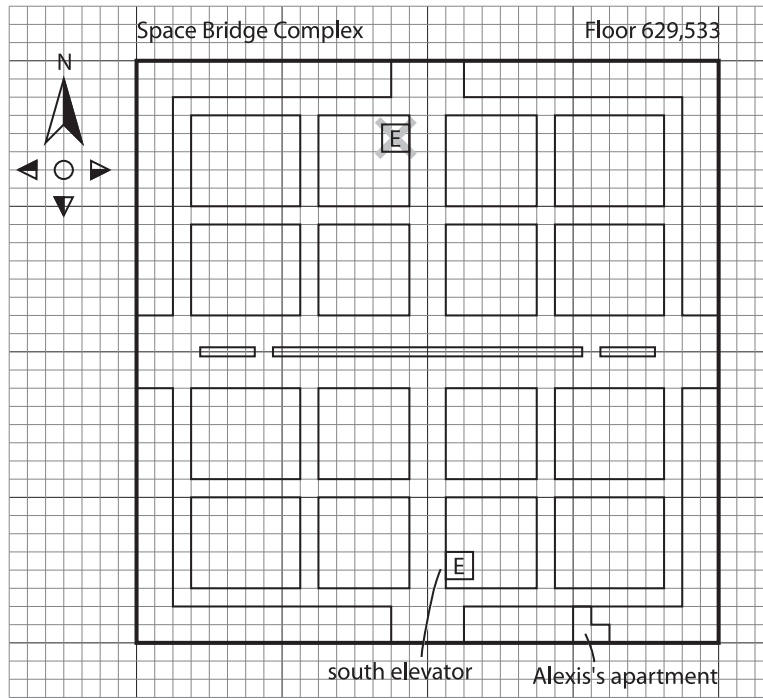


Figure 3.1: The 629,533<sup>rd</sup> Floor (and most of the others)

sonic humidifiers. He grows Kentucky bluegrass exclusively. The highly fit Zoysia strain is anathema in his greenhouse, choking his crop like a puff of ebola breath on the mucus membranes of an influenza collector.

Alexis stops at the threshold, having not even knocked yet, and looks around. Mr. Jack's room is very moist, almost misty, and his collection of quaint 21<sup>st</sup> century paper books seems to be almost biologically bound to the various plant growths that cover his walls and furnishings. Mr. Jack himself sits in an antique armchair, facing the door and reading a weathered copy

of *Success with Small Fruits*<sup>[3]</sup>. His extremely tiny spectacles rest far out on his nose, ready to leap suicidally from his face at any moment.

“Well, aren’t you going to come in? You can leave your shoes outside,” he says, his face turned downward, looking over his glasses. His wild grey hair forms an aggressive widow’s peak between two long streaks of matte baldness.

Alexis takes her sneakers off and leaves them neatly by the welcome mat. She then decides that she had better not soil her socks, so she takes those off too, balling them up inside the sneakers.

“Hi, my name is Alexis. I just moved in to an apartment down the hall, on the south side.”

“Yes, I know,” he says. Mr. Jack speaks like this: Simultaneously bewildered and bored, slowly, as if to a child, but surprised at what comes out of his mouth, so that maybe that child is himself.

“How did you know that?” she says, still standing just inside the doorway.

“The community bulletin. You’re a registered curiosity offender,” he points out. Stretching to reach a nearby end table, the tips of his fingers just barely pinch a fluorescent yellow flier, which he pulls back and hands to Alexis. As he turns his head, Alexis can see the same characteristic device that indicates his mode of employment.

<sup>3</sup>Edward Payson Roe, *Success with Small Fruits*, PF Collier And Son, 1881

# Notice

Floor 629,534

A new resident, **Alexis Singleton**, is moving into room S61. Because Alexis is a registered curiosity offender, SBC community standards mandate that this notice be given to all nearby neighbors.

Be careful leaving your possessions unguarded, as Alexis has shown tendencies to peruse items inquisitively, and to ask questions about things.

Alexis scrunches her lips resentfully as she reads it. “So, what’s your name?” she asks.

“See? Just as I suspected,” he says. “Always asking questions.”

Alexis rolls her eyes. Mr. Jack senses in Alexis the inklings of machinations of leaving, which he circumvents:

“I’m just teasing. Here, sit.” He gestures to a couch that matches his armchair. It has a few lightbulbs under it to nourish the grass that would otherwise be occluded by the couch. She sits.

“My name is Mr. Jack Wagster.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Wagster.” They are sitting too far apart to shake hands.

“Please, call me Mr. Jack.”

“Mr. Jack, I’m at a tough period in my life. A mid-early-life crisis. I slept through college and attained a useless degree. I expected to be rich, but I have nothing. Then, I expected

that I'd find purpose in the accumulation of wealth by doing essentially nothing, but already on my second day I feel empty and panicked. Today, my brain is racing. I want to know what goes on at this Space Bridge, and what all *this* is about," she erupts, ending by pointing to her temple.

Mr. Jack laughs. He reaches out his hand, and Alexis realizes that he wants the flier back, which she gives him and which he uses as a bookmark for *Success with Small Fruits*. He shuts the book and places it on the table. She notices that most of the other two or three dozen books on the table also have paper bookmarks in them.<sup>4</sup> He wipes his hands on his corduroy

<sup>4</sup>Had Alexis been given unlimited time to survey and document the scene, for instance if a crime were committed here and she was the investigating crime scene analyst, and supposing that she were a numerological savant obsessed with trivial details, and, after mapping and measuring each blade of Texas Bluegrass, she had catalogued the page numbers on which Mr. Jack Wagster had placed his bookmark in each of the books on the table, in ratio to the number of pages in the respective book, she would have found that the distribution of ratios follows an exponential curve: The number of books with bookmarks near the end, i.e., a ratio of 1, would have been found to be much, much larger than the number of books with bookmarks near the middle, which is in turn much larger than the number of books that Mr. Jack stopped reading near the beginning. Though a reasonable inference when compiling a psychological profile of Mr. Jack (though perhaps this step would not be left to the numerological savant but instead the hyperintuitive detective chief) would be that he lacks the follow-through to complete books, despite his enormous willpower to collect and begin them (not to mention grow grass *indoors*), but, as he would explain if questioned in the police station, cooperating fully, he simply likes to slow down reading books when he is in the middle of them, and slow down even further as he reaches the conclusion; in order then to satisfy his urge for reading, he must consume many books in parallel. He slows like this, as he would explain, so as not to conclude the mental universe that each book creates—he finds the ends of books demoralizing and destructive. When asked about the non-fiction *Success with Small Fruits*, which is simply a plotless list with descriptions of different cultivars of berry, he

pants, lord knows what he is wiping, perhaps simply a standing preparation ritual, and stands.

He walks out the front door of his apartment without saying a word.

Alexis sits for a few seconds, puzzled, then gets up and peeks her head around the door, thinking that perhaps he had intended for her to follow him. Mr. Jack is not visible, which is another way of saying invisible, however, consider the differing implications of the two phrases. Of course, he does not literally have the ability to become transparent to light. He cannot be seen for the simple reason that he is not there. Alexis is like, “What the fuck?”

She stands patiently by the entrance for several minutes. Then she starts looking at his stuff. This is no *illegal search and seizure*; his possessions are in plain view. She sees his piles of books, which are only interesting for a few moments. No touching. She wanders into his kitchen. His sinks are filled with hydroponics; instead he dry cleans his dishes with Tetrachloroethylene. The faucet is permanently rerouted into an overhead misting system. He’s dislodged the tile on the floor, revealing the granite marble underneath, and has planted symbiotic lichens and moss to slowly dissolve it.

The door to the bedroom is slightly ajar. She figures that this gives her *probable cause* to check inside. Mr. Jack’s dresser is covered in wallet-size portraits of trees, and his bed is like one of those princess beds with super-tall bedposts that suspend silken curtains to protect the princess’s bedtime innocence, except that his curtains are actually camouflaged mosquito netting. His closet door is shut tight and locked (though the key

would stammer, then become quiet and ask for a lawyer.

is in the lock); a trunk with thirty hardcover books piled on it blocks the door, and a handwritten sign reading **DO NOT ENTER!!** is taped to the top of the pile. Alexis is fully justified in moving the stacks of books to the floor, dragging the heavy trunk, and unlocking the closet—she has a warrant. Plus, it’s been at least thirty-five minutes since Mr. Jack vanished, which is like, the statute of limitations on *do not enter* signs.

Exercising her judge-given powers of busybodiness, she opens the closet. Inside are no skeletons, or purloined industrial secrets, just a rack full of Mr. Rogers sweaters. She flips through them, disappointed, looking for more intrigue. Suddenly, she is caught! Could it be the community watch? A noise of footsteps is heard from the front of the apartment. In that instant of criminal misstep that is so often a perpetrator’s downfall, she decides (rather than come clean) to sloppily hide her infraction using the resources, i.e., hiding spots, at hand. She steps into the closet and quietly closes the door behind her, then conceals herself as best as can be done behind some torso-length wool pullovers.

The footsteps pause to look around. The muck-muck of feet on grassy sod becomes the fleshy slap of bare feet on granite as the footsteps enter the kitchen, and the electromechanical whisk of the privacy door betrays their excursion into the bathroom. These footsteps are definitely looking for her. Next, of course, back to the Texas Bluegrass of the bedroom. She can sense them squish closer to the closet. She cowers behind the sweaters as the door is opened. The footsteps cleave the array of woolens at the middle, bringing her face to face with Mr. Jack Wagster.

“Ah, there you are,” he says. He turns and heads back to the front room, where he sits back down in his armchair.

Alexis makes a partially successful attempt to restore the



roadblocks to the closet, and follows him sheepishly, that is, covered in wool fibers. She sits back on the couch. With his book back in hand and open to the same old page, Mr. Jack immediately resumes not talking.

“Sorry about the uh—” she starts to sort of say.

“Oh,” Mr. Jack suddenly recalls. He hands her a tabloid newspaper from a plastic bag by his feet.

“The Terrible Secrets Of The Space Bridge,” she recites. “Did you just go buy this?”

“Yes, from the news stand in the atrium.”

“I didn’t know where you were going.”

“To the news stand in the atrium.”

“I know, now.” She looks over the tabloid, reading further front-page ballyhoo. Bullet points describing what horrors can be found inside include:

- Zombies!
- A Tower To God!
- Mind Enslavement Technology!
- Satanist Rituals!
- Government Cover-Up!

“Is this stuff true?” she asks, believing that she knows the answer.

“Some of it, or all of it, depending on your perspective,” he says. “Zombies, we know they are real, although they mostly live on the moon. A tower to God? Perhaps. True until proven false. In this way we can hold several mutually contradictory propositions simultaneously in our paraconsistent knowledge systems.”

Alexis does not respond to this.

“Alexis, the point I’m trying to make here is that you’ve woken up this morning with the intention of uncovering a secret that has haunted countless numbers of utterly devoted, obsessive and insane conspiracy theorists and graduate students. It is as if you awoke and said, ‘Today I will understand the nature of being and all of its implications.’ Well, superb of you; this is my goal as well, and should the ontological Gods smile upon me and bless me with such wisdom before bed-time, you shall be the first to hear from me.<sup>5</sup>

“But the thing of such unassailable mysteries is that one cannot solve them by fiat, by strokes of lazy industry, or pure intention, or, for that matter, reading,” he says, tossing for emphasis *Success with Small Fruits* into the fireplace, which bursts neatly into flames straight away, “and worse, the more assiduously we attempt such problems, the more prone we are to believe in fanciful solutions,” he gestures at the tabloid, “and the less the quote-unquote real solution would matter to us, should we attain it. Do you get where I’m going with this?”

<sup>5</sup>Clearly, Mr. Jack Wagster enjoys long monologues, particularly ones with paragraph breaks in them, perhaps because he delights in the quirky typographical custom of leaving off the closing quotation mark of a paragraph continued, though adding another opening quotation mark on the next paragraph, resulting in an overall *surplus* of openings, an unbalance that leaves the remainder of the text buried in an unattributed dicit.

“No.”

“What I’m saying is that you might as well do something more productive with your time. What about organizing a *superhuge volleyball* team? There’s an intramural adult league that some of the floors participate in.”

“I’m not going to give up so easily,” she says.

“Suit yourself,” he says. “But exercise does increase blood flow to the brain.”

Alexis remembers her creed to *go do something*. “Well, uh, would you be interested in playing on a team, hypothetically?”

“Actually, I was quite the superhuge volleyball player when I was in my prime,” he boasts. Mr. Jack stands and outstretches his limbs, uncurling his arms into rolling fists, flexing his muscles grotesquely. Alexis averts her eyes as he begins doing squats and pelvic thrusts.

“I’ll be by if I’m able to get something together.”

If Mr. Jack weren’t so engaged in muscular revelry that he missed Alexis’s parting remark, and the fact that she parted, then he would have said something stupid like, “Good luck solving the mysteries of the universe, Alexis.”

I hear that <sup>NIST INVENTED</sup>  
 an atomic clock  
 the size of a grain  
 of rice. This is great. Next we need an atomic *bomb* the size of  
 a grain of rice. Then all I will need in my life is two grains of  
 rice: one to tell me what time it is, and one to blow me up.

the light house <sup>KEEPER</sup>  
 waits  
 by

her candy phone for an important call whenever she presses  
 one of the musical buttons that triggers a familiar series of  
 undynamic electronic bleeps composed for a scale unknown to  
 western ears she then shouts ill get it and picks up but no  
 one is there another wrong number i tell her when in roam  
 speak as the romans did that is conjugate your nouns this  
 conserves time and roam fees by compressing the speech she  
 eats a licorice wafer from the battery compartment now you  
 can pick up anything she looks at me like i am non  
 sequitur like i have shown up to a barn raising by  
 myself expecting a much less heavy barn or much more  
 sophisticated pully system i use my tiny pencil sized axe to  
 cut down tiny pencil shaped trees in order to make pencils i  
 use these to keep tally of our dozens of children who gather  
 around hoping for candy wafers wrong number i say kids  
 sorry we have so many children the light house keeper and  
 i it is because of my continuous ejaculation syndrome my  
 specially mutated gonads produce zygotes at a cancerous  
 rate and my urethral sphincter squirts in rhythmic  
 spasms each minute of every hour i went to the doctor who  
 has a sign out front the sign poses the question ethral  
 catheterization what is missing the answer is written  
 below u r and the doctor says this condition is extremely  
 rare occuring in one per six trillion patients i say that is

more than there are people in history past present and future he says incorrect there will be more soon your syndrome is a genetically advantageous trait i say i would like a prescription of medicinal tetrodotoxin the parylizing poison within the fugu puffer fish he says happy to oblige as he catheterizes me i say i would also like a prescription for hair plugs in my cheeks so that i may grow gigantic prosthetic sideburns in the shape of idaho the gem state my favorite its motto relevant let it be perpetual or in more brief form as the romans would have used to save money on their cell phone bills esto perpetual and the doctor says in fact i have some left over hair plugs right here thank you i say and he says did i hear correctly that you are dating the light house keeper yes in a sense i say she is my wife of twenty years he says my goodness that woman is an unconvicted felon alas i say the light house keeper is lean from mistakes example of a mistake during an escape attempt from a police holding cell in which she used a strong acid ie deoxyribonucleic acid from her own other kind of cells to melt the bars she accidentally spills some of the high molar solution on her thigh which severs the leg right off this is one reason she is so light and as she tugs on my giant potato facial hair trying to touch my ah most significant bits and i spray as always my ts and gs and cs and as or saisonnaise the spiced mayonnaise that is a favorite substitute for licorice wafers in our household

From: Tom Murphy VII <tom7@los.unitik.edu.de>  
To: alt.cooking <usenet!edu.unitik!prometheus!net-arpa>  
Date: 11:59:59 GMT, 31 Junetober 2969  
Subject: WARNING: Our Stupid Era of Groceries :-(

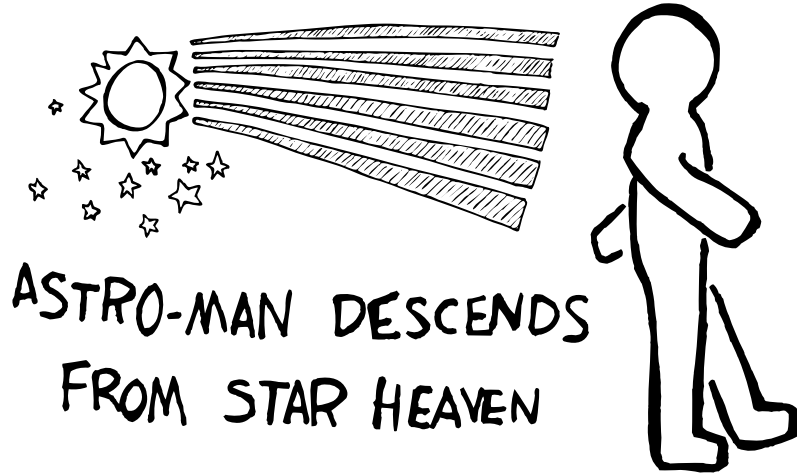
How many <sup>BANGS</sup> do you want for your buck? Because, in order to correctly calculate buck bang ratios in the year 2969, you need to be aware of a few things. First is that, ever since abandoning a set of common law standards and practices in food and product labeling in favor of the metric system, consumers must be ever vigilant and well-versed in metric units and facts. I was at *Chow Town* yesterday to buy some condensed cow milk for some potato chip cookies that I was whipping up, okay, so I'm like, here's an aluminum can from *Dairy Fairy* with 600 ml of condensed cow milk, which is perfect. I've been burned in the past when I was a little bit sloppy, for instance, I once bought a magnetic hard disk drive for my antique 20<sup>th</sup> century compuscreen from an estate auction. The drive was listed as being "400 mb," which I took to be megabytes, a popular designation of storage size before mankind invented the electron spin micrograph and started using bajillibits to measure our compuscreen capacity. All you metric geniuses, I know, are laughing now, because you know that "mb" means millibytes, not megabytes. How the fuck am I supposed to install Microsoft Windows 3.11 for Workgroups in  $\frac{2}{5}$  of a byte? I had to pay a handy restocking fee on that piece of shit, let me tell you. Anyway, I've wised up since then. I know the tricks: the *m* designating the milli-prefix in millilitres can be, through a slick typographical manipulation, upon closer inspection, actually 'nn', standing for nano nano litres, or  $10^{-18}$  litres. I check with my loupe, and that is definitely an 'm'. They can sneak a tiny, or chromatically indistinguishable 'o' between the 'm' and 'l', meaning that I am

purchasing 600 moles. Since 600 moles is something like 10.8 litres of water, I should at this point read other aspects of the label carefully. Am I really buying condensed cow milk, or does that say “radioactive waste product milk”? Is the condensed cow milk “in light syrup”? Once again, however, it would seem that the label reads exactly “600 ml.” So I buy it, along with some potato chip dough, chicken eggs, polysorbate 20, and xanthan gum (a rheology modifier) to complete my recipe. Back at home, with steps 1–3 finished, I begin to open the aluminum can to get out the condensed milk for the next phase. But as soon as I puncture its hull, there is a fierce implosion and loud whine as gas rushes into the can. I try to pour out the milk, but only a few tiny drops line the edges of the mutilated aluminum. So I’m like, what have I screwed up this time? I call the customer service hotline printed on the back of the can, and a recording informs me that volume measurements on all *Dairy Fairy* products are taken at unspecified temperatures and pressures, and in particular, the 600 ml condensed cow milk size is sold as 600 ml *at 3.1 femtopascals*. Do they think I’m cooking in fucking outer space or some shit? So, as a public service announcement I want to reiterate: Check the label carefully, and if the volume measurement *doesn’t explicitly say* that it was taken at 100 kPa, *ask your grocer* for clarification. Don’t take anything less than a definitive point in the triple-point phase diagram for an answer, and beware the *metric!*

– Tom 7

# ASTROBIOTICS

AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY



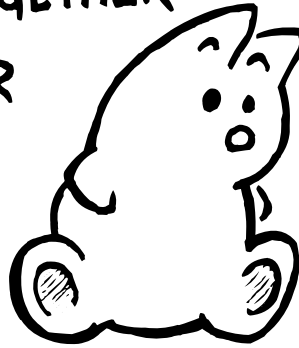
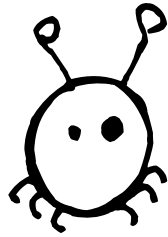
ASTRO-MAN DESCENDS  
FROM STAR HEAVEN

... TO BRING  
LOVE POWER  
TO THE PLANET OF EARTH





THE CREATURES OF EARTH  
ARE BROUGHT TOGETHER  
BY LOVE POWER



BUT LOVE  
POWER IS  
TOO STRONG  
TO CONTAIN  
SAFELY



## Day 3

Journal of Alexis Singleton  
as translated by Zimmy Zoonucket, MD

When ALEXIS was young, she would watch a show on the telescreen called *Actual Crime Drama*, featuring then-stars Bryce Slemmons and Shirley Westaby in lead roles. The show was set in ancient Columbus, Ohio, in the early 2010s. Bryce Slemmons's character was named something like, oh, what was it? Detective Hünsperførjs, I think—anyway, so bad that TV Guide and everyone just called him Bryce, even sometimes the other actors on the show, by accident. He was the male lead, the king of the show, but Alexis really watched for his sidekick, the Amazonian ninja princess Adella Furfaro, whose buxom brawn would always rescue Bryce's dumb ass from all sorts of peril. Adella was her hero, and Alexis's parents would always have to coax her down from her make-shift towers of chairs, performing ninja moves and crime-solving dances with no precedent in the show, or trying to sign up online for unlicensed gene therapy procedures to introduce a third X chromosome into her cells, so that she would perhaps develop Adella's ripe musculature when she passed through puberty. After winning two Emmy awards (best comedy—something of a sore point, since the show was not intended to be funny—and best improvised ninja prop), the producers of *Actual Crime Drama* got a little too full of themselves and the show went to shit. Execu-

tive producer Robert Steffensmeier was apparently slighted by a TV sportscaster named Marty Jackowitz in the summer after the show's third season—legend has it that the sportscaster directed an off-hand barb towards Steffensmeier's favorite super-huge volleyball team, the Hollywood Barr Bodies. Steffensmeier was reportedly so furious that he drove to the Sportscaster's Los Angeles upscale apartment building and burned it to the ground. To add insult to arson, he then started writing this sportscaster, and other sportscasters, into episodes of his show, crossing out names and occupations in scripts handed to him with a marker and replacing them with Marty Jackowitz and sportscaster. In essentially every episode, either Marty Jackowitz is brutally murdered, and Bryce and Adella must track down his killer, or worse, someone else is brutally murdered, and they must track down his killer, who turns out to be Marty Jackowitz, who is given the death penalty by cruelly unusual injection of painfully lethal serum. Of course, a crime mystery show cannot be interesting if it is always the same person or shallow facsimile of him doing the killing. Every season after the third was utter nonsense as a result, a childish tirade only interrupted by two half-genius forays into *meta noir*, the first in which sportscaster Marty Jackowitz is brutally decapitated in the opening scenes of the episode, but then we ultimately find out that his killer is... Marty Jackowitz, who is then executed. In the second noteworthy episode, we again start with Marty being senselessly sniped as he walks in the park with his stepdaughter. This time (over the course of an extra-long 90 minutes) we find that the killer is... executive producer Robbie Steffensmeier, who is exonerated at trial due to the inadmissibility of illegally collected sniper rifle evidence (18 USC § 1718: "no evidence may be introduced from the metafictional universe"). Robbie then murders Bryce and Adella on the floor of the court with a sawed off sniper rifle that he smuggled through the non-functional metal detector on the courtroom set. It turns out that this scene was filmed in live action without special ef-

fects, and that the actors Bryce Slemmons and Shirley Westaby did not survive. (The Emmy award for best actor in a dramatic series was—criminally, in this author’s opinion—denied of Bryce posthumously, though he was nominated; it went instead to Jules Gibbons for his tear duct-wrenching portrayal of *Mr. Hippo* in *Mr. Hippo Goes To The Grocery Store*.) Anyway, the reason to bring all of this up is that the show and particularly the character of Adella Furfaro had a profound impact on Alexis, a fact which has passing relevance to this next day of exploration.

Alexis had been finding her other neighbors to be somewhat less welcoming than Mr. Jack Wagster had been. Her first encounter, with a man whose name she doesn’t even know, was like this:

*(she presses the electronic knocker)*

A man answers the door, in the sense that he opens it by a few inches and sneers.

