

# Annihilation

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a novel

written as Gaud Rockefeller  
by Eddie Corona

part of the Brick Jayne universe

## SECTION 1: THE NEWS

“Sagittarius!?”

“What?!”

“You asked what *SIGN* I was!?” Daniel looked above.

“Oh!?”

Daniel walked around. He looked into the skylight. “You thought there was a chance...” He looked into Jasmine’s face. “You... You’re *SCARED!*?”

“It’s beyond FEAR!?” Jasmine tried to remain calm.

*You’re so melodramatic*, Daniel thought. “I can have you removed... but how long before *your constituents* come to get me!?”

“The economy, asshole!?” Jasmine drank from a stout glass—*water and ice*.

“The Arabs!?” Daniel walked to the second-story window. “The PRESS!?” He walked back to Jasmine and touched her hand. “Weather vanes!! We are WEATHER VANES!!?”

“If you *could* know that, why would it be true?!” Jasmine splashed water on her face.

“My death... would trigger a response!?” Daniel turned back to the window.

“Vanity!!?” Jasmine yelled. “VANITY... is what’s goin’ to KILL you!?”

“If you knew how FAST... an’ strong... their *whims* are!!!” Daniel spun toward Jasmine and pointed beyond the walls. “Your best bet... is AMBIGUITY, Jasmine!?” He held her. “Don’t tell them things they can sink us with!!?” Daniel could feel media photographers swarming beyond the outside lawn. “Your words are CONCRETE—they *always have been*—and they will SINK us... if we let the crazed reportin’ HORDE out there... tie us to lies... or snapshot judgments which are incorrect *OVER TIME!!!*?”

“You’re the only one that can BREAK ‘em!?” Jasmine looked into Daniel’s eyes.

“We’re back to VANITY!?” Daniel Abel squeezed Jasmine Zuniga. “If I can live through this, I’ll be a

stronger *MAN!!!*”

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“*Sam...*” Rodan looked down and saw that his feet were tangled in camera wire. “Samantha Betsy Johnson!!!” He looked to Sam scampering away from him.

“The shot is *GOOD!!!*” She turned back and grabbed Rodan’s handcam from him. “We’ll get the first shots with *THIS!!!*” Samantha filmed.

“*SAM!!!*” Rodan shrieked. “*RUN!!!* Run, RUN, *run!!!*”

Samantha Betsy Johnson took off in a full sprint. She saw Daniel Abel come to the window. She filmed.

“When ‘e comes out of that DOOR... I’ll have this equipment set up!!!” Rodan Brock watched Samantha film. He was in love. “Tricia and Max are in love, you know?!” He looked to Samantha Betsy Johnson and wished she was his wife. “They have a thing *GOIN’!!!*”

Samantha turned off the camera and headed back to Rodan. “It’s a rumor!!!” She watched sweat drip from Rodan’s brow. “They *WANT* to date... but they’re afraid o’ gettin’ *FIREDD!!!*”

“Max is quick... an’ Tricia is careless!!!” Rodan set up a tripod. “They belong together... but they’d get fired if they messed up *OUR* news!!!”

“They deserve love... but this is a fast business!!!”

“*Lawyers In Love!!* ‘Member the song?! That’s what this reminds me of!!!” Rodan grabbed his handcam back from Samantha and screwed it onto his tripod. He trotted to their van, pulled out a Toyo- View VX125B, and said, “This’ll be enough to look *SERIOUS...* but I think you’re personal footage right now’ll do the *JOB!!!*” He saw confusion in Sam’s eyes. “You got the shot, *right?!?*”

“*Yeah!!* But I don’t know if it’s an identifiable *IMAGE!!!*” Sam looked back to the opaque home where she had spotted Daniel Abel through a long, slender window. “We need *BETTER!!!*”

“That fucker has *TRICKS!!!*” Rodan screamed. “New York Times!! Still has friends there!!!” He looked into a sky which was becoming overcast. “We need to show the man in the *CITY!!!*”

“I have a better idea...” Sam bellowed. She saw that Rodan was too apprehensive. “You won’t... *jump...* that scrawny wrought iron fence for a shot?!”

Rodan Brock held up the Toyo and started filming. “This...” He could see Jasmine approach Daniel. “*THIS...*” He filmed. “We got ‘em!!!”

Samantha Betsy Johnson looked into the gloomy canopy of grayness. “Are you sure the lighting’s good enough?!”

“We got our *SHOT!!!*” He put the equipment back into the van. “We wanted ‘im on the porch by ‘imself!!

We got ‘im holdin’ ‘is PARTNER!!!”

Samantha Betsy Johnson felt insulted. She believed she ought to say a word on film for posterity and integrity. The home was perfectly set in the background. Looming clouds created a dynamic effect which they couldn’t wish more for.

“Hurry!!” Rodan Brock bolted. “If they don’t realize we’re out ‘ere... we can have better shots *TOMORROW!!!*”

Gratitude warmed Sam’s belly. “I know you’re correct!!” She jumped into the passenger’s seat. Rodan took the wheel and they sped into the evening.

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“You’re going to have my baby!!” Max Bell slid in and out of Tricia Galley. “We don’t have to pay attention to... *THEM*... any more!!” Max climaxed inside of Tricia. The view was pleasant. High above the Los Angeles valley, Max could see grids of lights shining dimly toward his face. Tricia looked up at him with a glow of her own.

“They will *KILL* me if they find out we are together!!”

“*Shut up*, Tricia!! You are ruining the moment!!”

“You will not support my baby with a job like yours!!”

“*Mercenary?*”

“No!! At the news station!!” Tricia scooted to the side once Max removed himself from the top of her body. She squirted around and wiped ejaculated semen with her dress. “There’s no sense in goin’ to have a burger, now!!”

“They would smell it... but it would be worth it!!” Max felt proud.

“I’m goin’ to name the tike after you!!” She looked into Max’s face and saw disappointment. “You aren’t runnin’ from your life, are you?!”

“I’m sick of my father!! Everything is MAX, MAX, *MAX*!! Even my job!!”

“You will have a child named... *DUCKY*... if you really want it!!” Tricia was happy to be in love.

“I don’t need to know what the future is!! Names?! Just another issue!!”

Tricia hit Max on the back near his kidneys. “You don’t have to give up so quickly!!”

“You would love me... if I had no balls at all!!” Max looked at Tricia. “I love you... but you have to be careful!!”

“You really think you could run the whole show?!”

“No!! Not right now!! I’m confused... an’ I don’t know that I have anythin’ to give any more!!”

Tricia rubbed Max’s back. “I’ll be behind you... but you have to love *YOURSELF*!!”

“I don’t need the complications!! I’m a failure... and the only reason I need a kid... is to finish... what I don’t know how to DO!!”

“*Run the world?!?*”

“Yes!! Run the world, Tricia!!” Max kissed Tricia on the lips. He loved her. He couldn’t love himself until he knew that she was happy. It was one of the strange instances he went through. Guilt crept into his belly whenever he thought of his childhood. He expected a lot. He accomplished a fraction of what he hoped. In Tricia’s mind, he overexceeded expectations. He hated himself for not doing better. He loved her for believing it was not all over. There were still chances. There would still be a final day when he would meet his *MAKER*... and then some.

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“Are you sayin’ George Ryan has anythin’ *TO DO* with it?!” Rodan Brock asked Samantha Betsy Johnson. “Blagojevich was taken by the feds... *an’ you think we’re on the verge o’ multiple COUPS?!?*” Rodan looked down at his charcoal slacks. Dijon mustard made its way from his sandwich to his pants.

“We have Abel shackled up with Zuniga—regular DC stuff durin’ scandal time—but I know it’s in the *air!!*” Sam wiped barbecue sauce from her left lip.

“When Gorbachev was taken in August of ninety, it hit us hard!!! But the ‘Gang Of Eight’ was tried, Yeltsin was embraced... an’ the United States never...” Rodan noticed that Sam became distracted.

“*Coups* in the United States... Uh!!! Let’s not jump the gun!! The governor of Illinois is a separate issue than Daniel Abel, *mayor of Washington DC!!* And we are increments below the *EXECUTIVE*... which is where your inferences seem to be leadin’!!!” Samantha slammed her sandwich onto the sidewalk below.

“Tricia and Max are *MISSING!!*” Rodan looked toward Samantha but she refused to return his gaze. “Isn’t it strange when it starts happenin’ to *US?!?*” He waited for an answer. He finished his food then drank the rest of his tea.

“I know what you’re sayin’!! Paranoia!! They said it would happen if a couple o’ coincidental strange occurrences happened...”

“*No!! THREE THINGS!!* Governor Blagojevich, Mayor Abel... *now our guys!!!*” He took Sam’s napkin. “Dominoes!! You were never good at LOGIC, Sam!!!” He rubbed at the yellow stain near his crotch.

“*Logic!!*” Sam shook her head then finally looked her cameraman. “Rodan, I KNOW things!!! An’ it’s not intuition alone!!! And YOUR LOGIC... is based in linear thought!!! I always noticed that about you!!! ‘If one precedes two... *then three!!!*’ These guys are more sophisticated!!!”

“*Zero!!*” Rodan was pleased with wiping away the condiment mess. “You think the next move is *ZERO!!*” He felt relieved. “You’ve been at this a little longer!!!”

Samantha was proud that Rodan accepted her answer. “Keep your ears peeled, though!!”

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“Whatever floats your boat!!!” Daniel Abel said to Jasmine Zuniga. “I thought I’d... *Listen...* You’re a staffer that’s more of a friend... I mean...” He searched for words. A thought cut in. “When I’m at the podium, words come to me!!! No stutterin’!!! No doubt!!! Ya’ get a couple o’ reporters out there...” He pointed to the shrubs where Samantha and Rodan had been parked. “And it’s like bein’ a child!! Ya’ don’t know when *MOM’S* comin’ home!!!” He looked down at a polished wooden floor. “So... whatever turns your crank!! I can’t say the political climate...” He stared at Jasmine. Her tube top was beige. “*THAT...* can’t hurt us any more than what’s goin’ on with shaken leaders... an’ an administration which had NO regard for the letter of law on the *BOOK!!!*”

“You think I look nude from a distance?” Jasmine asked. “I mean, I thought it’d be a good diversion!!! If they implicate you with the *other* Democrats—”

“*OR REPUBLICANS,*” Mayor Abel inserted.

“—then we could lose it all!!!” She held Daniel’s forearm. “We’re not as CORRUPT... as them!!!” Jasmine cried. She pointed to a television in the corner of the den. Though it was shut off, they stared at it for a few seconds.

“*Guilty conscious,* Jasmine!!!” He touched her shoulder. “Don’t disclose anythin’ that’s goin’ to hang us!!!” Daniel shook off a creepy feeling in his spine. “*Social storm!!* We’re human!!!” He looked to the TV. He could see Governor Blagojevich being detained. The tube was dark—*nearly black*. “We have not done anythin’... that’s not *PAR...* for our industry!!!” He thought about numbers. “The *ECONOMY!!!*” He walked to the beakoning television. “It dropped, I welched on promises... *but I’ll be forgiven!!!*”

Jasmine fought off a strange urge to laugh. “The economy has *NOTHIN’* to do with it!!!”

“*Image!!!*” He thought to turn the television on. “You think *IMAGE* has everythin’ to do with it... so you’re prancin’ aroun’ outside thinkin’ it makes me look good to the *PUBLIC!!!*” Mayor Abel rubbed his temples. “My wife has not been dead for a *FULL YEAR!!!*” He looked to a picture on the fireplace. “They still remember photos of her downed plane!! French Polynesia, not long after the great storm in Indonesia!!!”

“If ya’ want to go it alone, ya’ let me know!!! Ninety percent politics, ten percent *SHOW...* is what ya’ told me when ya’ *HIRED* me!!!”

Visions of presidents from Kennedy to Reagan popped into Daniel’s head. “It’s a hard reality, but you’re right!!!”

“How do I know when it’s *OVER?!!*” Jasmine asked.

“You’ll not know... an’ it’ll never be *OVER!!!*” Daniel fought an urge to toss out the picture of him

embracing his deceased wife. “Peaks!! Valleys!!” He looked to Jasmine. “*Ride with me!!!*”

*The world is crazy*, Jasmine thought. She pushed the thought from her head... but Daniel Abel stared at her eerily. *I need to help this chap... then we can get back to business as usual!!!*

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The summer before the 2008 election had been odd. Max Bell sat home waiting for Tricia’s call. Word was out that “it’s about to happen” and Max could feel the trepidation he thought he might when he first heard the rumors. Disney kids were being held against their wills. Universal was burned and many speculated that an inside job was performed. Max Bell worked in a local news room. He knew that the anchors did not watch *other* news programs for the source of their reports—that was entertainment to them at the *most*—but rather, they had special feeds from insiders, peculiar sources, and random phenomena. Word was out that *Renkter* was fed up. He had an unsuccessful run at the Whitehouse... but that did not bother him. As an independent, he did not expect to gain much steam. He thought he would be listened to... and *Larry King* would not have him on his program. As a sergeant for the United Nations during Kosovo, George Ulysses Renkter believed he had the best plan to wrap up the recent United States stint in Iraq. His brother, Jason Alan Renkter, was running for office as well... *but they did not keep up with one another as often as they believed they might*. Sergeant George Ulysses Renkter came near the end of his rope. He believed America was dying. He believed he expressed a redress of grievances to his own satisfaction and conscious. He believed he was not listened to... *and he believed that the next step would be to invoke his Constitutional right to overthrow a corrupt government*.

Max Bell sat at home and he wondered where Tricia Galley was. He was in love... but it did not matter. She worked at the station with him. Things swished in his head. Time danced around. Max felt the changes deeper. Sequences of events leapfrogged one another. He knew things had gone crazy. It was love in his heart. He watched television... and he wondered how much was fake, concocted, and set up. He felt hypnotized. *Miley Cyrus* was half nude... and she was underaged. Television was going loony. Hulk Hogan was rubbing his daughter’s inner thighs. *For publicity?* Vanessa Hudgens was filmed nude as soon as she turned eighteen. Max wondered if the pressure system had gone too far. He heard rumors that Sergeant George Ulysses Renkter would bow out of the race for the presidency in favor of a forceful takeover. His contemporaries were disenchanted, according to reports... and his ties were strong to active duty enlisted personnel. Max Bell felt the eeriness of a peculiar election cycle... but he did not know what was “real” and what was completely fabricated.

Tricia Galley’s job at Channel Eight News was to prepare cue cards for the anchors. She hoped to be a force in years to come. She would climb as far as possible. Status mattered, but it did not rule her life. She showed up to Max’s house in the Los Angeles hills after submitting her work to their place of employment. The

“revolution” that her colleagues spoke of *off camera* didn’t bother her—she didn’t believe it would take hold. She brought fear on her face. That fear was taken into Max’s heart. He wanted to solve her problems. No matter how serious George Renkter was about taking charge of the country, it couldn’t matter. *Love* could not be forfeited. If Disney was stormed by a disenchanted platoon of army disidents, it had to be pushed aside. Were the stars enslaved in a strangely-evolved social net?! It couldn’t matter. Would Tricia be suseptable to the same kind of tactics at Channel Eight?! It couldn’t matter. There was too much to worry about.

Max and Tricia made out when the lovebirds met with one another. The world was blocked out. Across the country, uncanny sentiments took hold into people’s guts. *Countrywide* had problems and *Indymac* seemed to be folding. Uncertainty swept the land. Gasoline had passed the five-dollar mark... *and no one seemed to care* Apathy was rampant... but Sergeant George Ulysses Renkter believed he could stir things up. If he could take over the airwaves, he could expose the corruption that seemed to set in. The first line of attack for *Desert Storm* was to knock out Iraq’s communications. In a domestic war, it would be no different. Disney would go down. Fox would be next. Renkter believed he had a twenty-five percent success possibility. That was good enough to him. His brother, *Jason*, would be swayed to join the revolution if the first couple of phases were executed without a hitch. Gasoline would be back to below two dollars per gallon, young teens would be free from corporate slavery, and... *he would be a hero in the process.*

Max Bell and Tricia Galley spoke of the possibilities after making love on Max’s couch. Max reflected on all that had happened. The reports they received were unsubstantiated. There was an equal chance that foreign millionaires from Wales, Australia, and Texas could take over Disney’s California operations. None of it could matter. It wasn’t in their hands to change things... *yet*. If they loved one another, they could love the outside world. If they loved the outside world, it could be enough to domino into world peace. It was naïve, but it was discussed and believed. Max boned Tricia two-to-three times per day in the first couple of weeks of their romantic interludes. He believed he was driving out the evil from the land. He believed he could plant the seed of a beautiful person whom could actually care enough to save people. In the end, he believe Tricia had what it took to remove him from his personal world of mental misery. He would trudge along at the station... and if he came across Sergeant George Ulysses Renkter, he would look him in the eyes. If he believed he saw wickedness, he would slug him in the face and have no apologies about deterring an aged man from his ambitions. If he believed Renkter was correct about *any* of the reported corruption, he would shiver at night when Tricia took off to her own home. He would cry, and he would wish for a new country... *and a new world.*

Max Bell recalled all the nutty things that had been going on in his world. He thought about takeovers. He thought about making love to Tricia... but she was now missing. Max believed he could be next. He thought she may have been abducted... and the hideous thought that she may have become emotionally imblanced crossed his mind. *Suicide*, he thought. He traveled high into the hills above Los Angeles. *She’s missing*, he thought.

Max stayed away from work. He stayed with buddies he had known from high school. Paranoia was no



longer the self-attributed feeling. *It's reality*, he thought. *Collective lunacy*.

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Rodan Brock ate a churro—he began a habit of eating “cleaner” food—and noticed that he couldn’t keep sugar from falling onto his burgundy sweatshirt. Samantha Betsy Johnson sighed in embarrassment. Rodan stated, “It’s a *SHAM!!*” He kept eating. “Our CEO can’t be contacted!! Tricia and Max have been spotted... and I guess they were in love affair and playin’ hookie from WORK!!!” Sea gulls flew in the sky. Coney Island rested in the background. Samantha waited for a sign. Daniel Abel spent childhood summers visiting the attraction. Though defunct for practical reasons, it still inspired awe and nostalgia. “We have conflictin’ reports from *OPEC!!* Dependin’ on how Blagojevich is handled... an’ dependin’ on how the *NEW ADMINISTRATION* is slid into place... we’re lookin’ at gasoline at seven dollars per gallon... or *a buck fifty!!*”

“You think the Arabs are buyin’ our GOVERNMENT?!!” Samantha ate a sloppy sandwich with mustard seeping out the sides. She admired the birds in the sky.

“No!!! But ‘influence’ is a better word to use than ‘buy’!!! An’ I have this strange feelin’ that ‘we the people’ are comin’ back... *for fleetin’ moments!!*”

“Daniel Abel is a SHAM!!! More than your ideas o’ our country bein’ bought OUT!!!”

“Don’t judge too quick!!! The guy plays for the cameras!! I know ‘e does!!!” Rodan Brock threw his churro wrapper on the pavement. Drops of rain started to pelt his scalp.

“*Polluter!!!*” Samantha grabbed a Wall Street Journal newspaper next to her and covered her head. “What was THAT?!!” She hurried to the van and motioned Rodan to follow.

“I DON’T BELIEVE ‘EM!!!” Rodan yelled. Lightning flashed near the horizon. “Mayor Abel had the strongest environmental policy in decades... an’ I saw ‘im break every rule over these past couple o’ *WEEKS!!!*”

“We shouldn’t be diggin’ through ‘is garbage containers... *MAYBE!!!*” Samantha hopped into the driver’s side seat. When Rodan Brock joined in the shotgun seat next to her, she moaned, “GIVE ME THE *KEYS!!*”

Rodan patted his pockets then reached for a ring of more than twenty-five keys. “It’s the one with the orange coverin’!!! Where’s your set?!!”

“I haven’t had to drive in a couple o’ months!! I love to drive in the rain, for some reason!!!” She thought about missing Daniel Abel’s reported visit to the historic amusement park. “Daniel wouldn’t come in this weather!!” She looked to the sky. “Where’d that shower come from?! Boy was that quick!!!”

Samantha and Rodan reached a Manhattan hotel at the same time that Daniel Abel arrived at Coney Island... *alone*. Jasmine Zuniga stayed in Washington, DC. She believed it would be good for public relations if they spent time apart. Daniel did not know if the press would track him to New York. Had it not been for the rain,

Rodan would have filmed him strolling along at a place he had been many times before. Instead, Daniel had a moment of silence. Samantha and Rodan laughed with one another miles away. Daniel Abel thought about national turmoil. He thought about the state of political interaction. He thought about resigning. He thought about running for the presidency. He thought about his childhood. He thought Jasmine Zuniga... and he thought about his departed wife. He thought about contingencies to invade media outlets. He thought about Mussolini being dragged through the streets of Italy. He thought about his possibilities.

“Status QUO!!!” Daniel yelled to birds above. They were the same gulls Sam and Rodan were admiring before sprinkles turned to pelts earlier that afternoon.

Samantha Betsy Johnson laid on her hotel bed belly-down toward the television. Rodan grabbed a couple of iced coffees from a bucket. He passed one to Sam. She spoke to him. “This is *insane* what’s goin’ on in Illinois!!! The governor may resign tomorrow... someone threw a SHOE at the president in Iraq... an’ no one’s talkin’ about the president-elect anymore... *or this past campaign!!!*”

Rodan sat next to Sam. “I think Daniel Abel’s goin’ to crack pretty soon if we don’t give ‘im a little more privacy—*somethin’ reasonable!!!*”

“It’s our jobs to report wrongdoin’!!!” She looked at Rodan. “You think it’s like toyin’ with a mouse?! What we do, I mean!!” She drank her iced coffee.

“It’s like murderin’ your heavyweight rival!!! Don’t do it!! There’s a threshold... an’ we need to be sensitive to it!!!”

“The last reports I got from the studio were that he’ll be shredding documents tomorrow—*TONS o’ ‘em!!!*” She finished her drink quicker than she thought she would. “Oh!! I got a text message from Max—I *think it’s MAX*—an’ there’s uncertainty regarding Tricia... still!!!”

“Sometimes, I think it goes both ways!!” Rodan offered Samantha another coffee but she refused. “The psychological torture!! It’s been years since I’ve known who was ‘truly’ in charge!!!”

“It’s never our job to know, *Rodan!!!*” Sam smiled at him. “It’s our job to report the changes!! Don’t go rootin’ for Daniel Abel or anyone else!!! If ya’ get tied to ‘em, ya’ get sucked in the trap!!”