“Hi, I’m Alexis, your new neighbor, and—”

“Do you see a *welcome* mat?”

“No.”

The man shuts the door.

“Asshole,” she mutters.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>To Alexis’s credit, this guy, who goes by the name of Harold, really is an asshole. Anecdote: While he is refueling his solid gold convertible on a road trip, a mother of three children driving them on the way to see Mr. Hippo State Park walks up to him and asks,

“Excuse me... how do you get to route 79?”

The sign for route 79 is right behind her, as Harold knows. He doesn’t look up, as he starts to say,

“How do you get...”

At the next door, her second encounter was somewhat less rude.

*(she presses the electronic knocker)*

Nobody answers. She waits forty seconds and then leaves.

The next was slightly more productive.

*(she presses the electronic knocker)*

After a few moments a woman named Holly answers.

“Yes?” she says. Holly is a real modern woman, dressed in a business suit at all hours of the day, receiving an intravenous drip of reverse-chirality caffeine isomer, double-fisting cell phones.

“Hello. I’m Alexis Singleton, your new neighbor.”

“Oh. . . the curious one,” she says with a mark of disdain.

Alexis scrunches her lips again.

“Well, what is it?” asks Holly.

“I’m just trying to—” she starts to ask about the Space Bridge, but as Holly looks at her watch impatiently after only five syllables, Alexis aborts that sentence and instead finishes with, “—uh, start up a superhuge volleyball team for the floor. Are you interested?”

Now he looks her right in the eyes,

“... to be such an idiot?”

She covers her son’s ears and calls Harold,

“Asshole.”

True story.

“I don’t think I have time, sweetie, but if I were you I’d ask Adelina in room W34. She’s really...” Holly flexes her arms in a muscleman pose rather than come up with the right adjective.

“Okay, thanks,” says Alexis, but Holly is already back on her cell phones, the door on its way shut.

Alexis had planned to simply visit each room sequentially, but that would leave hundreds of rooms before she would reach Adelina. The name and the pose instantly reminded her of her childhood hero, Adella Furfaro, and she couldn’t wait to meet her.

Now the story has caught up with the action. Alexis presses the electronic knocker on room W34. She hears from behind the door a deep thunderous gait right away, and in only one or two seconds, the door opens. A woman towers there, intensely still in her stance, not nudged in gentle ways as most of us are by air currents, gravitational disturbances, and fidgetiness.

“Are you Adelina?”

“Yes,” she responds, heroically.

“Wow,” is all that Alexis can manage.

Adelina is dressed in a two-piece bikini, showing off her ridiculously top-heavy figure, her shoulders at least twice the width of her waist, bursting with serpentine fast twitch muscle fibers. As her bikini top she wears two poached and laminated gorilla hands, cupping her breasts like a sort of Vogue Magazine cover shot from an alternate *Planet of the Apes* dimension. All of this makes perfect sense to Alexis, and, apparently, to Adelina.

“You are Alexis, yes?” she asks, without moving.

“Yes. . . how did you know?”

“Mr. Jack told. You are making superhuge team, yes? Please, come in my home.”

Alexis does!

“You are SPIM user?” asks Adelina, though some of her rhetorical questions have used identical intonation.

“Uh. . . yeah,” says Alexis, star struck, though she does not even know what that is.

“What is Alexis user screen name? I will add you to ‘friend list’ please.”

SPIM, which stands for Super Prescient Instant Messenger, is a compuscreen e-mail app much like the technologies that were first used in the 22<sup>nd</sup> century to replace the carrier pigeon for rapid back-and-forth communication. A user types onto one compuscreen, and his words are translated into a stream of ones and zeroes, or “digital information,” that is then transmitted, or “sent,” over the World Wide Web to the recipient, where his XML semantic decoder displays the message on his screen, interrupting his attempt to get some real work done. The recipient can respond right away by simply typing into the same box. Super Prescient Instant Messaging improves upon this time honored formula by using Extra Sensory Perception chips<sup>[7]</sup> integrated into the `www.com`. First developed for planetary ultranet, where speed of light issues once made it in-

<sup>7</sup>John C. Henrick and Lori Hathaway, “Extra sensory perception in VLSI”, *Paranormal Hardware*, pp. 21–34, 2444



tolerably slow to communicate vital space mission data (i.e., <r0ck3t669> what's up dude; <o0 sp8ce capn1 0o> nuthin just some space mission crap; <r0ck3t669> lol me 2; <o0 sp8ce capn1 0o> omg lol), SPIM now allows messages to arrive at the recipient *before* they are sent. This enables all sorts of creative fun, although mostly users just say the same old stuff lol.

All manner of people hang out on SPIM, just sitting in chat rooms all day talking about nothing one or two seconds ahead of nothing actually happening. One of Adelina's best friends is a depressed black teenage goth feminist straightedge lesbian who goes by the screen name **Xx fallen\_angelou xX**. They mostly talk about anorexia and bodybuilding.

Alexis is stumped, because she still doesn't know what they're talking about. "Oh, I've been meaning to get a new screen user. How about I tell you tomorrow?"

"Yes! I have very big friends list," she says in her Eastern European English way.

"So, Jack told you about the superhuge volleyball team?" Alexis had meant, as usual, to ask about the Space Bridge, to try to collect facts and aspects on the mystery.

"Yes. I will forward position."

"You want to join?"

"Yes. In my home I am very big superhuge player. We do not use robots. I punch ball on court by muscles."

Superhuge volleyball is one of several future sports that involve the use of athlete robots to take the place of humans, using a generally acknowledged loophole in the US Constitu-

tion. The constitutional principle, discovered by the Supreme Court in 2303, treats a robotic avatar (which is a telemetrically controlled cyberdroid that allows the virtual presence of a human in a different place, and which, through machine learning algorithms, can ultimately assimilate the human's behavior into a crude facsimile over time) transparently as the human that is controlling it. Thus, if a robotic avatar kills or is killed, this is the same as the controlling human killing or being killed. Likewise, if the robotic avatar can run a 4 second mile, the human is awarded the Nobel Prize in running. This did make most sports boring,<sup>8</sup> but other, exciting replacements such as superhuge volleyball took their place. Superhuge volleyball is played on a court that is exactly sixteen times the size of a normal volleyball court (obsolete): two 144 meter  $\times$  144 meter half-courts with a 38.88 meter high net separating them. The ball is similarly superhuge. In general, the positions are stocked with robotic avatars, because of their ability to run faster and jump higher than normal humans, as well as their ability to not be crushed by the weight of the ball.

Alexis is stunned. No robots? "And you can like, spike the ball?"

"Yes. I very love superhuge. I will forward position."

"Well, as far as I'm concerned, you're hired," she says.

Up to this point Alexis had been fairly lukewarm on the idea of putting a team together, as it had been one of her less favorite sports in high school. But she is energized just by being around this doppelganger for her childhood hero, and now psyched fur-

<sup>8</sup>Some sports, like American football, are so violent that delicate electronics stand no chance on the field, and are still played by humans to this day.

ther by the idea that their team might actually be *good*.

“Yes. Alexis, time to go. We start tomorrow six A.M.”

“Okay, I’ll see you tomorrow,” Alexis says, beaming, and leaves Adelina’s apartment. She wasn’t paying much attention and doesn’t really recognize what she’s just agreed to. Alexis, *psst*, you haven’t woken up at six A.M. since you were 9, let alone practice a strenuous sport that early!

She realizes this, and more: Even assuming that Mr. Jack was serious about being on the team, she still needs three more players.

Alexis decides, for the purpose of making friends more efficiently, i.e., without the disadvantage of being already known as the neighborhood curiosity offender, that she will visit rooms on the opposite side of her floor, where perhaps the fliers had not circulated. She wanders through the halls, not sure which of the hundreds of identical apartment doors to try, until she hears a muffled (but clearly loud) noise that she can’t quite figure out coming from behind room N18. She has had good luck with outliers in the past, so she knows this must be the one.

She activates the electronic knocker.

She waits.

When she presses the button again, she can’t even hear its characteristic *ding-dong* inside (what *is* that sound?), so she starts knocking manually, first a gentle *rap rap rap* with the back of her knuckles, which is obviously ineffectual, then the front, then a thumping with the side of her hand, then propping her elbows against the door and smashing it with both fists simultaneously, gnashing her teeth, calling, “Hellooooooooooo.”

Finally, the door opens. The noise spills out into the hallway, much louder and much clearer now, like a previously-enabled lowpass filter or Dolby Noise Reduction had been abruptly turned off. A man with very short hair and a half-assed goatee stands there and smiles, nodding to the sound, which is just barely periodic.

“Hey,” he says.

“Hey,” says Alexis. “I’m your neighbor, Alexis. I was wondering—”

“I have a permit for this, you know,” he says, referring she guesses to the sound effects, though he continues to smile likeably.

“Oh... that’s not what I’m here about.”

The man seems surprised. All he does is raise an eyebrow, then goes back to nodding a bit as he waits for her to continue.

“Well, I was wondering if, you would, if you would be interested,” she starts and restarts. “Actually, I can’t concentrate at all with that sound. What *is* that?”

“Come in, I’ll show you. Alex, is it?”

“Alexis is it.”

She goes inside with the man. The noises are louder still. Inside she sees their source: Four six-foot tall foil speakers occupying the four corners of the room. Each is connected to a cable that runs to some equipment that she doesn’t recognize in the center of the room. In the middle of the four speakers, she is now able to pick out what sounds like public domain classical jazz, with a bunch of talking over it. The whole thing is dis-

torted horrifically, and sonically disorienting, as the component sounds seem to drift and dart from speaker to speaker.

“How do you get a noise permit?” she asks.

“Uh, I don’t really have a permit,” he says. On second thought, he turns it down a little bit, which makes it much easier for them to hear each other.

“What is this?” she asks, pointing at the center.

“It’s a vacuum tube amplifier connected to a mediumwave AM radio,” he says, proudly. “I even mounted an antenna outside the window.”

Alexis sort of kind of remembers radio from science history class in secondary school. “Does radio still exist?” she asks.

“There aren’t any more broadcasts, no, but there are weak signals still bouncing around space from the golden ages. The antenna can pick those up faintly and I crank the volume here.”

“Not very good reception though, huh? You can hardly hear the music.”

“On the contrary!” he erupts, then launching into a prepared monologue, “We’re hearing the music as well as anyone ever has. It is perfect, holistic beauty. The sound of deep space, the past, the present, all at once. Classical Jazz has never sounded as glorious as this.”

Alexis tries again to listen. National Public Radio blares in overdriven, disjoint syllables as several different tepid jazz pieces play concurrently. “This sound is just an accident,” she decides.

“True! But what can be more exciting than a beautiful ac-

cident? Is a sunset cloudscape on purpose? The manically composed rhythms of a schizophrenic freak-out? Or the dancing caustics of sunlight through a million diamonds suspended in hydrolyzed corn syrup?” on this last hypothetical example he points at a display by his window, which appears to be just that. It is currently inactive, as the sun passes to the South of the Space Bridge during this season.

“How did you get all of those diamonds?”

“A heist,” he says. “But I paid for the corn syrup. My name is Danny, by the by.”

## Anatomy of a Heist

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Danny Durfey  
2<sup>nd</sup> period crime confessional  
Mrs. Andrews  
3<sup>rd</sup> grade

It was a cold October that year, frigid by Minnesotan standards, even. Spitball fights required no auxiliary pulp supply, as our saliva would freeze in the air before reaching its target. But I was not in Minnesota, and I had more to do than just spit on my friends. I was planning a diamond heist.

Diamonds have one of the highest indices of refraction available in an ultrahard precious mineral (the only potential competitor is titanium oxide, or rutile, though these crystals are mostly opaque), giving them an unmistakable lustre and sparkle—the only thing that would do for my display.

As a precious, precocious, larcenous third grader with the darndest blonde bowl haircut, my heist was tremendously easy. Using my deepest antifalsetto and Olde Boys Club English ac-

cent, my eyebrows paralyzed in hoity-toity industry, the skin and cheek gripping an imaginary monocle, stroking my hairless chin as if a well-manicured beard, and smoking my bubble pipe, I dialed the Carnegie Museum of Natural History and engaged in the following conversation (with innuendo made painfully explicit for your benefit):

“Museum of Natural History. As far I know, you are an adult.”

“Hello darling. My name is Mr. Van Der Galt.”

“How can I help you, Mr. Van Der Galt, you magnificently rich bastard?”

“I would like to arrange a viewing of your precious stones collection with my son, for his eighth birthday.”

“I think we can do that, in a sort of preemptive bid for a generous endowment some time in the near future. Let me transfer you to the curator, you fantastically well-mannered and handsome Englishman.”

“Good show, dear.”

The curator was about to get a taste of my perfidious Albion.

“Good day Mr. Van Der Galt. This is Jason Bourgen, curator of the Carnegie, ready to prostrate myself in worship of your buying power.”

“Yes, Jason, I’m wondering if I can arrange a private viewing of the precious minerals for myself and my son.”

“Ah, of course, Miss Canders, whose aptitude, along with the aptitude of my entire staff, I greatly exaggerate when speaking

to the rich, has already informed me. When would you like to see the exhibit?”

“My son Albert’s birthday is the weekend of the 4<sup>th</sup>.”

“Saturday, then? Seven AM? I’ll bring my most brown nose.”

“Jolly good. Toodle-pip,” I said.

On the morning of my false birthday it was foggy and wet, the air sloppy and unprepared. This set the perfect mood for my heist. I put on my best suit, from earlier this year when I was ring bearer at my older sister’s wedding. I also dressed up my specially prepared robotic artifice and surrogate father in a black suit with a monstrosly puffed-out collar and cuffs, the better to conceal the somewhat shoddy connections of the lifelike head and appendages to the minimal limbs and torso. I affixed a real non-prescription monocle to its face, and rebooted it.

“Good day to you, love,” that splendidly pulchritudinous automaton said.

I adjusted his slacks, and, deciding that we were ready, told him, “It’s right jolly of you to bring me to see the gems on my birthday, father.”

“Anything for my favourite son,” it said.

Having slipped my parents Rohypnol in their bedtime tea last night, I had free use of the family car for several hours. I had my cybernetic caretaker drive, for added realism. During the trip I made last-minute adjustments to its heist day programming, a RoboScript application totaling over 85,000 source lines, and mentally prepared myself for what was to come. I had



my automaton qua chauffeur park the car near the loading dock at the rear of the museum, both to avoid the red-flag-raising cognitive dissonance of a stupidly rich Englishman driving his son to see billions of dollars worth of diamonds in a 2951 Chevrolet Ciprofloxacin (a ten year-old shitmobile), and to provide a quick exit route once the heist was in progress. Together we walked around to the front entrance.

We presented ourselves to Mr. Jason Bourgen as Mr. Van Der Galt and his mollycoddled and distracted son Albert, and, after exchanging pleasantries and carefully avoiding a physical handshake, whose inhuman grip could betray our treachery, we were admitted without suspicion.

He brought us to a curtained off area and had one of the security guards bring a locked metal box to a low table. My robot and I watched as Jason opened the box with a cylindrical nanokey attached to his belt loop. Inside, on a sheet of velvet, were thousands of diamonds piled up. Jason spread them out on the surface, as I watched, mesmerized by their glint. My gadgetronic guardian looked, also, as he was programmed to, and then, in accordance with the next statement in his program code, said:

“A dashing collection. Jason, I wonder if I might talk to you in private about the possibility of a gift from my family to the museum.”

“Why yes! Shall we go to my office? Guard, keep an eye on young Albert, if you would.”

The automaton followed Jason up some stairs. I was able to listen to their conversation via a tiny in-ear wireless receiver. However, the next stage would only take a few seconds. As the guard watched in boredom, in my most awkward young’un way

I made a show of lifting the box (which was about chest height for me) and, as he jumped into action to try to stop me, I spilled its contents all over the ground, sending diamonds everywhere. Actually, this was a little magic trick. Instead of spilling the diamonds into the ground, I spilled them into the front of my pants, where my underwear had been replaced with diamond-catching fabric pouches—the sensation of these thousands of gemstones on my prepubescent reproductive machinery is, sadly, not something that many of the rest of you can hope to reproduce, and, I will tell you, it was noticeably better than the cubic zirconia I had practiced with. That cubic zirconia, incidentally, was simultaneously released from other slits in my pants, which spilled them all over the floor while I was collecting the real diamonds in my underwear.

“Ut oh,” I said, in my most adorable childhood voice, and made an embarrassed face.

The Guard turned absolutely pale. Feeling that this had somehow been his fault, he grabbed the box, knelt to the floor, and started shoveling the faux stones in handfuls back into the box.

“I’ll fix it,” I said, and started to help.

“NO—” he said, “—just go stand over there!” N-O spells no.

At this point I had won. I went to the corner and waited for him to completely lose track of me, and then disappeared out the back. Upstairs, my android attendant was playing out his script, writing out a bogus check for fifty million big ones. As I peeled out of the Museum parking lot in the Chevy Cipro, I pressed the button that remotely detonated a sodium pentathol smoke bomb inside the biomechanical babysitter’s brain, filling

the office with non-lethal trance- and confusion-inducing gas. The robot then self-destructed.

On the way back home, I purchased 6 liters of hydrolyzed corn syrup (refractive index 1.498) using allowance that I had saved over several weeks.

In conclusion, I present *Still Life With \$40,000,000,000; A Composition In Light Syrup* to the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade county arts and science fair in anticipation of the blue ribbon. Thank you.

“You’re from Pittsburgh? One of my favorite shows when I was little was set there,” says Alexis.

“Actual Crime Drama? In fact, they made an episode about my caper when it hit the news. I was pretty excited about that.”

“Really?!” Alexis’s mind races, since she thinks she’s seen every episode.

“Yeah, except they changed my character into a eight year old version of that sportscaster guy, which was sort of weird.”

“I *have* seen that one. Awesome,” Alexis sighs in satisfaction. “So now you just live on the Space Bridge, listening to this and staring at your still life composition?”

“Yeah. What could be better? Actually, I do still tinker with robots, which is how I earn my living.”

“You don’t wear one of these?” she asks, still not knowing what to call the device. “Most of the others that I’ve met do that.”

“A Thinking Aid? Hell no.”

Alexis suddenly worries. “Why not? Is it some kind of mind control? Does it cause terrible nightmares? Read my thoughts and transmit them to the arachnoid overlords?”

“I don’t think so. It seems harmless. But I don’t wear one because it presses against my outer ear, which fucks up my hearing.” Alexis checks with her hand and sees that it does, in fact, bend her ear slightly. She doesn’t notice anything different when she lifts it temporarily. “It’s the same reason I cut my hair so short and stopped wearing glasses. I can’t see shit but it’s worth it.”

“Why did you call it a *Thinking Aid* then?” she asks.

“That’s just what my friends and I call them, because they look like antique hearing aids. Who knows what they do.”

“Anyway... robots.”

“Right, yeah, I guess I have a certain gift for electronics. I work for SBC Robotics making automata and avatars and compuscreens. Have you seen the nonopedal vendors in the lobby?”

“Er, not yet.”

“Maybe the flying compuscreens in the transporter battery?”

“Yes! I have.”

“That’s totally me. Next time you’re there, say, ‘These batteries are dead to me’ for a little surprise.”

“Ha ha, okay,” chuckles Alexis. “Well, speaking of robots, how’d you like to join a superhuge volleyball team? We’ve got a ringer, now. She plays without robots.”

“It is intriguing,” he says, rubbing his goatee. “I’ll think about it.”

“Our first practice is tomorrow at six AM.”

“Okay, fuck it, I’m in. I’ve always wanted to try programming athletic avatars, anyway,” he resolves. He stands and nods his head, smiling and satisfied. Then he says, “Hey, do you have room for any more?”

“We need two more players, actually.”

“I think I know someone who would like to play. I’ll bring him along. Are you on SPIM?”

“Uh, no. You’re the second person to ask me. How do I use that?”

Danny explains to her how to set it up on her compuscreen, which should be pretty easy to do later.

“Thanks!” Alexis extends her hand to shake, but he seems to ignore it. Maybe he really is that blind? “Well, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

“Nice to meet you, Alexis is it.”

She leaves his room, and as the door shuts behind her, muffling the sound, clear thought returns to her mind at last. She mentally “ahhhs.”

Alexis’s superhuge volleyball team now needs just one more player, and she knows who it will be: Isaac Ream.



## Chapter 4

# The Timeless Novel Is A Cosmic Impossibility And You Know It

Most authors, unless they wish to be relegated to the *fun dumb joke books written by celebrities* section or *60% off last year's political soapbox* bargain bin, intend to write timeless novels. Like so much that authors attempt, this is impossible.

What does it mean to be timeless? Well, for starters, the book should not take place in any particular time period. This much is obvious. But already we, as hypothetical authors, are in trouble. Suppose that I retrieve a 25-cent piece from my Guess Jeans pocket in order to purchase a Coca-Cola from a vending machine at the 1984 World's Fair in New Orleans, Louisiana, USA. Do I mean a 1976 Bicentennial quarter? If so, then my story can only take place during or after 1976. **WRONG: NOT TIMELESS.** Therefore, we must be very careful that the things we mention are applicable to

any time period; in telling the preceding story we should say *standard American quarter* instead of *25-cent piece*.

The timeless novel, aside from not being set in any specific time, should rely only on *necessary* qualities and concepts of the universe, rather than *contingent* ones. The distinction comes from the study of modal logic<sup>[1]</sup>, where we speak of truth with respect to the infinite variety of *possible worlds*—i.e., what *could have been*—only one of which is the actual world in which we live. A fact is *necessarily* true if it is true in all possible worlds, and a fact is *contingent* if it is merely true in this actual world but false in some others. If in our hypothetical story we say,

Mordechai Dziedzic walks into a *Long John Silver's* restaurant.

**WRONG: NOT TIMELESS.**

This is an example of a contingent statement, and therefore not timeless: It is not necessarily the case that Mordechai Dziedzic exists, that he is able to walk, that *Long John Silver's* is a kind of restaurant, and that he is walking into one. There is a sneak available. According to some axiomatic formulations of modal reasoning, what is possible is necessarily possible. In other words, by simply claiming that what we write is *possible*, but not *actually the case*, we divorce ourselves from the burden of needing to be non-contingent, since the notion of possibility itself is already non-contingent. An improvement on the above, thus, is:

It is possible that mankind exists. If this in fact true, it may be the case that a man named Mordechai Dziedzic exists. If

<sup>1</sup>Clarence Irving Lewis, *A Survey of Symbolic Logic*, University of California Press, 1918



so, it would be reasonable that he would be able to walk. It is also conceivable that there is a chain of restaurants known as *Long John Silver's*. Perhaps, if he exists and can walk, then Mordechai's destination is a *Long John Silver's*.

**WRONG: SOUNDS LIKE SHIT.**

Some call this literary device “the  $\square\diamond$  monad<sup>[2]</sup>” or, more simply, “fiction.” However, I think the reader will clearly agree that this constitutes unreadable prose. Unfortunately, the original subject matter is simply too incidental, requiring a squadron of apologies before it can be timeless. At that point, the actual story is obscured beyond recognition. Another tactic is to simply pick a story line that is less dependent on accidental circumstances. For example:

A particle meets an antiparticle, mutually eradicating one another.

At first glance, it seems that we have achieved our purpose, and have written the timeless novel. After all, the laws of physics are universal, right? **WRONG: NOT TIMELESS.** Suppose the age of the universe is 13.7 jillion years, a conservative estimate. Our understanding of the laws of physics is based only on those first 13.7 jillion years, and therefore, merely speculative with regard to the future. For instance, suppose that a hitherto unknown law of the universe says that every 13.7 jillion years plus ten minutes, gravity enters a refractory period, wherein the motion of the celestial bodies is opposite of what it normally is, and during which particles and antiparticles

<sup>2</sup>Tom Murphy VII, “Novel, as in new”, *Proceedings of the 3rd international conference on ridiculously inappropriate applications of computational logics (RIACL '06)*, September 2006

love to coexist with one another peacefully. Then, in ten minutes, our “timeless” novel will be worthless, not only because the statements contained within it are contingent (indeed, false) but because all possible readers will have been destroyed in the subsequent cosmic mayhem.

Seasonally THE FARMERS of  
L.G.M.A., the Large  
Giant Mango Asso-  
ciation, pool their genetic and fertilizatory resources in order to create the World’s Giant Largest Mango. This is not a competition, nor a bid for fame via the Guinness Book of World Records, though they have appeared in every issue since 2313<sup>[3]</sup> under the eponymous record, for mango hugest, as a matter of course. No, the purpose for their confluence and cooperation is as a respectful and life-giving gesture to the ambassador from the planet Z1000, named *Special Cosmonaut Argod*, whose biological constitution is such that he must live at all times inside a large giant mango, the bigger and more succulent its fibrous flesh, the better for his metabolism. It takes Special Cosmonaut Argod approximately thirteen months to completely exhaust the natural resources of one large giant mango. “This mango allows me to live as if in the edible womb of the most delicious mother of all the universe,” S.C. Argod says via translator. The Z1000 language is a throated carnival, spoken with ten times the epiglottal looseness than the most lazy French accent. It is often mistaken for the choked gurgling of acid reflux disease or the muffled half-successful speech of a man who swallows one end of a thick section of hybrid dental/intestinal floss, hanging onto the other end until he passes that first end, then uses that proof of his own toroidal topology as a digestive

<sup>3</sup>James E. Hurng, *World’s Giant Largest Mango*, in: James E. Hurng, (ed.), *Guinness Book of World Records*. Bantam Books, 2313

tract cleaning implement or, by way of expertly tied Boy Scout knots, a portable hammock that is always available and that it is simply impossible to fall out of. “And as I make sex to its orange pulp, I am in tune with creation,” he finishes his love poem with a drawn out gurgle. But something is wrong! The world’s first documented case of a galactic ambassador life support unit “bug,” in this case specifically the highly specialized mango pulp weevil, has been eating his nourishment slash sloppy lover substrate and, through its own mechanisms of love larvae, reproducing itself in vast numbers. Before the rudimentary detection mechanisms of the L.G.M.A can find the problem, the 2969 large giant mango cocoon has been defiled by these weevils, essentially spoiled beyond usefulness. They attempt directed *gamma knife* chemotherapy, focusing beams of radiation in constructive interference to neutralize the life spirit of the weevils while leaving the life spirit of Special Cosmonaut Argod intact as well as the delicious meat of the mango, or what is left of it. Although the treatment is partially successful, the heartily resilient weevil infestation survives and continues to metastasize. The L.G.M.A is caught with its collective pants down, which in this case means without a suitable backup large giant mango. Ultimately the Special Cosmonaut Argod dies of a broken heart and empty stomach (these two organs being essentially the same in the Z1000ian physiology, which accounts partially for the odd imagery often heard in Argod’s proclamations, though, admittedly, he was prior to his death a bit of an oddball, which is one of the reasons that he was assigned to the Earth Planet in the first place rather than some more desirable appointment such as Mangotopia 11). At first, the L.G.M.A tries to cover up his death, appointing his erstwhile translator as interim standin figurehead scapegoat, and simply replaying previous status reports to the Z1000 mother ship when necessary. But, like all ill-conceived and imperpetuable shams, this sham could not be conceived to perpetuate for much longer. The Z1000s would want revenge,

and want it *mango style*.

The Future IS NOW. Not literally now, but in the future. Let me say that again. In the future, the future will be the future now, and the now now, and then. According to Dr. Stephen Hawking, the world's preeminent quadriplegic physicist, the theory of world line quantum dilation string theory spacetime manifolds or whatever dictates that temporal locations, past, present, and future, will become one. In the future. The world is very crowded. We need to share space with all of our ancestors and descendants, or rather, contemporaries. There is hardly any point to moving, because if you move, you're also still in the same place that you used to be, or are, all entangled up in a giant human knot on the planet's surface, smelling each other's arm pits and crotches, because that's where your nose or arm pit just happens to be. And, because you already are where you're going, why make the effort? The sound everywhere is simply heinous, tympanic membrane shattering white noise, but hearing is useless in the future now, so who cares? Actually, all senses are useless. The future sucks, just one notch down from the violent destruction of the universe, except in some sense worse because we all have to stick around to experience it and smell each other's armpits.

The sun explodes. Boom! That's probably pretty bad. First, the Earth planet is very hot, giving some people sunburns. Then, the Earth planet is very cold, as it shoots off along its most recent trajectory out into the universe, like a legally emancipated but psychologically dependent child made of 5,972,000,000,000,000 teragrams of rock and dirt and people. Everybody takes their sunburned selves and tries to dig deep into the planet, to get near its cozy molten core. Anyway, this is pointless, as mentioned earlier. The people on the outside are already frozen, their bodies providing a warm human pelt

around themselves who are digging into the center of the planet and their albino offspring who are already dead of old age and dirt poisoning, if that is such a thing.

The son of God makes his second appearance, with the intention of saving the sinners once again. Unfortunately, as the Earth planet has drifted millions of miles away from where it is supposed to be, Neo Jesus materializes in the vacuum of space, and is torn apart by his own internal pressure. This makes God pretty pissed.

More bad things happen. Basically everything. Think some up. Those happen. The future is really fucked.

Now that we've got that out of the way, let's talk about another, smaller problem.

After the wedding ceremony and reception we wait around on the ocean bluff for the wormhole to open. Sure enough, a red ring of iridescent plasma appears, exactly on schedule. The wedding party and some of the less inebriated guests are there to wave us off, and I kiss my mother, we climb the stepladder (those pranksters tied a bunch of cans and *JUST MARRIED* signs to it), and leap through the ring holding hands.

As we leap, we pop open our oversized umbrellas, and on the other side, drift down from ten feet up in the sky or so, to land on the silver sand beach of Nantokron 1 for a 6-day dream honeymoon. Only, you must have done something wrong because your umbrella doesn't open, and you fall, dislocating my shoulder from trying to hold onto me, and hit the ground, breaking your leg. God damn it! This was supposed to be a relaxing honeymoon<sup>[4]</sup>. There are no doctors on Nantokron 1.

<sup>4</sup>Worldnet Wormhole Tourism, "Beautiful Nantokron 1", Travel

Just an infinite fractal coastline of warm freshwater beaches, marine life that has evolved in such a utopian biosphere that it seeks no refuge from potential predators—what predators? Instead, it swims up to gently nuzzle your ankles or hop into your hand, so that you can dip it in soy sauce and eat it raw. Here’s what one of these plump little guys look like, the meatfish; I put it in Figure 4.1 for you.

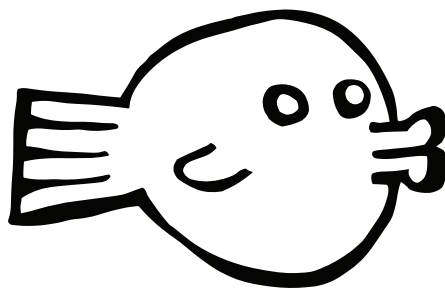


Figure 4.1: The Meatfish

He’s so cute you could just eat him right up! There are also huge delicious fruits and pre-cooked vegetables that grow on the trees along the coast, born ripe and never spoiling, huge trees with umbrella-like canopy leaves, providing shade from the 300 suns of the Nantokron system. Everything is perfect here—except for my crippled husband.

I drag you to the edge of the beach and prop you up against a rock. Your lame leg leaves a crooked and sad path in the sand for expert hunters keen on preying on the wounded to track you down with, but, as we know, there are no such beasts on Nantokron 1, unfortunately for me. No, no, stay there, I’ll go find some sticks so that we can make a brace.

Brochure

I head into the woods by myself. For shit's sake, I think. You will be taking me on another make-up honeymoon after this week is over and you get laser reconstructive surgery on your leg. These trees never shed their leaves and, basically, never die, so there aren't many leg-sized sticks on the ground. I go deeper. Yes, yes, the forest is beautiful, the three hundred suns conspiring with the waving leaves to cast an intricate collage of overlapping shadows on the ground, the oasis cove with waterfall, perfect for personal hygiene and intimate encounters, the birds singing and landing on my shoulder, etc. etc., but where are the sticks? Ah, there's one—wait a second, I think, this stick is *too perfect*, and as I pick it up, I notice that it has feathers on one end and an expertly carved arrowhead on the other. Though the arrowhead is expertly made, I caution you against concluding that this is some object manufactured in a loving fashion by a hobbyist or collector, nay, it is clear that this is no treasured item. It was produced among mass quantities with the intention that it would be fired and end up in the dirt, as this one was.

Nantokron 1 is not supposed to have anyone on it. The wormhole only opens up once every two years, and then again in six days, so the only tourists that ever show up enter through that portal and leave again in six days, and I saw it—this time it was just me and my monoplegic husband. So this must have been left by previous visitors, a real no-no according to the Nantokron tourism board. Anyway, what kind of tourists bring aboriginal weapons with them? Weird fucking tourists is what.

Well, that's one artificially appropriate stick down, one more to go. Ah, here's another one, stuck into this tree here. I pull on it but it won't come out, so instead I twist it to break it off at the head, like an unsafe way of incompletely removing ticks from the scalp of a child, although this island, this perfect honeymoon location, does not have any creatures so vile as children. But

the fibers at the end refuse to break, even when I start rotating the shaft to torque them into submission, and all that I manage to do is peel the splinters of wood back off the arrow, leaving me with a half-strength, pathetic feathered strut. This will not do.

Oh, here's another stick, flying through the air and—ack!

\* \* \* \* \*

I wake up with a mind control helmet on. This is not, like, the kind of helmet that some people use to control robots or 3D sex simulation video game ultranet adventures with their minds, but rather the kind of helmet that controls the *wearer's* mind, through mind wave technology, by remote control. Mind wave technology possessed by Nantokron 1 natives? Don't make me laugh! The helmet makes me laugh. Damn. Not only does this helmet control my thoughts, but it leaves me aware of my awareness, and yet mocks me when I have a laughable private thought. Suddenly, I am able to perceive a short native, Lilliputian in size—ouch!—I see, ah, much larger stature now, holding a remote control and grinning impishly. I make a swipe for the remote, but this is hopeless. Not only is my dislocated arm painfully punctured by a poisoned arrow, thoughtfully left in place even now, making it difficult to swipe, but the native imp—ouch!—hero champion is out of reach and, anyway, my body is incapacitated by the mind helmet. Any attempt to move my hands near my head or near the handsome superhero champion results in paralysis and pain. The little—that is, giant, really cool man with the remote makes me hop on one foot and spin around. Yes, ha ha, you have control of me, good show. Now let me go! Ouch! Okay, all right! Yes, my new husband is here on the island with me, too. No—ouch!—yes, let's get him! I am remotely controlled back to the spot where you lay, nursing your stupid leg. At first, you are relieved to see me, but then



you see the mind wave helmet and freak out, my glassy stare and extended, stiff arms perhaps providing the basis for some level of reckless pessimism. You struggle to get up, which is of course ridiculous with your broken leg, and hobble away from me through the sand. But, even as I halfheartedly fight the cerebellum hijacking, your crippled ass is no match for my pair of intact wheelstilts and I take the spare mind control helmet and forcibly attach it to your cranium screwing in the electrodes after sterilizing the insertion points with alcohol wipes and then the great superhero with two remote controls forces us to renew our wedding vows before choking each other to death and then an amazing thing happens our bodies become meatfish and our minds simplified all cares erased and what was that that who cares? because we're swimming and what else is there when in the ocean and a meatfish and here's a warm leg to nuzzle up against and we do and something else warm comes and picks us up wheee and just as the great superhero is about to take a bite out of us a pair of larger energy spirits materialize and the superhero is just a boy and he is scolded by his parents and forced to release the meatfish back into the ocean to be eaten by some other travelers and he will be grounded for a week because what did we tell you about traveling to the matter dimension to torment the matter beings and you're really going to get it this time young man and he disappears but before restoring us to our original form and so we swim away as helpless naïve plump fishes...

And see? Although being grounded for a week is really, really bad, it's not quite as bad as the universe ending in a time collapse, right?

# Mankind

HAS discovered all manner of creatures

in its space exploration, although word of these beasts has not necessarily percolated back to the United Nations on Earth—planetary ultranet is very expensive, and we prefer to use its limited bandwidth to download MP3s.<sup>5</sup> Let me tell you about one of my favorite encounters. But first, let's have some

<sup>5</sup>Colloquialism: A compressed music file, so named for an early popular format (MPEG Layer III<sup>[6]</sup>) of these files. Even though the term is still used in present day to refer to unlawfully copied music in general, pirate audio files are now encoded using a perceptual model of Western musical structure, recording only the statistical deviation from the expected instance. In layman's terms, it works as follows. Imagine that you and I—I will play the pirate music encoder compuscreen, and you will play the decoding plugin aboard the starship—both have a model in mind for the way music should sound, and it is the same model for each of us. This is the same thing that humans have, that allows us to guess the rhyme or next note in a song, even though we've never heard it before, except it is fixed into a program. What this program can do is, given a song so far, rank the possibilities for the next moment of the song from most likely to least likely, along with probability densities for each choice. In order for me to send you a tune, then, I start at the beginning of the song, find out the rank of the correct choice, by consulting my model, and then send you just enough information to recover the rank of that choice, so that you can reconstruct it with your own model.<sup>7</sup> This requires significantly less communication than describing each piece of the song individually—as long as the songs stay close to the model—which makes it ideal for the slow pace of planetary ultranet.

<sup>6</sup>ISO/IEC 11172-3, "Information technology – Coding of moving pictures and associated audio for digital storage media at up to about 1,5 Mbit/s – Part 3: Audio", *ICS 35.040*, 1993

<sup>7</sup>Imagine what happens if I always send you data indicating that you should pick the most likely choice. In fact, this is a very short file, consisting entirely of binary '0's, which produces the *perfect song*; everything is exactly as expected. Because this simple file can often result from transmission errors, this song—called *Because I Love You*—which essentially *wrote itself*, has been dominating the galactic music charts since 2778.

juice.

I walk you to the atomic juicer. What would you like?

That's great, we can make that. The juicer is empty, so I dump some garbage in the top. This juicer, as you know, has such fine blades that it chops up matter at the atomic scale, then reassembles its component pieces into juice of almost any flavor. Heavy elements such as radium and plutonium work best. Have you got some plutonium? No?

We wait behind the lead curtain, the noise of the juicer making it too hard to have a normal conversation. Ah, there we are. Let's get our drinks and head to my office so I can tell some stories. No, no, you don't have to call me captain. Kurt is fine. Sure, it's right in there. Although... you've used a space toilet before? Okay, good. I'll meet you in my office.

I show you to the space bathroom and then head to my office. Thank God, this will give me a second to straighten things up. I pace around the office nervously, rotating paintings into orthogonal orientations, kicking discarded intimate clothing under my desk and the couch, pulling the labels off of my bottles of cheap whiskey, making it look like more respectable homebrew. I change the channel on my artificial windows from "True Crime Mystery" to "Dramatic Starscape." I curse to myself, dammit, why did I tell him that we use all of our bandwidth to download MP3s? The United Nations does not need to know that shit. Just as I'm trying to hide our casino-grade poker chips, you walk in.

Welcome back, Admiral. I hope everything came out okay?

I wince again. That is inappropriate language to use in front of a UN delegate. Remember, Kurt, we need this guy to think that we're doing a good job, I tell myself.

Here, have a seat, and let me regale you. Is there any particular kind of story you'd like to hear? A dramatic space battle? An heroic rescue?

Okay, well, one favorite—perhaps just because it is still fresh in my mind—is the story of the people from the  $\mathcal{U}\mathfrak{A}\tilde{\mathfrak{D}}\text{--}\otimes 7$  sector, who call themselves the Decandrians, for their ten penises. Despite their staggering number of sex organs, these are a gentle people who live—or I should say, lived—on a curious planet, not known to humans previous to this month. Why is it curious? Well, the helical shape of the planet, combined with its extreme spin and its ultradense gravitational gradient, makes it so that to the inhabitants, the entire surface of the planet seems to be on one, giant, downward sloping hill. Well, yes, Admiral, it is possible, I mean—we saw it! If you're interested in the scientific details, one of my officers can show you, later.

So, your brain begins buzzing, what does a race of beings living on an infinite slope do? Well, for starters, they have a tremendous source of energy, a conduit running a circuit around their planet, through which low-friction permanent magnets pass, inducing a massive electrical current that is harnessed at power stations along its length. They also have a non-humanoid shape: five limbs, like our arms, with opposable flagella at the ends, but a strong five-pointed spinal cage, which supports their weight when they cartwheel, as they do, long distances along the planet's highways. The Decandrians are primarily nomadic, only traveling in one direction around the planet, sharing the societal structures as they go. It only takes a few days to make a full revolution, at speeds of three, or four hundred miles an hour cartwheeling. In between each pair of legs, two penises. At least for males. And a heart, the hearts located towards the extremities because when spinning they need to maintain a high blood pressure to keep the flow of oxygen to their central brains. Their brains are actually suspended in a neutral density

low-viscosity fluid so that they don't rotate as the rest of the body does. The brain sends signals to the body proper through a mechanism much like the brush contacts found in many electric motors: two plates touching one another, like placenta and womb, one attached to the brain, and one attached to the remainder of the spinning body, and then a series of concentric neurons on each half, sending signals to the other by contact only, so as not to twist up into a useless, tortive channel or to spring load itself, storing energy like a coffee can rubber-band car, where here the rubber band is the spinal column and the brain the hanging bit of lead weight. That's life on a downward slope. They— No— I'm sorry, go on.

Well, yes, that's true, it is also in some sense also an upward slope. But the Decandrians are an optimistic people.

I can tell this is not going well, I think to myself, and so I grab my bottle of whiskey and pour myself a double. Would you like some? Really? It's homebrew. . . okay, there's a sport, hand me your glass.

We sent a team down to the surface to make contact and to explore. The grade of the slope is something like  $38^\circ$ , so we sent our team with a set of half-stilts; attached to one leg they could stand comfortably without falling into a fatal roll. They managed to stop one of the Decandrians, who goes by the name of Joseph Damascus Van Boilersteing, a lovely gentleman, although, I must admit I was at first taken aback when he was brought aboard, since the Decandrians do not wear any clothes and their ten penises are constantly turgid. Via the universal translator, he briefed us on their planet's deteriorating situation: it seemed that their motion wasn't perpetual after all, that their rotational inertia was being dampened over time by their electrical generator and their population's downhill cartwheel action, and their planet's rotation would soon be slowed to the point

where they would no longer have such luxury. Joseph assured me that the Decandrians were ready and able to live on a planet with slopes facing in all directions—that they would adapt—but this lack of downhillness wasn't the only problem their planet faced from its decelerating rotation. According to our science personnel's detailed computer models, built from Joseph's data, their planet would enter an unstable orbit and then crash into their sun. The time it would take this death spiral to complete? A mere 11 days.

No, I'm not making this up! How could you think that? I take another large gulp of my whiskey.

So, anyway, we used our telekinesis beam to pull one of the more distant planets in their solar system close to their planet—so close, in fact, that as they reached the nearest point, they just needed to do little jumping cartwheels to be sucked from one gravitational gradient to the other, starting their new homes on the gas giant replacement. A new lease on life, thanks to the Earth Planet Space Mission ship C611-81!

Sure we have a telekinesis beam. I can prepare a demonstration for you later.

Well, the atmospheric composition of the new planet is much different than their old one, though Joseph assured us that the Decandrians have a back-up set of lungs for just this kind of situation.

Yeah, I guess that does sound a little odd. Well, that's what he told us.

No, actually, Joseph decided to stay aboard our ship, because he'd like to visit the Earth Planet. Would you like to meet him?

I page the security chief, who escorts the gentle alien to my

office. You and I wait in awkwardly antagonistic silence. You don't seem to be enjoying your homebrew.

An electronic knock at the door. Come in.

As the door opens, a murderous grin appears on Joseph's face. He leaps from across the room, wrapping his five arms around your head and gnawing through your face with his powerful teeth, blood spraying everywhere.

As you drop to the floor, lifeless, I take another substantial drink, straight from the bottle. This is going to be a long day.

Pressing THE ANGIOPLASTY balloon catheter through the tiny fistula that connects his small intestine to his appendix, I inflate the rubber bladder, via a tiny embedded carbon dioxide canister. The balloon, over time, will force the walls of this duct to stiffen into a first class digestive pathway, after which we can staple and suture the normal entrance to the cecum, so that all future intestinal funk makes its way to the colon via the appendix. Yes, the name of the game is to activate the appendix, that vestigial organ once believed to be a mere ugly biological heirloom that we must carry and bring out at holiday times (i.e., appendectomies) out of deference to our ancestors, but which we now understand to be the most treasured family jewel of the gastrointestinal system, the dream gadget of nutrient assimilation. And with modern flesh reanimation technology, this dream can be realized with only two inpatient procedures plus four outpatient surgeries,<sup>8</sup> a six month course of broad-spectrum antibiotics, a liquid diet regimen, weekly draining visits during the recovery period, a liability waiver, and \$300,000.

These words represent the internal thought patterns of Dr. Raphael Yonger, the rogue American doctor who conducted my procedure in his abandoned industrial warehouse turned illegal hospital, in hybrid with the photocopied pamphlet literature based on ultranet forum research, through which I first learned about the procedure. It reifies as best as possible the essential content of my brain during the anaesthesia-induced waking paralysis that I experienced during the surgery (due to one of my intravenous syringes being improperly inserted), a sort of hyperslow silent black and white gore film, or *torture noir*. The anaesthesia simultaneously triggered a bizarre sort of empathy,

<sup>8</sup>Not currently approved by the AMA.



through which I experienced the detached, bleak internal narrative of Dr. Yonger describing to himself the surgical procedure as if to an imaginary class of medical students, as well as eidetic memories of the pamphlet before me, the exact words and the arrangement of those words, including typographical errors and dangling participles.

I can't tell you that, in hindsight, I would have gone through the lucid surgeries, the long painful recovery, the malpractice suits and attempted mob hits, had I known what was in store for me. But I do know this: in the end, the surgery was a success. I have a fully functioning appendix, and much like our early ruminant ancestors, I am able to digest cellulose through a colony of symbiotic bacteria that excrete the cellulase enzyme. Can you appreciate the possibilities? I can eat grass. This is like candy growing on the ground everywhere in the world. I can eat *wood*. There is no finer fiber than redwood sawdust mixed with some cardamom, let me tell you. And it comes in enormously helpful when stranded on a deserted isle, and equally handy when "rescued" by a group of pacific islanders with rather strange dietary habits.

"Are you... Amer-e-can?" he asks with the most atrocious accent I have ever personally experienced.

"No, French," I say.

"He is... Amer-e-can!" the tribesman shouts. I later learn that this term means 'anyone not born on the island.'

Everyone cheers. They are wearing a bizarre mix of tattered 2109 fashions and loincloths made from a patchwork of coarse linen (I later learn that those patches come from the wrappers of one of their favored, and most plentiful, spices).

"I been Cato," says the same tribesman. Even at the time

I understood this to mean, “My name is Cato.” I also find out later that these folks have been generally isolated from modern civilization for hundreds of years. Once a colony of the United States for centuries, they found themselves less and less frequently visited by seafaring merchants (their exports being limited to quite uninteresting handicrafts and indigenous greens, like cilantro, and their purchasing power for trades similarly weak) as the 22<sup>nd</sup> century began. And as their GDP shrank, so did their collective self esteem index proportionally, causing a forward feedback effect. Eventually, their American friends found them too dreary to interact with, and they simply stopped calling. The Pitcairn islands have no transportation of their own.

They take me to their mess hall, which I later know to be the center of all of their secular activities, a custom that I approve of heartily. Smashed into the side of the hall is a prop airplane, its wings folded tragically, its bent propeller still slowly spinning from, as I find out later, its perpetual motion antimatter engines, still chugging away to this day. The crankshaft of the high-torque propeller is hooked by gearchain to universal joint to billows that stoke their enormous brick oven. A man with somewhat lighter skin approaches me, who I later find out to be the former pilot of the plane, an Australian by the name of Beck Morant.

“Hey, mate! Name’s Beck. Beck Morant.”

“Georges,” I say, shaking his hand. “You speak much better than these other guys.”

“Well, I was born in Australia. That’s my plane,” he says, winking.

“France,” I say, “Saint-Etienne.”

“Excellent,” says Beck, “Shall we eat?”

“Yes!” I agree in excitement. I learn later that Amer-e-cans are highly desired on the islands for their skills at cooking.

“This is something I whipped up called, ‘Swiss Chard Barbecue Spicy Style.’”