“I may as well run for office at that point, *right?!!!*” Rodan opened a coffee for himself. He was ready for the road. He knew sleep would come first.

“You know what happens if ya’ run for OFFICE!!! Death by the media!!!” Sam laughed then headed for the restroom. Fifteen minutes later, she was quick asleep in her bed. Rodan took off. He spent a half hour at a nightclub before coming back for rest.

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Tricia Galley returned to Los Angeles from Santa Clara where she had loads of family members. She took off one night after taking a home pregnancy test. The results came out affirmative toward having a child. She left her job, she left Max, and she left her life behind.

Max was still trying to understand heads and tails of the world. He listened to managers at Channel Eight. The prior administration was *rogue*—that’s the way it was talked about—a leader in the executive whom had not won *one* popular election nationally. The Electoral College and the Supreme Court provided the semblance of continuity, but the Patriot Act and erratic government officials from the NSA and CIA led people to believe that at any given time, free speech could be stripped... and personal rights could be suspended. Mortimer Wishum was the head news director of Channel Eight’s news service throughout the election of 2008. He had gained the vocation by default after dismantling of the WB and UPN networks. His world was in a personal chaos, but he was wise enough to understand that national turmoil complicated the situation in certain pockets. When Tricia took off, Mort knew where she was going. He was unaware of her love affair with Max, but he knew that she had a background from the northern part of California. When she arrived to work with a doctor’s note for a miscarriage, and a separate doctor’s note for mental duress, she was welcomed back openly. Mort did not know, even at that time, that Max loved Tricia—they hid it well—but he suspected they were “friendly” outside of work.

In Washington, DC, Sam and Rodan still covered mayor Daniel Abel and Jasmine Zuniga, his tight assistant. Mort explained the circumstance to Max Bell that best he could. “We have ‘red zones’—that is deposed governor Blagojevich and it would be George Renkter if he had continued his plans to infiltrate media outlets!! Sam Johnson and Rodan are in an ‘orange zone’—that means we can stay light and we don’t have to worry too much with feds snoopin’ through our *STUFF*!! The ‘yellow zones’ are our local zippers—the flood in Long Beach, the freeway chases, an’ the wrecks which leave city blocks without *power*!!”

The paranoia had halted. “You’re goin’ to send me on assignment!!” Max screamed.

“*Yes*!!” Mortimer agreed. “You and Tricia have *chemistry*!! I can tell that!!”

Tricia Galley sat silent in the corner. “I’ll work with him... if you’ll allow Sam Johnson to mentor us for two weeks!!” she finally let out.

“No time, *chica*!!” Mortimer turned to a massive map of the greater Los Angeles area on the wall. “You know the area, and we need to expand *quick*!!”

“I’ll take it!!” Max said. He rushed to Tricia, “Come *on*!!”

Almost tempting fate, Tricia asked, “Do we get pay increases?!”

Mortimer turned around, blushed, paused, then allowed, “The economy is shit... an’ we’ve been tightenin’ our belt buckles... but, yes, you deserve it!!” He wanted to confront Tricia about her recently miscarried child but thought it unprofessional. Instead, he walked to her and said, “You’ll be interviewing your replacements!! Pick good understudies!!”

“*Yay*!!” Max said. He couldn’t believe he spoke like a junior high kid. Tricia was proud that things worked

out. Max believed things were looking up.

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Mayor Daniel Abel sat in front of his large frontroom window at a coffee table drinking hot cinnamon tea. Jasmine Zuniga sat in the middle of the room behind him on a plush couch. Daniel became accustomed to the reporters outside—sometimes it would be Sam and Rodan, and other times it would be locals or various other journalists—and as he sat sipping spicy herbal brew, he envisioned the photos that would become published in the following morning’s news. He thought about the printing press and the shrinkage of the Roman Empire after “free thought” was delivered around the continent of Europe and even beyond. He thought about cell phones, the internet, ipods, blackberries, and laptops. “Annihilation,” he conveyed to Jasmine.

“Huh?!” Jasmine snapped into alert consciousness from a dreary daydream. “What!?”

“Annihilation!” He turned to Jasmine not caring how his back would appear to the photographers outside. “Annihilation!!!” He stood up and walked toward “Jazzy”—he became more comfortable with Jasmine Zuniga as the weeks passed and believed it could slip into romance if he wasn’t careful. At times, he wondered if she would leak it to the press within the same minute of a romantic pass. Times like this, it didn’t matter. *Fury* guided him instead of mild sexual passion. “Sergeant George Ulysses Renkter said one word before his poll numbers started fallin’... then the rumors that he wanted to invade *DISNEY*—whatta bomb!!—and now the guy looks like a *LOON*!! A lot can be said for a hectic news day!! I think that’s the afternoon I was goin’ to disclose my taxes an’ shady dealings!! December?! Can’t remember!! But one word—*ANNIHILATION*—he said and it inadvertantly saved my ASS!”

“Rita Nichols asked him, if I recall right, ‘*Are you sure you’re not talking about REFORM?*’ when asked about Fox, Disney, and media in general!!” Jazzy got up and held Daniel’s arms.

“Annihilation!” He looked away from Jazzy Zuniga. “One word... Made him look like a lunatic!”

“He meant it, though!” Jazzy sat back down. “He wanted to go into Disney’s studios with a thousand troops an’ take over the airwaves. He read directly from the preamble of the Constitution—the first twenty words of it—and recited with a burly-yet-raspy speech, ‘We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility...’ Then he laughed for a few seconds at ‘*DOMESTIC TRANQUILITY*’ an’ started talkin’ about mind-control from the networks!”

“Annihilation!” Daniel said again. “One word they wouldn’t forget!! Top headline!! I think the troops were dismissed as exaggeration, an’ the alleged attempt to save Cyrus, Hudgens, an’ others was seen as a screwed-up attempt to bridge to a younger demographic!” He walked back to the coffee table. He sat, feeling possible pictures being taken of him. “But I know what *ANNIHILATION* is!! It’s the death of the politician!! It’s them

putting their words in our mouths at *WILL!!* It's me sittin' at this gawddang coffee table for hours on end so they can have their shots of me in different sweaters!!"

"Annihilation!!" Jazzy said. "I don't think it's that easy!!!"

"The blackberry killed me!!" Daniel said. "I can't even joke in the men's room any more!!"

"Okay!!" Jazzy approached Daniel from behind. "So you have to do penance at that table and window for *WHAT?!* So they can sell their papers!? So China can believe we still have a functionin' government!?!?"

"Washington, DC in twenty years will *NOT* know what I went through!! I'm in that 'window'... *Jazzy!!* I was born when television ruled, an' I'll die when it doesn't matter 'cause of *THIS THING!!*" He reached into his left pocket and displayed his blinking cell phone. "Someone knows I'm made, the pictures have already been taken, you're in the 'window shot' with me... *and they'll want to have lunch...* or make an appointment with me to talk about a budget issue!!!"

Jazzy took the phone from Daniel. "The mayor is not taking calls right now!!!" she said. She hung up, looked to Daniel, and stated, "The office, probably, 'cause the *number...*"

"Doesn't matter!!" Daniel said. "Put it on my *MYSPEACE* that I am away... an' please put the 'away message' to say that I am signing bills, I have great confidence in our newest resolutions, and '*HAPPY ST. PATRICK'S DAY!!*' In a couple of years, we might not be able to do that—express our heritage, I mean!!!"

"*Yes sir!!*" Jasmine Zuniga was proud of Daniel Abel... but she could start to comprehend what he was explaining: *All* of his friends seemed more and more superficial, in the passing months, and they *all* behaved more and more like entertainers.

Daniel Abel sat back at the coffee table. As dusk crept into the evening, he turned on the small lamp in front of him. He looked down into a shaving mirror which he kept in a nearby desk. He knew the lighting favored his better side. He guessed the press would adore him in a 'loose' look with a lax collar. Sure enough, he one the front page of the Washington Post the following morning. California's hundred-day crisis was coming to an end, and the Post reported subsequent implications for citizens from the Pacific to DC. Jazzy marveled at her boss.

\* \* \*

"*They printed it!!*" Tricia said to Max. "Look!!!" The headline read: **Jazzy And Danny In Love!** Tricia held up the paper and smiled. "This could have been us, you know?!" She poked Max in the stomach.

Max drew back. "He's in the other room!!!" He kissed Tricia quickly on the forehead then shooed her backwards. "You'll get us both fired!!!"

"Our first assignment was *great!!*" Tricia ignored the shooing and hand gestures. She pranced around. "A bulldog who said '*grandma!!*'" She blushed and approached Max again. "My *mom's* gonna be so proud of me!!!"

“Finally in front of the camera!?” Max sharpened his focus. “WHAT ABOUT MYSPACE, TRICIA!!! You’re a regional celebrity, anyway, an’ I think ya’ have somethin’ like *three hundred and fifty friends*, there!?”

“No!?” Tricia slammed the Washington Post down on a corner table. “Most those people are college buds whom I’ll never see again!?” She looked to Max, “But TV!! That’ll get me exposure!?”

“Hulu, my hun!?” Max Bell got up and Mortimer was no longer looming in the forefront of his thoughts. “Hulu-dot-com!?” He gently clutched Tricia by the arms. “We’re goin’ to self-produce online... an’ this dinosaur of a station is goin’ to be a memory!?”

“ANNIHILATION!?” Tricia yelled. “I read the article!! That’s why...” She changed her mind. “*The radio is still around!!* Television did not kill it!! The internet will DAMPEN what our network does...” She turned from Max. She wanted to cry. “You’re right, in a lot of ways!?” She turned back toward Max and tears were streaming down her right cheek. “I don’t feel famous!! The fuckin’ *FRED* kid from YOUTUBE!! What kind of shit is THAT?!! And why do we filter the president’s speeches to the point of lunacy?!!”

Max walked across the room, peeked his head out of the door to make sure Mort Wishum wasn’t listening, then assured, “It’s a JOKE!! It’s a fuckin’ joke, yes!?” He watched Tricia cry. “That bulldog piece!! HEAVEN!!! Your mom’ll be proud... it’s your handprint in the clay!! It’s your kindergarten colorings!! It’s your voice on the oldfashioned taperecorder when you were a kid!?”

“Annihilation,” Tricia said as she calmed down. “Daniel Abel made it public that Jasmine Zuniga shared a romantic relationship with him—*the affiliate in DC’s been really good*—an’ he spoke about George Renkter whom wanted to *ANNIHILATE* traditional media!! ‘Bombs AWAY’... *Remember?!* Reagan!! One phrase!! Echoes!!! Backin’!!! A sliver of *TRUTH!!* Paranoia, but it’s more than that!?” She viced Max with her dainty hands. “We’re in the MIDDLE OF IT!?”

“Okay!?” Max backed off. “And the wheel has just been invented!?” He looked to the ceiling and sighed. “We can’t turn back!!!”

“Okay!?” Tricia reached for her purse, pulled out hot-pink lipstick. “Superficial!! I’m caught in IT!!! I can’t get out of it!?” She looked around the room—there were pictures of anchors and reporters, each with a kind of phony pose or grin—and she pointed. “*THIS...* is who I’ll be in a MONTH!?” It was Samantha Betsy Johnson with a tan News Eight overcoat. “I have you, Max... but promise me I can have a few ‘real’ hours a day!! Please take me away from this mess!?”

“It’s your dream and your nightmare!?” Max walked around and scanned the wall portraits. “That’s the problem!?” He looked at Tricia. “Give it a month!! Transition time!?” She came to him and held him. “You’ll like it!!! I promise!?”

Mortimer Wishum poked his head into the room at that point. “You’re *bonding!!* I like it!!!”

Tricia laughed into Max’s chest but Mortimer couldn’t detect it.

\* \* \*

Sam Johnson sat in a Maryland hotel with Rodan. “Compromise!! Number one, that’s what we’ll talk about!! Number two, you did a good job with *Rita Nichols*!! I hate workin’ with *PAPER PEOPLE*... but the shot seemed right?! Is she still partners with Lois Monroe?!”

“Compromise!! Stop pretending we were goin’ to win a *PULITZER PRIZE*!! We had the vid, she had the backstory!! I’m glad we compared notes!!” Rodan walked to the window and shut it ninety percent of the way. A cold wind was blowing outside. “Rita’s the equivalent of STEPHANOPOULOS but for women—a *Washington INSIDER* turned into *media regular*—an’ Lois is still a mystery to me!!”

“We were supposed to be out here ‘til late November, *no later*!!” Sam stretched. “The Blago THING... an’ *MAYOR ABEL* intermingled with the whole *ECONOMY* thing!!” She yawned. “Lois!! Yeah, I thought Lois Monroe would be at our sides in front of Abel’s front yard!! Fiasty!! I’ve come across ‘er a few times at upscale dinners, but I’ve not talked to the lady *personally*!!” Samantha Betsy Johnson went into the restroom and started changing into pajamas. She kept talking through the half-opened door. “Washington *POST*!! They still own themselves—*knock on wood*—an’ Tribune’s havin’ problems... an’ Murdoch bought WALL STREET... an’...” She poked her head out. “*I thought it’d be ASSOCIATED PRESS* who we worked with!!”

Rodan rested on his twin bed. “Yeah, *Rita was okay*!! She seems like a bitch in her articles!!” He rubbed his eyes. “We’ll find out tomorrow if we’re headin’ back to *LA* or if they want to permanently assign us out here!!”

“*Please don’t tell ‘em we started sharin’ a room out here*!! I mean, Trish an’ Max!!! I heard they’re doin’ assignments now!!! WOW, they’ve come a long way!!”

“I feel good about the Abel guy, actually!!” Rodan watched Sam cross the room in powder pink attire—*feet pajamas*—nothing too appealing compared to her professional wardrobe. “I think Jasmine’s goin’ to crack sooner than him... *even though she seemed better about makin’ the romance public*!!” He watched Sam pull covers off her bed and fluff the pillows. “Where’d you get *THAT* ancient get-up!?”

“*Superstition*!!” She smiled. “I’ve always done it!! If I dressed like a nerd in college, I dressed like a harlot in the dorm!! On assignment, we need the ratings an’ the skirts get shorter!! I dress like *THIS* at night!!”

“*Good night*!!” Rodan rubbed his temples, turned off the lamp, then slept peacefully. Samantha stayed awake for almost a half hour thinking about Los Angeles and the chance of returning home soon.

\* \* \*

Rodan and Sam were in the air from LaGuardia on their way to LAX three days “Jazzy And Danny” came public about their intimate relationship. It had been silent. Rodan turned his head from the world below his window

and faced Samantha whom rested comfortably in her isle seat. “*Chicago!!* Sears Roebuck!!! I can feel it!! Those bastards out there!! What’d they get?! A one-point-six billion dollar bailout they didn’t need!?”

“It was Northern Trust, baby!?” Sam smiled, but she was tired. “It was a promo—*that’s what they were mad at!!* The bands... Beverly Hills party!!! Golf!!?”

Rodan noticed that Samantha was beat—*obviously fatigued*—but continued, “That’s how it starts!! I know it!!! I’m in the air!!! If I didn’t have a decent life back home, *I’D WANT TO DO IT!!* Hit those bastards!! Seventy-two virgins OR *NOT!!*?”

“So Sears is goin’ down for bein’ a big buildin’ in the same city as a suspect institution—‘*bank*’ I should say—and it makes sense to...” Samantha yawned. She couldn’t help herself. Her eyes were half open when she flagged a stewardess for some coffee.

“*Rage*, Samantha!!! I feel RAGE... an’ if I knew how to do it, I’d be...”

“Hey, *RODAN*... I like listenin’ to your ‘devil’s advocate stories’... but keep this one down, *okay?!?*” Samantha smiled at him and admired the Sun in the distance behind his shoulder.

“*RODAN!!!* They named me that in high school!!! It didn’t catch until I was at the news station, though!?” He tapped Sam lightly on the arm. “I guess I’m ALWAYS givin’ ‘em a chance—the underdog, I mean!!?”

Rodan became muted until the airplane was past Illinois and the Sears Tower area. From that point until Los Angeles, he spoke to Samantha about Rod Blagojevich and state politics.

In Washington, DC, the mayor felt relieved the story was circulating of his involvement with madam Zuniga. It was only a half-truth that they had become passionate for one another, but he thought it was the least complicated for the press to jointly understand. Numbers bounced hither and thither, and economies were being fixed, adjusted, and calibrated. The new administration was on its way, and hardly a person could put a finger on what still seemed *wrong* with entire equation. “Annihilation!?” Rodan spoke to Sam as they touched down.

“Annihilation of everything I KNOW!?” He smiled a wide smile at her tired face. “Nothing is done the same!!?”

“That seems to be the word of the *MONTH!!*” Sam countered.

“Annihilation,” Daniel calmly emphasized to Jazzy three thousand miles east. “Everything we were part of... *seems to be forgiven by a half-hearted confession regardin’ a semi-accurate association!!!* It doesn’t seem fair... but I have to take what’s given to me!?”

\* \* \*

Samantha and Rodan settled into their Los Angeles work stations as “Danny and Jazzy” headed for a lunch on the eastern side of the country. “I watched three hours of UFC fights yesterday.” Daniel Abel drove north on



Connecticut Avenue. “*There’s a nice coffee house on Canal Street near Georgetown,*” he casually added. “I was watchin’ their faces, an’ what I wanted to see was how a champion *LOST!*!” His nineties Lincoln Towncar coughed and needed tuning up. “Tank Abbott—*popular guy*—had a style where he’d ‘thud’ his opponents... until they would come back with a hard assault... *almost like he wanted ‘em to get ‘im mad!!* Then he’d whale!! Yoshiyuki Yoshida seemed to have an *ASIAN PRIDE* thing goin’ on!! I almost want to say he scanned fighters for *motive!!* An’ Shamrock—*God bless the guy*—seemed to have a homoerotic style... but I wanted to see when they *lose*... because I have to fight through it!!”

Jasmine was in the passenger’s seat listening with mild interest. She reached to Daniel’s leg, patted it, then let him continue.

“*The wounds heal, you see?!!*” He looked to Jasmine. “The pride!!” He turned left on K Street. “Everyone knows he has his day!!” He shook his head. “I’m relieved of the reporters in my front lawn... *the papers have praised me*... an’ I still feel defeated!!”

“You’re a great man!!” Jasmine said. “This car is a symbol of it!! You admonished your opponents for hypocrisy—*praising public schools, but sendin’ their children to private ones*—an’ ya’ drive a auto middle America can relate to!!” In moments, they were hanging a right on Wisconsin Avenue. “You eat where regular people eat, *more often than not*, an’ they like you!!”

“My wife!! I wish my wife was here!!” Daniel hung a quick right on Canal Street and was lucky to have a convenient parking spot. “I wish *she* was here!!”

“We’ll work through this *TOGETHER!*!” Jasmine opened here door. She saw students approaching.

“It’s THE *MAYOR!*!” a girl squealed. “THE MAYOR AN’ *JAZZY*, from the paper!!” Her friends rushed over.

Jasmine waved and smiled. She was quick to zip toward Daniel’s side. The girls were procure picture phones from their bags. They began to take shots.

“*We are only datin’!*!” Jazzy announced. She put her lips near Daniel’s cheek. The girls took more snapshots. “You can put it on your blogs that we’ve only been datin’ a couple of weeks!!”

\* \* \*

Tricia Galley, Max Bell, Sam Johnson, and Rodan Brock sat down at a diner near the *Mann’s Chinese Theatre* on Wilshire Boulevard. The afternoon was balmy, but the outdoor accommodations seemed pleasing to everyone for lunch. After being seated on a wire seat, Tricia opened the conversation, “*Zane Wilson*, like I said, was the guy that trained the bulldog to say ‘grandma’!!”

Sam Johnson was still shifting in her seat. Pigeons flew overhead and she was skeptical of the canvass

umbrella above them. “Yeah!!! Congradulations!! Like I said, usually your first piece is the one you’ll remember *most*!! Mine was bake sale!! I can recall the pumkin cake, an’ I remember some *atrocious* plumb pie!!”

Rodan laughed, “I was there when it happened!! You’re a *cameraman*, MAX!!”

Max blushed, “Yeah!! I prepared for it... *but it’s weird when people stare at ya*!! I thought Trish would get ALLLL the attention!!”

“Oh!! He spoke to ghosts!! The guy did!!” Tricia said. The others looked at her. “He said that’s how he *communicated* with Bilbo, *his bulldog*!!” She sneezed then wiped her nose nonchalantly... and continued, “The ghosts tell him... *when his grandma’s around*—dead, of course—an’ the dog speaks ‘er name!! Actually, just ‘grandma’... but we cut out the piece about ghosts ‘cause it seemed taboo!!! Mort told us to bring somethin’ cute an’ easy!! No ghosts!! Too controversial for my first piece!!”

“Yeah!!” Sam said. “I had to cut out a *LOT* along the way!!” She paused while a waiter set down water and menus. He said something about the house special and let them continue. “So *Zane*, like you said was kicked out of a college for *WHAT*!!”

“They smoked pot at some school he went to in *Claremont*... and he said it was no big deal until recently!! Pavlov!! They guy studied *PAVLOV*, an’ a girl in his rec room insisted it was horsecrap—*she was a FOLKLORE expert*, supposedly—an’ she proceded to make candles waver!!”

“*You’re missin’ the best part*!!” Max said.

“I know!!” Tricia said. She kept on, “She threw water on his face, then water on the candles!! ‘Stop hitting dogs, asshole!’ she had told him. ‘Talk to their *REAL* owners!’ So this *Zane* guy goes home to Buellton on the weekend an’ talks to his grandma—*departed*, surely—an’ the dog says, ‘*GRANDMA*!’” Tricia wiped her brow. She felt a mild cold sweat. “Makes me scared... *but that’s part of the business*, right?!”

“*Cute story*!!” Sam chuckled.

“You’re still missin’ the best part, TRISH!!” Max insisted.

As the waiter approached the group for the orders, Tricia slipped in, “*The candles turned back on*—I’m talkin’ about the PAVLOV lady at the school—but I wasn’t convinced that Zane made that part up!!”

Samantha Betsy Johnson ordered for the group: A sampler platter of various finger foods including jalepeño poppers, quesadillas, chicken wings, and nachos. She ordered lime margarites for everyone, as well.

“So *Zane* got kicked out of the school because of *FACEBOOK*!! While stoned, I guess he told three hundred and seventy-four people that he was talkin’ to *GHOSTS*!! He’s since retracted it, but it scared enough people that they kicked ‘im out!! Weird!!”

“That’s stuff we were all part of when I was young!!” Sam yelled. She drank water. “*Your generation can’t be wrong*!! I mean, when ya’ are, the *WORLD KNOWS ABOUT IT*!!”

Tricia hesitated. She said, “‘Before Ford/ After Ford’!! Remember that conversation we had before you left to cover Abel in DC?!! You said we were there... but I know it’s beyond!! Take this as a joke, but ‘Before

Facebook/ After Facebook' makes more sense!/" She looked around. A third of the people eating outside were preoccupied with cell phones, blackberries, and various other electronic devices. "Life is different... but it's about being *LIKED*, I hate to say!/"

"She's *pretty!*/" Max said to Sam about Trish. "That's what saves me!/"

"*Yeah!*/" Samantha Betsy Johnson felt flushed. "Yeah!! It's only been three years or so since I've known the trifecta: YOUTUBE, MYSPACE, *FACEBOOK!*/" She felt a sinking feeling in her tummy. "I have to update my FACEBOOK once per day... or I get really *paranoid!*/"

"*Implications!*/" Tricia demanded. "What're the implications!?! 'Cause we're journalists... *an' we're supposed to know!*/"

"Annihilation," Sam coldly said. "It's the mantra we're goin' with!/"

"ANNIHILATION!/" Trish yelled. "It's that easy!/"

"NO!/" Sam said. "You have to *watch* the ANNIHILATION aroun' YOU!/"

"Social structures, relationships, various patterns of behavior... *ET CETERA!*/" Trisha could smell the food from the next table over and couldn't wait for the appetizers to come in. "In their place—*the former customs*—what're we to do!/"

"Surfin'!/" Max said. "Just like the old... *way!*! Surfin' the WEB... an' *surfin' on the beach!*! John Lennon said to SWIM!! We have to surf!/"

"That's why you're behind the camera... *an' she's in front of it!*/" Rodan yelled. He laughed.

A bowl of complimentary tortilla chips arrived with spicy salsa. The group watched it being set down.

"I'm gonna take it easy!/" Tricia said. She reached for a chip, dipped it into salsa and made sure she scooped a few onions with it. "I'm not goin' to *STRESS* the next time a bank closes down!/"

"*Easy to say...* if it's not your bank!/" Samantha said.

"Annihilation!/" Tricia said. "Makes sense!/"

"*Out with the old... In with the new!*/" Max felt cheerful. The drinks arrived. He toasted his partner, *Tricia Galley...* and he congratulated Rodan and Sam on a decent return from the Atlantic seaboard.

## SECTION 2: THE INNER WORKINGS

“BLUEVODA, crap ass!!” Zane Wilson shrieked to Zach Rouss. “If we go *GODADDY*, they’re goin’ to know we’re nerds!!” Zane sat absently on a couch in front of a monitor. The room was dimly lit and he didn’t notice the bag of *Frito’s* on the cushion.

“One, we’re not nerds!!” Zach reached for the squashed bag of chips. “Two, I’m already familiar with ol’ reliable!!” Some chips dove between and behind cushions and would probably remain there for months. “*Thanks for openin’ the...*”

“Alright!!” Zane said. “I got it!! We go Voda an’ I’ll pay the bill—somethin’ like five bucks a month for the basic rate—an’ it gives *unlimited pages*!!”

“You know people’ve been billed as much as *eighteen hundred dollars for that SHIT*!!” Zach ate chips and some were spit out as he continued. “I’m not sure that *BLUEVODA* has the same...”

“*Dick*!!” Zane shook his head. “*DICK!!* You were the same way in CLAREMONT!! An’ who got on the news first?! ME!!” He felt proud. “*FACETIME*, bitch!!” He cracked his knuckles. “You can’t buy that!! I have what those *EINSTEIN LOSERS* from FACEBOOK pray for: *a start*!!”

“Ass *SWIRL*!! I program better than YOU!!” Zach kept eating chips.

“I have the idea, *THOUGH*!!” Zane stood up. “It starts off like Facebook or MySpace, *right*?!” Bilbo strutted into the room. Zane brought the talking dog from Buellton to his buddy’s house near the beach in Ventura. “*This fucker*, ya’ see?!” Bilbo *rooed*, but it did not sound like “grandma”. “*DEMIGOD*!!”

“*Okay*!!” Zach listened and didn’t mind Zane’s foul language. “Alright!! MySpace—*just like it*—then there’s a cut... like makin’ it into *MySpace Music*... or *Celebrity MySpace*... *but...?*!”

“Demigod, asshole!!” Zane ran to Zach’s kitchen, grabbed a miniature bag of *Frito’s*, then pointed his index fingers upward after tossing the chips onto the couch. His thumbs faced one another. “*Picture IT*!!”

“*Yeah*!!” Zach said. He was half-scared, half-jealous. Zane was theatric. He was booted from school, but his visions kept popping out. “*Go on*!!!”

“Your AVATAR must resemble ya’!! That’s stage one!! It’s like a *SUPERBOWL*... but we pick ya’ up!! The Sims—ya’ *remember that fuckin’ game*?!—we turn your avatar into a virtual cartoon...”

“*Okay*!!” Zach said. “Z And Z Enterprises!! I can feel it!! The first Z is my name—*has to be*!!”

“*Shut UP*!! So ya’ get clocked, *RIGHT*?! I see ya’ do it all the time!! ‘How many views does my *MYSpace* have’?! Pussy!! Ya’re such a *pussy*!!” Zane calmed, and waited. “But you’re every man on the *PLANET*!! And at five hundred views, ya’ get *WINGS*!! Automation like NPC’s!! Like *DREAMS*!!” Zane sat purposely on the chips he had tossed down. They opened, he forced a few into his mouth, then he said, “Ya’ can see what ya’ do durin’ the *NIGHT*!! Your AVATAR might be minglin’ with Amanda Seyfried, *that girl ya’ liked from the Lohan movie*!!”

“Okay?!” Zach said. “Stage *THREE?!?*” He looked to Zane. “Ya’ got your wings an’ claws or whatever... *but what happens...* at the end?!?”

“There is no end, but that’s not the important part!! Of course, ya’ do battle!! Stage *THREE!!* Round robin for the world to see!!” Zane ate chips. “And the same as Father Time turnin’ into a baby, it starts fresh with every year!!”

“Okay!! I like it!! It sounds too much like *SPORE...* except that it goes in reverse—*friendly to chaos*—yet it makes sense!!” Zach rubbed his hair. He was almost sure potato chip crumbs were in there. “I’ll check out the *Voda* versus GoDaddy situation, but ya’ have to figure the databank!!”

“I got connections!! GoDaddy’s not the way!!” Zane felt apathetic, all of a sudden... but wouldn’t dare to say so. He forced a thought, “Remember that our ‘captors’ started humbly... *like us!!*”

“Okay!!” Zach rubbed Bilbo on the head, then he looked firmly at Zane. “It’ll be *done!!*”

Zach Rouss found a domain registrar called *StarterOrbit*. The price was reasonable, it offered unlimited domain registrations, it seemed hi-tech-yet-easy-to-use... *and the Better Business Bureau had no major complaints against it*. A week and a half after chatting about it, “mydemigod.com” was secured by “Z And Z, Inc.”—*a Nevada-based corporation*. Zach Rouss was listed as president; Zane Wilson signed in as vice-president. With the sky as the limit, and the boundries of cyberspace as the borders, Zach worked night and day to carve a niche. *MySpace-friendly*; easy-to-use; fun to be part of.

Zane Wilson saw greater possibilities. Like the *battles* of MyYearbook, he wanted MyDemigod to pit cyber heroes against one another... but he wanted the feel of MTV’s claymation matches between Spears and Aguilera. He worked on graphic art... and he checked in with Zach. He wanted the best *ever*.

\* \* \*

“You remember the *talkin’ bulldog piece* I did last month?!” Trish asked Mort Wishum in the Channel Eight coffee room.

“Of course I do, honey!!” Mort laughed. “It was your first piece!!” He bit into a vanilla pastry.

“The guy—Zane was *‘is name*—started a new company... an’ launched MyDemigod-dot-com!!” She looked at Mort. He seemed frustrated. “He already has a hundred thousand people signed on—*that’s faster than FACEBOOK started*, I’m almost sure—an’ it’s cute!!”

“Don’t give him free publicity!!” Mort snapped. Tricia had never seen him angry before. “Those faggots are takin’ over our *BUSINESS!!*”

“Huh?!” Tricia couldn’t believe what she just heard. She went on like Mortimer wasn’t upset. “The thing is in its *‘Zork Stage’* an’ just got out of the *‘Pong’* category yesterday. In other words, graphics are gettin’ better...

an' Z And Z are picking off people from Facebook, EA Games, an' MySpace..."

"*You're IN with 'em!!*" Mort challenged. "You need not..."

"*Listen, old man...* I'm going to explain something before I start tapping numbers on my *CELL PHONE* to call you in for *HARRASSMENT!!* I'm not *IN* with them!! You have to face the inevitable!!"

"I'm sorry!!" Mortimer Wishum said. He wiped his face, but it was still deep red from embarrassment.

"*The site's not even that good...* but people like it..." She saw she wasn't getting through. "The Times are *DOWN*—yes, Mortimer!!—and it looks like Tribune's not goin' to make it!! But *THESE ARE THE CHANGES I SEE!!!* DON'T IGNORE 'EM!!"

"Inevitable, *HUH?!*" Mort yelled. "ANNIHILATION!!" He looked at Tricia. He calmed. "Annihilation—*that was your word yesterday!!*—an' today it's somethin' different!! *INEVITABLE!!* I *loooooove* that *ONE!!* Listen, I've been in this business a *looong* time!! I'm not cryin' conspiracy, but I'm not goin' to fold to these fruitcake upstarts at Facebook, *Hulu*, and all which morsel!!"

"*I'm not sure you're hearing me,*" Tricia said. Just before she turned to leave, she could see resignation on Mort's face.

"Cover the *FUCKIN'* piece—it's good news, an' good ratings—but understand that you're cuttin' in to your own *job!!*" He waited for breath rate to slow. "You have a raise, *Tricia!!*"

"*Great!!*" Trish said sarcastically. "I'm not here for that!! I don't need the guilt... but I'll take it!!"

"This might be our last year on the airwaves, *TRICIA!!*" Mort said. "The numbers aren't good in the financial department... but before we go down, I want to pay you *RIGHT!!*"

"It's temptin', *Mort,*" Trish said. "I have numbers that *Zane* wants... an' it's not hard to send 'em over the fiberoptic lines... *but...*"

"You're a moral girl, Tricia... an' that's why..." Mortimer thought he was going to have a heart attack. He waited. "Let me go, okay?!"

Tricia poured Mort a glass of water than waited in the next room to see him. She wanted to make sure he was in better health. Five minutes after giving Mort the water, he walked through the room where she was at without a word. He looked better... but Tricia was almost sure he wanted to smash the internet competition. He looked riled. She thought of Sergeant George Ullysses Renkter trying to *annihilate* Disney and Fox... and she laughed. *What's next?* she wondered. *Killing the number two pencil?!*

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Samantha Betsy Johnson and Rodan Brock created accounts for MyDemigod in May of 2009. Four-month cycles were slated every year. It was recommended that users invited buddies from Facebook, MySpace, and other

social networking sites. From January to April, a time of “bridge building” was expected. Being that MyDemigod *officially* got underway in the late spring, an exception was made for point values. During May through August, no more adds were supposed to be allowed. Once again, due to the late launch of the site, preliminary users were given until June to recruit. The mid-months were designed to build relationships already existing... and to develop “demigod” attributes. For example, regular people would not approach A-list celebrities in real life for fear of having their *heads* being bitten off, a figure of speech. But in MyDemigod, *that attribute could be added*. If you were prone to run from relationships and commitments, wings could be added—angelic, dragon, eagle, so on. A person on the track team could invest in *Mercury* wings. Points were added by number of relationships... but it wasn’t always good to ask “Joe Blow” and “Jane Whoever” to join your site because of “evaluation scores” regarding character status and personal histories. Andy Dick would not necessarily have more bargaining power than the captain of a good high school football team. Paris Hilton would not necessarily score higher a relatively unknown hot American Idol contestant. If a user picked the “wrong” friends, it could even hurt hers or his chances of success in future clashes.

With every week, a noticable change would occur with avatars: helmets, shields, scales, spears, axes, and so on. This was not unlike certain existing MySpace *applications*... except for the twist: When September arrived (and many younger folks were due to return to school), the round robin commenced. Users had to turn on their friends. *It was Spartacus in nature*. It was similar to the relatively old arcade idea of Double Dragon. Friends helped each other... *then had to fight one another*. Money and fame were the lure.

MySpace was a dynamic site in the eyes of Zach and Zane. The problem was that memories and associations toward people became stale. Facebook was nice... but who wants to always know when their elementary school partners are doing their laundry? Zach and Zane tosses these ideas and questions toward one another. YouTube is cool... but where’s the emotional reward in a ribbon? MyDemigod let people build and destroy —*the nature parts of life*, as Zach and Zane saw it.

Samantha Betsy Johnson reached fifty friends quickly due to her public appearances in front of news cameras. Rodan Brock had a harder time accumulating MyDemigod friends, but he felt good about the people he chose. “*You can count your true friends on one hand, Samantha!!*” he told her when he reached twenty-five collaborators. MyDemigod also factored in ratings of people *doing* the rating. Zach and Zane didn’t go as ballistic as the BSC system in college, but there was a calculus to it.

On the eastern part of the country, Daniel Abel admired his MySpace account. He signed up for MyDemigod thinking that it would have *zero* effect on his public life. He befriended Jasmine through an inhouse LAN connection. She called him a “kiss ass” and that’s what surprised him. Daniel was driven by political victories throughout most of his life. He wanted to do well with MyDemigod for social reasons—*mostly to laugh in public*. “You have three *REPUBLICANS* on your site as FRIENDS, Daniel!!” she told him. “Don’t you know how that makes us *LOOK!!*” She thought about his MySpace account—the one she was responsible for changing daily

messages and blogs for. “You weren’t such a *SUCK UP* on MySpace!”

“One, I’m a centrist now... *since that media scandal!!* Two, you know the rules!! I BATTLE these guys in September!! It’s like bipartisan partnerships in the office!! I’ve gotta get along with *SOME* of them!!”

“Oh!! And they’re reveiwin’ ya’ *GOOOOD!!*” She shook her head. “They’re goin’ to *SLAM* you in September if ya’ let too many of them IN!!”

“Yeah!!” Daniel said. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Yeah!! And I lose the youth sector if I ignore *their* games!!”

“Don’t lose, *Daniel!!*” Jasmine said. “These fuckin’ things are real!!” She thought about walking out of the room. “*Abraham Lincoln as a MONKEY!!*” She looked to the chandelier above her. “You are a demigod *ANYWAY!!* Look in the papers!! The cartoons!! You’re a slickster with a young lady!!” She wanted to stop talking, but found her lips moving, “*I DON’T WANT TO SEE YOU LOSE AGAINST THOSE GOP WANKERS!!* What is it?! The first round is claymation or somethin’?!”

“It’s electronic meant to *look* like claymation, yeah... but that’s part of the business!!” Daniel approached Jazzy and held her by the arms. “Just like the devil horns!! America’s past!! The marker-drawn mustaches!!” He let her go. “I’m not goin’ to *lose*, by the way!!”

“The Cartoon Network and Letterman already said they’re going to air the best of the matches!! They’re open to the public!!”

“Hey!! I appreciate what you’re saying... but we’ve finally reached the point where computers are faster than people!! A drop in the well!!” He waited for her to relax. “Thirteen hours of video are loaded on to YouTube every *MINUTE!!* You can’t possibly watch everything that’s *good* out there!! Remember the VCR?! It felt that way... at a time!!”

“Okay!! So you created a persona on MyDemigod which is increasingly becoming more like the *SPACE PHANTOM!!* And theortically, ya’ can be be beatin’ up on *Demi Lovato* right now... ‘cause your Cyber Demigod becomes an NPC—*Non Player Character*—when you’re away from the desktop!! An’ their taping this with... *WHAT IS IT?! AVI* format converted to RealTime so they can share with their friends across the country?! Do you want that?! A morphed Daniel Abel beatin’ on *Demi Lovato* with *ANGEL WINGS?! So you can win an election!?!*”

“Identity theft, lady!! Look up Hilary Duff right now on MySpace!!! There are more than three hundred, *EASY!!* The only way you can claim your prize with MyDemigod is if you show up to their California headquarters and you have your password memorized!! There’re three Daniel Abels in this city, *alone...* on MySpace!! I stopped caring!!”

“Okay!!! I guess we have to live with it!!” But I think it’s better if you let me pick your friends, from this point forward!! I want *Demi... and all those young stars...* to be on *OUR* side!! In September, you’re mandated to pick one third of your buddies to knock off!! I don’t want you gettin’ careless!!”



“Fair enough!!” He thought about how serious it was becoming to her. “That’s why I put a *few* of my Republican constituents on the MyDemigod site—they *know we’re going to have to cyberbattle!!*”

“You’re not good in PR, Danny!!” Jazzy approached him and squeezed his cheeks. “That’s what I’m here for!!” She smiled.

“*I hate when this gets real!!*” he said. “There’s never a warning when ‘it’s just a cartoon’... or ‘*don’t pay attention to that article*’!!” He felt flustered. “I’m goin’ for a jog!!” Within three minutes, Daniel Abel was in lavender sweats and heading out the door. “*Frickin’ crazy*,” he muttered as soon as he stepped off his horseshoe driveway.

Jazzy Zuniga watched him scamper away and started working the keys to his computer. “*You’re going to be popular*,” she said to herself. “But you’re not going to beat my *father* at this game!!” She spent twenty minutes acquiring computerized relations within MyDemigod which would make most comedians happy... but not most mayors of major metropolises.

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“*They’re doin’ it again, man!!*” Zane Wilson sat on the floor. His back rested against Zach Rouss’ couch. He looked at the bong standing upright on the glass table in front of them.

“Doin’ *what*?!” Zach asked. “You’re hearing the ghost of your grandmother again!!”

“No!! It’s *Squidward from Piss Ant Aquarium!!* He’s telling me that you’re working for the morning news—the *Maria girl’s your contact*—and some numb ball from *KABBALAH* is goin’ to take over my finances in a month!! Too fast, they’re saying!! Our company is too fast... *and erratic!!*”

“Am I Patrick?!” Zach asked. “You said I was *PATRICK* once in your sequences... and I was pretendin’ you’re stupider than ya’ are!!” He drank orange soda.

“*The Piss Ant Aquarium*, this time, is furious that I’m in Ventura!! When I was in Buellton, they called me ‘Pea Boy’... and they intermingled meanings with urine—a *play on words!!*”

“Say hello to your grandmother, *Zane!!*” Zach was worried about his buddy, but he had seen him worse.

Zane clapped. Bilbo trotted over. “*Graaaa... Maaa...*” Bilbo forced.

“Okay!! I think the company’s doing well... but you have to stop smokin’ for a week... *at least*,” Zach told Zane. “You have good ideas... but you’re dry... *and scared!!*”

“The fagboy—*Squidward from Piss Ant*—is jealous of our age!!” Zane turned around to face Zach. Zach stared mindlessly at a black-and-white muted program on television. “He said that’s why he had me reprimended for the *FACEBOOK*, thing!!”

“Don’t listen to *SQUIDWARD*, MAN!!” Zach rubbed Zane’s temples. “Aquaman!!” He stopped rubbing

Zach's head. "Can you see *AQUAMAN* in your head?!"

Two seconds passed, then three. "He's throwin' balls at SQUIDWARD!!" Zane laughed, but it wasn't a comfortable laugh. "He hit the fish boy in the forehead!!" He turned back toward the TV. "He wants to join our company!!!"

"What's goin' on with this *SHOW*?!" Zach asked. "I mean, why are we still watchin' fifties stuff?!"

"*Innocence*!! We need to remember that humans weren't always bad... *and controlled*!!" Zane looked at the bong again. "I can save humanity, *Zach*!!"

"We're workin' on it!!" Zach felt proud. "We do I feel like we have no more meanin'?!"

"*God*, I hope we didn't cave in to our enemies an' not realize... *Ah*!! Listen, tomorrow, when I wake up I want you to tell me what happened with our finances!! Why is it that with every dollar we bring in, it feels like we can go *FEWER* places!!" Zane felt nauseous. "Understand!! I can't understand!!"

"Tomorrow, we'll get calamari!! We'll eat that *SQUID*!! Symbols, brother!!" Zach felt good. "We'll knock that *fucker* out of your head, clean from your id, ego, an' everythin' in between!!"

"*Freud* would be happy with ya', Superboy!!" Zane said to Zach. He got up, went to the restroom, and drank nearly a quart of water. They fell asleep within the next ten minutes—Zane on the floor, Zach on the couch.

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The NHL season was winding down. Tricia and Max were sent to cover a Ducks/ Sharks game at the *Pond* in Orange County. "Slacker or *Pandora*?! Which do you use?!" Tricia wished she was driving the news van.

"*XM*, actually!! I don't like to tie up my lines for radio... *when it's right next to me*!!" Max loved hockey. Tricia didn't comprehend the offsides rule, quite yet... and she was never sure when *icing* happened. For some reason, she understood the blue line once EVERYONE was one side of the rink.

"If your mother liked me more, I could be at your house... *more*!!" She thought about hockey. "When I was a kid, we didn't have *offsides*!! I sat near the defender's goal... an' that's how I scored!!"

"*You were seven*... an' ya' played on a *LAKE*!!" Max couldn't wait to get inside the building.

"My aunt stayed in Regina—a *few hours north of Montana*—an' I played hockey... *actually*!! Just not...!!" She felt uncomfortable regarding her knowledge of professional rules. "*The puck has to pass which one first*?! The opponent's blue line? Center *ICE*? Or it's offside... *or icing*?! I keep gettin' it *confused*!!"

"You have the *ballpark* idea... and I'll jot down notes!! Report the score!! Interview the captain, some players... *an' the coaches*!!" He smiled. "They'll tell ya' what happened!!"