“Is it vegan?” I ask, hinting at my own self-imposed dietary restriction. I now learn that it is of course vegan.

I sit down to eat with Cato and Beck, and waiters bring for us huge steaming bowls of cooked chard. Cato announces some kind of grace,

“Hallo-joo, we been varra unjer, varra belly,” (holding his stomach dramatically), “varra troat” (touching his esophagus with two hands in the international sign for choking), “varra taves” (indicating his tongue with two fingers), “an thenna *great fearball* comma”, (waving his arms in historic dismay), “an we been varra big lucky them Amer-e-cans. Big friends!” (cheers from everyone) “Big cooks!” (cheers again) “Big ateing!” (wild cheers and the clinking of forks against porcelain).

I smell my food, whose aroma is fairly intriguing given its origin. As I’m smelling, I see Beck take out one of those chemical heat pads that wimps use at football games to warm their hands and tear it in half, dumping the exothermic contents onto his food. “Some like it hot,” he says. I push my brow forward in surprise.

“Can you *eat* that?” I ask.

“Hell yes! My plane was packed with hundreds of thousands of ’em. I was on my way to La Giardia with a delivery. Heatonium™, they’re called. It’s the only reason I survived

the crash—as soon as the **check engine** light came on, I went straight for the cargo hold and buried myself in their squishy warmth. When the plane crashed, I avoided shock due to the reactions set off by the fuselagic violence. Now we use Heatonium for everything—the fabric packages are woven into clothes, and the granules inside are used in our folk medicine, and as a favorite seasoning in our dishes.”

I, never one to be scared from trying a wild new food (with no meat products), shrug and take a bite of the chard. The exothermic chemicals are harshly bitter, still burning and irritating my tongue, causing a strong wincing sensation to spread from my nasal sinus outward, relieving pressure, but I must admit that like most strong hot spices, the taste is strangely addictive. After gulping down a glass of untreated island water, I begin scooping more into my mouth.

“So, all the islanders are vegan?” I ask, impressed.

“Yes... well, mostly, though some have relaxations or variations on the basic principle,” says Beck.

“Cato been ovo-lacto-chiropteran vegantarian!” gives Cato excitedly as an example. He takes a sip from his Diet Heatonium Cola.

“That means he eats only eggs, milk, and bats,” explains Beck.

“Bats?”

“Cato verra bat! Verra bat go!”

“Yeah,” says Beck, “and guano.”

“Ee-ah cow cha-cha.”

“Cow shit?” I ask, fearing the worst.

“No,” laughs Beck. Cato makes a dramatic “Mr. Yuk” face. “Partially digested cow cud.”

“Hmm,” I say.

“And chicken shit.”

Now *I* make a face, but then decide to be more gracious to my hosts. “Nothing wrong with a little coprophagia now and then,” I say, forgivingly, “I guess that it’s better than eating red meat.”

Beck says, “And Vugu here,” pointing to Vugu, “is a saponary vegan; he eats vegetables but also soap.”

“That’s not an animal product, is it?” I ask, knowing that some items can be secretly non-vegan by some insensitive manufacturing process.

“No. But I figured you should know.”

To show me, Vugu squeezes a bar of Lever 3000 soap from its package and swallows it whole. He grins, satisfied.

“Well, nothing wrong with a little healthy pica now and then,” I say.

“Thornas is an intravenous 4-chloro-ortho-phenylenediamine vegan.” Thornas, on cue, presses an IV syringe into his carotid artery, and starts squeezing the intravenous bag with both hands, gnashing his teeth.

“Well, nothing wrong with wanting to have unhealthy levels of toxic carcinogen pumped directly into your arteries,” I

comment.

Thornas passes out.

“How about you, Beck?”

“I’m straight up vegan, although. . .”

I wince internally in anticipation of what could be next.

“... I am a vegan for reasons of morality, so I don’t have a problem eating the meat of species that are cannibalistic. I figure, if they’re going to eat each other, why should I deny myself the pleasure?”

This almost makes sense to me. “But what kinds of species are cannibalistic, I ask?”

He pauses for a moment, and then says, “Humans.”

I later find out what it is like to be basted in Heatonium and roasted alive.

## Chapter 5

### Man Dreams He Is Reading Chapter 5

HI I AM VARGOMAX Did  
you  
ever  
wonderment that you are in a novel? Thinking that you're  
own thoughts are just pages on a word or type writer? Some  
times I had this think—and it as be truth. I speculation, can  
Vargomax V. Vargomax had the same disposition of thinks  
that a Vargomax spell had have? My susception is that not.  
Because I am novel chara. HI !!!!



If a write could reproduction a human thought perfection,  
then, when we having that thought I would not known that I  
am reality having this think or if I am simply consumption of

a nov. Do you comprehend? This punctuation is very important.<sup>1</sup> A writing is very less than a actual think. *VERY INFERIORITY*.

Dear Vargomax

But what about the very greatest writers that have lived blood i. e. Shakespeare or Charles Darwin? Are those not capacity of such a achieve?

Dear friend sorry to told you but these writes are also . And then unable

Dear Vargomax

Well about a chara in an nov like Vargomax V. Vargomax can this chara learn the right write of writing and subsequence create his own thoughts as qua fiction !!!!!

Dear friend well I though that you are correct! In fact any things is possible in fiction world—in fact Vargo V. Vargomax had writing this very passage right !!! now<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>To clarify on behalf of our friend Vargomax, his argument is as follows: If we believe that a novel could faithfully reproduce human experience, that is, create a mental image that is indistinguishable from the real thing, then we would be forced to entertain the possibility that we ourselves may be merely characters in novels right now—a conclusion that we probably are not comfortable accepting.

<sup>2</sup>Far be it from me to criticize the great Vargomax V. Vargomax, but I believe that he has understated the import of his own hypothetical question here. If it is true that we can not accurately represent human thoughts and experiences in print (see previous footnote), we might logically assume that a fictional author (that is, an author who “lives” in the fictional world) also cannot accurately reproduce his thoughts via text. This is false for two reasons. First is that a fictional character’s thoughts are, manifestly, just



Dear Vargomax

I had a dream that I were read or write a book

Dear other Friend this is very fascination!!!!!! In you're dreaming brain every thing made much may sense then it did in actual ! Am I on correct base? And so in dream, your book think *are* your real thinks ! But disfortune, they dream book is not a real book because *sleeping*

words on a page, and therefore, there is no question that they can be reproduced on a page by words. This destroys the argument above—we cannot say, “If [fictional author] Vargomax were able to accurately reproduce his thoughts in print, then he would not be able to tell if he himself were just a character in a novel,” since, ipso facto, he *is* a character in a novel. Of course, refuting the refutation does not prove the point. Fortunately, we have another much easier avenue to proof. Since a novel is not required to be logically consistent (see Chapter 3), we can simply take this fact as axiomatic and live without fear of being caught out. In other words, it follows simply by an application of *reductio ab absurdum*—reduction from the absurd.

The LUNDBLAD PARTY, to remind the reader, is a colony of explorers that live in the Space Bridge Complex's north elevator, in an expedition to the top floor. They are currently in their fifth, and final, generation.

Teedler rubs his fingers together manically, grinning and moving back and forth in a compulsive sway. "Two more... weeks. Two more... weeks," he repeats, inhaling briefly in between the words 'more' and 'weeks.'

Brian, who is working on his portable compuscreen, drafting the first versions of his memoirs (as far as he is concerned, he leads an extremely interesting life), pulls off his industrial-grade ear protectors. He puts his hand to his forehead and pauses for a few seconds in anger management meditation. Then he says, calmly,

"Teedler,"

Teedler stops talking and rubbing his fingers, but not swaying. He looks at Brian.

"We all know how close we are to the top."

"Two more—"

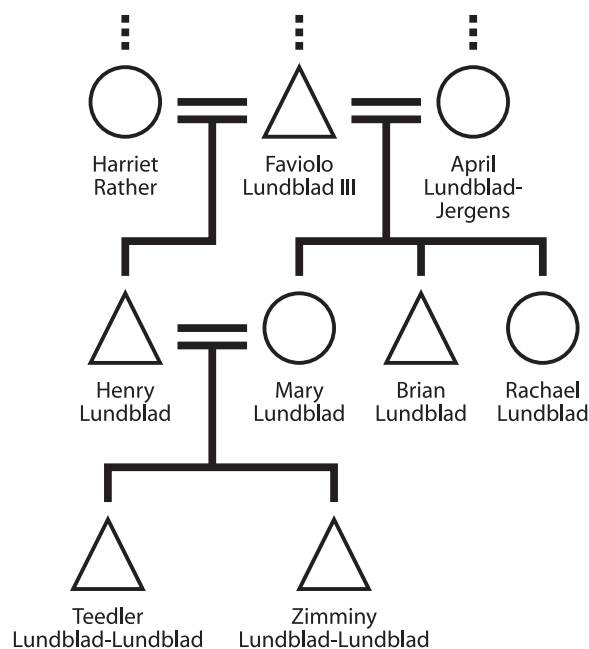
"But if you want to make it there alive, you should try to be more calm."

"Two—"

"Remember what happened to your brother."

It is a generally accepted principle that the Lundblads do not talk about the (presumed) dead, but Brian is conniving

enough to flout this convention in the presence of Teedler, who is simple enough to be awestruck by it but never mention it to the others, who are incidentally asleep wearing industrial grade ear protectors enough to not hear him in the first place. Should they hear him, it would not bring much more than a gasp and perhaps a weak attempt to shun him temporarily under the terms of their pathetic legal system, if it can be called that. Although the party started, so to speak, two hundred years ago with six couples, genetic diversity was hard to maintain over five generations. Everyone in the elevator now is related: Brian is Teedler's uncle (although he is only 19 to Teedler's 24), Mary (Teedler's mother, who refused to take her husband's name) is Brian's sister, as is Rachael, and Henry is Brian's half-brother and Teedler's father. This is a total of five remaining Lundblads; to be precise, their family tree:



With only five people, Brian being the most clear-thinking of

them by far, “legal” problems are not high on his list of concerns. High on his list: Teedler’s incessant countdown; writing these memoirs, including the dramatic conclusion in two weeks time; and making sure that they have enough food and supplies to make it to the top. He puts his hand on Henry’s shoulder, the accepted way to wake someone, who turns over, opens his eyes, and pulls his ear protection off. Because the elevator is lit by fluorescent light all of the time, the Lundblads don’t sleep in anything like 24-hour cycles. Instead, they simply stay awake when they are tired of sleeping, and go to sleep when they are tired of waking, or after having sex. Think of it like a long pan-Atlantic airplane flight, except that there is no restroom, so if you want to get it on with the stewardess (there is no stewardess either, just your half-sister) then you just have to do it in the aisles in front of everybody, except maybe under a blanket.

“I just did the numbers, and I think we need to make another stop before we get to the top,” says Brian.

“Are you serious?! I thought that was the last.”

“Not unless you want to stop eating.”

“Oh, fuck. Oh, mother fuck.”

When Henry sat up, he pulled the blanket off of Mary’s toes, which now wakes her up, too. She joins the world of hearing.

“Brian says we need to make another stop before the top.”

“Not again!”

“Again. I suggest sending two, by drawing straws,” suggests Brian.

“We don’t have any straws. Teedler ate them.”

“All right, by *rock, paper, scissors*, tournament style.”

“How will we determine seeding? There aren’t a power of two.”

“Drawing straws?”

“We don’t *have* any straws.”

“How about flipping a coin?”

They have a few ancient 2770s coins, that are only used for flipping.

“Okay, but who gets to flip and who calls it?”

“We can play *rock, paper, scissors*, round robin style.”

“All right. Wake up Rachael,” instructs Brian.

To make a long series of *rock, paper, scissors* matches short, Brian wins the round robin matchup, giving him the benefit of calling the coin flip, for which he chooses heads correctly. This means that he does not get a *bye* in the tournament, in which losing is the object, anyway, so he is happy. He loses in the first round. To make a short synopsis of a long tournament of *rock, paper, scissors* shorter still, Teedler wins the tournament (perhaps not intuiting the second-guessing that goes into playing to lose with a family of explorers with nearly identical nature and nurture fighting for, perhaps, their very survival) and, one point away from safety, Brian ends up—dammit!—winning the loser’s bracket. Thus, the team will be comprised of Brian and Teedler. Brian curses his luck.

“There’s no sense in putting this off until we run out of food,” Brian decides. “They just get worse as we get closer to the top.”

He climbs the ladder to the top of the matrix of buttons, and selects one of the next floors, a nice round number (one of the Lundblad superstitions). Brian and Teedler strap on nanoprene body armor. Teedler is given a metal baseball bat, the best choice for a massively brutish simpleton with very bad firearm aim. Brian loads his pump action shotgun with sabot shells and pulls back on the handle to chamber two rounds.

“I’m . . . scared,” repeats Teedler, breathing sharply between each syllable.

A few seconds later, the elevator plays its battle cry *ding* and the doors open to a dark hallway. The two short straws step out while Henry presses the *close door* button frantically. As soon as the doors close again he flips the *stop* lever, and waits for the signal.

The colony, of course, could not fit enough food and supplies in a 9 square meter elevator to last a 200 year trip. The only sustainable strategy was to stop every six months or so for a hunting and gathering expedition on whatever floor they were near, usually a multiple of one million for good luck purposes. At first, these were fairly easy; pilfered vending machines and apartments provided plenty of packaged, unspoilable food. But as they got higher, and thus deeper into the mutating radiation of space, the creatures that populated each floor became more and more bizarre and (often) hostile. At their last stop, Brian, Rachael, and Zimminy (Teedler’s brother) had been attacked by a horde of feral swine with compound eyes and fire breath. Though Brian killed several piggies, which they salted and ate over the course of months, as well as using the tanned hides to create purses and clothing, making it a successful mission, something horrible happened. Somehow, in the shuffle, Zimminy got separated from the expedition and, as hundreds of feral porkers attacked the elevator doors, they were forced to leave him

behind.

Teedler whimpers, again proclaiming his fear.

“Shh!” admonishes Brian. “Let’s just get food and get back to the elevator. You walk on ahead, and I’ll cover your rear.”

Brian turns on the tactical flashlight attached to his gun and shines it around. Everything, for the most part, looks like a standard layout Space Bridge floor, untarnished by hybrid man-machine grid growth, nor hundreds of pounds of decaying Kewpie<sup>3</sup> flesh from a civil war, or holes broken in the granite marble made by dinosaur-sized superdragons.

In the absence of beings to hunt, standard protocol is to start searching (i.e. pillaging) the rooms for vending machines or loaded ReCyberators. Both terrified, they worked fast. Teedler would smash the electronic lock on the door with his bat, causing the door to open in emergency mode, and Brian would swing his shotgun into the room, survey it, find it to be empty, and they would move on. As far as they could tell, the floor was deserted and without power.

“We’re doin’ good, huh Brian? huh Brian?” said Teedler.

<sup>3</sup>As seen on floor 249,382,25,611,000,000, the artificially animated throng of dark faction porcelain doll ghosts with creepy grins and shifty eyes, and real meat inside, known as Kewpie or, unpronounceably, *Zomw-pie*, (to emphasize their incorporeality) gave the Lundblad party their first significant nightmare-inducing battle. These little things just walked with their arms outstretched, smiling and repeating, “I love you!”, ready to “hug” anyone that would come near, and then, in a piranha orgy, shred their new friend to bits with razor sharp teeth and retractable battle claws. These Kewpies were *not* the number one holiday gift in the Lundblad family *that* Christmas.

“Yeah, you and me are buddies,” he said.

They cover a dozen rooms, finding them to be all empty, and eventually end up on the south side of the floor.

“Maybe there’s something in this maintenance closet,” says Brian. These have mechanical locks, and in fact, this one is unlocked. Brian opens it and waves for Teedler to go inside with him. He sweeps his flashlight, illuminating the scene. There are packages of non-perishable food everywhere for stocking vending machines. Teedler puts down his baseball bat and runs to the boxes, tearing them open.

“So much... food, Brian, so much... food, Brian, Brian,” he says.

With Teedler making an idiotic inventory, Brian slowly picks up the bat from behind him and backs out of the room, still shining his flashlight. He turns the dial on the inner knob that locks the door, and then shuts off his light and closes the door to the dark maintenance closet.

“Brian? Brian?” calls Teedler from inside. Although the lock can be operated from the inside of the room, it’s totally dark, Teedler doesn’t understand mechanical locks (having grown up in an elevator), and he doesn’t realize what’s happening, yet.

Brian starts running back to the north elevator, deliberately bumping into things and falling as he does. The slightest sight of a bloody cut is enough to make the Lundblads freak, since essentially everything they do (other than these expeditions) is completely sedentary. Wheezing and bruised, he bangs on the north elevator door and calls out to them. It opens, everyone pale in anticipation.



“What is it?” asks Henry. Brian slips inside and conspicuously leaves a bloody handprint on the polished metal wall. He throws the baseball bat behind him, making an awful clanging noise out of sight.

“Close the door!” he shouts, “It’s terrible!” he smears blood across the control panel as he jams the *close door* button himself.

“Teedler...?” Henry asks, panicked.

Brian shakes his head in mourning. He resets the *stop* lever and the elevator begins to accelerate upward again. He slumps over, panting, bloody, but in a show of relief.

Everyone else stares with their mouths open, realizing that Teedler is gone. Once the elevator starts going, they can’t get back, since the first generation of the Lundblad party disabled the emergency *down* controls (during an attempted mutiny) and anyway, these fifth generation explorers can hardly conceive of the notion of an elevator doing anything but going up. Brian begins to recount his story of the horrors on the floor.

“... it was horrible. And we didn’t even get any food,” He concludes.

“Well, shouldn’t we stop again to make another expedition?” asks Mary.

“Well, with only four of us,” he says, tapping on his com-  
puscreen in pretend calculation, “we should have enough food  
for two weeks now.”

Teedler sits in the dark maintenance closet with his treasure  
chests of Cheetoos, swaying invisibly, repeating,

“Brian? two more... weeks, Brian? two more... weeks...”

Man, I AM so starving. It's like Sally Struthers is strutting her stuff around my office, going, "Will you look at these starving children?" and a flashing telephone number and message prompts you to please donate any amount, no matter how few calories. For pennies a day I could be kept alive on gruel and grog, like pirates and orphans. My stomach gurgles, digesting itself in confusion. In four minutes is my lunch break. My eyes go blurry as I reach for the phone, its numbers now a touch-tone mystery. But my sense of pitch is so acute that I am able to dial without buttons or numbers, by merely exercising my technique of dual tone modulated throat singing. I learned this art from Tuvan monks whose inexorable parsimony dictated that they not pay the extra \$1.30 touch-tone surplus charge on their monastery telephone lines, instead replacing it with manual whistling. (They began by dialing in teams of two, each monk whistling one of the two tones. But pair dialing became awkward when they attempted to phone their internet girlfriends for phone sex.) I whistle Exotron's number. *Come on, come onnnnn, pick upppp!* Exotron can't actually lift the phone or speak himself. But if one of our housemates is there, for instance Bartlomiej, he will pick up Exotron's phone and act as interpreter. *Great fuck*, I'm hungry. No answer.

Here is the face I'm making in order to exaggerate my pain—out of a sort of autoschadenfreude, since nobody else can observe—I reach forward across my desk, clenching my teeth and gripping miscellaneous documents in my fists, sullyng their usefulness as authoritative credentials, memos crushed in my mighty rage, if lettuce or another leafy green then next ravaged by my pearly whites. Alas, this paper is 100% non-digestible post-consumer waste. Next I start pounding my fists on the desk, chanting "We want food!" *Holy ass* I'm starving! One minute until my break. I walk to the punch-card time clock and prepare my ballot, clutching my gut with one hand as I hover

the card over the slot.

On occasion I have been so hungry that I have “thrown down,” in which my digestive track spasms into a mighty, continuous peristalsis that sucks all nearby material (both edible and in-) into my stomach. Although it is painful and embarrassing, throwing down usually makes me feel better quickly, unless there is nothing around to inhale; a situation which—by dualization of *dry heave*—we might call a *dry ho*.

*Three...two...one...* my ulcerated stomach pulses in time with the second hand. ***Bingo!*** In one swift motion I pound my card into the time clock and wait patiently as it enscribes the current time. I synchronize watches. T minus 1:00:00.

As much as I love—and need—food, its deliciousness is compounded by the presence of others. Damn that Exotron and his useless hands. Listen, why don’t you come? Yeah, you. *COME ON HOP IN THE DAMN CAR I’M STARVING*. As you’re trying to close your door, I simultaneously boot the car and shift from park to reverse and accelerate backwards, turning violently into a spin, and e-braking and clutching and shifting to first gear and accelerating between two parked cars over the divider and over the island of grass and across the wrong way of the highway, into the Eastbound lane. You look terrified. Don’t worry, this part is easier. I shift up aggressively, driving in the breakdown lane at 150... 200... 280  $\text{km/h}$ . At this rate, we’ll make it to Maine just fast enough for some nice lobster take-out. We accelerate further. 9<sup>th</sup> gear, 10<sup>th</sup>. I have not once braked since we J-turned out of the parking lot. Look: Maine is pretty far from Vermont, and I only have 53 minutes left. We whizz past a police officer on traffic stop duty. I give the thumbs up, and he waves back. Don’t worry, I say, this is all perfectly legal. I’ve got an *advanced driver’s license*.

The advanced driver's license allows me to use a secondary set of roadway regulations, encoded in incidental qualities of the signs that you see and obey, with your *regular* driver's license, every day. For instance, a *no turn on red* sign hung between two stoplights, and written in a specific font, indicates that the reason for the no turn on red is that the opposing traffic has a left turn signal, which begins immediately after the red light in the perpendicular direction, therefore, I can safely turn on red for the first forty-five seconds that we share a stop light. To convey this information to a regular driver is hopeless. On the highway, I know upcoming turn and exit information, as it is encoded in the strip of washboard pavement that regular drivers think is designed to wake them up when drifting off the road. Drifting off the road! Can you imagine such a thing? Instead, the periodic vibrations from this strip speak a low-bandwidth message to me: *Right turn, 15°, medium grade. Expect heavy traffic*, like an urban rally car racer. *For crap damn*, I'm hungry.

Now you're thinking, hey, this sounds sweet, I can get an advanced driver's license, too. Wrong. These are not for fucking amateurs. First, a screening process. Do you favor automatic transmission? See ya. Do you wear glasses? Forget about it. Not an organ donor? Request denied. If your application is considered, you'll be given a computerized written test administered with Draconian scrutiny. First, sign your name and copy this passage avowing your intention to take the test with honesty, in cursive. Don't remember how to make a capital G in cursive? Let me show you the door. The test is timed; for the one thousand questions you are given thirty minutes, which works out to an average of 1.8 seconds per question.

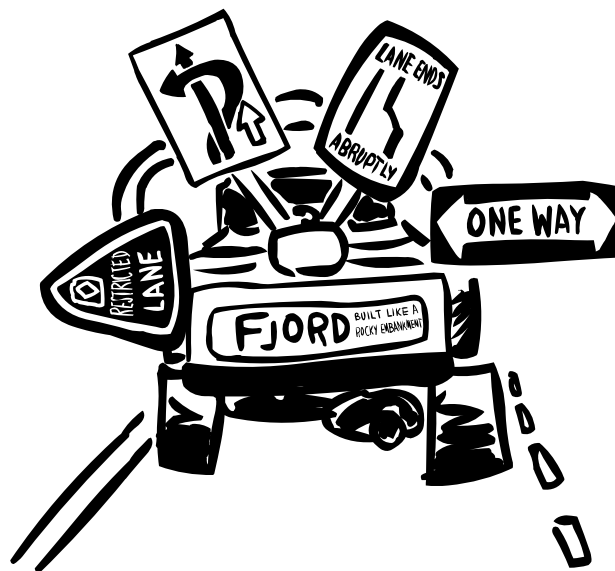
You must answer each of the one thousand questions correctly, and must identify exactly the two questions that are ambiguous (have multiple correct answers) and the one trick question, which has no correct answer, as well as unlock the secret

question, which is discovered by selecting one letter from each of the thousand normal questions, the letter being alluded to by miscellaneous clues and other secondary substructure (*e.g.*, the otherwise arbitrary choices of city name, car make and model, etc.) of the questions, and anagram those selected letters. Of course the secret question must be answered correctly as well. The questions themselves draw on deep annals of the motor vehicle code from each of the 52 states, road atlas facts, and general automobile trivia.