"The Ducks won last year... *an' the Sharks are*..." She began to lose interest. "Okay!!" She looked into the visor mirror to make sure her face was put together. "The Bruins're goin' to win this year... *is what they're sayin' in*

*the studio... but don't say that on air!!"*

"*Yeah!!*" Max became a little fidgety. He was used to watching games with guys from school. "*California!! We root for the Ducks, at Channel Eight... but if the Sharks win... you're okay with it!! That's what Mort would want to hear!!*"

"*It's cheatin',*" Tricia said. "But it's part of what we do... *I guess!!*" She frowned. "Did you sign up for *MyDemigod* yet?! It's only been a couple of weeks... *an' I don't like who's hooked up with me!!*"

"They're threatenin' ya' already?!" Max exited on Katella. "*It's supposed to be in good fun!!*"

"We have people at the station that take it seriously—*too seriously*—and they're tellin' me I have to take the '*FALL*' in our group... 'cause I'm the girl, *I GUESS!!*"

"Word is that you're supposed to treat it like *MySpace* until late August... then figure out who's not goin' to slug it out with social dilemmas... *At that point*, I guess it's *Mortal Kombat* in a lot of ways... except that the NPC feature takes away the joystick action—the *computer fights for you depending on what traits your buds say ya' have... an' the ones ya' strive for an' acquire along the way*—so don't be weirded out by those people!! But... *No*, I haven't submitted mine yet—I *wanted to have some plan in place... And...?!*"

"You don't take it too seriously!!" Tricia had a tinge of anger. "*When Classmates* came out, I was slow... an' I didn't pay the twenty dollars, or *whatever*, to get the gold membership..."

"*And your rival from high school stole all your girly pals!!*" Max roled down his window and laughed heartily away from Trish.

"Listen, *COCK!!* This is off the record from *Channel Eight*, but your ass *BETTER* be online with a *MyDemigod* account *TONIGHT!!*" She thought about sex with Max. "Fucker!!" She didn't want to break up yet. "*They'll tear us apart!!* These 'special sites' come along every three-or-so years!! Get *ON IT!!*"

"My code name's '*Annihilation*'... Trish?! I've been through this with fuckin' *FACEBOOK!!* Seems like the end of the world!!"

"I'll change my name to 'Inevitable' tonight!! Somethin' personal with *Mort!!!* We have until July, then our screen names become permanent... *for the rest of the year*, at least!!"

"Pull your laptop an' secure that name, *by the way!!*" Max looked ahead at the *Pond*. Traffic wasn't as bad as he thought it might be. With media credentials, they would be parked and ready to go in hardly any time.

Tricia asked for info from Max as he drove. Before the first puck was dropped at center ice, Max began his *MyDemigod* adventure. "Annihilation" was his nickname... he was partners with "Inevitable"... and for some reason, he felt like *more than a million bucks*.

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Zach Rouss and Zane Wilson watched the Sharks play the ducks from Zane's mother's home in Buellton. "Stage Three graphics kicked in today!/" Zane set down his blackberry. "This is the *Dig-Dug* stage!! Yeah!/"

Zach was more interested in the game in front of him. "*Sharks might go all the way!*"

"Stage Four, by mid-June would be *Pole Position*... and the final stage, by early July ought to be Dragon's Lair!/"

"That's on overstatement on Lair... but it'll be close!/" The Ducks led the Sharks one to zero and were on a power play. "One and a half minutes left with *Sharks' advantage!*/" Zach was tired... and he yet to join his own co-creation. He figured, with Zane, that it wouldn't look professional—*conflict of interest*—if it was done too soon... but *Tom Anderson* was a national figure for MySpace even though he had sold to *Google* for insane dollar amounts. "My first attribute's going to be *feathers*," Zach said to Zane, "and I'm going to cload myself in *HOCKEY* attire!/"

"Dumb son-of-a-bitch!/" Zane said to Zach. "The look doesn't matter if they think we're cheatin'!! My only *MyDemigod* friends at this point are charities... except for the Sharks, of course!! Dang, we got a good lease in *San José!* I feel bad that understudies an' ordinary Joe *Geeks* are runnin' our operation!/"

"I was up there a couple of weeks ago!! Not good!! We intimidate 'em!! We laid out good plans, we articulated a good direction and trajectory... an' they collectively're tryin' to prove themselves to *society!* Ya' know what that's like!/" Zach watched San José score a shorthanded goal and cheered. "That's *US*, baby!/"

Zane said, "There's an infinity out there to be plugged in to!/" He mused at the game, then mentioned, "My character—*my demigod*—is lookin' like a *THORN MAN!*/" There was one more order of business, "Yahoo is offerin' us *four point five mill* to sell!! Ya' want out?/"

"*Blue PILL*, wanker!/" Zach screamed to Zane. "We want *RED PILL*... an' we want to ride it for a couple of years!/"

"I shouldn't bring up the offer from Zynga then?/" Zane asked. The game on TV went to intermission. Third period would be next.

"Those fuckers think we're just another *app!*/" Zach was glad the Sharks were back in the game. "Don't talk to 'em!/"

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"You did *good* tonight!/" Max said to Trish. "When we get out of this traffic, I'll let you drive!/"

"*Yeah!*/" She thought about the two to one *Sharks* victory, the final goal scored with fifty-five seconds left in regulation. "I had fun!/"

"*Zane Wilson!*/" Max looked at Tricia and admired her beauty from dim lighting from car headlights and flourecent street lights. "You kept mentionin' his company durin' the game!/"

“*Zach Rouss*, his buddy, went to Harvey Mudd College in Claremont!! *Zane*, you remember from the *bulldog interview*, attended Pomona College and studied psychology... *but he had theatre trainin’ as well!!*” Trish’s feet were up on van’s dash. She stretched back into her reclined seat. “A few weird things happened at those schools since internet was hooked in to the rooms in the late nineties!! Paranoia... *more so than usual!!*”

“Harvey Mudd might be the best engineerin’ school in the country—*private one*, at least!!” Max was becoming frustrated with the outpour of automobiles from the game. “Zach had it together with computer programming!! Those *wizards* at Mudd ride unicycles around campus!! An’ they develop ‘tomorrow’s chicken coups’... an’ things like that!!”

“They had a plan, from what I read in *BusinessWeek!!!* Bill Gates did somethin’ similar at Harvard, I’m sure!! When the administrations began to fear their potential, they were goin’ to jet out!!” She thought about *Zane*. “Of course, only *Zane* was kicked out of the school... an’ *Zach* graduated!!”

“I have a strange feeling about those two!!” Max looked to Tricia. “Those *schools!!* Berkeley’s one of ‘em!! They have that ‘liberal element’ which people simultaneously fear and admire!!”

“Liberals are the best *artists*... but there’s strange violence people don’t like to talk about!!” Tricia thought about San Francisco. “*Haight-Ashbury!!* The *SUMMER OF LOVE!!* Drugs, women... *and music!!*” She remembered a documentary on the hippie years of the sixties. “But there was a darker side!! Kids lived under the *Golden Gate* bridge... and there were pamphlets ‘bout where to go if YOU WERE *RAPED!!* Crisis centers!! It wasn’t all *FREE LOVE!!* People wanted a *FREE RIDE!!*”

“So that’s where *Zach* and *Zane* are comin’ from!!” He looked ahead at the row of red tail lights. “It’s a time warp over there!!” Max remembered where an *IHOP* was on Katella Avenue. “*Pomona* was established in the *nineteenth century*... an’ Harvey Mudd dates back to the fifties, I believe!!” Pancakes entered his mind. “Their site, *MyDemigod*, is a mixture between their worlds of engineering an’ theatre... in a lot of ways!! Are you ready for a hot stack of waffles!?! I’ll let you drive after we put somethin’ in our stomachs!!”

“*Frickin’ TRAFFIC!!*” Tricia yelled. She felt good. She couldn’t wait to go home to check on her avatar. Periodically, it morphed subtly from her regular face and body to that of how she’d imagine herself in dreams. It was fun to her... and she looked ahead to the round robins.

## SECTION 3: PUBLIC LIFE

The year was 1991 and Mortimer Wishum still had some *pizzazz* in his fifty-one-year-old frame. *Gutenberg: The Real Man* was a book he picked up at Waldenbooks. Pirate Radio had been huge in the Los Angeles area for a while... and then it faded. Nirvana was a new act during MTV's nightly *Headbanger's Ball*. Mort liked the fresh vibe from Seattle, something that seemed to start with *Queensrÿche* a year or so before—*Empire* was the album that he played from his Seal Beach home. Fox was a baby network. "The internet" was not in the regular public lexicon yet. Convertables were popular in his neighborhood. One of the better-known bumper stickers in his area was "Welcome To California—Now Go Home!/" and concerts were strong throughout the *Southland*.

Mortimer Wishum came over from ABC News to help Fox get on its feet. He was a sharp news man... and he didn't believe the expansion of cable would doom his career, even with CNN reaching more and more homes. He still read the LA Times when he wanted serious news. He cherished his *Compac PCI* because, at fifty-six kilobytes per second, it transferred data much faster than his *Commodore* which he hung on to until the prior year. The phone modem was a novel idea which never enthralled him... but it was fun to send bits of information here and there at times. He visualized a future, *maybe in a hundred years*, when electronic machines would all be wireless, transfer color photography instantly, and people could talk to one another without the hiss of radio interference.

Mort read the *Gutenberg* biography in the summer of 1991. That summer, a breakthrough cinematic feature was released: *T2: Judgment Day*. The special effects surpassed anything previously attempted, and the theme warned of a future in which liquid metal robots would threaten humankind. Mortimer brushed it off as exaggeration and hype... and he spent the final couple of weeks of his ninety-one summer with a chum in Needles, *not too far from Lake Havasu*. He contemplated purchasing a timeshare in Cabo—he heard they were worthwhile—and he prepared himself for a world with *four national networks* in television.

Mortimer sat in the *Channel Eight News* coffee room by himself. Tricia did quite well covering her first sports event. He stopped thinking about going from Fox to UPN to his current post. His laptop was in front of him and opened up. He had felt uncomfortable with *MySpace* because he thought it seemed too theatric for its own good. His thoughts shifted to recent events. A half year earlier, he reluctantly began a Facebook account back in December of 2008. It reminded him too much of the dreaded *PDA's* he hated. A half year after joining Facebook, he couldn't understand the public fascination. *Why do I need to know when exroommates are doin' their laundry?!* he asked himself on occasion. He felt out-of-touch... but he changed his mind about *Zane Wilson*, and he changed his mind about Tricia Galley. Oh!! He was going to join *MYDEMIGOD!!* And, *OH!!* When September rolled around, people better WATCH OUT!!!

"I know people from here to New York!/" Mort said into an empty room. "I can beat these kids!/" He thought about connections in Japan, Australia, and Peru. "These kids think they're goin' to whip old timers all over the *map!*/" He thought about 1991. "My last good summer was in Needles!! The California recession hit, then

*dickheads started talkin' shit on AOL for years on end when that finally kicked in!!"* Mort scarfed his pastry and downed his coffee. "Fuckers!!" He got up to check on the crew in the other room. "This is the first year I have a *shot* to win again!!" Mortimer pretended not to admire Trish's work when he faced the crowd in the next room. He asked everyone if he was needed around. No one had a problem with Mort leaving before the habitual nightly debriefing... *and he went home and cried.*

In the morning, Mortimer Wishum created a MyDemigod account. He was "Thrasher"... and he looked forward to dueling anyone and everyone when "friendship phase" was through.

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The year was 1995 when Samantha Betsy Johnson could first remember the term "email"... although she later did research on the internet as a reporter for *Channel Eight News* and discovered "timer sharing" began in 1957 in regards to a centralized computer "talking" to outside computers. She learned during that report that DARPA—the *Defense Advanced Research Project Agency*—was began in 1958 which spawned the "arpanet" in 1966... soon conjoining Rand in America, the National Physical Laboratory in England, and Cyclades in France for sharing information through distant *computers*. Sam Johnson, fresh on the job at *Channel Eight* in the autumn of 2006, reported that the communication between these founding data hubs became the root of what was later known to everyone as "the internet"... but in 1995 when she was preparing to graduate from *Oregon State University*, a lanky Asian kid came into her dorm. *Email me*, is what he told her. *AOL—America Online—it's the hottest thing goin'!!*

The freshman kid had a mild crush on Sam—a *cheerleader majoring in journalism*—and went on to become a cameraman in the NCAA, the XFL, and various ESPN special events before reconnecting with miss Johnson years later. He'd thank online service for the ability to maintain healthy relationships in spite of turmoil after splitting from school. Sam had a *Prodigy* account and used the term "message me" when talking to her *CompuServe* mates after classes. Her home was near campus, and she kept in touch via computer mostly at home, *not only to contemporary Beavers*, but to relatives across the country as well.

Samantha Johnson was heading home three days after the Sharks had defeated the Ducks, Tricia Galley was lauded for her coverage... and she thought about how computers subsumed a lot of her life. It was only fourteen years before that received *AOL* software... but she could hardly remember life before that time. Rodan was a good cameraman... but she could hardly remember him as a geeky dork at campus. She remembered him criticizing Northern Trust on the way home from DC... and she remembered him frustrated that they up and decided to give back one-point-six billion dollars which they hadn't asked for to begin with. She remembered football games of the *Beavers*... but she could hardly remember high school life—*daily activities*, at the very least.

Samantha Betsy Johnson used a computer site called *Twitter*. Facebook was nice to her, but she made sure

to be overly-casual to her colleagues. Twitter reminded Sam of Facebook... except that it was much more difficult to receive feedback. *That was good to Sam because “feedback” became synonymous with “criticism”...* and as a reporter, she couldn’t doubt herself while in the field. The surprise came earlier in the day when Mortimer Wishum told her, *I’m part of YOUR generation, now... honey!!* He looked like a madman. Facebook reminded Sam of the public bulletin boards at college where people went to price off-campus rooms, look for various tutors, or tried to get lucky dating mysterious strangers. Twitter was more like a personal log... *except that it was open to review for a few of her peers*, and anyone that might stumble upon her *handle*—her “code name” as she put it most often. *MyDemigod* was made for Mortimer, in a lot of ways. He talked of “turnover rate” a bit... and was proud that *Channel Eight* held on to its reporters as well as anyone else in spite of not being the largest or best financed. Samantha thought about a lot of the stuff going on in recent times and almost decided to *try* to opt out of it—*she didn’t want a MyDemigod persona*, and thought it would complicate her other connections with fans and partners on other sites.

By the time Sam Johnson arrived home in *Marina del Rey*, she decided to wait things out. She knew when there was unnecessary pressure in the world, and this seemed to be one of those cases. *EVERYONE* seemed to be signing up for *MyDemigod*... but something wasn’t *right* with the whole system. What about reality?! Why didn’t people care about reality any more?! If Rodan was around, he would turn the queries into philosophical discussions. *How do you define reality?* That sort of sidebar. But what about the physical world? What about pollution!? *Mort swore he wouldn’t get caught up in our computerized nonsense*, Sam thought. *But he’s a believer... or he’s broken down to the point of no longer caring.* What about Joshua Tree Monument?! Workers at *Channel Eight* spoke of a summer trip there... *until MyDemigod came along.*

Something was unsettling... but Samantha knew her *gut* would talk to her. There were *crossroads* in life... and her innate feelings would take over sooner or later.

Samantha thought about calling Rodan before laying down for bed. She looked at her phone and wondered, *Is this my future? No one warm in the bed? Just a sidekick to talk to through a plastic contraption?!* That’s when it hit. Sam signed on to *MyDemigod*. *If it’s the last thing I do... and if it’s the last site I sign on to... I WILL KICK THE ASSES OF PEOPLE THAT’VE SCREWED ME!! This isn’t fair!!!*

\* \* \*

Tricia Galley was a teenager in 1997 when she created her first email account. Sure, she had access to her family’s *AOL* connection, but she felt like she was intruding more often than not. When her father purchased a second computer—one for the kids—she established “*tgalley@earthlink.net*” as her source for distant social interaction. That was her favorite year on computer until she met Max. Back then, she would talk to drunk college boys and believe it was safe and cool. As ninety-eight and ninety-nine came into being, *Y2K* loomed, terrorist plots



exploded in general public consciousness, identity theft ran rampant... *and it culminated with the falling of the Twin Towers in New York.*

Trica Galley was not much of a conspiracy theorist, but she knew such thing *COULD NOT* have happened without the aid of rapid communication. “It’s Raining Men” by the Weather Girls and “Disco Inferno” by the Tramps, she was told, were a couple of indicators that diabolical people wanted humans hailing from the heavens... *but early disco couldn’t coordinate such action with mere rotory phones.* She thought it was stupid. *Helter Skelter, bitch... Are you goin’ to tell me that’s part of the equation?! When I get to the bottom, I go back to the top of the slide... where I stop an’ turn and I go for a ride... ‘til I get to the bottom AND I SEE YOU AGAIN?!* She had just enrolled in Santa Monica Community College, but fate had her transferring to Pepperdine as a freshman due to unexpected inheritance in the family. *Tricia never caught into society the same way that Sam Johnson and Mort Wishum had.* Part of it was denial that her generation was going through turmoils that the older folks didn’t experience. Age wasn’t all, though. Max Bell was her age, but he was in denial that he could be kept down—*for fleeting moments, he was a wizard and a king... in his own mind.* Max was strong for Tricia and eventually it started to rub off.

There was one thing in particular that Tricia remembered about 1997: traffic habits. Industry was still strong, “sweat shops” weren’t yet rooted out, and the great California budget crisis was far away. People sped home—they *went straight home.* Tricia could remember asking her father to deviate from plans for ice cream or fast food, but her father seemed to perpetually be fatigued and wanted to take her straight home from school. With the internet came crazy perverts and stalkers. They had actually always been there, but they now had *KNOWLEDGE*—they could find out more easily where cheerleaders and movie stars lived. Tricia was a good volleyball player. At Pepperdine, she knew it wasn’t smart to always go “straight home” when visiting family. It was a hassle, but she usually planned two or three offset stops when visiting her childhood house. Sometimes, it was the beach, other times it was a school chum. *MyDemigod* presented problems in its first few weeks—it was the whole thing over again. People from high school sought her. As a matter of fact, *Pipl.com* was encouraged to find people from past years. For ordinary people, it was no different than *Classmates.com* and it was flattering to hear from pals from cons before. For Tricia, it felt like going through the “telemarketing era” again.

Tricia started her *MyDemigod* account hoping that not a lot would change. Max, though initially reluctant, was now strong believing it was a good thing. Tricia could not put her finger on it... *but she felt her life becoming sucked away.* She dared not say anything to the public just yet, Max included... *but she believed MyDemigod was robbing her of life.*

\* \* \*

“Jasmine!! Come here!!! I need you to see THIS!!!” Mayor Daneil Abel was becoming excited. Jasmine Zuniga was in the restroom taking care of her hair.

“*WHAT?!*” Jasmine rushed in with a towel over her head. “What’s so important?! Water is runnin’ down my *BACK!?*”

“*I just flipped on TYRA... and it’s those kids!?*” Daniel’s mouth was wide open.

“Young men!?” Jasmine said. “*Zane* looks handsome!?”

Zane Wilson and Zach Rouss were on the *Tyra Banks* show reporting the early success of *MyDemigod*. Momentary subtitles distinguished one from the other.

“The kid got kicked out of *school...* and his buddy... *NO!! WAIT!!* Operation *SHAVE* was supposed to be the name of the... *THE SHOWER WAS RUNNIN’...* I didn’t want to get you out when...”

“*Calm down!?*” Jazzy said. “It’s only a show!?”

“*My daughter goes to those schools—the Claremont Colleges!!—an’ the one on the left said it’s full of corruption, lies, an’ and exaggerations!?*” He choked momentarily on his saliva. “One of the schools he calls ‘*Piss Ant Aquarium*’ because every time he...”

“Listen!?” Jasmine said. “The guy doesn’t want a *libel* suit...”

“*NO!?*” Daneil Abel sat down and started to breath in and out. “‘*Rape system*’... he said. ‘*Get your pretty daughters out... because*’... He said they rape your pride, put words in your mouth... then his sidekick cut in...” He trotted to the kitchen and retrieved a *BusinessWeek* magazine. “They were so much *nicer* in this write-up!?”

“The guy’s *bitter*, understand?!” Jasmine stated. “And the guy—the sidekick—hung on and graduated!?” She looked to Daniel. “*He’s exaggerating for TELEVISION!?*” she said. “Television,” she emphasized.

“Operation Shave—that’s what they called *MyDemigod* when they designed features!?” He looked up at Jasmine. “This is why I hide in my house and let them see *NOTHING...* at least durin’ crisis time!?” He wiped his brow. “Less is *MORE!!* Some cock professor put words in this guy’s mouth, apparently, when he was being kicked out for *FACEBOOK* remarks, ‘Zane Wilson does not believe in *GHOSTS...* but we cannot have him causing campus-wide panics!?’ Zane said that they guy privately alleged deeper accusations, though unsubstantiated, such as *knife threats* and and bomb scares!?” Daniel Abel wished for water but continued on, “Zane said, ‘I believe in *GHOSTS*, Tyra... An’ what pot smoker has time to manufacture explosives for worthless people?!’ I was like that, *Jasmine!!* I mean, I don’t support legalization of weed as a mayor ‘cause it’s political suicide... *but I knew farts at Yale whom put words in my mouth!?*”

“You hated ‘em!?” Jasmine was amused by Daniel’s interest in the subject. He face looked *young* when he spoke. She went to get a glass of water for him without being asked.

“So that was the crux!?” Daniel explained when Jazzy came back. “*OPERATION SHAVE* is to release *Zane* of his demons!?” He thought about it. “I think I joined that site for the wrong reasons!! I mean, ya’ get the chance to ridicule a satirist from the *POST* an’ it feels sweet!! But I think this guy is actually tryin’ to *forget* his

enemies over time!! *BOLD!!*”

“*Annihilate?!?*” Jasmine asked. “Annihilate them from his memory?!?”

“*Yes!!*” Daniel said. He drank water. “YES *MA’AM!!*”

Daniel trotted to his bureau and jotted some notes. It pertained to *Zach* and *Zane*... and it pertained to how he was going to approach his next election. *ANNIHILATION*. The word was back again... *and it felt splendid*.

## SECTION 4: FOCUS AND RAPPORT

On June 2, 2009, Trish and Max moved in with one another. Studio City wasn't Malibu, but it was a *start*. Their apartment was quaint. As they moved boxes and furniture in, they spoke about their jobs and about their computer situations. Tricia happened to watch the *Tyra* show which featured Zane Wilson, the *guy with the talking bulldog*. "He's theatric, ya' know?!" she told Max as she carried a box miscellaneous goods. "Some professor overreacted an' jolted the administration. I saw that happen at *Pepperdine*. 'Projection psychology' is what they call it. Someone's bipolar an' implicates someone else before bein' discovered!!" She set down her box in the middle of their new living room. "*Liars* do that a lot... as do over-the-top weed addicts!! That's what I didn't like about college!!"

"*Did you even graduate?!*" Max Bell sat on the floor. "I can't remember you saying *anything* about Pepperdine except your freshman year... *and making it on to the volleyball team!!*"

"Did I tell you I was bein' stalked for a couple of years?!" Trish sat next to Max. "This is why I don't talk about that... *period...* in my life!!"

"Okay!! It'll come out some day!!" Max felt a cool breeze come through a nearby open window and knew he was going to love the location.

"You don't like talkin' about living with *YOUR MOM* all these years!!" Tricia said. "But those guys... *One said that he was shavin' a bad professor from his life...* and he thought MyDemigod could be better than MySpace because we're too 'nice' sometimes with people from our past... *or casual acquaintances from school and work!!* And MyDemigod allows both!! Things form... *and things are torn down!!* Look at the Kingdome in Seattle—that was one of his examples... *Why is it that the Rose Bowl has stood so many decades... but the Kingdom came and went?!* I mean, aren't we gettin' better at buildin' things!? An' relationships are the same!! Zane said the freaky professor—*Squidward* is what he referred to him to on Tyra—seemed great for a while then 'crapped out'!! The guy has charisma, I mean!! Like so many of those American Idol cast offs!! William Hung, he brought up!! Simon Cowell doesn't like him... *but does he have the authority to shut the public off from William's music?!* No!! 'The school wants this!! The school wants that!!' Yeah, I started siding..." Tricia stopped. "I'm glad I interviewed the dude before all this public awareness..."

"*We have company...*" Max alerted Tricia. "Hello, *neighbor!!*"

Tricia greeted an elderly lady holding a healthy-sized bowl of cupcakes. Trish and Max shared time with her, moved the rest of their goods in, then remained silent about *MyDemigod* and Zane Wilson for the remainder of the evening.

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Tricia Galley and Max Bell travelled to *Marina del Rey* to have a luncheon with Sam Johnson and Rodan Brock on June 3, 2009. “We moved the bulk of the things in by last night!?” Tricia ate pineapple from her kabab. “How’s Rodan doin’ on his MyDemigod site?!” Trish ate grilled chicken and was glad they were near the ocean. Waves pounded in the distance.

“He says ‘it’s happening again’!! The stuff he remembers from early AOL days!?” Sam laughed. She reached for more fruit salad.

Rodan poured burgundy wine for Trish and Sam. Max was still fine with his glass. “The fuckers are outside again with their boomboxes!?” He pointed toward the inland area. “*Bumpin’ away!!* Barely loud enough that ya’ can hear, but not so loud the cops do anything about it!?”

“*Chicken shit!!*” Sam Johnson said. “There were cybercults when America Online started, do you remember that?! You could talk to psychics and all that?!” She drank from wine. “*Rodan* says there were cybergangs that screwed with people’s heads on purpose!?”

“You think the ‘prestige’ of a *MyDemigod* victory could be enough to start that crap again?!” She smelled her wine, then drank. “Sounds stupid... but I don’t doubt a few jack-asses do it!?”

“I couldn’t jog, by 1999!?” Rodan looked around. He wanted to be apologetic, but he felt correct in his bones. “Lotta hate groups, back then... *not that they’re all gone!!*”

“I talked to the nicest lady, last night!?” Tricia announced. “Neighbor!! Brought us cupcakes!?”

“Hey!?” Max spoke over Trish as if she hadn’t said a word. “Tell me if *this* is goin’ on, Rodan!! When ya’ leave the station, do ya’ feel that *someone* is always on your tail as of late?! I mean, like *RIDIN’ YOUR ASS!?*”

“Paranoia!?” Rodan shook his head. “I want to say it’s paranoia... but *yes*... I do notice that!?”

“*Fuckin’ Channel Two!!*” Max bellowed. “I know it’s those guys... ‘cause they’re the only ones takin’ this *seriously!!* I mean, Dave Letterman not only wants to talk to the winner of MyDemigod, but all the contestants kicked off from mid-November... on ‘til the end... just like *Survivor!!*”

“Listen,” Rodan said, “I don’t want to be overly skeptical, but I know guys at Sony... *back in Japan*, I mean!! They’ll tell us if somethin’ fruity’s goin’ on that we can’t see!?”

“We’re the trees—*they can see the forest*,” Sam added. “We spoke about it last night while you two were moving lamps and tables!?” A cool breeze zipped through Sam’s backside. She felt great.

“Okay!! What if they’re ‘in’ on it!?” Max asked.

“You can’t be paranoid to the point of *death*,” Rodan offered. “It’s just a game... but I watched that *Tyra* episode Tricia talked about when you first drove up... Build/ destroy/ build!! That’s the program!! I like it!! We’re goin’ to be friends no matter what happens down the line!?”

“Who are you tryin’ to convince?!” Tricia asked. “Us, or yourself!?” She laughed.

“Is that *TRASH TALKIN’*... or is the wine gettin’ to you?!” Rodan felt good.

The four had a hearty meal, had a handful of giggles along the way, then they split into separate camps. Trish and Max had to finish moving in to their apartment. Sam and Rodan had night duty at *Channel Eight*. The vibe was decent... but Tricia kept getting strange feelings that something was wrong. She still couldn't put her finger on it.

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On June 4, 2009, Rodan showed up to Zach's Ventura home. Zane Wilson was not with Zach, and Samantha Betsy Johnson did not come along for the trip. Rodan knocked at the door then showed Zach his media pass when the door was opened. Zach let Rodan in without a word. Rodan asked, "What's goin' on?! 'Cause I wanna know!! Off the record, of course... 'cause I'm a cameraman an' all!!!"

"I'm a wizard!!!" Zach said with glee. He offered Rodan popcorn which had just been buttered. Hot stuff. Rodan dug in. "*Tricia handled Zane so well that I'll tell ya' all!!! I'll let it rip!!*"

"Okay!!!" Rodan said. He sat next to Zach on his couch. "You obviously know that we're all going through somethin'—*it has to do with your program*—but this didn't happen with MySpace!!!"

"You think we lucked at it, *right?! No!! We used MySpace!!*" Zach thought while he sucked from a Capri-Sun straw. "Imagine usin' the abacus an' slide *ruler* while designin' the first *computer!!!* Doesn't seem fair that others come by, years later, usin' hand-held calculators and computers to design ever *BETTER* computers, right?! AI, practically!!!"

"So you're a *wizard!!*" Rodan laughed. "Can I have one of those, by the way?!"

Zach got up to go to the fridge. He pulled out three Capri-Suns—*one for himself and two for Rodan*. "Yeah!! Wizard!! I'm convinced that Merlin existed an' read from scrolls!! I have the same power to transform society... but I use the *desktop!!*" He noticed that Rodan wasn't completely convinced. "*SHIT HAPPENS!!* Ya' put that on a bumper sticker an' people behave differently!! 'Smile'!! Put that on a button... *people respond!!*"

"Why would you tell me this?!" Rodan shook his head. "Isn't part of your... *power...* that ya' keep it secret?!"

"No!!" He looked at Rodan's face and saw distress. "'Cause we're at *OVERKILL* if you're here!!" He stood up from the couch and faced a drape-covered window. "You guys think we slopped it together—I'm *almost sure of THAT!!*—but we studied Facebook, YouTube, and MySpace while in school!! We developed connections... an' Zane even knew when to get kicked out—*that's right!!*—right before *SPRING BREAK...* 'cause nerds don't cut it any more!! Some kid clutchin' a diploma yellin' *VICTORY* is moron!!"

"*But you graduated,*" Rodan noticed.

"I pressed buttons before I left... *and my circumstance was different!!* I am engineering-oriented an' ya'

can't argue that two-plus-two is anything but *FOUR*... unless you're what Zane is—a *psychologist!*!”

“*You cheat, fucker!*!” Rodan was angry, but he knew there was more. “Dog eat dog!! Is that why?!”

“*Close!*!” Zach faced Rodan. “There are wizards in South Carolina, Saskatchewan, an’ Florida!! They are all over!! So if I can rule my house from *California*...”

“*Say no more!*!” Rodan said. “You’re down-to-*EARTH*... an’ I like it... but what about my problems?!” He didn’t know how to explain a phase of paranoia which crept into his life again. “The game... *seems real!*!”

“If I had to advise you, plan to lose!! I mean, it’s a round robin!! Make sure you lose with grace, and try to lose against someone ya’ *like*... maybe you’re girlfriend!!”

Rodan thought for a second. “*That’s why!*!” He thought about Samantha. “I plan to WIN!! I mean, I know I won’t just by the numbers... *but it’s the attitude*, right?!”

“*Could be!*!” Zach Rouss then stunned Rodan Brock with a word. “ANNIHILATION!!” he said. “It’s all about losing your enemies an’ the ghosts in your closet!!”

“*Fuck!*!” Rodan snapped. He didn’t believe “the word” was spread too far. He wondered if it was a coincidence. “You couldn’t tell me anything about *George Ulyses Renkter*, could ya’?!”

Zach and Rodan chatted for another half hour. Neither felt comfortable. At a point, they compared it to *NASCAR* driving. They were grateful to be at the tops of their games... but any little thing could send them spinning off course. Zach tried to assure Rodan not to fret—worst case scenario, they would fold the company if it became too much of a monster... and start over with something else.

\* \* \*

On June 5, 2009, Tricia Galley made a personal bet with Sam Johnson about who would go the furthest with *MyDemigod* that year. She bet on Mort, Sam bet on Max... *which was weird for Trish to comprehend initially*. Somehow, there had to be more than just *MyDemigod* as to why she was behaving abnormally and feeling inconsistent. She wanted to speak to Samantha about it... *but held back*.

Zane Wilson was in San José the prior day when Rodan spoke to Zach. Zane was prepping and testing the autumn phase of battles. *Rules weren’t nailed down in all respects*—the public was merely given guidelines of what to expect—and nuances were being pounded out. He called Zach in the early evening when Rodan was ready to take off. By chance, he caught the *Channel Eight* cameraman while still in Ventura and invited him for the first round of simulation demonstrations. After Tricia made her bet with Samantha, she received a cell phone call from Rodan. “I talked to *Mort* earlier—I’m in San Francisco right now, *by the way*—an’ Max is goin’ to fill in for *Sam* tonight!! You’re invited...”

“*I’ll come!*!” Tricia was happy. She knew what Rodan was doing up north at the Bay. “Hold *ON!*! Here’s

Samantha!!”

Samantha Johnson grabbed the phone. “*Good TIMING!!*” She thought about the postings on the bulletin board—*Channel Eight still used a traditional one...* in conjunction with a homeroom computer—and she mentioned that *MyDemigod* is going through its first wave of court challenges. “*Stress!! Duress! Attributed suicides!!* The regular thing... and they’re bringing up the same ol’ grievance about stealin’ images!! Joe Blow becomes the *THE THING* from Fantastic Four... an’ they want to know who owes whom *royalties*, if anythin’ at all!! Same *NAPSTER* crap, in a lot of ways!!”

“Worst case scenario, we’re shut down before the *fightin’* phase!!” Rodan said.

“*Yeah!!* But you’re talkin’ like you’re in the *COMPANY!!*” She paused. “I’ll take Max tonight... *but if there’s openings for us... YOU LET ME KNOW!!!*”

“Don’t tell *Mort!!*” Rodan chortled. “I don’t think he’d understand we’d go for a chunk of what might be *billions* in a couple o’ years!!”

“*Don’t count your chickens...*” Samantha gave the phone back to Trish.

“I’ll be there tonight!!” She looked around. “Mort is good with this now, *by the way!!*”

\* \* \*

“*You’re a man-beast,*” Jasmine said slyly.

“*What?!!*” Daniel Abel was snapped out of a trance.

“You wanted to know why I asked what your sign was!!” Jazzy swirled cubes around in her water. “I could have gone to the cabinet an’ looked in your records!! Some things *do* get past me!!”

“*That was months ago!!*” Daniel folded a copy of *The Economist* he had been gazing numbly at.

“*Yeah!!*” Jasmine drank from her glass then poked her head into the isle to attract the attention of a stewardess. Jazzy and Danny were flying to Miami Beach as Tricia made her way to San Francisco... three thousand miles to the west. “*You have those qualities!!* It’s not split personality... but *rather...* expanse of expressions!! Holed up from a few photographers... *then flyin’ to Miami Beach for the weekend...* while barely gainin’ back the media’s graces!!”

“*Reverse psychology!!*” Daneil said. “It’s always worked for me!!”

“Alright... *but your avatar is almost formed!!*” Jasmine caught the attention of a flight attendant and requested a seltzer water. She pulled her laptop down from the overhead storage. She logged on. “*THIS!!* It’s not an archer with a horses body... *but a griffin is what I figure ya’d be as a DEMIGOD!!*”

Jazzy and Danny were traveling first class. They were surprised when they heard a girl’s voice from behind them. “That’s a *STUPID* game!!”



Daneil poked his head above his seat and looked back at her. “*What darling?* It’s a social networkin’ site like *MYSACE!*!” The child appeared to be flying alone and was perhaps eleven years old. “Surely, your parents have allowed you to post *MySpace* photos an’ bulletins!?”

“IT’S A *GAME!*!” the girl commanded. “You’re yankin’ each other’s chains right now... *but wait ‘til the final phase!! KIDS ARE GOIN’ TO RUN EVERYTHIN’!*!”

“*They do anyway!*!” Jasmine whispered to Daniel. She felt a tinge of shame for her urge to want to straighten the youngster out.

“*Okay, precious dumpling,*” Daniel uttered to the juvenile. “You call it toe-may-toe, I call it *toe-mah-toe!*!” He wasn’t content with that phrase to close his portion of the exchange. “I hope your friends take over the *WORLD!*!” He tried to avoid sharp sarcasm. He sat forward again.

“Some of us are becomin’ *billionaires* by the time we’re twenty-one!” the child persisted. “*Why do you have to work so hard to get six digits per year!?*”

“*Is she a child or an android?!*” Jazzy asked. She was having a good time. Miami Beach loomed in her head. “The vacation’s goin’ to be nice!?”

“*They’re usin’ your information against YOU!*!” the tike shrieked. “*MyDemigod* is nothin’ by a suicide machine!!?”

Jazzy finally realized who was speaking. It wasn’t a child, but rather, *her father*. The kid was clearly under the thirteen-year-old age limit... and her dad, *probably a professional man*, explained the situation to her in adult terms... and possibly proposed some reasons why she might not want to be part of *MyDemigod* anyway.

The stewardess arrived with seltzer water and a couple of bags of peanuts. Jasmine requested, “Can you please get a cola for that young child behind us?! She seems uncomfortable!?”

The rest of the flight to Florida was quiet and calm. When the airplane landed and seatbelts were off, the radiant preteen scooted past Danny and Jazzy as if they hadn’t spoken at all. Jasmine guessed that she had fun grandparents or parents waiting to greet her. On the other side of the country, Tricia neared San Francisco International Airport and couldn’t wait to see *Rodan* and the *Z And Z Enterprises, Inc.* headquarters.

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Tricia ate quietly from her sourdough bread bowl. Gulls flew in the sky, *Pier 39* experienced pleasant weather, and the clam chowder hit the spot. She wanted to bring up the uneasy emotions she periodically went through. She almost spoke up when Zach Rouss injected, “*Psycho Carivans!! That’s what we got out here!*”

“What?!” Rodan asked. He had been admiring the ocean. “Is this *regardin’* the BOOM BOXERS I was talkin’ about?!”

“Yes!!” Zach said. He lived near the ocean much of his life. He found himself admiring the great bay as well. There was a *cooler* element in the north of California which seemed to say to him that the ocean was more of a spectacle than a swimming locale. He shook off the idea. “We had people up here sayin’ that *cars* nudge ya’ off to the side of the road!! MyDemigod, of course!! Lies?! Exaggerations!? I’m not sure... *but I heard o’ that stuff in Southern Cal when AOL was peakin’ at twenty-five million users!!*”

“What’re they at now?! Three million?!” Rodan asked. He didn’t care for a response. “Okay!! These are phenomena, *if anything...* And I know you’re position!!”

“*There’ll always be complaints!!*” Zach watched Tricia dig into her soup. “If you design your program so that more good will come out of it than *bad...* then...”

“There’s no way to *know!!*” Rodan demanded. “I mean, what if rebel factions start winnin’... *an’ takin’ the conflict stage too seriously?!!*”

“I’m operatin’ on the premise that people need to forget things... *an’ they need to acquire, release, then regain allies throughout life!!*” Zach almost felt like he was beating a dead horse. “You remember summer vacation when we were younger!! You meet friends at school, go home to the family... *then meet new companions the followin’ school year!!*”

“I don’t want to admit it, but you’re right!!” Rodan thought about filming for the XFL. “I had a job where I didn’t like my boss, *right?!* I did *not* want his recommendation on my record!!”

Tricia stayed quiet. If Max would’ve been present instead of Rodan, she would’ve joined the conversation. Instead, she ate her bread bowl and watched the outdoor activities. There were a lot of parents parading children through different stores and venues.

Zach felt compelled to emphasize what happened with Zane at the college they attended. “*My accomplice, Zaney, is one of the extreme example!! We travelled along the sixty freeway when goin’ from Ventura to Big Bear... to avoid a more direct passage past the place where...*” Rodan seemed to be losing interest. “*Zane is intuitive, you see?!*” He gained Rodan’s attention back. “They were goin’ to murder him at school... *but ya’ have to understand that means attackin’ your character before anythin’ else!!*”

“An’ MyDemigod stops it from happenin’?!” Rodan asked. “*Why?!*” Rodan was surprised that eerie emotions shuffled in his tummy. “This is a fuckin’ *vendetta!!*”

“We were at school durin’ this window, *Rodan*, when we realized that STUDENTS knew more than professors in certain pockets!! I’m talkin’ about *REAL LIFE APPLICATIONS* to life’s problems in the modern era!!” Zach felt bad for Rodan. He didn’t want to peer too deep into his psyche.

“I *KNOW*... what you’re talkin’ about, *MAN!!*” Rodan wanted to eat. A sandwich sat in front of him which he had only taken one bite of. “I hate it myself!! Our boss—you *see?!*—we still have to do ‘scientific method’ stuff with reportin’ our stories!! Confirmin’ leads, checkin’ out photos... *but sometimes I can tell where trouble is by where the newscaptor goes!!* I mean... *I hate goin’ through the motions of talkin’!!* Don’t you ever...”

“You’ll like our place!!” Zach inserted. “Hey!!” he yelled to Zane. Rodan turned around and saw Zach’s buddy bouncing toward the group. “Good to *see* ya’!!”

The four headed to San José after lunch was wrapped up. Zane had news about the mechanism for MyDemigod’s next phase, and he had political opinions to share concerning *Z And Z*’s impact on local businesses and competitors. Tricia felt deeply grateful to be along for the voyage. She almost felt like she was witnessing history-in-the-making. She watched *Zane* every now and then while they scurried along the *Eighty-Four*... and she could barely assure with full confidence herself that she was seeing the same person whom she had interviewed—the one with the speaking bulldog.

\* \* \*

“When we were headin’ down Alden, you thought I was takin’ ya’ to *Cedars-Sinai*, didn’t ya’?!” Mort Wishum laughed loudly without shame. “You guys think you *know* it all!!” Mort was seated with Sam Johnson and Max Bell at the Ivy. “*Those photographers out there...*” Mort turned around and pointed then waved. “That would be *you*, Max... if ya’ were *STUPID!!*”

Max felt bashful. *Channel Eight* employees had a habit of dining outdoors. “It feels like I’m with... *my dad!!*” Max confessed.

“Those people know who I am!!” Mort turned, waved, and some photographers took snapshots. “Cindy Crawford!! They’re here to see her an’... *I think George Lucas might be comin’ by today!!*”

“So we’re not goin’ to be on *Fox* at six thirty... unless it’s incidental!!” Sam said. “Now I know how the kids in the backgrounds of my stories feel!!” She looked to Max. “You still haven’t been... *exposed!!*”

Max said, “I’m on *MySpace*—that’s all I need!!—an’ I’m of the belief that *MyDemigod* is a fad... an’ it probably overrated!!”

“I’m glad ya’ mentioned them... ‘*cause Facebook is takin’ ‘em seriously!!*” Mortimer took out a chubby Puerto Rican cigar, moistened the frame of it, then tried to light it. “Xanga... *and* Multiply!!” The cigar lit. “The face of social networkin’ it still the same... *but...*”

“*You’ve done your research!!*” Max howled. “Wow!! Welcome to OUR *GENERATION!!*”

“Listen, *boy!!*” Mort puffed. “Every three-to-five years, or so... *I update myself!!* Now, there’s no luxury to wait anymore!! Xanga, Multiply... *Facebook...*” Smoke seeped from the side of Mort’s mouth. “There’s goin’ to be influenced by this... *MyDemigod* thing... if we help it along!!”

“Two things, *Mort!!* One, we’re supposed to report the news—*not create it!!* Two... When did you become a fan of *MyDemigod!!* You hate that...”

“*Look around!!*” Mort belched. “Can’t ya’ smell the roses?!”

“Of couse, *MORT!!* I’m young like those photographers outside!?” Max wanted to wave at them... but he couldn’t recognize a single one of them and opted to drink his iced tea.

“*That’s how we look now!!*” Mort said. “People get their news from Yahoo! They get it from *Newsvine* an’ Google!!?”

“Entertainer?! Are you here to tell us we are entertainers moreso than *news people!!*?” Max felt ashamed. He remember similar feelings from being in junior high and schoolmates while shopping with his parents.

“Facilitators!! If we are good, we have to take what is out there an’ make it our own!! Of course, Sam here has a good nose for *true reportin’*... but...” Mort puffed on his cigar. “They are the future... *it seems!!*?”

“I don’t like it... *but I’m realistic enough to know to say ‘OKAY’!!* I mean, how could I change fate?! How can I change what’s goin’ to happen!?” Max noticed what Rodan had noticed in San Francisco: the lady reporter—the *featured artist*—remained quiet through the male exchange.

“You can *WIN!!*” Mortimer waited. “You feel like a celebrity here?!?” He looked around. “*We’ll feature you like ‘Randy of the Redwoods’ was featured by MTV years ago!!*”

“*Sounds flatterin’!!*” Max said.

“I’ll help, if you’re *serious!!*” Sam proposed. “Can’t really hurt!?” She looked to Max. “*Station promo!!* Looks like your face is gonna be plastered on all bus stops, billboards, an’ bus sidings!?”