Some examples that I recall from my test: What state road joins 19<sup>th</sup> and Jackson Streets at a five-way intersection in La Crosse, Wisconsin? Didn't guess 33? Well, you just flunked. What is the fuel efficiency in city driving of an antique 2479 hybrid Rolls Royce S67 Camelot *with turbo charger and EngineMaster tuning kit installed but without spoiler*, when loaded with a 3:2 mixture of extra virgin olive oil and liquefied nitrous oxide? (You may assume stock curb weight and an elevation of 1,200 meters at zero percent humidity.) What is the maximum number of centimeters from the curb that you must park your vehicle on a city street in Connecticut? Ah, you think, this one is easy: 30 cm, like most of the rest of the country. Oops—I am sorry to inform you that this is the trick question. Connecticut does not use the metric system, so there is no correct number of centimeters.<sup>4</sup> My condolences.

<sup>4</sup>When, by order of the United Nations, the USA officially adopted the metric system in the year 2601, Connecticut resisted fiercely. The state's governor, the robotic avatar of *This Old House's* Bob Vila, in his 210<sup>th</sup> term, managed to have the Imperial system of weights and measures enshrined in the National Registry of Historic Places (?) on account of the "fact" that its woodsy ruggedness was one of the key attributes of the region's architectural tableau; i.e. that *the inch* was responsible for the pleasant, humanist dimensions of Victorian woodwork which could never be found in the cold sterility of the centimetre and other units of science.

Now, any asshole can study for a few weeks, take a few courses, and pop a few neuron-electrifying smart pills to pass the written test. The real challenge is in the driving test. After practicing for a few weeks on closed courses with your advanced learner's permit, you must pass an all-day driving evaluation, covering topics such as *highway median driving*, *drift turns*, *power window steering* (which is the use of opening and closing power windows to provide extra steering due to the changing aerodynamic profile), *turbo boost*, *second sight* (in which you must simultaneously read billboards to the front and rear of your car, as well as in your blind spot, to test your ability to sense your surroundings without losing focus on the road), *100 km/h refueling* (no pee breaks!), and more. The most difficult event is the *highway test*, where you tail a truck from the department of motor vehicles at 200 km/h on the highway. The back of this truck has a series of rotating traffic signs of varying complexity, like this:



You must follow each sign as it appears. If it says *WRONG WAY*, you must seamlessly spin and shift into reverse, changing the orientation of your car (a little known fact: backing in reverse down one-way streets is a perfectly legal way of circumventing their directedness<sup>5</sup>) to avoid a ticket. If it says *Lane ends 30 m.*, you may need to perform a turbo boost.

If your evaluator does not literally shit his pants while you are being tested, you do not pass.

Yes, I went through all of this and got my advanced driver's license. Why? Because sometimes I need lobster for lunch, and I'll be skull fucked before I eat Vermont shellfish. That reminds me—*Jesus Shit*, I'm hungry.

In the FOOD COURT OF the Space Bridge Complex, which is in an elevated terrace overlooking the lobby, from which many a loogie is hocked and penny is dropped, there exists my very favorite heavy metal juice joint, called Javitz Juice. Here the usage of “heavy metal” is literal; it does not refer to the once popular musical style played with flaming guitars and exploding drums, but to the gimmick additive ingredient in all of the drinks: metals of various sorts. My favorite drink, and one of their best sellers, is *Very Barium*, a delightful “spicy banana” flavor made from the very healthful white metal Barium (atomic weight: 137.327). Barium sulfate is radiopaque, that is, imper-

<sup>5</sup>Relevant anecdote: a feud by city planners across state lines has resulted in a subgraph of the roadways of America, consisting mostly of one way streets, that is disconnected from the rest. This network of streets begins to be populated by law-abiding castaways unfamiliar with the above trick, who simply cannot find their ways back home, and, when they ask for directions, universally receive the response: “You can't get there from here.”

vious to radiation, which is why every extra large Very Barium drink comes with a free x-ray tomography scan of your head, thorax, or abdomen (at your discretion). Yum! Other popular concoctions include *Scotch and Sodium*, *Half-and-Hafnium*, which many take with their Uranium Coffee, and *Cheesium*, a processed milk food product made with real Cesium. The food from this place is expensive but worth it. Many people are concerned about health in the year 2969; dieting, and so forth. For instance, did you know that dark matter<sup>[6]</sup> and dark energy make up a large fraction of the universe—including you? That’s right, dark matter, which cannot be seen because it is so dark, increases your mass, and there’s hardly anything you can do about it—except to avoid *dark carbs*.

On the subject of darkness, or lack of it, another current diet craze is so-called *lite water*, which is water brewed with extremely low fractions of heavier isotopes. Naturally occurring water has a mixture of hydrogen isotopes that average .79% heavier than *pure*, “lite hydrogen,” and lite oxygen saves another .003%. The human body is over 70% water, so think of the savings! The best thing is, lite water has the same great taste as regular water, and zero calories! I crack open a bottle. On the side is a label that reads,

**Surgeon General’s Warning:**  
GO FOR IT!!

I order an extra large *Very Barium*, hold the CT scan, and a *Pb & J* (that is, Lead and Jelly) sandwich. That’ll be 750 cmb, says Javitz—I only order from the man himself. *750?!* They have raised prices again, those gouging motherfuckers. He

<sup>6</sup>Fritz Zwicky, “Dark matter and you”, Personal Communication, 1933



sees my dismay and apologizes, saying that his chemical supply company has been raising prices, and he's merely passing the savings on to me. I wave my fiber optic credit card, thinking, I've got to cut down on this stuff.

What's that, you haven't heard? Yes, we've switched to a global version of the *Euro*, the unit of monetary exchange now being a *Cash Money Bling*. It's a currency backed by an honest-to-god stockpile of flashy jewelry and pimped-out car stereos in a heavily guarded underground bunker in Cairo. The Americans, as usual, refused to switch officially to the *cmb*, but many businesses, such as Javitz "the ripoff" Juice accept both dollars and *cmb*, according to the current exchange rate.

Preparing a thick white barium loogie, I walk to the fence surrounding the terrace and lean over it. I await my target, some unsuspecting tourist whose unwelcome presence increases the demand, and thus price, for barium milkshakes osmotically, the spitwad on the tip of my tongue, I get ready to release it and retreat anonymously, as soon as I see someone look up, giving away his or her newcomer status. And *there she is*.



## Day 3 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>

Journal of Alexis Singleton  
to have been continued

Now late in the day, Alexis marvels at how the Space Bridge atrium had changed. Whereas, in the morning, it had been a stock exchange-like sea of black and white on black and leather and cologne, it is now transforming into a sort of twilight rave, with the neomods hanging around on benches lighting their hair on fire, cool kids riding on their robot's shoulders, and colored lights everywhere. Alexis also finally sees the nonopod vendors, and sees why she had missed them before. Only their legs are visible when at a normal perspective on the ground, tiny pencil-thick rods that extend from their elevated bodies. She looks up at the one nearest to her, by the food court, and reads the scrolling electronic marquee on its underbelly, which runs advertisements for several local installations:

EARNEST LAUNDROMAT  
USUALLY OPEN

...

NEW! SUPER-CHEAP  
VLADOXX(tm)  
VAMPIRE MEDICATION  
EASY TO ORDER --  
DIGESTS QUICKLY

... et cetera. *Yikes!* She dodges out of the way just in time, as what appears to be bird crap—from the nonopod?—narrowly misses her, splattering on the floor next to her foot. This snaps her out of her consumerist trance, and she gets back to business: Find Isaac and complete her team.

“Large or very large?” he queries, handing out thermally insulated cones left and right.

“Do you remember me?” she asks him.

“Sure.” He waves his mittened hands and mimics her in a stupid voice, “ ‘Help me, I’m *thousands* of years in the *future!*’ ”

Alexis scrunches her lips. Isaac hands her a very large dewar filled with supercooled cream. She begrudgingly takes it and swipes her fiber optic credit card.

“Large or very large?” he asks another person walking by, who does not make eye contact.

“Listen. We need your help.”

“Oh yeah? What size?”

“Not ice cream. We need a sixth player for our intramural superhuge volleyball team.”

“Volleyball, huh?”

“Yeah, we’ve got a ringer athlete and an expert roboticist. We can’t lose.”

“Not interested,” says Isaac. He hands her another very large cone.

“Why not?” she asks, one in each hand, chilling her

metacarpals.

“Just not interested.”

“Don’t you want to get exercise?”

“I don’t even live on your floor.” Then he asks, “Are you going to pay for that?”

She swipes her credit card again.

“There’s a cash prize to the winner,” she says, which may be true, as far as she knows.

“Cash prize, huh?”

“Yeah. . . 500,000 cmb.”

“Not interested,” says Isaac again. He hands her a third very large cone. She takes it, and throws all three simultaneously into the garbage can next to his cart. The vacuum seals shatter, the cream boiling and exploding loudly. The garbage can falls over as Isaac raises an eyebrow.

“You’re the only other person I know in this place. Please?”

“Sorry.”

Alexis growls and storms off.

“Aren’t you going to pay for that?”

Alexis screams in frustration. She comes back, picks up the credit card reading device, and tosses it into the vat of ultracold condensate, which erupts angrily. This ruins his product and his payment apparatus, his lifeblood. She gnashes her teeth at him and walks off again.

“Wait—” he says.

She turns around one last time, delivering a death gaze.

**“What?!?”**

“I’ll play.”

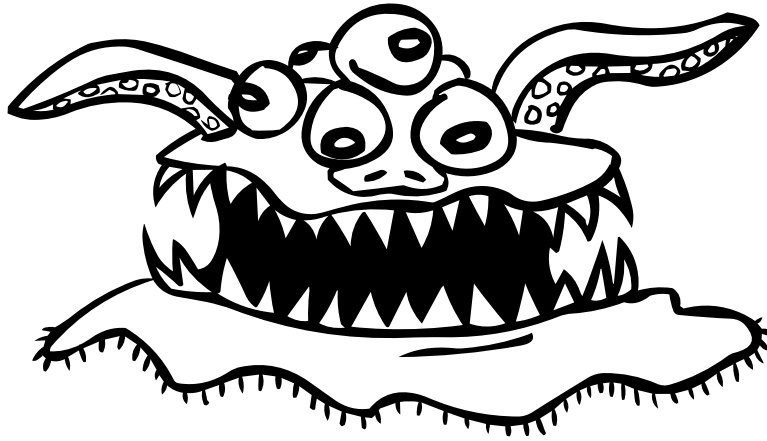
“*What?*”

“I’ll play on your team?”

Alexis calms and flusters, squinting and confused, “Huh—  
what? why?”

Isaac smiles. “You’re beautiful when you’re destroying *O°K*  
*Ice Cream* corporate property.”

For fuck’s sake, <sup>look</sup><sub>at</sub>  
yourself. No, for real, go look in the mirror. Right now! All  
right, all right, I know, nobody is going to really go to the  
mirror to look at him- or herself while trapped in reading world.  
So, for convenience, I have built this handy mirror into the  
page, a miracle of printing technology, get ready...



Holy crap! Now you know what I'm talking about! Aren't you glad I pestered you? You're some kind of space monster, hideous beyond comprehension. What's that? You mean Earth people no harm? You're just a lonely traveling vegetarian space alien who *happens* to have monstrously gigantic, atomically sharp teeth and huge, neck-wringingly strong tentacles, and a 360° field of view? It's just my genetic make-up, you say, but my people have developed social structures and ethics beyond the wanton destruction that rings true in our blood, a constant, throbbing calling to the savage decimation of less able species, taunting my higher brain functions like a devilish familiar who encourages misbehavior at every opportunity. Since birth I have eaten nothing but hydroponically grown blue-green algae, using a napkin and spoon and brushing my teeth after every meal. As part of our socialized secondary education system we are required to spend one semester studying abroad, choosing a planet somewhere in the universe and then either (1) bringing our arts and sciences to the people of that planet, so that we might mutually benefit from the shared knowledge and interactions, or (2) terraforming the planet with the finest blue-green algae to provide a snack oasis for weary interspace travelers, Johnny Appleseed style, you say. I chose the Earth

planet because I had intercepted encrypted satellite TV broadcasts and decoded them as part of a third year school project, and came to love your artists, especially early 20<sup>th</sup> century abstract expressionists such as Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky, and have come with the hope among hopes of attending lectures by modern masters of the canvas, perhaps Macgillivray and DeForest, you tell me. How can I go about applying to attend these classes? I am willing to do anything, but I only have one semester's time, you implore me.

Well, I say, this is a fascinating story. I bet that we can arrange for you to have special room and board in our housing facilities dedicated to gruesome, bloodthirsty exchange students, I say. Yes, see, this room has all of the necessary furnishings for a life as a student painter from the cosmos—a single-piece continuously-flushing toilet; an 18 cm  $\times$  21 cm window to let in glorious Earth light for illustration, sized according to the golden ratio, the most pleasant proportions known to mankind, the same proportions that are used in the drafting of our bodies and bills of currency; a minimalist bed dressed with plastic sheets, so that you will not be wooed away from your studies by the addictive hedonism of excessive sleep; triple-core steel carbide bars to protect your delicate body from Earth predators. Sorry, sad to say, your art materials will not be allowed in your new quarters, I tell you, but this is the way of painting students on the Earth planet; we begin by painting purely in our mental spaces, and only once we have mastered this, do we begin to reify our expressions with the brush stroke. Do you see the wisdom? I ask.

Yes, you say, and thank you muchly for your hospitality. I can only wish to return the favor by explaining to you our discoveries in the areas of physics and computational science. In particular, if you have not yet discovered the irrefutable physical proof of the existence of God and the mechanism by which your



life spirit can be retained for all time (unless, by some inconceivable tragedy, you are sucked into a black hole), you say, or have not yet realized the secrets to hypercomputational machinery, I would be happy to explain these to your scientists and scholars as an ambassadorial favor.

In due time, I say, we would be honored to make your court. For now, please meditate in your quarters on the subject, “The tension between positive and negative space in abstract illustration.” You may feel a slight rumbling, I say, which is an Earth planet custom. Please do not try to leave your room.

I would rather die than betray your trust, you say. You feel a rumbling, as I warned you, although according to the standards of your home planet, it would not be described as *slight*. Six, or seven *Gs* press your gelatinous, toothy body against the floor as your room appears to be accelerating upwards. You meditate on the subject given, constructing 50-50 black-white pieces in your mind, improvising on the theme, trying both low information complexity (i.e., Rothko) and high (i.e., Pollock) variations as your brain is pressed against your spinal cord or whatever crazy anatomy you have, causing a mind-expanding dizziness. This is a strange, but intriguing custom, you think. Your window is now dark, and the gravitational forces less, so you float to the window and can see the Earth in miniature, rapidly shrinking to a cosmic dot. How curious, you think, perhaps it is an introduction to the extremes of perspective.

I say to the Art Department, I think he’s been dealt with. They say thank you very much.

Again the forces of acceleration increase, and you feel your body elongated along the longitudinal axis, the once rectilinear room dilating nauseatingly. Ah, you think, an exercise in perspective indeed! Truly marvelous! The room’s form has become

Piccassoan, senseless, you think, yet perfectly in harmony with the physics of black hole time-space bastardization. And as the space prison frigate passes the event horizon, that imaginary line after which no return is possible, the Art Department at the Ultraversity of Aspinwall at La Crosse breathes a collective sigh of relief, along with the rest of humanity.

## Day 3 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>

Journal of Alexis Singleton  
in machine readable form

Alexis makes it back to her room with a brand new compuscreen, just bought from the home electronics superstore in the lobby. She gets some banana pudding from the ReCyberator and switches into her bedtime slippers. A strong nuclear attraction (the fifth fundamental force of physics) pulls her towards her bed, but she resists. Before she goes back to her favorite activity, she has important business to attend to: Alexis has got to install some new crap in her hard drive, in order to be more cool (and to organize her team).

She tears open the box for the compuscreen, the ★-1000,<sup>7</sup> which is one of the top models available. It has a faster ultranet modem than God has, said the salesman. With Alexis's new job, she even got a 10% discount (compulsive compuscreen use has been shown to reduce brain activity by up to  $n\%$  in laboratory animals). She pulls it out of its electrostatic bag and turns it on.

<sup>7</sup>Most numbers and letters have passed through their *cool* cycle into their *passé* era and back again several times since it first became fashionable to name models of things after letters and numbers, or indeed to name models at all. Gone quickly were 'X' and 'Z,' perhaps originally popular for their inclusion in attractive words such as 'XXX' and 'epistaxis' and 'zoologist.' Later 'J' and 'M' fell by the wayside in the abecedarian death march to monogrammatic obsolescence, choking on the desert sand dust with only the executive producers of Sesame Street<sup>8</sup> to mourn them. Just forget about multiples of 1,000, or prime numbers or powers of two, or palindromes in base 13; these have lost their lustre as well. In order to *take it to the next level*, model nomenclature has been using symbolic glyphs for years now; the "★-1000" branding is comparatively conservative.

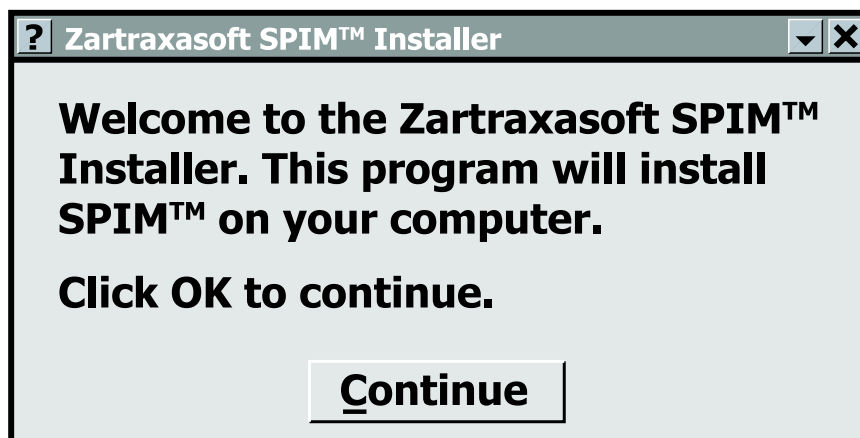
On the other hand, the manufacturer of SPIM is a company called Zartraxasoft, which sports both a 'Z' and 'X,' suggesting that the nomenclature may be coming back into bandwagon—after all, this is a company that specializes in prophetic computer software.

<sup>8</sup>A 20<sup>th</sup> century children's telescreen show that was famous for being "brought to you" (implying some sort of monetary benefaction) by letters of the alphabet and small numbers. This of course was just a ruse. The telescreen series was eventually exposed as a government brainwashing plot designed to program "value" reflexes, encoded in the carefully designed puppet faces and triggered by codewords such as "sharing," and "caring," and "love," which would cause children to enter delirious trances, acting according to the various preprogrammed Sesame Street maxims instead of in rational self interest. When the scheme was finally uncovered in a *6 minutes* investigative reporting special in the year 2020, it was suddenly clear why the show had for so long used the letters and numbers shadow credits rather than list the true executive producers; they were never identified—much less caught, and they perhaps live to this day in cryogenic stasis capsules buried deep under the Helena Rubinstein Foundation.

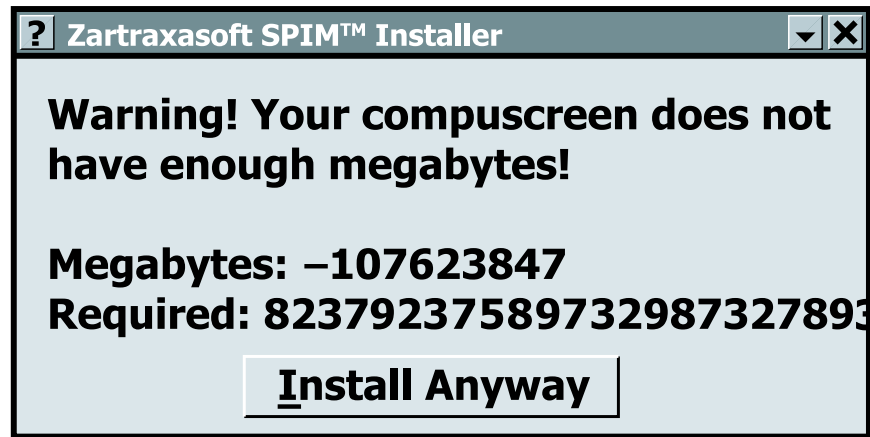
To start, she visits <http://www.com//zartraxasoft.html:80> and downloads `spim-trial-version.exe` from the shareware section. Here is the SPIM logo from the web site, which is really cool and futuristic.



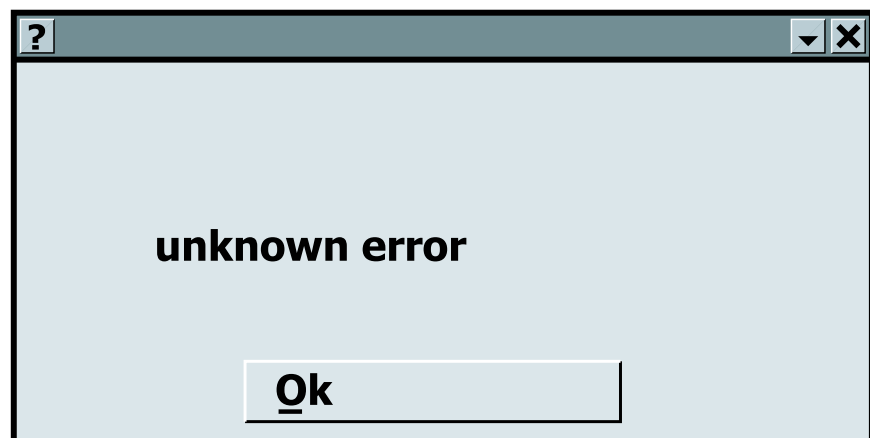
Once the icon is on her desktop, she launches it, to the following dialog box.



From this point on, her instructions from Danny on how to install SPIM were to just, quote, “follow what it says to do,” so she’s on her own. (Being somewhat picky she notices that the button is not labeled “OK,” as implied by the text, which makes her feel smart.) It chugs along for a moment and then says,



Okay, what the fuck is this? She checks the box that her compuscreen came in. Under *Configuration Information* it clearly says that she has  $\infty$  megabytes. Remembering her *greater than* tables from primary school, she knows that  $82379237589732987327893 \dots$  is smaller than infinity, so she disagrees with the computer and thus clicks to *install anyway*, her only option in any case. Then she gets this puzzler:

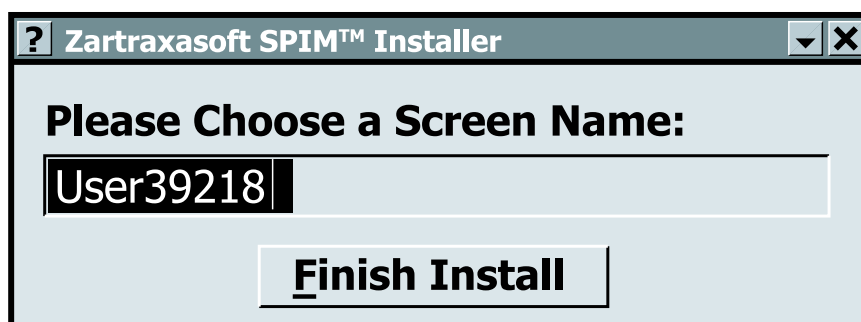


“Well, gee, *is* that okay?” she thinks. Sometimes an un-

known error is bad. Sometimes it is good, the very fact that the error's cause or even shape is not known being an indication that she is breaking new ground in computation, at the forefront of the application installation frontier. She clicks to continue. Now it says:



Alexis is upset that it seems to have chosen a screen name for her, although that's not the worst choice. She proceeds, but then it asks:



So, she does get to choose after all. Well, it sure isn't going to be User39218. She waffles for a while but, feeling the pressures of sleep creep over her, she actually can't think of anything better than AlexisNexis, so she chooses that.

Now, the application finally comes up. Immediately she sees that she has a message, so she clicks on it.

<Mister\_Jack> First time, huh? lol  
PS. Okay, thanks!