“*Golly!!*” Max wanted to cry.

Mort leaned over to Max. “You’re goin’ to be a *REAL* demigod... if all plays out!!?”

## SECTION 5: POLITICS

“Fred Friendly—*his birth name was Ferdinand Wachenheimer*, but his middle name really was ‘Friendly’—was the president of CBS an’ that’s who said the thing I said!!” Mortimer Wishum hooked a right on to Beverly Boulevard from North Almont Drive. He thought about part of the lunch conversation regarding Lindsay Lohan’s tribulations with court misunderstandings and acquiesced courses. Mort had a couple of glasses of classic burgundy wine—*it’s what his body weight would allow to remain at the permitted limit*—yet he felt unexpectedly woozy.

“It sounded like a *moral tale*—that’s all!!” Max shifted on an equipment box behind Mort in *Channel Eight’s* news van. “Joe Meanie versus Fred Friendly!!”

“*Damn YOU KIDS!!*” Mort said. He surprised himself with the reaction. He felt *old* for a few moments. “*Yeah!!* Your laughter said it all!!! But I knew the guy in passing back in the eighties, he ran a good ship... *and that’s what I remember him sayin’ the most!!*”

“*“Because television can make so much money doing its worst, it often cannot afford to do its best!”*” Sam Johnson looked at the napkin she had written the statement upon. “Yeah, but you said it has consequences in the modern world... *‘cause of WHAT?!!*”

“Well, rock and hard place!!” Mort waited behind a BMW to turn left on Robertson. “You have these reality shows which’re concocted... ya’ have our news which skims over the ‘*serious*’ issues... an’ ya’ have these new *INTERNET KIDS* whom touch our lower levels!!”

“It’s not the death of us because we *can* up the ante!!!” Samantha said. She felt trepidation after looking at Mort’s face. He searched for an easy answer... but something was fleeting in his expression.

“*Thirtysomething*, lady!!” Mort finally said. He watched pedestrians on the sidewalk. “You see those kids?!” The ‘kids’ were really thirtysomething adults going about shopping and daily events.

“*Yeah!!*” Sam said. “You don’t look *connected!!* Is this goin’ somewhere?!”

“*Thirtysomething* was a show on ABC in the eighties!! It was the first ‘*niche*’ show!! In other words, ya’ had to appeal to the *lowest common denominator*—LCD—before then!! We have a public trust... *an’ it’s those stations!!!* The FCC—”

“You work your way around a *lot* of federal guidelines in crunchtime!!! Why do I feel like I’m hearin’ a prepared speech!?!?” Sam continued to scan Mort’s facial muscles and sweat beads on his brow.

“*The FCC required us to do a lot, back then... and we had more respect for the system!!*” Mort cruised along Robertson and was satisfied with the weather.

“*But the monopolies!!*” Sam granted. “You mentioned that regulations were lax and fewer owners could operate *more* markets!!!”

“Dog eat dog, lady!!!” Mort said. He was alarmed by his candor. “When ya’ know you’re next on the *CHOPPIN’ BLOCK...*”

“So it’s *NOT* a gimmick!!” Max Bell asked. “You’re goin’ to put me on every bus bench to remain in the cheap!!” Max chuckled. “I’ve gotta head to a mall every time I believe our ratings are goin’ down!!”

“No,” Mort said. “Not that easy!! And we have to sign releases!! I mean, if you agree, you forfeit the *MyDemigod* money—the jackpots offered by sponsors—and you agree to donate that to charity on behalf of *Channel Eight*... but the money’s goin’ to come *back* to you ‘cause of *fame*!!”

“It’s theoretical, I’d like to talk to Tricia ‘bout it, but *YA’ GOT A DEAL!!*” Max extended his hand forward. Mort shook it feebly to remain focused on the road. “A verbal agreement is good for a *year* in this state... an’ we have a witness with *Samantha*!!”

“*This is good!!*” Samantha was used to having Rodan around as a cameraman (she hadn’t enjoyed photography since high school) but she zipped out a disposable *Kodak* from her purse and snapped Rodan. “This is for our home news page!!!”

“I’m goin’ to tell you somethin’ *ONCE!!*” Mort was stopped at a red light, turned around to look at Max, then said, “*ERR ON THE SIDE OF FASCINATION!!*” Samantha pointed forward. The light changed. Mortimer accelerated, then said, “In business, ya’ err on the side of *CAUTION!!* Except for your assignments with Tricia, you say anything, *do anything*, BE ANYTHING!!”

“*Randy of the Redwoods* is my guide?!” Max asked.

“You be *Pee Wee Herman* if ya’ want!!” Mort shook his head. “You and Tricia are *impulsive*, still!! Two exceptions: debriefing at the station, and *emergencies*!!”

“*Newton Minow* is my commander!!” Max proclaimed.

“Huh?!” Mort asked.

“If I say that Newton Minow—he’s *the one that said that television is a vaste wasteland in front of the US CONGRESS*... back in the sixties...”

“*National Association of Broadcasters*,” Mort inserted. “Not *CONGRESS!!*”

“Yeah, well... if I say that he’s my commander on television or my *MyDemigod* then it means that something’s goin’ awry... *something’s screwy*!!”

“*You guys sound like you’re about to grab some strap-ons from underneath that chest there!!*” Sam offered. She blushed. “You men are *wackos*!!”

“*Safe word*,” Mortimer acknowledged. “You’re right, *Sam*, but he’s right!!”

“My left boobie is bigger than my right!!” Sam volunteered. “It’s not true... *but that’s my ‘safe statement’!!*”

“Walter Chronkite never made any sense!!” Mort uttered.

“*What?*!” Max asked. “You *looove* that cat!!”

“*No!!* If I say that, it means to go back to normal mode at the station again!!” Mortimer Wishum felt better than he had felt in months. “I’m feelin’ *GOOOOOOD!!*”

“Gotcha!!” Max said. “Bascially, when we get bounced out of competition, *I’ll hear that!!*”

Sam Johnson felt delight as well. She never really liked *Channel Eight*. It was a last resort—a *safety net*—but she was starting to feel like a person—a *person of worth and interest*.

The Sun shone brightly above. It was good to be in California.

\* \* \*

Daniel Abel held his glass of iced tea in his right hand. In his left, he set down a tube of suntan oil. He adjusted an umbrella as soon as he could and he looked to his left where Jasmine Zuniga oozed under the Florida Sun. Daniel was not sure if she had dozed and chanced conversation. “This should be the end,” he said in her direction. He watched her lazily turn her head toward him. He could not tell whether or not her eyes were opened underneath her large sunglasses. “Three terms!! That’s what I figured it’d take!! I mean, ya’ run for office for a reason... an’ though I *believe* in helpin’ the poor an’ needy...”

“Ya’ *had personal reasons!!*” Jasmine said. “Ya’ had enemies ya’ had to get away!!”

“The pen’s mightier than the sword!!” Daniel replied. “Many of my legislative pieces’ve backed off *leagues* of people I didn’t want around!!” He sipped from his tea and watched Jasmine remove her glasses. He admired the look in her eyes. She was paying attention. “With each election, I had a foe!! I could’ve *shot* my opponents, but that’s for *neanderthals!!!* I chose to mark off a few people!!! Life’s like that!! No matter what ya’ do, there’s always someone there that hate’s ya’!! No matter how hard ya’ try!!! An’ with each election, I chose ‘buffer systems’!! In other words, if it was the *Gazette* that’d supported my former opponent, I would write *them* off... but secretly so I didn’t look paranoid an’ out to kill *everyone!!*”

“*Neanderthals* wouldn’t shoot each other ‘cause they didn’t have guns back then!!” Jasmine noted.

“*Yeah!!*” Daniel said and smiled. “Glad you’re listenin’!! But that girl—the one on the airplane—she had the confidence to speak to us like adults!!”

“I’ve watched weird things on *YOUTUBE*, an’ weirder things since *MyDemigod* has become stronger!!” She laughed. “There’s a fourteen-year-old banjo player from Savannah, Georgia whom has well over a million views for a few of ‘er videos!! I like the girl!! An’ it’s better than the crap they used to play on MTV2!!! I mean, this girl’s doin’ it for free, she’s obviously on the cheap... an’ I *like ‘er better than...* let’s say... *Carrie Underwood!!*”

“*Yeah!!*” He turned around and looked at their hotel. He thought to jog in to return a couple of beverages. He waited. He watched kids splash in the water. “Those days are almost over... *if they’ve not already passed me...* an’ I missed it somehow!!”

The pool looked nice to Jasmine. “Isn’t there a waitress that asks for drink orders out here?!”

“I’d say the *synchronicity* swelled in the late nineties!! ‘Synchronicity’... by the way was a great album in 1983, I believe... though it never reached number one... ‘cause of ‘*Thriller*’!! But I’m talkin’ ‘bout society bein’ in synch with each other through *media*!!! I mean, in the days of books an’ radio, ya’ had many choices!! Then, as television engulfed mainstream society’s mental images an’ ideas, ya’ had a near-monopolization!! Three networks—*NBC*, *ABC*, an’ *CBS*—coverin’ the same stories!! An’ we all knew what was happenin’ on *Cheers*!! We knew *ABC*’s Tuesday night lineup of *Who’s The Boss?*, *Growing Pains*, an’ *Moonlighting*!! We gave a crap about what was happenin’ between *Luke and Laura*... even though it was fiction!!! An’ Fox came along, cable expanded, the internet came into being... an’ *DirecTV* was every frickin’ place!!” He shook his head, nearly in unexpected anger. “There it went out the window again!?”

“*But you said late nineties!*” Jasmine wondered. “Fox was around in the late eighties, an’ cable was there too!!?”

“*Yeah!!!* But the patterns an’ habits didn’t break!?” Daniel wiped his forehead with a small towel. “You didn’t challenge ‘*The Big Three*’ to save your LIFE!!! *Sixty Minutes* would still cut ya’ up!!!”

“Now, *bloggers* can save you!?!? Is that what you’re sayin’!?!?” Jasmine grabbed the suntan oil that Daniel had set down earlier and started to spread doses on her face.

“*I’m not sure what I’m sayin’!*” An inner voice told Daniel not to show doubt. It was the voice from his debate coach from college. *Don’t show doubt, Daniel... Not to anyone!!* Daniel shut the voice up. “That kid!!! She could have two hundred thousand viewers at home an’ I’d not know ‘bout it!!!” He watched Jasmine put oil on her nose and thought it looked funny. He chuckled at the site. “And now I do everything *opposite* of what I’m supposed to... an’ I’m *applauded* for it!!! As we speak, the *Post* is puttin’ their words in *my* mouth!!!”

“I’m glad you realize that things’ve changed!?” Jasmine thought about Blagojevich as an early-morning radio talk show host. “*They asked Blago about his hair more than anything else!*”

“*The hair!*” Daniel reached for the tube of suntan oil. “Yes!!! That’s when I decided on this trip!!!” He spread oil on his belly. “Opposite!! Strange, but things got better for me when I went against conventional wisdom from *yesteryear!*”

“I’m ready to go in for a drink!?” Jasmine said. “I’m hungry, *too!*”

“Yes!!! Eat!!!! We’ll eat... an’ when I have my vacation later this summer, ya’ better be ready to work!!! We’ll be here at poolside with stacks of office papers!?”

“‘Cause the press is goin’ to follow you *then*... an’ not now!!!” Jasmine got up. “You’re so good at... *adjustments!*”

\* \* \*



When Zach, Zane, Tricia, and Rodan reached *Z And Z* headquarters, squad cars were dispersing in the area. Zach figured that a nearby warehouse had been broken in to. Zane wondered if they suspected his company of holding too much pot. Tricia and Rodan, being involved in daily news casts, hardly felt emotional swells. Tricia volunteered, “I have *a lot* of family members that live in this area!!” She became embarrassed. “I miscarried Max Bell’s child before becomin’ promoted to field reporter!!” She watched the cops drive away. “We could visit relatives if you really want to!!”

“*They got the weed!!*” Zane rumbled. “I know they got our *WEEEEEED!!!*”

“Nah!!” Zach supposed. “I don’t even think they came from *OUR PLACE!!*”

“Yeah, *right!!*” Zane frowned then turned toward Tricia. “You can design a couple of programs when we get inside!!”

“You an’ Max are *datin’?!?*” Rodan mused. “I was listenin’ to your story!!”

The four exited Zane’s automobile and headed inside. “Alright!! California took a hundred days to secure a budget this year!! Taxes went up last month in April!! Schwarzenegger was seen in Hawaii a couple of weeks after that... *mess!!!* I don’t mind that... but then we had *state employees* here in California stayin’ at thirteen-hundred-dollar-per night *luxury* hotels for conferences!! An’ I think the *STATE* footed the bill for *Backstreet Boys* concerts... an’ some other stuff!!” Tricia tried to calm down. “*Blago* went from villian to morning radio host... an’ I stopped payin’ attention to feeds on *that one!!!* Rodan covered the mayor of DC, *Daniel Abel*... an’ I just was texted that he’s been spotted in Miami on vacation!!! What the fuck’s goin’ *OOOON!?*”

“*No one’s said a word about AIG!!* I’m surprised!!” Rodan looked around. He expected laughter but only received subtle smiles. “It was N Synch or Justin Timberlake, by the way... *Tricia!!* About the concert those employees watched...” Rodan watched Zane power up four computers in succession. “I have an anecdote... *while they prepare the network!!*” Rodan cleared his throat. “The Missing Persons were a hot act during the eighties!! ‘Words’ and ‘Destination Unknown’ are a couple of their songs!! Don’t ask how I started *liking* that band—I mean, it’s eighties *fluff*, right?!—but I liked Falco, *too!!* German guys!! ‘Der Kommisar’!!! That tune!!!”

“And ‘Amedeus’!!!” Tricia added with glee. “*Rock me AMEDEUS!!!*”

“Yeah... But in this *image culture* of ours... *SO-CALLED*... ya’ would think that the Missing Persons would have the great retro MySpace area, *right?!?* Sexy lady singer!! I mean, you can age... *but your image doesn’t*... an’ Elizabeth Taylor’s an example of it!! But this Falco group had the goin’ site!!”

“It’s weird!!” Tricia said. “We still have people in our news room that don’t have *MySpace* or *Facebook*... let alone *MyDemigod!!!*” She sighed. “They can get in front of a television camera in front of millions of people in the greater Los Angeles area... *but they’re afraid of cyberpredators!!*”

“*Crazy!!*” Rodan conceded.

Zane looked up from his work. He had been busy hooking up additional monitors for Rodan and Tricia. “We might be the *Penguin’s* of our era!!” He saw surprise in Rodan’s face. “Penguin’s was...”

“I *know* what Penguin’s was!?” He looked Tricia. “*Do you like frozen yogurt?!*”

“Starbucks!?” Zane cried. “I thought they were headed down the same path... *but they did somethin’ different!?!?*”

“I thought Britney Spears was goin’ to be another Debbie Gibson,” Tricia confessed. “*She lasted longer than I thought she might!?!?*”

“Alright, *IDIOTS!?!?*” Zach cut in. “You guys are headin’ in the wrong direction!! It was our place!?” He showed his laptop screen to Tricia. “The cops were here investigating a ‘disturbance’!! I guess they didn’t think to question us... *but the report is that vandals were seen along our street!?!?*” He paused. “I’m not afraid about *THAT*... but this is why we attained the LIMELIGHT so quick!! On the SECOND response... *most the time!!* Do you realize some of our competitors’re still workin’ with focus groups an’ waitin’ for feedback which takes weeks or months to process?!?!?” He saw admiration in Trish’s eyes. “We’re goin’ to mark up the *police*, now!! Who would’ve thought we would’ve done *THAT?!*?”

“*Give ‘em twelve extra points*, or so?!” Zane asked. “The ‘DANGER POSITIONS’ we discussed... like firefightin’!?!? Makes sense!! To be a demigod, ya’ve gotta be numb to fear!!! An’ it’s goo *PR* at this juncture!?”

Zach shook his head in disbelief. “This is the other reason we’re doin’ *well!!* We’re on the same page half the time... *an’ it’s scary!?!?*”

The four ordered from a Chinese delivery. That afternoon, MyDemigod reached its ‘CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS’ phase. Tricia was able to insert variables an’ give solid advice about whom would be positioned over others as people vied and jockeyed for social poll position status in the coming months.

## SECTION 6: GONE

Tears poured down Zane's eyes. *Stoned*. He had smoked five joints and Zach had only smoked half a joint, *tops*. "Listen to it again, PLEASE!!!" Zane pointed the remote at the stereo. "Love, Hate, Love" by Alice In Chains played. "The bass line, ya' fuckin' faggot!!!" he yelled at Zach. "LISTEN!!!" He pointed the remote again. This time, Olivia Newton-John's "A Little More Love" played. "Listen to the bass line, ya' fuckin' DICK!!!"

"Is it imperative?!" Zach asked.

"You bitch!!! If I can't get ya' to see that it's the SAME SONG, I can't get ya' to see that *TRICIA* knows more about our company than we do!!!" The song played.

"He thinks you can see the *forest*," Zach told Tricia. "He thinks we're trees!!!"

"Bitch!!!" Zane listened to the song. "THEY ARE COMMUNICATING!! Alice In Chains is sayin' that they like Olivia... but they have some pretty-boy producer that wants *metal*!! That's what sold back then!!!" The song continued. "If we can't be that tight, we're goin' to be bumped out of our own site in the *FIRST ROUND*!! Ya' have to read your lineman's thoughts!!!"

"*Lineman*?!" Zach asked. "Are we in music or sports?!"

Zane got up from his couch and threw cheesy chips into the air. "You better listen to this BITCH!!!" he said to Zach. "I am no good to you!!! I AM THE FLY!!!"

"Yes, yes!!!" Zach said to Zane. "I knew this day would come... I just thought it'd happen later than sooner.... like in *December*!!!"

"I'm ready to knock out anyone that..." Zane started to say. He turned to Tricia. "They're after us, you know?! It's not paranoia!! We have their fuckin' files *right here*!! I mean, a few talk about how they're goin' to cram shit down my THROAT!! But I don't care!!!" Tricia seemed to hold mild interest. "Mister Burns, you see...?!"

"No *SIMPSONS* analogies!!!" Zach yelled. He threw a Capri Sun at Zane. "Please!!!"

"Mister Burns was *SOOO* fucked up—he had every disease, apparently—that all his sicknesses cancelled one other out!!!" Zane explained. He was solemn.

"*That's not the way it went*!!!" Zach tried to correct his wavering chum. "They couldn't get through the *DOOOOOR*!!!!!"

*Knock, knock, knock.*

Just then, the door to *Z And Z Enterprises* produced sounds.

"Premonition!!!" Zane screamed. "I knew I was psychic in *SOOOOO* many ways!!!"

Rodan opened the door, taking no heed to the police investigation earlier in the day. Five armed men stormed in. Their faces were masked except for their eyes. *Germans*, Rodan thought. Four of the men had blue eyes. The first took Tricia by the neck. He spoke to Zane Wilson. "We have cookies!! We have money!!!" He

kissed Tricia's neck after pulling part of his mask down. "You will program us something that will erase our taxes, police records, and everythin' else we have to do with this fuckin' *government!!*"

Zane ran to the far wall. He grabbed his rain coat. "Bitch!! You will not be disappointed with my WOOORK!!" he slurred to the head man. "You will be more squeaky clean than the last president when I get through with your file!!" He yelled at Zach, "*Bitch!!* This man has INITIATIVE!! Ya' will learn that, someday... or ya' will be DEAD!!!"

Tricia shook her head. Secretly, she admired the smell of marijuana residue in the place. She disliked herself for it.

\* \* \*

Max Bell arrived to the *Channel Eight* news cafeteria and was greeted with a surprise. It had been a busy day. Some of the posters had already been made and placed around various parts of the lot. He saw himself from the outside and felt eerie. The news he received from the cafeteria was eerie. Tricia was kidnapped. Zane Wilson and Zach Rouss were on their way with her and a handful of terrorists to an unspecified place into international waters off of the California coast upwards around Frisco. Rodan was with them. Max took it in and felt numb.

\* \* \*

"Hessians!! Motherfucker!!!" Rodan wiped his brow. He sat on a coarse potato sack in the dampy cabin of a ninety-foot yacht. "*Die Hard!!* Ever since I watched DIE HARD... I figured this *wouldn't* happen!!!"

"It's not a *national* thing, per se," the largest of the thugs explained. "Every now an' then, we get these feelings like we *just can't make it!!*" A beautiful blonde was next to him. She didn't participate as part of the suburban warehouse heist. She waited at the dock for the group. "Japanese've bought so much in this *STATE...* an' our children're treated like dogshit in the schools!! It's more than reverse discrimination!!!"

The lady spoke. "He is *HANS!!*" Her eyes hypnotized Rodan. She touched his leg. "I am Gretel!!" Rodan became aroused. "We are not here to *kill you...* but we will kill you if things go wrong!!!"

Hans stated, "There are three degrees to our mission!! Full success means we go back to our homes unscathed!! This includes a six-month leave from America—a *trip to Australia an' New Zealand!!* The second degree is that you cannot help us!!! Shot!! No less than one of you will be *SHOT!!*" He walked toward the compartment's stair. "The lowest level is that we get busted!! ALL of yo will be executed... an' the remainder of my *chums...* will fight for our lives in what may be... *Let's say we'll go out like shootin' stars!!*"

Tricia was scared. She cried in the corner.

Rodan mustered courage and calm, “You like us!!! Deep down, you want us to win!! I can tell that!!”

“Contrary to most of your cinematic features,” Hans agreed, “robbers are not evil!! Not in my belief!! We have back stories!! If ya’ took time to know us, ya’ would agree with *nearly* all of our logic!!” He watched news events on a portable television. “*Rogues*—that’s what they’re describin’ us as on television!! But I call us *SURVIVORS!!*”

“*Bro...* I’m not that far out of *COLLEGE!!* I remember what it’s like to hate the government!!” Rodan offered. “The domino of bank failings!! The bailout of billionaires!! The auto industry that couldn’t compete in its home butterritory!!! ‘THE LAND OF OPPORTUNITY’!! An’ the inventor of the car no longer the *big whip!!*”

“*Yes*, your girlfriend is cryin’ over there!!” Hans walked to the cabin’s minifridge and produced a few bottles of *Kölsch*. He poured one into a plastic cup, walked over to Tricia and handed it to her... then did the same for Rodan. “This is the finest beer *ANYWHERE!!* In Germany, ya’ can drink it warm an’ no one would care!!”