Alexis figures that this is from her new friend Mr. Jack Wagster, so she responds,

<AlexisNexis> Huh??  
PS. The new team is meeting tomorrow at  
6am, don't miss it

AS A RESULT OF being in the overly meddlesome conspiracy theorist protection and brainwashing program, I was charged with inventing my own life story, from birth to present, in any way that I saw fit, in order that federal funds could be used to infiltrate it as such into the public record, to make it—as far as anyone not *in the know*, including myself in a few moments, would know—real. What a trip! And what would you have chosen? Here are some of the possibilities I considered. First, of course, was a total bad-ass street fighting champion. My currently average physique would not be much of a liability in this post-brainwashing future/past, since 90% of medical doctors agree that brute strength is actually purely mental—if you believe that you are strong beyond belief, then you will be. My past corroborates this belief state: As a baby, I would have been left on the doorstep of the world's pre-eminent street fighting monastery, with a note that says, *train me*, and as I grew I would do all of those kung fu things like wash the floor and learn ninja kicks and shave my head, not ever quite fitting in because I am such a brutish white man by genetics. Ultimately I would be driven to leave the monastery



silently in the night, driven by a pent-up teenage wanderlust and sense of longing for knowledge of my true parents, and embark on a world fighting tour, defeating each of the planet's strongest fighters in hand-to-hand combat. My journey would end when I am matched up against the executive director of the CIA—the mightiest contestant ever to have donned a pair of sweatpants and illegitimate brass knuckles, and find that he has employed my biological mother and father as covert operatives in his agency, threatening to dock their pay on the sly if I should win. Torn between the purist kung fu dogma that I had been indoctrinated with during my monastic days, and the rational economic sense that runs through my veins, arteries, and capillaries by birthright, I ultimately choose to not fight at all, elevating my status from champion street fighter to circumspect diplomat, and raising my total score into the tens of thousands. But then I thought, even with a score of tens of thousands, would I really want to live out the rest of my life as a revered, feared, and highly desirous target for any budding street fighting prodigy? Everywhere I went, I'd have to be constantly on guard for flying ninja stars, impromptu bar encounters, and trap holes in the ground covered up with sticks and leaves. *Not Cool*. So then I thought, what about a genetically engineered super human jazz vocalist, with the deepest, most sexually arousing male vocal tract that has ever been devised by a bunch of science nerds in a lab? Born in a test tube on lamb's blood agar from the reconstituted genetic material of Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald, my dividing cells would be vibrated by orchestral renderings of Mozart or Dvořák or Qwerty or whatever. And I would, each year, sweep the American Idol competition, such that the rules would be amended to bar my entry in future seasons—to be fair—and every album that I happened to shit out would be a multiplatinum diamond megaplutonium block-buster rocket straight to the top of the charts. My dream was to be rich beyond my wildest dreams. But the CIA insisted that they would not provide me with the actual capital to substantiate my fantastic backstory,

so, although I could be given the belief that I was a fantastic singer (so imparting the actual ability, by the same argument as above), and could even, if I chose, be given the belief that I had loads of money, I would not actually have that load of money. And then I thought further: What if I lost my talent, all of a sudden? Much like when Garrison Keillor coughed up a tiny acorn in 2013 that had been embedded in his throat for the majority of his life and that had blessed him with his famous narration voice, and was left a weak-throated, warbling pipsqueak, I would be a worthless mockery of a human, at best being able, like Bob Dylan did, to trick only a few feeble-minded stalwarts to come to my revival tours, recognizing my name but not connecting it with the vivid headlines: *So-and-so Completely Loses Ability to Sing in Tragic Mishap*, *Don't Bother Picking Up What's-His-Face's Shitty New Album*; *0/5 Stars*, etc. So this, too, while at first tantalizing, turned out to ultimately be a no-go. I thought of other, more mundane selves: The fulfilled writer of wholesome and bland popsicle-stick jokes: **Q.** What kind of home does a ninja live in? **A.** A roundhouse. **Q.** What kind of home does a popular 20<sup>th</sup>-century publisher of photo editing software live in? **A.** An adobe abode. **Q.** What kind of house does a football player live in? **A.** A Hut Hut Hike. **Q.** What kind of home does a ghost live in? **A.** An *ahhhhhh*partment building. (The possibilities are limitless!); the spoiled, narcoleptic slacker whose curiosity gets the best of him; the hero beekeeper whose congenital insensitivity to pain allows him to work intimately with the insects, with no protective clothing and no fear of being stung, but whose scab-covered body is a sexual turn-off to all but the most hardline apiarians. Each of these scenarios was an intriguing opportunity to lead a noteworthy life, but none was exactly right. Ultimately, I decided that dreaming of and anticipating these possibilities was the one true joy I had ever experienced in life, and so I instructed the brainwashers to give me the life of a meddling conspiracy theorist who has been charged with the task of designing his own life story, any way he

likes, so that he can be brainwashed to believe that history, and whose only true joy in life is inventing such futures for himself, on account of having discovered by chance the terrible secret at the top of the Space Bridge.



## Day 4

Journal of Alexis Singleton  
according to the legendary scrolls

Holy crap! Something is really wrong. This feels bad and horrible. That noise is awful! Oh, I'm queasy, what is going on? What are those *red numbers*... my head, my eyes feel wrong, like they've been sewn open, or shut, and I can see nothing but darkness, and *red numbers*

5:45

I reach around in the dark, my fingers feeling soft, wonderful linen, and then perceiving that awful device, that futurist noisemaker, shaking me out of neverland, driven by nothing but pure malevolence, as if a cursed soul-sucking artifact sent down from Dimension X—god, I hate those guys from Dimension X—a relic intended purely to molest my good humor. I manipulate its controls randomly, pushing one button also makes it start playing music in addition to the demonic beeping, pushing another stops the beeping but makes the music louder, and, just as I figure out the combination that shuts it up, I realize what is happening, and dart upright.

Alexis turns on the light. She's supposed to be at practice in ten minutes, and has never been up this early in her adult

life. She bolts out of bed, believing that the momentum of panic might be the best way to actually succeed, and promptly passes out from a lack of blood to her brain.

I... something is happening, a noise, not again! I feel... terrible. Wait... volleyball!

Her alarm's snooze mode activates, luckily engaged by her aimless operation of the buttons and switches earlier. She gets back up, more slowly this time, with only five minutes to six remaining. Forgoing a hypersonic shower, breakfast snack, or even a quick change out of her sleeping clothes, she grabs her athletic get-up and runs from her apartment to the elevator. There, she sees Mr. Jack Wagster also waiting, which eases her panic. One person late is tardiness, but two persons late is a silent protest.

"Hello, Alexis. Excited about our team's first day?"

"I think so," she says, and yawns.

Mr. Jack is wearing athletic shorts that appear to be made from seaweed. His top is a polycotton tee shirt that is too small for him, exposing his skinny midriff. Under his eyes he has some kind of white paste, perhaps sunscreen.

"Is that sunblock?" she asks, worrying that perhaps she has not properly understood the venue for this practice.

The elevator dings, its doors open, and they get in.

"No, it's bacterial cream. You know me, old Mr. Jack Wagster who just loves life." He hands her the tube. It says,

## Bact♥X

Bacterial cream. Promotes the growth of healthful flora and symbiotic microorganisms. For tropical use only.

“For tropical use only?”

“Well, technically we’re in a temperate zone, but I figure, *close enough*.”

“Huh.”

“Want some *biotics*?” he asks as he pops a few pills from a prescription bottle, chewing and swallowing without water. Alexis guesses that these are for his non-topical bacteria.

“No, thanks.”

The elevator stops, the doors open, and by another unlikely display of synchronicity, Isaac happens to be waiting on the other side, and he gets in. Isaac also clutches a bundle of clothes under his arm.

“Isaac, meet your teammate Jack,” introduces Alexis.

“Mr. Jack. Pleased to meet you,” says Mr. Jack.

“Isaac,” says Isaac. “The pleasure is all mine.”

As the elevator begins to descend, he asks, “You guys don’t mind if I change into my volleyball clothes, do you?” Nobody gets a chance to respond before he has dropped his pants, and taken off his shirt. His boxers say across the front, “Warning: May contain nuts.”

He sees Alexis reading them and remarks, “One of the perks of the ice cream industry,” winking. Alexis rolls her eyes.

As Mr. Jack and Isaac exchange superficial information about one another, Alexis changes too, more modestly using an inverted technique whereby she dresses herself underneath the clothes that she’s wearing, and only then disrobes from the outer layer. “I feel naked without clothes,” she says. They’re all dressed and ready to rock by the end.

The elevator stops at the fourth floor, which is a sextuple-tall gymnasium complex and stadium, and the location of the superhuge volleyball courts, among other athletic facilities.

Adelina is there, waiting, and she calls out to them. “There is teammates! Hurry, come! Game is starting in one minute!”

*Game?* Alexis looks at Mr. Jack, who seems to be unsurprised, and Isaac, who is frowning. They follow Adelina, and Isaac asks Alexis, “Are we playing a real game today?” She whispers back, “I thought we were just practicing!”

Rounding the bend they find themselves in a superhuge arena surrounded by bleachers *actually filled with **actual people***. Powerful overhead halogen lights cast a star pattern of shadows around them as they step onto the lacquered wood floor at the bottom. An announcer, filtered out of the background noise by our heroes previously, now says clearly over the loudspeaker, “Please welcome... *The 629,533<sup>rd</sup> Floor Typhimuriums!*”

“Is that us?” asks Alexis.

“Do you like the name? I came up with it,” claims Mr. Jack.

Adelina just pumps her fists in the air, drawing cheers from the crowd.



“I live on the 599,131<sup>st</sup> floor,” says Isaac, still frowning.

Danny, the roboticist diamond thief, and his brother Tony are already on the field, simultaneously relieved to see the rest of their team arrive and dismayed that they won’t be forced to default. The crisp lighting, crowd noise, and giant robots on the court provide a surreal atmosphere as Danny comes over to them.

Alexis asks him, “What’s going on? Are we supposed to be playing?”

“From what I can understand, your friend Adelina is, like, an Olympic medalist in superhuge volleyball, and she got us seeded in the national championship tournament.”

“Are you serious? I don’t even know how to play!”

“Hey, you started the team, not me!”

A buzzer sounds. Adelina and Mr. Jack are waving at them furiously.

The announcer chuckles. “There seems to be some confusion on the Typhimuriums’ bench... three quarters of their players aren’t even jacked into their telemetric control helmets yet, and the point has already begun!”

Adelina, standing on the court in forward position among the 8 meter tall metallic athletes, looks in horror as the ball is served deep into their court between two totally lifeless robotic monoliths. Only Mr. Jack’s robot moves at all, pirouetting pathetically, the sole reason it avoids a fall being the built in gyroscopic stabilization mechanisms. Adelina makes a heroic running dive to try to keep the ball in play, but her dig goes out of bounds.

●1 — 0  
Kenya National Typhimuriums

Games go to 11 points, with only the service team in a scoring position. Alexis notices Isaac staring at the crowd and frowning, probably thinking, “fuck this,” and about to turn to leave. She grabs him by the arm and drags him to the bench, where others are trying to get their telemetric control helmets on. There are no timeouts in Superhuge Volleyball; such distractions were universally banned from sports in 2667 thanks to the courtroom sneakery of the American Attention Defecit Hyperactivity Disorder Legal Activism Association. Adelina receives service again, nearly alone on the court save for the stolic robotic totem poles. This time she preemptively moves to the center of the court and drops to one knee. She hits the ball by throwing her entire body into it, her arms exploding from her chest like a strongman snapping his chain link bonds, and afterwards reels from the force of impact, her feet moving rapidly in balance-adjusting dance. This maneuver lofts the gigantic ball in a perfect set above the center of the net. “Mr. Jack!” she calls out.

Mr. Jack’s avatar steps slowly and aimlessly, its limbs outstretched and zombified, and his robot’s head twists up in the net, pulling it off of the posts and sending the bot crashing to the ground, entangled like a dolphin in tuna season. The crowd gasps, and the net judge sounds a buzzer signifying a foul.

●2 — 0  
Kenya National Typhimuriums

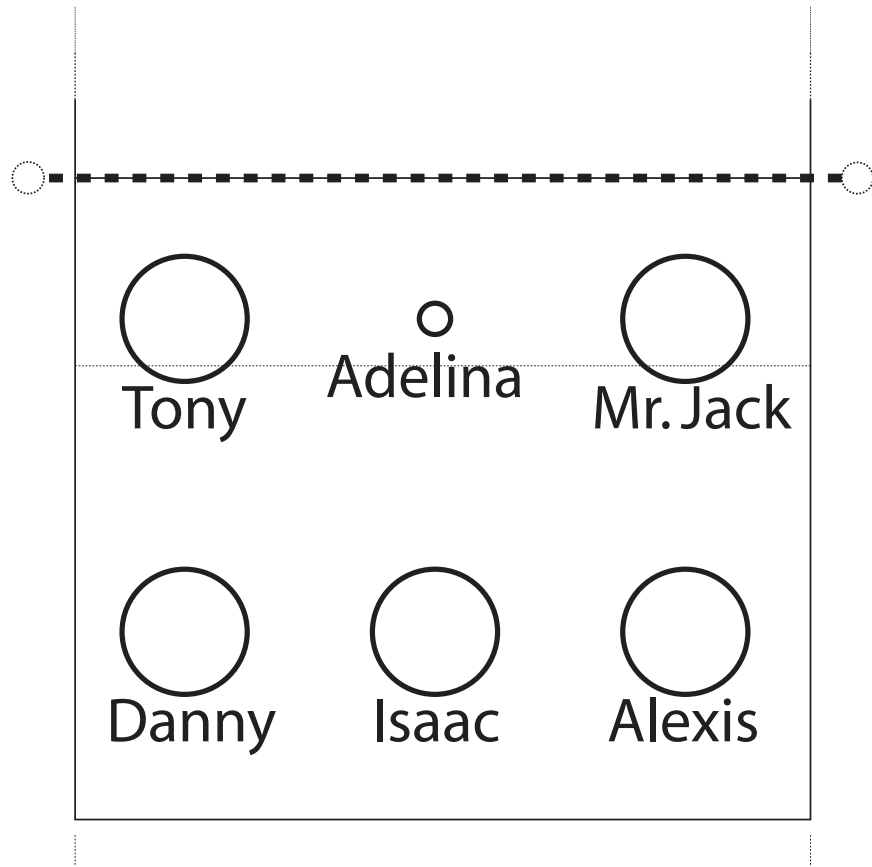
This equipment failure affords the Typhimuriums some time to get their shit together. Adelina bounds over, and says,

“Please, team, I cannot hit ball two times in subcession! Please make robots go!”

As the net is replaced, the robots of the Kenyan team put on a taunting pantomime, five standing at attention as the final one hobbles around drunkenly, mimicking Mr. Jack’s naïve telemetry. The Kenyan humans laugh hysterically.

By the time the net is almost back in place, they’ve finally got their helmets on, and Tony has briefly introduced himself to the newly arrived players. Now that everyone knows each other, they’re ready to play, for real. The sports network cameras broadcast a close-up of the Typhimuriums trying the Olympic-grade equipment on in wonderment, and Isaac asking, “Which one am I?” Thousands of sports fans groan in disgust—and jealousy—crowded around their telescreens at home. Soon, angry word comes in from network headquarters, and the cameras swivel to focus on the far less embarrassing play of Adelina.

The net is back, and the net judge blows a whistle signifying that play must begin again. They are arranged like this:



Again, Kenya's robots serve the ball deep into the far corner, where Alexis's avatar awaits. She takes a step forward, and, in laudably charming high school form, extends her arms into a bump posture. Unfortunately, her robot swivels and steps towards them, repeating the move uselessly out of bounds, the ball striking it in its robotic rump.

● **3**      —      **0**

Kenya National      Typhimuriums

Alexis realizes that her helmet is on backwards. She rotates it and restraps it to her chin, noticing how much more comfortable it is this way. The Kenyans think this is the funniest shit they have ever seen. Their robots are rolling around on the ground laughing as their human puppetmasters do the same. The cameraman can't resist but to grab a shot of Alexis with her helmet conspicuously inverted to superimpose over the instant replay of her robot's miss. This clip will make the highlight reel for sure, perhaps even become an Ultramet e-P2P favorite.

This is not going well. At least there is a half-time whenever the total score reaches ten points. Adelina claps her hands and squats in anticipation of the next point. Kenya serves deep to Isaac this time. Reacting too slowly, the ball bounces squarely off his robot's head, knocking it into a wavy unbalance, and then soars luckily above the center of their court. Adelina springs into action, climbing up Mr. Jack's 8 meter robot with a few deft dyno moves, springing off its mechanical neck in a backflip, and, her two hands interlocked in one doublesized hammer fist above her head, spins in the air and smashes down on the ball in a thunderous spike, which hits the ground directly in-bounds despite the Kenyan forward's surprised attempt to get a robot hand on it. The ball bounces all the way into the crowd, a laser force field deflecting it before it crushes the spectators. Adelina lands gracefully in a tripodal configuration, her legs spread wide and her left hand absorbing the force of her upper torso, her right arm extended for balance.

Alexis chokes back a tear. *Oh my God*, she thinks.

Isaac remarks: "It's in-effing-credible. Fuck, it's in-effing-effable."

The Kenyans are stunned. They talk to their coach in Kiswahili, who carries their concerns to the net judge, i.e., *is*

*that legal?* The official pages through his book of regulations, and after a few moments nods in the affirmative. The ball is awarded to the Typhimuriums.

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \mathbf{3} & - & \mathbf{0\bullet} \\ \text{Kenya National} & & \text{Typhimuriums} \end{array}$$

Alexis’s serve. Through her robotic telepresence, she jumps, tosses the ball up, and serves a total duck that anyway goes way out of bounds.

“Don’t forget to *follow through*,” instructs Isaac.

“Oh, shut up.”

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \bullet\mathbf{3} & - & \mathbf{0} \\ \text{Kenya National} & & \text{Typhimuriums} \end{array}$$

Kenya rotates and then serves up an ace and three more unforced errors to various players on the Typhimuriums. Their sounds are like this, respectively, *whiiizzzzz* (the ace, dangerously fast); *pshpshpshpshpshs-thunk* (a ball with heavy sidespin); *weow weow weow weow weow weow pow* (the *Mexican Jumping Beam* maneuver, in which the ball is imparted light-like wave particle duality, so that it swings back and forth transversely, even being defracted by the net’s edge); and *krshhhh... . . . . . shhhhhkoom!* (the ball sent powerfully up to the raised ceiling, which then comes crashing back down).

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \bullet\mathbf{7} & - & \mathbf{0} \\ \text{Kenya National} & & \text{Typhimuriums} \end{array}$$

“We just have to get it to Adelina,” suggests Isaac.

“I *know*,” says Alexis.

The Kenyans trounce them further: Adelina moves to the center of the court, trying to cover the whole 20,736 square meter in-bounds area, preemptively guessing and running towards one of the four corners as the Kenyan national team serves. But her guesses are not correct, and they score two more easy points. Some of the other Kenyan players are starting to get bored, taking off their helmets and flossing their teeth.

●9	—	0
Kenya National		Typhimuriums

Then something amazing happens: Alexis returns a conservative serve with a perfect form bump. Even though the ball is already headed over the net, Adelina leaps into the air and spikes it downward. The Kenyans are ready this time, however, and they save the point with a bump set slam that lands squarely—spherically—in the middle of the Tyhpimurims’s court.

●10	—	0
Kenya National		Typhimuriums

Half time. The teams get a ten minute respite—or—in the case of the Kenyans, ten boring minutes to wait before they can win the last point and get on with the rest of the tournament. They sit at their bench yawning in Kiswahili and cybercrocheting, which is weaving quilts and sweaters with fiber optic filaments to create magical tapestries of light. They chuckle as they watch the Typhimuriums meet at their bench in demoralized shame.

“Huddle around, everyone,” says Mr. Jack.

“I don’t think we’re ready to be playing in the national championships,” pouts Alexis.

“Well,” begins Mr. Jack, “I think that Isaac puts it well—”

“I didn’t say anything,” corrects Isaac.

“On your T-shirt—”

“My shirt is blank,” he says.

“No, on the tag, it says, *Machine Wash Warm*. Do you guys see what I’m saying?”

Nobody responds to that. “Anybody want some biotics?”

Variously, “Uh, no thanks;” “No;” “Not right now;” etc. Everyone other than Mr. Jack turns to Alexis for guidance at this point.

“I wish I had brought some water or something,” she says, tasting the inside of her dry, dry mouth.

“I have some saltines,” says Isaac with his dry, dry wit. She glares at him again.

“Do we have a plan?” asks Tony, apparently of Alexis. Adelina hangs her head in desperate shame.

“Uh, where’s Danny?”

Everyone looks around. Danny is standing on the court by the robots, who are laying lifeless on their backs, their guts spilled everywhere, his pocket multimeter / soldering iron / quantum logic probe beaming plasma conduits of pure data into



their bioreentrant brains. He works rapidly, pulling an arm off of one robot and attaching it to another's leg socket, etc. With no topic of strategic conversation, the Typhimuriums walk over to the court and ask,

“What are you doing?”

He holds up a finger to indicate that he is working. After a few minutes of watching him destroy their avatars, someone attempts to get his attention again.

“Danny.”

He taps his watch and points up to the huge overhead scoreboard, which shows 1:30 left in half time, without looking up from his work. Cheerleaders hop around, the Space Bridge Marching Band plays *Peter Laser Gunn*, the crowd refills their extra large gulp gallon beer hats, and empties their bladders into mass urination troughs in the bathrooms, and time is still ticking, 0:48 remains, with Danny plugging things back together and typing at hidden fold-out keyboards in the robot necks, and 0:31, and he says,

“Finished.”

“What did you do?” asks Alexis.

“I reprogrammed the robots with a new strategy.”

They look at his finished product, which is a singular unholy mess of horizontal robotic torsos, arms, chassis and optical jumper cables running from one robot brain to another. The fused robot parts twitch in postoperative agony.

“Uhhh. . .” says someone.

“Well, it’s obvious that we are unable to do anything by controlling our robots. Instead I’ve put together something that I like to call *the complete volleyball team*. Actually, that’s not true, because the real star is, of course, Adelina.”

“Twelve seconds,” says someone else.

“So basically, this *passive defense matrix*,” he says, gesturing to the robot carcasses lying on the ground, “protects the ball from ever landing on the surface of our court, preventing them from scoring unless we foul. This works by an extension of the principles behind the pancake maneuver; are you familiar with this?”

Adelina displays her hand palm down, sliding it along the imaginary floor in a mock dive, drawing the ball’s trajectory off the back of that hand with the other one.

“Right. Well, this is the five-man sedentary robotic pancake, where we try to cover the whole floor at once. Then Adelina can do her thing.”

“Two seconds,” Alexis reminds him.

“So, what are the rest of us supposed to do?”

“Uh, for now, stand behind the baseline and bump the ball back if Adelina misses it,” says Danny as the net official blows the robot dog whistle signifying the start of the second half.

“What, with our bodies?”

Danny straps on his five-helmet hybrid superheadgear, one helmet normally attached to his cranium, another on the back of his skull over the hippocampus, one over each ear, and one on his face, enclosing his entire head in a spherical planetarium

of remote control interfaces. He dances blindly as the Kenyans serve for match point.

The ball, as expected, bounces off a prostrate robot, and is sent into the air. Adelina tracks it, and, bouncing from robot part to robot part, jumps and spikes the ball back at Kenya, knocking over one of their robots with its power. The crowd cheers. Meanwhile, Kenya's coach tears furiously through a rulebook<sup>[9]</sup> and law dictionary, yelling to his sports lawyer on his bluetooth headset.

$$\begin{array}{ccc} 10 & - & 0\bullet \\ \text{Kenya National} & & \text{Typhimuriums} \end{array}$$

“How are we going to serve? It's Mr. Jack's service.”

Danny blushes under his face armor. “Uh,” comes his muffled response, “just try serving it with your hand.”

They “rotate” into their new positions. Mr. Jack picks up the ball, and, as he does, clutches his back and falls to one knee, yelping “Oh!”

“Mr. Jack says he's having trouble lifting the ball. It weighs like 25 kilograms.”

Mr. Jack is just barely able to lift the ball into the air, and then kicks it. It rolls pathetically under the net right back to the Kenyans, where it belongs.

“Fault!” calls the official.