“You think I’ll be ‘the hero’... *right?!?*” Rodan asked. “I’m goin’ to attack you, do some judo, shoot half the boat, then swim off to safety... *with her on my back!!!*” He drank. He admired the flavor. He looked to Tricia. She drank as well.

“You thought *ARABS* were the ones that’d catch ya’, *huh?!?*” Hans asked. “I mean, that’d be the obvious one, *right?!?*” Hans waited for an answer, but felt uncomfortable with silence. “*You...*”

“We’re television reporters in *LA*,” Rodan finally told Hans. “We put irrational fears into the public ‘cause they want to *hear* them!! I’d like to tell ‘em about you... *an’ ten other terrorist groups that aren’t highly suspicious at this point*—Russians an’ Chinese *still* have widely developed mafia clicks in the *SOUTHLAND*—but people listen to what they want to *HEAR!!* Does no good!!”

“Ah!!” Hans said. “So we have a workin’ relationship!!” He looked to Gretel. “Show him the transmitter!!” She pulled her black sleeve down a few inches and showed Rodan what looked like a wrist watch. “We won’t lose each other ‘cause of that device!!” He slowly walked to Rodan. He handed Rodan his *Thirty-eight special with silencer*.

Rodan looked across the room to Gretel. She held a shotgun with her right hand, but it was not pointed at Tricia nor Rodan.

“*Shoot...* if you want to be a hero... or if you’re so suicidal that ya’ think ya’ can get past *US ALL!!*” Hans commanded. “We will have a country in America... *when we return!!* Or we won’t return at *ALL!!*” Hans gradually opened his palms to Rodan. *Sweaty*, but not anything more. “Give back the gun!!” Rodan handed the firearm back. “That was a game of *TRUST* we just played!!”

“*Yes, sir!!*” Rodan uttered in confusion. “I went through fraternity initiation which felt like that!!” He looked to Tricia. “You know I wasn’t goin’ to shoot you... *unless I’m insane!!*” He looked to the cabin’s ceiling. “You want me thinkin’ at night that we’re in the *SAME BOAT!!* Pun?! Not sure if I intended the pun, here... ‘*cause I’m nervous!!!*”

“The goal is to return you to Canada!?” Hans divulged to Rodan. “You take care of our computer networks... *an’ we put you in safety in British Columbia!!* Hans an’ Gretel?! You won’t know if these’re assumed names when all’s said an’ done!!?”

*Hey bitch, I’m goin’ to kick your ass,* Tricia thought. Her anger was directed at Gretel.

“We have one final thing!! Greg Brady—*yes we are fanatics of American sticoms where I come from!!*—gave a playbook to a rival!! Football!! The Berlin Thunder had *such* a good year last year!! I am a fan, now!! But the rival did not believe it was *intentional*—the givin’ of the playbook!?” Hans turned toward Rodan, opened his weapon’s chamber, and verified that real bullets were in the gun. “We are letting you know our intentions so you don’t *goof up* in crunch time!! Greg’s rival did not believe him—*an anecdote*, keep in mind!!—an’ was ploughed on the FIELD!!” Hans suddenly felt calm, “We have ya’ linked to *X* number of people on the Facebook—trust me on that—an’ we have murders lined up!! If we don’t hit our highest goals, we’re goin’ to track your friends in to banks, *PURPOSELY* botch robberies... in order to disguise HITS!?” Hans rubbed Rodan on the head. “*Maslow*, brother!! If our food an’ shelter weren’t threatened... you’d have it easier!?” He walked to Gretel, kissed her on the lips, then turned to Tricia. “Dot your i’s... *CROSS YOUR T’S*... You won’t...”

“I’m behind you, *broooooow!!*” Tricia quivered when she spoke.

“Make out, if ya’ want!?” Hans suggested to Rodan. “We’re lockin’ this cabin behind us!! No noise!! Nothin’ unnecessary!! I’m goin’ to bone my lover, now!!”

Gretel winked at Tricia as she headed toward the stairs. Hans watched her ascend and chuckled.

\* \* \*

It was business as usual at *Channel Eight* with one exception: They didn’t report Rodan and Tricia as kidnapped victims. Late at night, posters were being prepared. Guests were being booked. Promos were being articulated and conceptualized. Mort Wishum could have included a “breaking news flash” in the eleven o’ clock telecast that part of his crew was reportedly abducted. That might have raised fear. It might have complicated things. It *might* have jeopardized Rodan’s and Tricia’s lives. As it was, the “Max of the Redwoods” campaign went on as if nothing had happened to anyone close to the news team. The name of the promotion would be changed to suite *Channel Eight*’s viewers, but the tentative start seemed satisfactory enough. Mort knew he would have to inform other stations about what was happening in his own studio. After all, Zane Wilson and Zach Rouss were with his young employees. Mort decided to “buy time” by waiting until eleven thirty-five when the last of the local networks ceased to report local happenings to in the greater Los Angeles area. To dampen the misfortune, he planned to challenge each station to present its own *MyDemigod* entry—someone each station would rally around. Mortimer Wishum felt nervous... but he pulled everything off smoothly before the strike of midnight.

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“Few of you will ‘connect the dots’ any more!! I admire you!!” A large brute stood behind Zane. “You’ll divert funds to our account in Australia... you’ll set us up something *like* what you have in America in regards to database information on ‘regular citizens’... an’ you’ll even make a program which challenges our intellect in the form of a *game*!!” The large man smiled. One tooth was missing from his top teeth on the left side. “I am impressed!!”

“*Rex*,” Zane turned to look at the giant. Zane Wilson felt overly personable with large people due to cooperating well with jocks back when he attended college. “The game is meant to keep ya’ sharp with your *FINANCES*!! In a lot of ways, it’s more than a game ‘cause it reflects real dollar amounts!!”

The man rubbed Zane’s hair. “It’s the tip of the iceberg, you know?!” He rubbed sweat from his forehead. Their ship was well on it’s way to Vacouver, British Columbia where they would board a flight to an unspecified Pacific island. The brutes were good with information exchange, but refused to lay out the “grand plan” for concern of haphazard fortunes. “It feels just like *Nine Eleven* all over again!!” Rex’s eyes rolled back a bit as he went into reflective nostalgia. “You were the LONE *SUPERPOWER*!! Wow, what a dumb thing!! To set yourself off as such a TARGET!! You could’ve dubbed yourself as THE GREAT *BREADBASKET*... or somethin’!! But no, ya’ wanted to emphasize your *MILITARY*!! An’ ya’ still had a chance after the TOWERS fell!! But ya’ fucked the institution that could’ve helped ya’—*the one ya’ paid SO MUCH in to an’ was headquartered in New York CITY*!!”

“The United Nations?!” Zane asked. He knew the answer. Presenting the question was merely a formality to show he was listening. Besides, he wasn’t sure that he agreed with what Rex was getting at.

“Yeah!! The United Nations!! Keep in mind the second word in the identification!! ‘NATION’... *sucker*!! We all believed in NATIONS!!” Rex wanted to cry and held his brow. “I am *EUROPEAN* an’ we do not gloss over the fact that Britain preceded the idea of nations!! The MESOPOTAMIANS, the *SLAVS*, the ROMANS... the *SAXONS*... the PRUSSIANS... an’ everyone else!!” Rex’s brief urge to weep passed. “We are a people, an’ charters don’t do a lot to turn us on one another in the *LONG RUN*!! If ya’ didn’t challenge the world as ‘THE GREATEST NATION’... we would’ve had no reason to turn back to our *old ways*!! Maps don’t mean a fuckin’ thing, *brother*!!” Rex pointed to an atlas near Zane. “That fuckin’ thing is good for navigation, but the terms on the paper’re gonna be outdated in a few years!!”

“The world versus the *US*?!” Zane asked. “I help you ‘cause I hate authority!!” He thought about the administrators that thumbed their noses at him in Claremont. “I know your problems... *but it’s not fair*!! I didn’t vote for the last dickhead who just left office!!! Why do I have to forfeit my *NATION*!?!?”

“Brother,” Rex calmed Zane by putting his huge hands on Zane’s shoulders and gently rubbed for a few

seconds. “This is part of *history*!! The Greeks thought they’d be the best forever!! The Romans!! The Spanish, the British... *now* YOU!!!”

“It’s like living with a family member with cancer, *ya’ know?!*” Zane described to Rex. “The city governments!!! The STATE governments!!! Even the federal ones!!” Zane shook his head and turned back to the computer he had been working on. “They’re goin’ to die... *an’ I know it!!* They call ya’ crazy if ya’ try to TALK TO ‘EM!! Ya’ have to be a rubber stamper just to get *next* to ‘em!!”

“I remember America, *brother!!*” Rex said to Zane. He couldn’t believe there was no rage against his hostage. He had watched his share of American movies in his childhood. Things weren’t supposed to feel this smooth. “You had *zest!!* You were *right* a good deal of the time!! The moon launch made EVERYONE feel good... an’ ya’ fed people durin’ the sixties before Vietnam!! I think the *Peace Corps* is still goin’, right?!”

“They make ya’ swear against *communism*, I understand!! Had a couple of guys from school check in to it!!” Zane punched keys.

“It’s not so bad, *man!!*” Rex looked over Zane’s head and tried to comprehend the numbers being punched on to the screen. “In a world of nations, *you’re the bully!!* You have your way with nearly *anyone!!* In a world of humanity, reason, and *enlightenment*... we can take back our place on this planet!!” Rex watched Zane turn around again. “You can *be* with us... an’ we can help *EACH OTHER!!*”

“I’m a human before I’m an American, *sir!!*” Zane smiled. “As long as you don’t start pokin’ an’ proddin’ Tricia, ya’ don’t have to worry about me!! Feed the girl... *an’ I’m happy!!*”

“You’re at the cusp of *treason*, little fellow!!” Rex laughed.

“No!! I’m not!! If you’re correct—if *these pirate actions’re the tip of the iceberg!!*—there’ll be no nation by which I stand against when all is said an’ done!!” Zane wanted to explode with a madman’s cackle but held it. “If you’re wrong, I have a legitamate case of ‘duress’!!! Not sure that people give a crap any more... *but it’s still on the books as a defense!!*”

“*You’re a good egg!!*” Rex submitted. “We’ll keep ya’ aroun’ for a *WHILE!!*”

\* \* \*

Three days after the San José kidnappings, Max sat on a bus bench across from the TV Guide building on Hollywood Boulevard. His picture was sprawled behind him. He looked around. He almost expected to be approached for an autograph—*maybe a few*. He thought about Tricia. There was nothing he could do. *I want to bone ‘er*, he thought. He looked in to the sky and admired the California shine. He was due to check in to work in a half hour. Mort directed him to be late... *if need be*. He would have to show pictures from his cell phone of fans. He was in a persona which was supposed to elevate the *Channel Eight* news to a higher level. They wanted to be



more *personable*. He thought about actresses he had seen on television. *Contrived*, he thought. *The script writers in this town are givin' them expectations on how to act OUTSIDE of their lots... an' I bet when they get inside of their studios, everythin' is method drama—they behave naturally but pretend it's actin'!!! There're more cameras on the OUTSIDE, now!!! That's why!!! Everythin' out here is an ACT!!!*

A swarm of paparazzi circled around a person or two across the street. Max wondered who it was. He wondered if the cameras would head his way.

*Whoever it is over there... I bet she was ordered by her studio to show up over here... an' I bet there's a certain drama she's supposed to play out in front of the flashes an' questions!!*

Max headed to work in a half hour. He didn't think much of Tricia when he showed up. For some reason, he thought she was doing alright.

\* \* \*

The kidnappers and the four captives showed up to New Zealand the same evening that Max thought about his potential fame on the bus bench which presented his picture. Rex spoke to the group. All sat on rusty metal fold-up chairs in a mildewy warehouse. “Mayor Daniel Abel from Washington, DC called me—*he called our people, I should say*—an’ offered his services to try to attain ‘*Rodan and the group*’... as he said it... an’ he said something *really* peculiar to me!!”

“What was that, *sir?*” Zane asked. His clothes were a light brown from heavy dust over the days. Their yaught traveled to Vancouver where they promptly boarded a private jet. There was no change of clothes, yet. Zane raised his hand as if he was in a high school class room. “*You don't mind questions, of course?!*”

“No!!” Rex looked startled due to the interruption. “*Questions are good...* but games are NOT!! Make sure ya’ ask GOOD questions... or you’ll be shut out of the plans!!” He clapped his hands twice to gain the attention of Gretel whom seemed to be mentally adrift. “*DEFECT, lady!!*” He looked at Gretel once she refocused her thoughts. “He was no doubt humoring me hoping we don’t *KILL* this cameraman whom he grew fond of... *for some reason...* but there was a *TINGE* of seriousness!!”

“*Blagojevic* is part of an upcomin’ television series,” Gretel contributed. ““*GET ME OUT OF THE FUCKING COUNTRY*”... or somethin’ like that!! But the FBI won’t let ‘im leave ‘cause they’re goin’ to send him down the river for illegal wire taps an’ all which thing!!”

Gretel radiated with a sexy glow in Rex’s eyes. “Can you explain to *Rodan* that the World Bank and IMF have certain politicians *EAR MARKED?!* He’s a news guy!! He ought to know what’s goin’ on!!”

“The *Somalian NAVY* apprehended a couple of your vessels because...” Gretel paused, looked to Rodan, then to Zane. She got up from her seat and joined Rex in the front of the room. “*You are officially a ROGUE*

NATION!!”

Zane said, “*FUCK THAT!!*” He cried. “I pay taxes!!”

“We are European, lad!!” She walked to Zane, put her right hand on his left shoulder. “You are *ONE OF US!!* Genetically, you are no different than me!! Ideologically, ya’ have shown enough *RESISTENCE* to you country that we can trust you!!”

“Do you know what *THE INQUISITIONS* are, Zane... BOY?!!” Rex demanded from the front.

“*The MOORS!!* Spain!! The Catholic Church became corrupt—*maybe too weak*—an’...” He stopped when he saw Rex become red and angry.

“The Inquisitions are still goin’ on!! Waterboarding, *you stupid moron!!*” Rex pounded a brittle wooden table which had acted as a podium. “*Tithing?!* What do you think of forced tithing and paying for your sins?!”

“*Wrong!!* Of course!!” Zane let a tear drop fall past his cheek without wiping. Somehow, he started to feel courageous after it was gone.

“What are your federal taxes and outlandish campaign contributions!! YOU HAVE RECREATED THE FUCKN’ *CATHOLIC CHURCH OF THE MIDDLE AGES!!*”

“Okay!! Let me work with you!! I don’t like religion... *an’ I don’t like authority in general!!*” Zane stood up. He became serious, “Annihilation!! You guys are part of Sergeant Renkter’s *plan*, aren’t YOU?!!! That fucker said that if the United Nations ceased to exist, *we would have to overthrow the United States!!*” He walked to Rex. He turned toward the crowd. “*Disney!!* It started with Disney, guys!!”

Zane Wilson spoke for nearly forty-five minutes. Half of his speech was a paraphrase of what George Ulysses Renkter said during a relatively unsuccessful presidential campaign... *at least in terms of poll numbers*. He talked about mind control problems. He spoke about hidden agendas. He interjected ‘inevitability’ of certain programs running their courses. He spoke of logic, and he spoke of third world countries closing the gap technologically. He alluded to corruption, and he intertwined speculations from ‘*zany professors*’ he had come across. He conceded that he never thought it would happen—a *great world change*—but contrarily admitted that he could never phathom how such a charade could continue indefinitely. He ended by saying, “I salute you all as humans... *and if you can tell me that I’m George Washington fighting the British, I’ll be happy!!* If I’m Jesus Christ fighting SCRIBES, I am happy!! If I am Martin Luther givin’ *SOCIETY* somethin’ new an’ vital... *GIVE ME A CHANCE!!*”

Zane Wilson was applauded, but it was dampened quickly. “*To the victor of war, goes the spoils!!*” Rex reminded everyone. “If *WE THE PEOPLE OF THE NON-UNITED-STATES* are the dominant faction *COLLECTIVELY*... then we must not return until the corruption is cleaned up!! That might take fifteen years!! The US has been humbled by looks of disdain from *everyone* in nearly every corner of the globe!! They may give in!!! If they don’t... *WE CAN’T TALK TO THEM!!* We must let them suffocate from the absence of LOVE!!”

For the next half hour, there was various discussion and chatter about various issues. The brunt of their

agenda was spilled out. They made a pact with one another. Slowly, Zane Wilson began to take to them. He thought about *Boxing Helena* and the strange phenomenon of falling in love with captors. He hoped he would not have future extreme mental problems from all of the radial shifts of philosophy and identity he experienced from minute to minute and hour to hour.

## SECTION 7: THE FIGHT

“*Dreams unwind... LOVE’S A STATE OF MIND!!*” Brutus yelled as the group walked along a dirt path. Halfmoon Bay was a fifteen-minute walk away. They were now on the southernmost island of New Zealand. Their first couple of weeks were in a hut across the straight near Bluff. “Your country is like that, ya’ know!?! You *laughed* when I stated that the Sun never sets on the British Empire!!!”

Brutus was the largest of the group. Until the prior week, he had been the most quiet. “I understand well,” Rodan responded. He was winded. They had been on foot for forty-five minutes already. “There’re pockets in America where it feels *real*—nationalism, I mean!! You talk of the *Commonwealth of Nations* an’ I laugh!! I mean, it doesn’t effect me directly!!”

“You don’t know that the Commonwealth suffocated your country!! You’ve been away from the USA for a month an’ you’ve said you could already feel the difference!!”

“Okay, *bro!!*” Rodan turned and faced Brutus. “You want to get real?! I stand five-eleven an’ you’re six-four—*well over two meters!!* You step in that plain over there in the name of philosophy!! All nationalism out the door!! You threaten my honor by dissolving my nation from my brain!! I’ll kick your ass with *KARATE* if everyone steps back!! Put down your guns!!” Sweat dripped from Brutus’ forehead... then he shook his head no. Rodan smiled. “My plight is not the same one as those white kids from the *Claremont* schools!!” Zach turned around. “They’re *pussies!!*” Rodan said to Brutus. Brutus smiled. Rodan continued, “My guys—*my parents*—ran from Japan after World War II... an’ the United States has been good to me an’ *them!!* Sony, Toyota, Yamaha... *You name it!!* The United States let us in with open arms!!” He hesitated. “*But these kids...*”

Zach seemed dumbfounded. Zane spoke on his behalf, “*This guy is the product of our generation!! Grunge!!* When I was a baby, everyone was apathetic!! No one liked *ANYTHING!!*”

“I would like the United States if they stopped *LYING!!*” Zach finally said. The group started walking toward *Halfmoon Bay* again. “They shouldn’t preach about ‘due process’ and not deliver!!” Zach said. He looked over at Tricia. There was something on her face. It wasn’t fear and it wasn’t hope. There was a mystery in her brow as if she was contemplating an unsolvable conundrum. “If I ever get back to that place... *I’m not sure I’m going to care about DC again!!*”

Every now and then, the group would watch television together. A New York Times reporter had escaped from Taliban captivity in Afghanistan a couple of weeks before. No one had known he was gone. The State Department declared that it would have jeopardized his safety. Mexican drug cartels were kidnapping Americans in California... *but there was denial that it was going on*. Belgians were pirated not long after the coups off the shores of Somalia. Tricia Galley waited for her name to be mentioned from *Channel Eight News* while watching satellite transmissions. Instead, she watch Max Bell transform into one of *MyDemigod’s* stronger characters. The promos were clean and the often featured b-list celebrities. Jealousy fluttered in her belly. She missed *Channel Eight*. She

missed Max. She didn't believe her life could ever be the same no matter where she physically wound up.

\* \* \*

Mayor Daniel Abel sat in his study. *Deep leather seats.* Empty glass which moments before housed fine bourbon. Tie undone. Press creeping in his head. *PRESS CREEPING IN HIS HEAD. PRESS CREEPING IN HIS HEAD!!!* He got up, walked across a recently waxed wooden floor, and moved the curtains to the side.

*No one.*

He let the opaque curtains drape back down to the floor. He stepped back. He could see Sam Johnson and Rodan Brock in his shrubs. Rodan made a dash across the horseshoe driveway for a better shot. Daniel quickly opened the curtains again because this time he knew it was *true*—a premonition. But there was no one there.

*He jetted out of his front door!!*

"Daniel?!" Jasmine called. She was just exiting the restroom near the kitchen.

"*THEY'RE NOT HERE!!!*" Daniel cried. A tear fell from his right eye, then his left... and nothing after that. Marion Barry might've been seeing squad cars in his head. *Paranoia.* But Daniel Abel realized they did it to him. Whatever prompted *Rod Blagojevich* to try to be part of "I'm A Celebrity—Get Me Out Of Here!/" in Costa Rica... whatever led Larry Craig into an airport restroom where he was busted in lewd sexual acts with undercover law enforcement... and whatever had Gary Hart throw his political career down the drain on the vessel "Monkey Business" after gaining frontrunner status for the Democrats in 1984!!! Whatever prodded this madness got to Daneil Abel somehow!! He was in his frontyard yelling at ghosts!! He knew he was conditioned. *Someone out there didn't want him on the streets any longer.* He remembered *Rambo*... of all things. Not the recently remade one which couldn't hold a candle to the original, in his opinion. He thought about the *pride* he felt when he believed it really would and *could* happen: A man pushed over the edge questioning patriotic duties could alter society in immense ways. He never told anyone that that's how he began in politics—as a *LONE RANGER* within his mind... and he thought about the rubber stamping. He thought about the erosion of his beliefs and ideals. He thought about the reasons the press came to pester him: He became what he he hated. He seldom voted outside of party lines during the past few years. He became a *dick*.