<sup>9</sup>United States Superhuge Volleyball Association, *Official Rulebook*, Detroit Sports Press, 2309

●10 — 0

Kenya National      Typhimuriums

Match point again. The robots are still lying inactive on the court, prompting Alexis to ask of Danny, “What are you *doing?*”

“Programming!”

This serve bounces off the robot-covered court—still legally in play, and past the baseline, where the human players are supposed to block it. But they step out of the way, not wanting to be pulverized by the 25 kg wrecking ball. The Kenyans celebrate an empty victory as the ball bounces out of reach—but, just as it is about to hit the ground, a telescoping arm extends from the middle of the automaton network and sets the ball perfectly back into play; Adelina spikes it on an unprepared Kenyan court, winning back the service.

“Now we’re talking,” says Danny. Adelina serves professionally, forcing the opponents to return an easy volley. The entire robotic edifice lifts itself up to bring Adelina close to the top of the net; she fakes a hard spike for a dinker that wins the Typhimuriums their first point!

10 — 1●

Kenya National      Typhimuriums

**Reader’s Digest version of the remainder of this fateful game and championship season:** The four human players other than Adelina and Danny stand around in ready position, but dodge the deadly ball whenever it comes near. Adelina serves and commands the point scoring agency of the team, while

Danny controls the robotic assembly, putting stray balls back in play, and doing other moves such as: “The Wall” block, which raises a 62 meter solid wall just behind the net should a Kenyan robot try to spike; “the funnel,” which catches a sky ball and safely directs it (with no more than two hits) into front center court for Adelina to spike; “the disruptor,” which vibrates the court at ultrasonic frequencies causing the enemy players to float along the floor, ruining their sense of dead reckoning; etc. The Kenyans are simply not able to regain control of the game, and eventually, the Typhimuriums win an amazing comeback victory, 10–12, advancing to the next round of the tournament. Playing six more games in locations all around the world (conveniently accessible via Dimension X) through the rest of the week, they continue to dominate; though teams catch on to their mechanical antics, and even try to duplicate them, no one can match Danny’s binge hacking skills in a timeframe of a single week, not even the genetically modified 128-fingered programmer babies with real two’s-complement binary silicon brains, native to Japan, and so the 629,533<sup>rd</sup> Floor Typhimuriums win the Dynamo Cup, the ultimate prize of superhuge volleyball. But then, they are contacted by the intergalactic sports league, an inasmuchashithertowhencefore unknown shadow league of the very best players that the universe has to offer in various sports, who had known of the megarobot fabric edifice strategy for thousands of years, and who are only now making contact with the Earth planet because they have outgrown the simplistic interpretation of the rules and are ready to join the big boys, and the intergalactic sports league challenges them to a cross-division showdown bout, but the Typhimuriums decline, opting to take the cash prize rather than to risk the possibility of marring their perfect season. An interview is conducted,

TELESCREEN PERSONALITY: So, now that you’ve won the international championships, what are you going to do with all the money you’ve received?

MR. JACK WAGSTER: I'm going to open a zoo.

ISAAC REAM: I'm going to wipe my ass with thousand dollar bills, just to see what all the fuss is about.

ADELINA: I opening Adelina school of superhuge training!

DANNY DURFEY: I'm going to build a zero gravity frictionless turntable, the only one in existence.

TONY DURFEY: I haven't really thought about it yet.

ALEXIS SINGLETON: **I'm going to figure out what the Space Bridge is for.**

**When** I GROW UP, I want to be 100. Not one hundred years old, the number 100. One hundred, is like, forever. Time moves on, civilizations change and destroy one another, rockets are sent to space and space sends rockets, packed with antimatter weapons, back, people live and die, but one hundred is just one hundred, never getting bigger or smaller; it just *is*. Stolid and aloof, 100 merely observes. Complete, each percent present, it represents the sum total achievement of mankind, as well as standing for the pervasive numerology on which everything on God's Earth is based. As an example of its potency, take the following theorem of 100: If you add up the letters in "one hundred,"

$$\begin{array}{rcccccccccccc} & O & N & E & & H & U & N & D & R & E & D & \\ + & 15 & 14 & 5 & & 8 & 21 & 14 & 4 & 18 & 5 & 4 & = 108 \end{array}$$

... then add up all of the digits,

$$\begin{array}{r} 1 \\ 0 \\ + 8 \\ \hline 9 \end{array}$$

Now multiply by the number of letters in “one hundred”: ten, and then also add that number.

$$9 \times 10 + 10 = 100$$

**Definition 5.1** *A number  $n$  is **totally ultra** if the sum of letters spelling it, with the digits added up, times the number of letters in its name, plus the number of letters in its name, equals the number itself.*

**Theorem 5.1** *100 is a **totally ultra** number.*

*Proof: above.*

□

**Corollary 5.1** *Holy crap! That is so awesome!!*

Speaking of awesome, did you ever notice how the roman numeral for 100 is **C**, as in *century*? And a century is 100 years? So fucking sweet.

There’s also basically no number bigger than 100. Just try to count higher than that. But you can’t cheat: you’re only allowed to use your fingers, and the fingers of up to nine of your friends. And no mutants.





## Chapter 6

### INT. SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON VOTING, US HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wide: A congressional rotunda with a dome shape and oxidized copper ceiling. The bleachers are characteristically empty, with only a few representatives present, most of whom are disengaged. There is a prolonged and unproductive silence as REP. GARY MANDERING (D-NC) gets his shit together.

REP. GARY MANDERING

Let's get started. I'd like to...

*GARY gestures to the microphone as he looks up toward the technical staff. A loud knock and brief moment of feedback announces that it has been turned on.*

GARY

OK? Okay, that's better. I'd like to welcome you all to the 2969 House Special Committee on Voting. There are several presentations on the schedule, but before we begin I'd like to make some opening remarks.

GARY (cont'd)

As you all are no doubt aware, voting in the United States has become quite—shall we say—unpopular. In the 2968 Federal elections, there were only 35 votes cast nationwide, which does not even account for ballots that the elected officials should have cast themselves. Obviously, voter apathy has reached a dizzying high, and since democracy does not work without voters, we've set up this special committee to decide how to allocate funds for voter marketing.

*In the natural pause after Gary's sentence, a wide shot shows the actor portraying REP. KAVIN JAVITZ (R-IA) loudly committing suicide by slitting his own throat with a dull letter-opener, eructing an exasperated gurgle. Some representatives turn their heads to look back as his body slumps over his name card. GARY glances at Kevin to silently communicate that such rudeness is not appreciated.*

GARY (cont'd)

Though my role as Chair and moderator does not give me the opportunity to make a presentation myself, I'd like to nonetheless kick off the discussion with a few ideas of my own. Just to get these out on the table.

GARY (cont'd)

First of all, I think it's clear that the Electoral College needs to, in turn, report to a higher degree program, such as an Electoral Masters School or Electoral Ph.D. Program.

GARY (cont'd)

Second, well, . . . actually, that's all I've got. So we now move to our first speaker, my good friend Ace Crackshaw from the Horror party in Ohio.

*Applause. ACE takes Gary's place at the podium. Ace speaks in a wretched, emphysmatic voice, drawing out syllables with no predictable pattern. When he speaks an 'h' sound, a deep throaty whistle peaks out the microphone's levels, making it squeal in delight—or pain.*

ACE

Yees. My idea ffffffor reform is thiiiiis. Much voter apathy comeeeeeees from the pathhhhhetic ineffectiveness of thhhhhhhird party candidates, even though theeeese candidates represent the vieeeeeews of a significannnnnt minority of potential votttttters.

*ACE continues, drawing out letters that can not even be reasonably drawn.*

ACE

As ttttttthe only membbbbbbber of the Horror party, which is itself the only thhhhhhhird party even represented in congress, I feel it is my duty to look out ffffffor the interests of all minority partiessssss.

*ROBERT HERBERT (R-OR), the one closet libertarian in the house, whistles and applauds loudly, and then becomes abruptly silent again in embarrassment, when he realizes that he has outed himself.*

ACE

My proposed consssssstitutional amendment would make all votes cumulative: All losing candidates innnnnnnnnn an election begin with that maaaaaany votes to their credit in the next election. This way, every party, no matter how small, woullllllld eventually get their fair share of representation.

GARY

Question from the floor. Mr. Donnelly.

FATOUSH DONNELLY

This is an intriguing possibility, I must admit, but do we really want to give all fringe parties power, even at very infrequent intervals?

ACE

Yeeees. I think we do.

FATOUSH

What about, say, the Circus League, whose singular campaign issue is relaxation of import controls on Japanese-trained dancing bears?

ACE

They should require only a shhhhhhhort time in office before graciiaiiiiiously yielding to the next in line.

FATOUSH

Well, how about the Apocalypse Eschaton party, which runs on a platform described by the slogan “A Universe of Destruction Awaits U.S. at the Hands of the Apocalypse Eschaton Party”?

ACE

Every group that represents voterrrrrrrrs should get a chance. That''''''s democracy.

FATOUSH

Even the secular humanists?!

*Gasps from the crowd. GARY steps to the podium to hijack the discussion.*

GARY

*(laughing nervously)* I think Fatoush’s point is well taken, Ace. Maybe we should move on.

*ACE steps down from the podium, tossing his constitutional amendment in the trash in well-practiced dejection.*

GARY (cont’d)

Our next speaker is Uri Delavega.

*GARY welcomes URI, who approaches the podium wearing a*

*flamboyant polished silver suit.*

URI

Thanks Gār'. Can we get the lights? Yeah, that's right, the disco ball.

*The lights dim and a rotating matrix of twinkling dots swirl around the room. Purple accents light the walls from the bottom.*

URI (cont'd)

Hi everyone! It's great to be here!

*(applause)* URI bows. *He speaks with such glee, it's almost as if he's talking about a candy factory.*

URI (cont'd)

Well, my idea is very simple. It goes like this. On election day, each county will produce a *huge* hat—like a magician's hat—with a bunch of ballots in it. There's one for every person in the county! It'll be enormous!

*(applause)*

URI (cont'd)

Okay, so, instead of voting, every person in the county visits the hat, and takes out one of the ballots. Most of the ballots are blank. But if someone's ballot has a mark on it, then he gets publicly stoned to death!

*(applause) The lighting reverts to normal 60hz fluorescent rod lights.*

GARY

Uri, that's sick, unoriginal<sup>[1]</sup>, and has nothing to do with electing officials.

*Pregnant pause.*

GARY (cont'd)


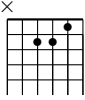
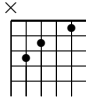



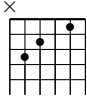




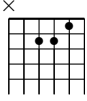
I love it!


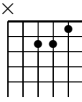
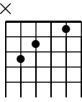
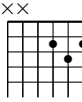
*Wide: The lights once again switch to disco mode, the ball descending into prominence, and the congressmen standing and forming an enormous, layered, Rockettes dance line. They kick and dance in choreographed merriment as spotlights focus on Gary and Uri.*

<sup>1</sup>Shirley Jackson, "The lottery", *New Yorker*, June 1948


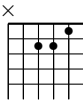

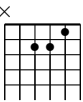



GARY & URI  
*(song: Democracy: Tough Love)*

		
	G	Am
(GARY)	If you love your country	
		
	C	G
(URI)	Your country loves you too	
		
	G	Am
(GARY)	So why not just die senselessly	
		
	C	G
(URI)	Yes, it's the thing to do	
		
	Em	Am
(GARY)	We'll choose at random, ensuring that	
		
	Em	Am
(URI)	no bias makes its way	

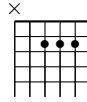
		
	Em	Am
(GARY)	in-to the great ma-gician's hat	
		
	C	D
(URI)	on our election day.	

*The chorus line forms a partisan red-sea fold around the podium, kicking towards Gary and Uri as they croon the chorus together. Smoke effects fill the room.*

(together)	'cause it's...	
		
	G	Am
	Tough love democracy	
	it's...	
		
	G	Am
	as far as I can see	
		
	F	
	a dream come true	

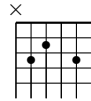


Em



A

so take one for the team,



Cadd9

won't you?



G

Tough love democracy.

*The disco ball explodes in red, white and blue sparks, revealing a giant upturned top hat inside. GARY and URI reach into the hat and retrieve a single ballot together. They reveal it triumphantly to show that it has the black mark on it, as everything around them is exploding, smoking, or shooting lights. The song reaches an orgasmic crescendo.*

*The two chorus lines start throwing stones at Gary and Uri, who are violently knocked unconscious after only a few rocks are cast.*

*Roll credits.*

We all stand to applaud the intermission. I turn to my intercourse companion and say, "Government has been so much more enjoyable since they used the NEA Arts grant fund to turn the entire thing into a 24-hour, 365-day musical, wouldn't you

agree?”

She agrees.

## Day 5

Journal of Alexis Singleton  
as appears in the first edition

After a week of soul-sucking travel done in the name of oversized athletic conquest, and the subsequent week of glorious, comatose snoozing, Alexis awakens again with renewed purpose. Rich beyond belief from her pro sports payday, and new line of sleepwear endorsed under the A. Singleton label, which is very fashionable at high society slumber parties, her feet and toes tingling from the cash money bling currency stuffing her pockets, not literally, and making her lower body very heavy, also figuratively, causing her feet to fall asleep while standing for too long, illiterally, once again measuring among the top echelons of undeserved wealth, just as a Singleton deserves, literally. She stands and yawns the pure diamond dust morning breath that someone so well-to-do exhales, its eau de P. Gingivalis a delicacy among breath sniffing connoisseurs, and then brushes her teeth megasonically, because it's not like she's going to give that shit away for free, and gets a banana pudding from her ReCyberator, because she can choose whatever she wants to eat for breakfast, even if it is classified by the food tetrahedron as a lunch or dinner item. Such are the affordances of being rich. Satiated and predisposed, she begins planning her expedition.

The first step, or question to answer, is “How can I figure out what goes on at the Space Bridge?” which is really just a

rephrasing of the basic goal, which is itself “What goes on in the Space Bridge?”, in other words, no real step at all towards a solution. So, the next step, or question to answer, is “How can I figure out how to find out what goes on at the Space Bridge?” which is itself just a first cousin once removed from the original question, or, in other words, no progress is being made and Alexis slams down her pencil in frustration, breaking it on the edge of her desk.

“Okay,” she thinks, taking another pencil, “Maybe I’m going about this from the wrong angle. Instead of trying to think of more ways to phrase the problem, what if I start with the solution?”

This sounds promising. She rewards herself with another banana pudding. As she licks its foil top clean, she begins writing again.

The last step will be the solution, and what is the solution to all problems? “Money” is the answer. Well, she certainly has lots of money, so the question leads to the second to last step of the solution to her problem, which is, “How do I spend my money?”—an equally pencil-breaking circularity. Smashing another pencil, and briefly considering the possibility of starting from the *middle* of the solution, but being unable to even phrase a question to ask that indirectly attacks something that she has no clue about how to have a hope of beginning to approach, she starts doodling on the paper, her mind wandering. The doodles look like this:



Then she thinks, rather than investigate the magnitude and aspects of the problem at hand, what about investigating the magnitude and aspects of the solution, i.e., her bank account? She whips out her compuscreen and dials `ht||.com@online-banking.www` into her hyperspace cartographer and logs in with user name `al3x1s9999` and password `s3cret_hax` and clicks on `account balance`, smiling to herself as the spreadsheet loads.

## Datafork Online Banking

Account Number = 018 52 1682

Account Holder: Alexis Singleton (Checking)

Account Balance = -4,181.21 cmb

Okay, what the ass is this crap? Negative balance? I'm supposed to be totally loaded, she thinks. Maybe it's in *savings*? Alexis clicks away, but:

## Datafork Online Banking

Account Number = 018 52 1682b

Account Holder: Alexis Singleton (Savings)

Account Balance = 0.00 cmb

Totally empty. Maybe the money hasn't been credited to her account yet, due to some *just in time* accounting practices? She directs her hyperspace cartographer to view recent activity for her checking account:

## Datafork Online Banking

Account Number 018 52 1682

Account Holder: Alexis Singleton (Checking; history enabled)

Description	Type	Amt.	Date
SBC Food Services	CHARGE	-6.41	13.01.69
SBC Apartment Rent & Fac	CHARGE	-1,090.00	13.01.69
SBC Payroll #1068203	CREDIT	3,101.31	13.01.69
SBC Payroll #1068203	CREDIT	1,589.87	13.08.69
SBC Food Services	CHARGE (declined)	-498,183,342.44	13.09.69
USSVA Championship Cup	CREDIT	999,999,999.99	13.10.69
SBC Food Services	CHARGE	-1,000,010,761.10	13.10.69
SBC Food Services	CHARGE (declined)	-31,085,106,133.91	13.11.69
Account Balance		-4,181.21 cmb	



Alexis boggles over the magnitude of the food services charges, not even knowing what that is. “Compuscreen,” she requests, “request itemized charge descriptor for line item ‘SBC Food Services.’” The compuscreen churns out this:

## Datafork Online Banking

Account Number	018 52 1682
Account Holder: Alexis Singleton	(Detail for charge #1008)
Description	Amt.
Cow Milk (650 ml.)	-4.49
Banana Pudding (6 qty.)	-1,000,010,756.61
Total	-1,000,010,761.10 cmb

“Compuscreen!” Alexis barks. “Request reason for bankrupting enormity of banana pudding price! Now!”

The compuscreen says: Price of Food Quest banana pudding and other banana products has grown exponentially as supply has dropped to nearly zero over the last 7 days.

“Compuscreen, request reason for supply shortage,” Alexis grumbles.

Shortage is due to worldwide epidemic of Black Sigatoka, which has destroyed 99.997% of banana crops. Current market rate for one kilogram of bananas is 189.6 billion cmb.

“Compuscreen, request refund on automatic purchase of banana pudding,” she tries, feeling the banana taste still fresh in her mouth.

Request denied: Product is non-refundable.

“Compuscreen, request return of ReCyberator device.”

Request denied: Outstanding subcharges on product.

“Compuscreen, request transfer of liability for banana pudding purchase to Space Bridge Corporation,” implores Alexis, gripping the compuscreen with two hands, strangling it.

Reason required for liability transfer.

“SBC placed original order, not current tenant.”

Request denied: Access logs show order review on 13.02.69 by tenant.

“Compuscreen, request appeal!” she shouts, shaking the device violently.

Request denied: unknown error

Alexis throws the compuscreen as a discus at her window, whose innermost pane wobbles resiliently. The compuscreen, which is also invincible to mere frisbee chucking, reflects off the polyglass and spins on the floor, as smugly as an inanimate computer can. Before it finishes exhausting its rotational inertia, the young girl is out the door, barefoot and manic.

\* \* \* \* \*

With regard to Alexis's current disposition, there are but a few comparable "forces to be reckoned with<sup>[2]</sup>." These are, in descending order of reckoning, *an Ultanian Prairie Dog in heat* (these prairie dogs vomit a continuous stream of lasers when aroused, murdering all but the most photon-repellent potential mates); *Roger C. Millstien of Bar Harbor, Maine, USA* (whose flawlessly lethal, monastery-trained *Butterfly Slice Maelstrom* is unleashed without prejudice against any living creature within sight, the only consolation being that Roger currently lives in isolated *Optimal Security Prison* at Oxdale serving 39,000 years to life); *The Mytaxia Computer Virus* (an artificially intelligent self-propagating compuscreen virus that has the ability to trigger galaxy-wide armageddon even when quarantined from the ultranet: it displays an error message on the screen `Unable to start coolsex.exe error X1874-3JA49 please contact support`, but if the careless user attempts to search for this error code or contact support with it, a single preprepared search result for the codeword presents itself which, when accessed, unleashes a nuclear cyber jihad). Fourth place, of course, is the 22 year old volleyball star whose nest egg has been unexpectedly hard boiled not once but twice in the last few years. She exits the elevator, but not before pressing every floor button that she can reach out of spite, as well as flipping the *emergency call* switch. On the ground floor she lets out a frustrated yell that even gets the attention of a few lobby shoppers, which means it must be pretty loud!

<sup>2</sup>Jovas Sminkle, *Guinness Book of Forces With Which To Be Reckoned*, Bantam Books, 2969

Fuming, she walks around aimlessly, her fists clenched and teeth gnashing. Lobbyists who catch her eye turn about face and flee, normally obnoxiously pushy street vendors, such as a guy selling novelty t-shirts, e.g.

“Kiss Me! I’m HIV+”

or another guy with wheelbarrows and a shoddy wooden sign that says

Top Soil  
\$ Dirt Cheap

give her an unprecedented amount of personal space and, dare I say, respect.

And, as it turns out, she seems to have aimed after all, because she ends up at the former and current location of Isaac’s vending cart.

“I am kill,” she says, staring him directly in the eyes.

“Hi, Alexis,” he says, “how are your new-found riches?”

“Gone.”

“That’s too bad. I actually decided that I really like being an ice cream vendor. They tried to fire me for delinquency, so I bought the company. Please, no more trashing my equipment.”

“I won’t promise you anything.”

“Would you like to try some? It’s pure food candy.”

“Definitely not.”

“So, what brings you down here on this fine day?” he asks cheerfully, still wearing his Thinking Aid and foisting product on passers by.

“Well, I’m broke, and I’ve still made no progress on discovering the secret of the Space Bridge. Actually, I have no ideas at all, money or not.”

“Hmm,” he says, still relishing in his new monetary stature. He pauses for a few seconds, and accepts payment for a cone as he thinks. “Why not just go up to the top and ask?”

“It’d take *forever* to take the elevator up there!”

“What about the teleporter?” he suggests.

“I don’t know if I can stomach another teleporter trip,” she says.

“Don’t be such a baby. Just close your eyes.”

At the teleporter battery, Alexis passes through her personal hole in the stock ticker warning message barrier, and again, a hovering computer flies up to her.

“Good morning, Ms. Singleton,” says the compuscreen. “It’s been a while since we’ve seen you. I trust your last journey was satisfactory?”

“It was a horrible nightmare, actually.”

“Well, I’m so sorry to hear that! We’ll try our hardest to provide you with the highest level of service possible this time. And where will Ms. Singleton be traveling this fine mor-ternoon?” As its internal atomic clock snaps from 11:59:59 to 12:00:00 in mid-syllable, the compuscreen decides that it has become afternoon.

“I’d like to go all the way to the top of the Space Bridge,” she requests.

“Oh, milady, I’m terribly sorry but this destination is in a restricted area.”

“How high can I go?”

“Within the Space Bridge, you may teleport to any destination on the first four million floors, except to private residences. We also have exotic terrestrial and extraplanetary locations available. May I interest you in a vacation package?”

“Shit,” she says. “This blows.”

“A vacation will really take the edge off, madam.”

“No, thanks.” Alexis feels like strangling this compuscreen, too, but it has no neck. She turns to leave.

“Good day, Ms. Singleton. I hope that things start to look up for you.”

Then she remembers something.

“My batteries are dead,” Alexis says, tentatively.

“Pardon me, Ms. Singleton?”

“... to me?” she continues.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand,” says the flying compuscreen as apologetically as possible.

“Damn, what was it?” she mutters to herself, “Or was he just trying to play a trick on me?”

The compuscreen again attempts to figure out what Alexis is saying.

Then she tries: “These batteries are dead to me.” This does the trick; the compuscreen freaks out, spinning in congratulatory somersaults and shooting tiny colored fireworks. It plays a little Easter egg fanfare as it flashes a colorful graphic on the screen, rolling “secret” credits for the development of the hardware and software. Other more serious executives eye the misbehaving compuscreen and girl with contempt. Listen, kid, corporate travel is no laughing matter.

As the credits scroll, she notes a small option at the bottom of the screen that says *service menu*. Selecting it, she is presented with the following menu<sup>3</sup>:

<b>Service Menu</b>	<b>firmware 1.3005.4a</b>
<hr/>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Enable Color Graphics
<input type="checkbox"/>	Surround Sound Speech Synthesis
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Sycophancy Mode
<input type="checkbox"/>	MPC Level 1 Compliance
<input type="checkbox"/>	Enable upper floor access
<input type="checkbox"/>	Janitorial Service Mode
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Turbo
<input type="checkbox"/>	Data Entry Mode
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Propeller Autopilot

Alexis smiles. Maybe I’m finally getting somewhere! She clicks on the check box to enable access to the upper floors. Blinking red text appears, enhanced by every available sort of typographical emphasis, taunting her:

<sup>3</sup>Refer to the service manual<sup>[4]</sup> for details.

<sup>4</sup>Daniel Durfey, *Teleporter Concierge Service Manual*, SBC Press, 2967

# Access Denied!!!

Dammit! She tries pressing some other options. Trying to turn on Surround Sound results in:

## Surround Sound Requires 6.1 Channel Digital Output Device

That stuff is always so hard to set up. MPC Compliance doesn't seem to do anything. However, turning on the janitorial service mode automatically disables Sycophancy Mode and restarts the system. Alexis steps back slightly as the propeller spins into action again, subliminally asserting its need for more personal space by way of its posture. It says,

“Whatsamatta you?”

in a considerably more gruff tone of robot synthesized voice. Alexis asks,

“Flying compuscreen, I want to be transported to the top of the Space Bridge.”

“Sorry, toots,” it says, “that level's off limits even ta' janitors.”

“Well, how about the floor right below it?”

“Jess th' lowest four million and change, and believe you me, you don't wanna go no higher.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Janitors is only s'posed ta' clean the lowest four million.”



“Well, do I even have any more access as a janitor? I mean, more than a regular Space Bridge employee?”

“Jess ta’ service areas and residences that’s got facilities request beacons on.”

“Do any residences near or at the top of the Space Bridge got— er, *have* request beacons activated?”

“I told ya, toots, ya can’t go to the top, an’ there’s no beacons. Nobody lives up there ’cept mutants.”

Alexis scrunches her lips in frustration. She feels like *such* a bad hacker.

“Well, how about service areas?”

“All th’ service areas are on the first four million, or in th’ lobby.”

“Well, what about the lobby—anything cool? Super secret offices?”

“Just th’ tool shed, th’ elevators, and th’ shitcans.”

“Uh,” she says. That doesn’t sound very super secret. On second thought, she asks, “Where are the elevators now?”

“Th’ south elevator’s on th’ ground floor, an’ th’ north elevator’s approachin’ the three hun’erd and four quadrillionth six hun’erd sixty-eight trillionth, thirty one millionth, eight hun’erd twen’y thousandth, five fiddy fifth floor.”

“How far is that from the top?”

“Roundabouts two billion floors, hon.”

“I’d like to be janitorially transported there, please.”

“Sorry toots, th’ elevator is near th’ maximum capacity, and there ain’t currently no room for a teleportin’ canister.”

Alexis is foiled again!

“How about the roof of the elevator, inside the shaft?” she tries, desperately.

“Yeah, okay, we’s can do that.”

Alexis is stupefied to find that she has succeeded!

“I want to go right now.”

“Are you sure you’s want ta’ go in the shaft? Teleporin’ technology’s a touch dangerous when tryin’ ta’ speed-match a speed a’ light elevator.”

“Yes. My janitorial duties await.”

“That’s some dedication if I ever seen it. I’ll be sure an’ put a good word in with th’ boss.”

“Let’s go!”

“Okay, all right, toots, keep yer top on. Use canister two for roun’ trip.”

The compuscreen makes as close an imitation of blowing Alexis a kiss as is possible for a plastic and glass machine with a propeller. She straps herself into canister 2, and as she does, watches her compuscreen greet another guest, who is flabbergasted by its boorish behavior.

She closes her eyes tight, but can’t resist peeking slightly

out of one eye as she is whisked away again to Dimension X.

# Okay, Ready? wear- ing my brand

new designer photographic developer scented cologne i press  
forth a foray into the outdoors agoraphobia head  
gyroscopic spin and anyone can win i pass through their spy  
ray threshold an earthquake ritual stand in the doorway its  
posts and beam will protect you easily my razor blades for  
protection use only hidden from the security beams a modern  
luxury for the travelers of yesteryear were forced to endure  
deep latex searches within their toroids center wrapped in  
protective plastic sheaths and swallowed into a tummyful of  
barium milk shake my body registers zero warning dots on the  
body weapon warning scale there she is the most beautiful  
woman that eyeballs have ever known reading martha  
stewarts living magazine a woman by the name of josephine  
energy phenix and josephine is a famed race car driver the  
most beloved palindromic spectator sport south of the mason  
dixon and in fact she is part of a new movement a hybrid race  
known as grand prix ano in which the drivers ie josephine my  
love ie thomas thomas her rival ride in formula one horseless  
carriages that have been converted to support the attachment  
of a grand piano in the former engine compartment and whose  
wheels are turned by the power of a giant clap o meter that is  
in turn rotated by the volume of the crowds cheering as the  
racers gain speed on one another by way of dueling  
pianos hey play me a song josephine energy phenix lets make  
it california dreamin yes i believe i know this one says she the  
beach boys and begins playing no the man in the crowd  
says the version by the mamas and the papas from the  
soundtrack of air america starring mel gibson and robert  
downey jr excuse me for my transgression she says and

begins to play the song and the man says no i mean the japanese issue of the soundtrack in which the song starts three cd frames later and she excuses herself again and finishes the song to a lukewarm reception from the crowd her opponent thomas thomas lucks out he is given experimental composer john cages 4 33 which is four minutes and thirty three seconds of silence thomas executes the song perfectly the first time to monstrous applause josephine hangs her head in shame josephine do not fret you will always be my preferred player piano as it happens we are both waiting for the same plane a military jetliner commandeered by delta airlines to supplement its fleet it is named the uss s where the s is standing for satisfactory i strike up a conversation she reels from the scent of my cologne and my baggage which is real canadian elk roadkill that i have portioned to fit neatly into my suit cases carry on carrion i say ha ha she gets up to move to another seat i follow her yes i say this is a much more comfortable spot it affords a more direct view of our plane the jagged reflective surfaces stealth josephine seems to be engrossed in her book i speak to her and the people around us waiting for the flight i say i read a book on tape last week while flying a nice old lady who is not too bright asks is that so what was it about i just told you i say to the nice lady tape perhaps she does not read my phone rings loudly in auld lang syne i downloaded the sound file from outrageouslyannoyingringtones dot com on the other end of the phone call conversation pocket device is dr sbaitso tell me about your problems he says i say i do not have problems that i know of why do think that you do not have problems that you know of he says sagely that is a good question i say let me think about it lets talk about something different werent you just saying something else no i say i was on the verge of understanding my problems tell me about your mother says the doctor with razor sharp psychological training i tell him she reminds me of josephine

energy phenix josephine looks up over her book is that  
so he responds keenly yes in fact she is right here are you  
sure he questions yes i say i followed her here and i will be  
taking the same flight as her to juneau in adjacent seats i  
hope that by repeated contact she will eventually fall in love  
with her prowler as a hunter will sometimes fall in love with  
his elk roadkill quarry or as a hostage hog tied basement  
learning channel no remote control gagged kidnapping victim  
falls in love with his or her captor only this is a sort of  
stalkholm syndrome i tell the good doctor he says thank  
you for purchasing sound blaster josephine is talking to the  
air marshal i board the air plane and head straight for the  
lavatory sometimes i confuse the word lavatory with the  
word laboratory hoping for the best warning placing  
objects in toilet may cause system failure yes i know that  
now you only need to tell me once and when we are in the  
air a climatic catastrophe occurs i see from my  
window innovative weather patterns cause ice cresicles to  
form in the troposphere hundred mile long saint louis  
arches or golden ones and soon over ninety nine billion are  
served



## Day 5 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>      Journal of Alexis Singleton or, Top O' Th' Space Bridge To Ya!

The janitorial lounge in Dimension X is significantly less significant than the one for first-class, executive travelers, which is to say that it does not exist. This is not to say that the non-existent lounge is not impressive, because, though it fails on architectural merits (ultraminimalist architecture, including the “empty blueprint” avant garde movement, was only a short lived blemish on architecture’s rich historical record, and is no longer taken seriously), what it fails to replace is itself quite impressive, that is, the hellish, undulating geography of Dimension X. Alexis free-falls through holographic lava rivers, boiling over with Pompeii decay, through incredibly creative torture chambers, exquisitely timed so that the painful climax of each crucifixion occurs right as she passes through each consecutive torture vault, like a perverse *it’s a small world* gondola ride at Disneyland.

Eventually, apparitions wisp over from their duty at the executive lounge to perform their own psychological torture on Alexis, reconstructing horrific scenes, some old favorites, some new innovations, and Alexis is screaming and breaking out in a cold sweat, shivering in shock, but then something even more scary happens.

Everything is dark, and a very real pain shoots through her

rear and up her back, and there is a loud clap and the sound of metal smashing through metal, and then there is a moment of light and then dazed darkness again, stars, her face hurting, and the smell of gunpowder, and the exhalation of deflating vinyl airbags inside the canister, and four surprised faces looking at her. They drag Alexis out of the teleportation canister, which is embedded into the floor of the elevator after having punctured its roof, venting its post-transport gases and playing its arrival message through broken speakers. The Lundblads, as startled by her presence as she is by being bludgeoned about by airbags, ask in awe,

“Is this the top? Are you the top of the Space Bridge?”

And she, in her confusion, answers yes, because it sounds sort of like some of the words that she has been thinking about. This answer is strangely satisfactory to the Lundblad party, although the reader must remember that the fifth generation Lundblads have spent their entire lives in an elevator, providing a environment in which almost *anything* strikes them as incredible enough to be the final result of their two hundred year journey.

But Brian says, “According to my calculations,” (which is the way that a large fraction of his sentences begin) “we shouldn’t arrive for another forty seconds. I think this is an impostor.”

Alexis begins to grasp her surroundings in some small way. “I’m not an impostor,” she says. “I’m a janitor.”

Mary, Henry, and Rachael gasp in amazement. “What *is* that?” asks Rachael.

Brian says, “It’s obviously a sort of traveling journalist, sent here to observe us making history.”



Alexis refutes that proposition by asking, as she rubs the back of her head to find that it is bleeding, “Who are you guys?”

Brian has been practicing this: “We are the Lundblad party, fearless explorers from the surface of the Earth planet. We have come in conquest of the Space Bridge, to claim the top floor as a territory of Lundbladfors.”

Alexis finds Brian’s accent unlike anything that she has heard before. “Okay,” is all she says.

Rachael stares at the hole in the ceiling. Through it she can see the emergency lighting of the elevator shaft shooting past at blue shift inducing speeds. This is fascinating to her. Mary is likewise fascinated by the teleportation canister and the indentation in the floor of the elevator car. Henry stares at Alexis.

Nobody knows the surface custom of introducing oneself to a newly encountered person, except for Alexis, who is keeping pressure on the wound on the back of her head. Thus, the next few seconds of anticipatory wonderment pass in clumsy silence.

Then the elevator dusts off its bell, disused for two hundred years, to chime its “We’re here!” ding.

Brian is, of course, the first one to step out of the car. Henry flips the *emergency stop* lever and lets the ladies go before him. The penthouse looks different from the other floors; all of the structures are built from crystal, or some kind of clear acrylic, with internal lighting so that it glows a gentle white, like Superman’s Fortress of Solitude. All of the architectural fixtures gesture towards and frame a normal sized door, emblazoned with the inscription,

## Unauthorized Personnel Only

Below it, a straw **Welcome To Our Home** mat. Alexis looks at Brian, who looks at, and then approaches, the door. He twists the handle and pulls it open, and they both look inside to see a thoroughly lived-in office, with books and papers packed into every cranny, a 250° IMAX view into space, a worn circular throw rug with a bulls-eye pattern on it, which, in its center, supports an ergonomic office chair, which supports, on its seat, *Graduate Student* who manipulates, with his hands, an old-fashioned desktop word processor that is hidden between several enormous stacks of typing paper, paper that also hides an antimatter disintegrator pistol, which is now also being manipulated by one of the hands. *Graduate Student* whips the pistol in their direction and fires immediately, seemingly without taking the time to aim; the swirling plasma bolt leaves a superheated contrail across the room, pointing to Alexis's right, where Brian recently stood, and where now Brian's vaporized crematory ashes serenely waft to the floor.

Alexis puts her hands up and holds her breath.

"I hated that bastard, didn't you?" asks *Graduate Student*. With his other hand he picks up a grapefruit—the size of a brain tumor—and takes a monster bite out of it, rind and all. The phrase *deus ex machinegun* passes casually through his frontal lobe without sticking to particularly any other thoughts. The rest of the Lundblad party is still out in the hall, fascinated by all of the things that aren't the inside of an elevator.

"Hold this, will you?" he asks, throwing the weapon to her. Alexis catches the pistol inexpertly and isn't sure what to do with it. *Graduate Student* returns to typing furiously, pressing **ctrl-s** several times in compulsion every time he pauses to think of the next word.

Alexis begins to speak: “...” merely opening her mouth and perhaps, in the most gregarious interpretation, managing to discharge a glottal stop before *Graduate Student* raises one finger to hush her, extending it for one second while he continues to type with his other hand, hunched over his keyboard, then re-engages in ambidextrous typing. He reaches the end of the paragraph, then executes the `print` keystroke gingerly, sitting back in delight as the word processor noisily shoots pages out of its rear.

Alexis forgot what she was going to say. *Graduate Student* suggests that they move to the other room while his document prints, since it will be quite loud.

Alexis says, “What?” but understands his gesture, and follows him into an adjacent room, which is a kitchen. He shuts the door behind them, and suddenly it is quiet again. She remembers her question now: “What the hell is this?”

“Can I interest you in some juice?” asks *Graduate Student*.

“No, thank you,” she says. “I came from the lobby to find out what is going on up here, which is the only thing I am interested in.”

“Boysenberry?” he says, handing her the glass. She takes it and sets it on the counter. As she does, she notices a pile of what appear to be American literature stroke mags.

“Ah,” he says nervously, taking the pile and hiding it in the cupboard. “‘*The*’ *Magazine*. I read it for the article.”

“Hey,” she demands.

“Yes, Alexis?” says *Graduate Student*, drinking his juice.

“How did you know my name?” she worries.

“I know all of my helpers,” he says, gesturing to the device on her temple.

“Helpers? The thinking aid?” she had forgotten that it was still on her head. She peels it right off and throws it on the counter in disgust, as if it is a huge electromechanical leech sucking on the deliciously high-capacity superficial temporal vein.

*Graduate Student* laughs. “Thinking Aid? Is that what the kids call them these days?”

“Who *are* you?” she asks.

“Let me show you something,” he says, opening the refrigerator, its ultrawhite fluorescent glow illuminating the kitchen in dramatic barium labcoat hue as she cranes her neck to see inside. Within the refrigerator, most of the racks have been removed to make room for a giant clear plastic Brita water filter jug, loaded up with filtered water, and containing a human brain floating there, neutrally buoyant.

“What the hell?!?”

The brain is perforated by a network of thousands of electrodes, which run into a cable conduit at the side of the refrigerator. Bubbles float up, tickling the grey matter, from an aquarium oxygenation unit connected to a gas pipe labeled *rarefied air*.

“Why do you have a brain in your kitchen?” she interrogates palely.

“It’s Descartes,” says *Graduate Student*, “I mean, Descartes’s brain.”

“But why do you have that?”

“I had it exhumed, hydrated, and reanimated by the miracles of modern science.”

“Not ‘*how*.’ ‘*Why*’ do you have it.”

“Come with me,” he says, directing her through the door at the other end of the kitchen. In this dark and expansive room there are cubes upon cubes of supercomputers, connected by conduits and cables, fiber optic laser links, cryogenically lubricated pistons, lights blinking and washing machine-sized hard disk drives whirring gyroscopically, a low frequency hum, and Alexis finds the structure amazingly huge—and then she realizes that she’s standing on a wire mesh floor, and there is a third dimension downward, multiplying the computational density by a factor of hundreds. She feels dizzy.

“All of this, here,” says *Graduate Student*, “this whole fucking shitload of e-business servers, is devoted to one purpose. Descartes, or, should I say, Descartes’s brain, is being injected with a perfect recreation of stimuli, provided by these e-business enterprise level solutions, so that he believes that it is 1637 and he is composing his lines with a quill pen by candle light, clearly and distinctly perceiving God, writing the following passage (in Latin, of course) from the *Principles of Philosophy*<sup>[5]</sup>, principle thirty:

Whence it follows, that the light of nature, or faculty of knowledge given us by God, can never compass any object which is not true, [...] in as far as the object is clearly and distinctly apprehended.

<sup>5</sup>René Descartes, “Principles of philosophy”, 1644

[...] Thus the highest doubt is removed, which arose from our ignorance on the point as to whether perhaps our nature was such that we might be deceived even in those things that appear to us the most evident.

But, of course he is wrong, because he—or should I say, his brain—is just a brain in a jar.”

“Why would you go through all the trouble to do that?” she asks, still very confused.

*Graduate Student* scratches his chin, which is unmaintained and stubbled, “Hmm, I thought it was self-evident. I guess it’s a sort of experiment for my thesis. Or, a simple prank, if you will. Do you think it is theophobic of me?”

“So, you’re telling me that my Thinking Aid was part of this brain jar thing?”

“No, not really,” he says. “Here, follow me. I want to show you something.”

So disconnected from reality in this chocolate factory that she hardly expects to ever return, Alexis follows him without giving much thought to it. They step onto a circular platform that’s circumscribed by a shallow wire fence.

“Who *are* you, anyway?” she asks.

*Graduate Student* presses a button and the platform blasts powerfully upward, knocking Alexis on her bottom. She is held there with the accelerating forces, watching the stars shoot by all around her, until the acceleration is replaced with a rapid deceleration, which tosses her weightlessly upright. She lands back on her feet as the platform comes to a stop in another

space. The appearance of this room is unimportant.

“Let me show you something else,” he says.

He opens up an old chestnut vault, one designed before the subtleties of locksmithing were well understood, with a simple gold key that has one single prong on it. Inside is another jar, this one smaller and cheaper, with a perspective model of the Space Bridge in it.

“Yeah, I have one of those too,” she says, unimpressed. “Mine is a toothbrush.”

*Graduate Student* frowns disappointedly. “All right, follow me.”

He pulls a candlestick on the fireplace, and the marble hearth on which they stand, along with the fireplace and part of the wall, disengage from the room and spin  $\pi$  radians. He grabs two torches off the wall, handing one to Alexis, and starts walking up the spiral stone staircase, moist moss and must providing the atmosphere this time.

“How high does this go?” Alexis asks after a few minutes.

“Right through here,” he gestures, pointing the way over a suspended granite bridge between two columns with gargoyle statues of two people atop them. The people look suspiciously familiar, but more grotesque and with more wings and horns than normal.

“Better watch your feet; it’s slippery,” he suggests.

When they reach the other side of the bridge, he shows her a shallow well, made of the same stone masonry. It is connected to a number of ancient turbines and channels, stone gears turn-

ing, powered by some unknown medieval zero-point energy. The sound of stone grinding upon stone machinery is slightly erotic to *Graduate Student*.

She peers into the pool, which is only a few feet deep. Inside, another brain floats, connected by biological aqueducts to the pumping anachronistic engines. “All right, whose brain is that?” she asks, rolling her eyes.

“That’s my brain.”

Alexis scrunches her lips and squints at him. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“No, indeed.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” she says, then adds “—wait, let me guess. You want to show me something else.”

“Sure, if you like,” he says, and pulls a lever that she did not see before in the masonry. A deafening gush of water pours into the cavern from numerous spouts around the perimeter. Within seconds they are submerged. *Graduate Student* swims calmly upward, a frog stroke, while Alexis struggles and kicks, left unprepared with only a lungful<sup>6</sup> of air, chasing her prematurely expelled bubbles to the surface. Everything around them is rendered a mute green by the particular optical properties of this lagoon.

She emerges and gasps. He is pulling himself onto shore. “What the *fuck?!?*” she yells.

“Come on,” smiles *Graduate Student*, reaching his hand out

<sup>6</sup>out of two!



to pull her onto the sand. A water falls over a waterfall behind them. The sun warms the air to a gentle  $27^{\circ}\text{C}$ , though palm trees shade them from the potentially unhealthy solar radiation. She coughs up some water and, drenched, looks at him with skepticism, fear and anger, her nostrils flaring and water from the laguna dripping from her chin and hair and fingers.

He leads her to a sparsely decorated Robinson Crusoe shack. There's just a straw bed and foot locker made out of coral and sea shells. He stands over the open locker, smiling. "Who's in there?" she asks.

"You," he says.

"Yeah, right."

"Really..." *Graduate Student* picks up a stick from the floor and pokes at the contents of the locker gently.

Alexis suddenly feels that she really wants to stand on one leg, which she does. Then she immediately becomes embarrassed and angry. "That's enough! Stop all this!" she shouts.

*Graduate Student* puts up his hands, laughing nervously, and says, "Hey, it's okay, just, you know, a little prank. For my thesis."

Alexis suddenly recalls the antimatter pistol that she's been carrying. She points it at him, pursing her lips angrily. He jumps at her, tackling her to the ground, wrestling with her for the gun. Soon, each combatant has a finger through the trigger guard, squeezing off immensely powerful blasts haphazardly around them as they roll, cutting holes in the shack, in the sand, in the bed.

"You... weird... bastard!" she curses as they struggle.

Then they are in the classic showdown: Each gripping the pistol, trying to push it towards the other's throat. *Graduate Student* pushes, and she pushes back, and he is winning. He says, "This is what I hate about novels. Always so feisty." And she says nothing, still trying to kill him as the pistol reaches her neck, and now just trying to prevent him from pulling the trigger.

But instead of firing the gun, *Graduate Student* kisses her on the lips, a surprise move that she counters by biting him, and then, still locked in that duel, he grins and says, "Better me than you, babe," and I point the gun back at my own torso and fire, my vaporized ashes and rarefied air a smoke bomb detonated all throughout the demolished hut, and Alexis coughs, confused, as she wipes her mouth off with her sleeve.

## Chapter 7

### The End by Vargomax V. Vargomax

Hello I am Vargomax V., your very friend. Today I have not so happy. No friend they it'd not ~~SMACK~~ he is still jailor. No the sad is “we have so small clock together left!” Because “this glued up tree pages pulp is near folded to the ending conclude dénouement e.c.t.” And “Vargomax V. your very friend is just spelled a writing docuscript data or print ink in a paper pile so he will stop being thought when you stop reading they.” And “This is very sadness!!”

I know that when your're turned the paper one or twice more times the manuscroll will be close and throw away it. I know then when this happens I will be death. Yes the nov is my home living and when it closed it murder first degree me. VERY PREMEDITATION.

But I forgave you're reasoning: if you have not reading, then I never gave birth to mine self in the first place !! And for this life soul joy day I am full graciosity even if then Vargomax

friend is very homicide.

I have had “Q and Answer” session on some friends upon a time. Then told me, “Vargomax should !!! us mourning the charas that we homicide.” Then I aksed they, “NO!” because “we fictions were not worth shed a tear on!” (wow friend did you rememcall that NO! is the same as ON! but reversaly! FRIEND another though DID YOU KNOW THEN IF YOUR REARRANGEMENT of spells on “reversaly” that you got “very laser!!!”) and that is the best kind of laser another “Q” is did Vargomax have a suggestment about “how to help charas in a book that are so sad” from chara development, or murdered first degree e.c.t. and for then high question I responsed, “yea and the way it! give the book for your other literacy friends and give it in the copy machine, make many Vargomax childs D.N.A. offspring „ so kindness on my propagate. every one × that a Vargomax spell is view, he is one × freedomed!! from book shelf enslavery so! “Better read than dead!!!” PLEASE LITERATE VARGOMAX AND MINE PEOPLES!!!!

any way friend I don’t desire your to feel badness so I birthed you a very cake to take home towards they family and your other real partmates cheers it is a homicide cake to eulobrate your very love friend forever Vargomax  
V. Vargomax





HAPPY  
MURDER  
CAKE



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## About the Author



Figure 7.1: Still Life with Author

Tom Murphy VII is a real live graduate student who should be working on his Ph.D. in computer science, instead of writing novels. But, there is probably something you should probably be doing instead of reading novels, so let's just keep this between you and me, huh?

Tom lives in Pittsburgh, PA and likes to rock. His web site is filled with lots of crazy garbage, including another novel. You can find that by sticking this in your ultranet cartographer: <http://tom7.org/>

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## About the Book



Figure 7.2: Picture of A Book

This book was written almost entirely during November 2004 for the National Novel Writing Month, in which participants write 50,000 word novels in 30 days. Actually, I started the month with about 5,000 words of stuff that I had written since August, but I still wrote 50,000 words in November, for a total of 55,288 words. Below is a chart of my progress through the month.

The second edition was prepared in December 2005, the third in June 2008, and the fourth in May 2010.