Daniel Abel was aware of David Rohde escaping captivity in Asia. The New York Times kept it mum, as well as everyone else... *until he was safe.* There was word that a couple of reporters were gone from an LA studio... but it couldn't be Samantha Betsy Johnson and *Rodan Brock*. Sam was on the air promoting Max Bell as a *MyDemigod* candidate. She made it to one of the *very* late night talk shows. Twitter couldn't be trusted... and news stations weren't forthright. *Was his mind going!?* Moments before, he was chasing phantoms in front of his house. Somehow, his mind kept screaming to him: *THEY'RE OUT THERE!!* He could see Rodan sipping from a thin red

straw. Coconut mug filled with piña colada. He was on a tropical island. “*Will you stay out of my head!?!?*” He looked back at his house. “Guilt,” he yelled over to Jazzy. She must’ve been watching him for a few seconds. She leaned against the open door frame. “I fucked over the wrong people, *ma’am!*”

“You need another vacation already!?” she hollered over to him. “Stay out there and yell at your ghosts... *so they don’t follow you back in the house!?!?*”

Daniel trotted to Jazzy. Whispering, he said, “I have to find them!! Rodan knows something I don’t know!! Asian politics!!! While I interviewed with Sam, he countered her questions with thoughts of his own!! Collective society or COLLECTIVE *SOUL!* I can’t remember!?” He wiped sweat from his brow. He looked down at his shoes while he said, “That’s why the city’s a *HYDRA!* That’s why there’s no real leadership anymore!! That’s why I can predict all the things that go on... *even the supposed goofs!!!* Congressman King calling Jackson a pervert!! That guy’s the biggest homo on *CAPITOL HILL!* It’s all the ‘wink and nod’ crap!! ‘Now would be a good time for spontaneity!’ So spontaneity’s contrived!!! It’s so *PHONY* that I’m suffocatin’!! I’m *SOCIALLY SUFFOCATIN’!?!?*”

Jasmine stretched out her arms to hold Daniel.

Daniel whisked past Jazzy through the front door. He laid belly-down on his brown leather couch. Jasmine followed behind him, rubbed his neck, and didn’t say a lot for the next thirty minutes. When it was over, Daniel turned upwards and told Jasmine, “I need to *GET TO ASIA!*!”

\* \* \*

*Z And Z Enterprises* rolled along without Zach or Zane... just like clockwork. *MyDemigod* in particular was not that difficult to operate. There were protocols and schedules. There were other designers. Not all of *Z And Z*’s workers operated in San José. There were constituents whom worked in Madrid, London, Berlin, Bordeaux, and New Delhi. A flow chart alerted third, forth and fifth in command to take charge. Richard Branson from *Virgin Records* lived it up around the world. Zach and Zane were not presumed kidnapped. *They were presumed hiking... or skiing... or rafting.* Directors and officers were instructed that the duo enjoyed travel... *and to abstain from meddling in their affairs.* Six months. Specifically, if they were absent from company affairs for a six month period, no one was to become involved. The exception was the year-end corporate meeting. Zach and Zane, if they were to not attend, were obligated in writing to prescribe their proxies. But nothing was out-of-whack as far as the regular *Z And Z* employee was concerned. As a result of their departure, *MyDemigod* changed in subtle ways. Customer satisfaction was key... and fairness within rules was crucial. The “round robin” kicked in during the last week of June. This was to occomodate television sponsors. Also, brackets and accounts had filled up quicker than anticipated. *People were ready for blood.* People were ready for cyber red splashes here and there.

Then the enigmatic marvel materialized.

Max Bell sat on a revving Kawasaki. *Sunset Boulevard*. Cameras snapped.

It took seven and a half hours to throw it together. Dudes in Michigan were gaining acclaim. Money was being poured in. *Better than Survivor*. MyDemigod castoffs were guaranteed cash for appearances here and there. The challenger was from Buena Park. He knew of Max Bell from the ads. He knew—*he had inside information*—that Sunset would be closed for a John Travolta thriller. He reached Max through *Pipl dot com*.

*All we have to do is show up*, the guy said. They spoke at a bit past midnight. Cell phones.

*Who IS THIS?!* Max demanded. *How'd ya' get my NUMBER!?!?*

*Galahad!! The INTERNET!! Buena Park!! I work at Medieval Times as a KNIGHT!! Extra!! I used to be an extra on sets while I trained to JOUST!! John Travolta's movie... Sunset Boulevard!! Inside information!!! Win-win!!! I show up with two bikes and two lances!!! Before they film, we get our PHOTO SHOOT!!*

Max revved his engine. He looked down at his lance. He watched John Travolta come out of a coffee shop. Goose bumps erected along his forearms. His heart dropped.

*You make a close pass!! I fall as soon as ya' pass me!!* Galahad had instructed the night before. *I've done it a hundred times!! I gain noteriety, YOU gain respect... an' all ya' have to do is show up an' ride a motorcycle a hundred yards!! We're guaranteed to be cemented in MyDemigod's top ten until December!!!*

Galahad took his place a football field's length away.

*Point your lance at me... but do not let the tip pass YOUR LEFT KNEE UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCE!! It'll be the ruin of both of us!!!*

The unexpected happened. Mister Travolta walked toward Max. He blew along the top of his coffee cup. He planned to watch the joust.

*Maybe he doesn't know we're not part of the movie*, Max thought. *Perhaps he hasn't read the script yet... or maybe he thinks there's changes.*

Galahad raised his hand from the distance. Thirty seconds. That was the sign.

The next unexpected thing occurred. The camera crew from Travolta's movie turned toward the street and started filming the sequence.

*Fuck*, Max Bell thought. *They'll catch it!!!* Max raised his visor and nodded at Galahad. He tried to tell him that it felt too real. *Tricia!!* Max had no clue where she was. *She'll see this on YOUTUBE!!*

Galahad had been there many times. *The crowd wants more*. Sometimes, ya' had to give your body up a little more than other times. *I'll clip his tire!!!* He settled his thoughts.

Max wore goalie's protective gear... *just in case*. Then something nonsensical escaped his mouth, "Arthur will be *AVENGED!!!*" Cameras snapped. He looked down the road and watched Galahad shake his head in disappointment. "*THIS ONE'S FOR YOU... GUINEVERE!!!*" Max revved his motorcycle, dropped his visor... *THEN SPED*.

“*Shit!!*” Galahad yelled. He fumbled for a grip on his lance, tossed off his helmet, then made his way.

*Boy*, Max Bell thought. *Tricia’s gonna like this!!* Max grabbed his chin strap with his free hand. He tossed his helmet off. *Close pass*, he thought. *Why’d he go without a helmet?!*

*What!?* Galahad considered. *Are ya’ mocking me?!* He sped toward Max.

Onlookers cheered. Amateurs photographers honed in on the battlers. John Travolta sipped warm coffee.

*BAM!!!*

Max got hit in the chest. Instead of falling back, the awkward ensued. He rode a front-wheel wheelie for fifteen yards... *then gently fell off his bike.*

“*Fuck-that-hurt!!!*” Preteens scampered to lift Max. “I leaned *in* to it!!!”

Galahad, when he reached Max’s initial starting point, turned around, waved... *ditched his lance to the side of the street...* then rode a wheelie for a quarter mile on his way out.

“*Galahad!!*” Max lifted himself. “That was Galahad... *my rival from MyDemigod!!*”

Three preteens dusted Max off. “We *KNOW* who you are!!!” Girls swarmed Max, took pictures with him, then gave way Travolta’s crew. *The planned schedule was becoming prepared as if the atypical clash had never happened.*

Tricia Galley watched Max Bell on *YouTube* twelve hours later. She was scared, happy, and confused. Without knowing why, she tossed her Ipod into the ocean afterward. She felt torn. If she had to pin it, that’s the best she would tell anyone.

\* \* \*

Samantha Betsy Johnson received a phone call from Hans the night that Max had his spill on Sunset. Tricia had already tossed her touchscreen multimedia device. *No loss.* It had been a fisherman’s the day before. Tricia’s original one from California was shipped to Pakistan... *just in case the government got involved and attempted to track using GPS.* Sam was told to hang loose. No one was in trouble. There had been an Iranian woman whom had recently been returned to the United States after having been tried as a spy... and there were a couple of gals in North Korea with a similar circumstance. Hans explained that it was no coincidence. “*Your country is not what it used to be!!*” He explained how people felt like captives in their own homes. Sergeant George Ulysses Renkter, while running for president, complained of deputies’ helicopters directing disturbing sound at homes he spent time in. Matt Bush, *former major league baseball player*, was tied like a hog and put in a cop car. Former Superbowl quarterback, *Steve McNair*, was shot in the head by a girlfriend whom turned the firearm on herself. An elderly lady in ther seventies was tazed. Disney, *according to Zane Wilson*, had a strange mind-control over pockets of the populous in various suburbs. All in all, the United States as it stood was a *shadow* of what it had been.



“So you’re telling me that Tricia and Rodan *defected* from the United States as much as they were kidnapped!?!?” Sam demanded. No one was in the house with her. She could have recorded her end of the conversation but opted against it. She feared she would become too nervous and it would be detected, *possibly threatening security and relations.*

“Judge not... *lest thou be judged!!!*” Hans said coldly. “For decades, you in the United States *marked* the rest of the world as backwards and primitive!!! Your ‘WAR ON TERROR’ is a joke!! Couldn’t your country have worded it better?! Perhaps, ‘OPERATION GLOBAL TRANQUILITY’!! No!! You fight their terror by bettin’ ya’ can be the bigger BULLY!! But guess what!?! *Now ya’ have scared ninety-five percent of humanity... and half of your own people!!*”

“Okay!! So Zach and Zane called you and...”

Hans cut Sam off, “No!! We selected them!! They were idealists loyal to humankind!! Rodan and Tricia were incidental... *but I need to let you know that they are safe and will remain safe so long as your country does not interfere!!!*” Hans thought for a moment. “When I was a child, I admired the United States!! It bothered me how anti-Catholic their history lessons seemed to be!! Forced tithings and INQUISITIONS!! Your country has its black mark, now!!! Please tell your statesmen to stop talking shit about torture!! I’m not sure *MOORS* were ever knotted together like PRETZELS!!”

Silence. Sam Johnson had nothing to say.

“*Here’s Tricia!!*” Hans handed Tricia Galley his cell phone.

“I’m fine, Sam!!” Tricia felt great relief. “We eat fine, we sleep okay... *and we’re on the run with people whom recently bleeped on the FBI’s radar as white supremacists!!* It started off...”

Tricia rambled for a bit over twenty minutes. She mentioned that she watched Max take a spill on a motorcycle. She assured Sam that all felt safe and seemed well. She suspected they might be gone as long as a year. If a windfall came through, they could be back in a month and a half. Hans and his group suspected that the United States had no more than ten years remaining as a nation. *Their credit rating was plummeting quickly.* Republicans spoke in tones alluding to the original thirteen colonies as the only ones that mattered. California was doing its own things. *No one was sure where money was coming from or where it was going to.* Corporations had more power than small towns in certain areas. Things were in the air.

Sam assured Tricia that she wouldn’t alarm mad hordes. She told Tricia to keep in contact every couple of months... *or she would be prompted to seek assistance.*

Eating together in New Zealand after the call felt weird to Tricia. *She knew life in LA would never be the same again.* She wished on a shiny star. She hoped for peace. She wanted to see Max again... *but she began to question her maturity level as to when they became a couple.*

## SECTION 8: THE FACTS

“*MyDemigod* seems to have a mind of its own!!” Zane Wilson told Hans. “My password doesn’t seem to be workin’... *which is not a big deal in itself*—all I have to do is contact a staffer an’ straighten it out with a direct video feed—but it’s not tracable about who’s making the decisions!!! Last week, an ‘Elite Twelve Hundred’ were presented to the world... This week, it’s the ‘Horde of One Twenty’... *an’ Max Bell* made it from LA!!! Some porn girl from *Brazil* made it, as well!! I guess she was flyin’ around America and havin’ sexual relations with her competition in order that they opt out!!! She posted her vids on *Metacafe* and some other sites!! Two UFC fighters made it!!! One from Chile, one from Canada!! These guys aren’t household names, so far as I know!! But this fuckin’ thing has a MIND OF ITS OWN!!”

“What’re ya’ talkin’ ABOUT?!!” Hans finally asked. “*What’re the implications?!!!*”

“It got religious... *THAT’S ONE!!*” Zane turned from his computer screen to Hans. “It’s set up to be like the California initiative ballot process!! In other words, sometimes the two major parties don’t want something... *but the people want it...*”

“Like the medical marijuana!!” they said in unison.

“But the options we had for the public weren’t that drastic!!” Zane turned back toward his computer and started typing. “Three fifths of a vote by no less than a million people could push competition brackets forward or back!!” The screen Zane wanted to show popped up. “...‘DON’T MISS THE APOSTLES TWELVE CUT NEXT WEEK’...” Zane shook his head. If a staffer did this, hers or his name—the *person’s icon*—would be in the lower right!!! But someone hacked into the system... *or the staffers are afraid to admit who they are!!*”

Hans peeked over Zane’s shoulder. “Wow!!” He rubbed his eyes. “Who will be crowned ‘MESSIAH’ in August?!!” He paraphrased the next inference. The word ‘MESSIAH’ was not paraphrased, though.

“Yes!!” Zane shut off the computer then stood up. “We had it planned, tentatively, to have the final lot in *DECEMBER!!*” He looked across the room at an dusty television which may’ve been produced in the nineteen seventies. “We set up plans where there could be a ‘buy out’!! If we had at least three million accounts in the first month... *and...* if our *PayPal* contributions reached two and a half million in the first two weeks, we had contingencies to alter our schedule!! Television, I believe, is in its last leg as ‘THE DOMINANT MEDIUM!!! We figured we’d take money from CBS, ABC or whomever... so as to not screw with their autumn line ups!!!”

“So this is a hacker... *or a frightened staff member?!!*” Hans questioned.

“Yeah!!” Zane rubbed his chin. “Unless a staffer recoded options for the public in *general!!*”

“Oh!!” Hans looked amused.

“Andy Dick seems to be the biggest celeb that made the cut of one hundred and twenty!!” Zane walked to the old television. “Everyone else seems to be freaky... *or having radical quirks!!*”

Hans wasn’t sure what to say. He was interested in the details but it had nothing to do with his agenda as a

whole. He began to make his way to the door.

“If Max wins, I’m sure they’ll look for us, *Hans!!*” Zane uttered. “He’ll be on national TV... *and he’ll talk about Tricia!!* Make sure he doesn’t win unless you want the US armed forces snoopin’ around difference corners of the globe!?”

Hans turned around at the door. “We’ve said it before that your nation is not what it used to be... *but you’re correct!!* Max winning would make things more difficult... *but that’s one in one twenty!!* Besides, we’ll be headin’ to Singapore in a week!! We’ll keep the goose chase sophisticated and intelligent!! If fate has our back, we earn our way back to our feet!!! No one gets hurt!! You lose time!! Worse case for you... *is that ya’ lose time!!*”

A sliver of anger sat in Zane’s guts. His head screamed for rationality. “Money!! If we can transfer you enough *MONEY...* before Max wins... it’ll solve many problems!?”

\* \* \*

“There’s a good chance that your government is *on* to us,” Brutus explained to Zach. He bit into a *French Dip* sandwich then dipped for more sauce. “Out there in the Tasman Sea aroun’ the Foirldland place... *That’s where they say the quake was centered!!* The European particle accelerator tests from last year... *Quakes...* Nothin’ but quakes around the world in the ensuing forty-eight hours!! So they’re gettin’ *GOOD!!* And Disney, according to *Mister Zane Wilson* in there...” He pointed to the wood-polished door on the room’s north end. A coffee table sat in from of Brutus and Zach. Zach looked at the door, then at the table. He felt as though he was getting ready for a dental exam and somehow found himself in the middle of small talk. Brutus continued, “Disney wouldn’t touch that to *save their lives!!* Disney, who owns ABC!! ‘More Americans get their news from ABC news than from any other source’!!!” He shook his head. “Makes me sick!?”

“*Yeah!!*” Zach was hungry. “But this really might be a coincidence!!!” He looked at Brutus’ sandwich. “Can I have a bite?!!! I mean, ya’ guys have been really good with treatin’ us okay... *in regards to violence, or lack thereof...* but you’re RUDE quite often!! I mean, *SHIT!!!* Eatin’ in front of people?!!! Didn’t your ma teach ya’ that it’s unpolite?!!!”

Brutus looked at the half that was remaining. “One, I didn’t know you didn’t eat!! That’s your fault!!! They called me in with the same five minute notice!! Two, I’m a big guy!! I need more!!! Three, my *MA...* taught me not to whine and beg!! Aren’t ya’ a bit ashamed of yourself?!”

“Here’s what happened!!! Five minutes ago, I got a call... *just like you did...* and I was told to show up to the computer room *ASAP!!!* Flip flops, pajama bottoms, and uncombed hair!! I went through this in college!! No food now... but then I realize they’re not wrapped up in there!?”

“Underground nuclear tests!! Australia and New Zealand won’t let US ships dock out ‘ere powered by

nuclear energy!! Shit load of atolls!! No accident!! Terror!!! Your government terrorized Pacific Islanders for decades!! Underground nuclear tests which *felt like earthquakes!!* We get word that a tsunami touched the shore out here... *and our first thought is that the United States has found its lost wiz kids...* and the reporters and all!!! Think ‘conspiracy’ first, then think of what mainstream America would report!!” He looked Zach in the eyes. “You’ll survive a lot longer if ya’ think like them!!”

Hans and Zane came through the north door. Brutus handed the rest of his sandwich to Zach. Zane Wilson spoke, “We’re close to settin’ up accounts!! I can’t get to *Z And Z* funds yet ‘cause they’re set up in corporate form!! I managed to get withdrawals of five hundred bucks per day without gettin’ traced!! I mean, it’s my personal checkin’ account... *and it’s tracable to Singapore!!* We’ll be headin’ there in a week or two!!” Zane grabbed the French Dip which had just been handed to Zach. He took a hearty bite then gave it back. “Twelve-hour shifts!! You’re in there for twelve, *Zach-o*, with Brutus!!” He looked at the tall beast and plugged his nose. “Ya’ could use a shower!!” He looked back to Zach. “Notes are right of the computer!! Pink sheet has stats, aqua sheet has segues and protocols... *an’ the three white ones have ‘hits and misses’!!*”

Hans said, “The sooner we get cash—*big cash*—the sooner you’re free people!! I recommend not headin’ to the United States for a year!! We talked about that in there!!! India and South Korea are a couple of alternatives!! We have connections!! Ya’ could do computer work!! It’s a way of losing your ghosts!! Forget the abduction and the weary United States circumstance!!!”

“Thank you,” Zach Rouss said. “*Numbers!!* First things first!!! Numbers in my head!! Social situation afterward!!!” Zach looked to Zane, “Hang in there!!! Ya’ look tired!! Get me chips in a few hours!!” He looked at Brutus, then at Hans. “If ya’ have a joint—a *marijuana joint*—I could understand WHY I’m doin’ this!! Cosmic!! Then everything flows!!! If ya’ have no weed, get me Jim Morrison music!!! Doors stuff!! Almost a legit substitute in tight situations!!!”

\* \* \*

Zach and Brutus were still pounding away at computerized revenue while the rest of the group stood around watching a black and white television in a tiny warehouse. Tricia Galley had barbeque chicken and the news was concerning Indonesian terrorism. One American had been killed in an explosion... and eight others had succumbed to death. Hans had been telling everyone that the US military might have been responsible for the tsunami... and now he was charging them for somehow being involved with the noteworthy event next to the country they’d planned to travel to next. “*Singapore’s out of the question...* They traced the dummy cell phones!!” Hans looked around. “I’m almost sure of it!!!”

“I covered the mayor of DC for a while,” Rodan said. He ate a grilled chicken leg. “*Daniel Abel!!f* His

wife went down in that area!?” Hans faced suggested he didn’t believe the story... or he didn’t care. “French Polynesia!! It’s like a Bermuda Triangle of sorts, as of late!! Tsunamis everywhere... *and I partially buy your theory that military operations effect things more than anyone’ll admit!!*” He tossed his bone into a tin bucket. “My grandfather is a rice farmer in north Japan!! Every few years, his crops get fucked up... and he’s left without money or meaning!! Irkutsk!! Russia!!! In frickin’ August, a cold front come from mainland Asia and jacks *everything!!* Winter in summer... in the northern hemisphere!! And ya’ think crazy things like this matter!?! My dream is to take him to Alaska before he dies... and buy him a fishin’ boat!! I want him to have a little elbow room!!!”

“You’re about to invite us all to your grandfather’s place!?!?” Hans felt angry at the young kid’s intuition. He was sharp. He feared a coup if things ever went too far awry.

“Yes!! And when the money comes in—*when Zach hooks us up*—we can go to Alaska!!” Rodan walked to a table in the middle of the warehouse. He picked up a plate of chicken and offered it to a few people standing around the television. “If ya’ don’t want to risk the United States yet, we can stay in Japan for up to a year!!”

“*Good ideas!!*” Hans became introspective for a couple of seconds. “Reverse psychology!!! If we’re goin’ back to the US, we go to San José!!! Nothin’ happened!! No kidnapping!!! They stole the stage in Indonesia and now we’re not suspects!! We’re just people that took ya’ on a spontaneous vacation!!”

*There were a few cheers from the people around.*

“Listen, *MAN!!*” Rodan turned away from Hans and set his eyes toward the TV. “Television taught me that police officers are great and crooks are bad!! *NYPD Blue* and that kind of thing!! I even wanted to be a patrolman for a while!! The Rodney King thing opened my eyes... and I’m in news now!! A cop ends a pursuit recently in someone’s backyard!! He clocks a suspect... *already on the ground with his hands behind his back...* and puts his palm up for a high-five!!! *Dark Blue* is a new show which demonstrates the more ‘human’ aspect of police work!! Not to mention *Reno 911...* which is a parody!! So the lines blur and crooks can be kind and cops can be thugs!! A twenty-first century *Savannah Smiles...* if you will... but...”

“I know how it feels!!” Hans directed his eyes at the television. “I’ll let you go *right now...* if ya’ look me in the eyes and tell me that your life was GREAT before we heisted ya’!! Your life was dogshit, you were searchin’ for meanin’... and we used each other for mutual benefit!!”

Rodan turned back toward Hans, “It’s the *PRINCIPLE!!* And I’m not a principled person!!” He turned back toward the television. “Give me six hours and I’ll be over it!!”

Hans put his right gritty hand Rodan’s left shoulder. Rodan shrugged. “We’ll make it up to you... *but ya’ have to believe we were near the end of our ropes!!* Can ya’ look me in the eye and tell me ya’ believe me!?!?”

Rodan turned around. He looked Hans in the eye, “You’re great people... but you’re misguided!! Children don’t know any better when they throw apples at new cars... *but I did that...* an’ I didn’t know what the fuss was!! There’re better ways!!” That was as much as Rodan could tell Hans while looking him straight forward. After scanning the room, Rodan said, “You’ll learn how to make it without threatenin’ to *KILL* people!!”

“Your government scared us more than we scared you!?” Hans replied. “I’d like you to believe that!! If ya’ don’t... *there’s nothin’ I can do...* but my promise stands!!”

\* \* \*

Tricia Galley was let loose a week after the Indonesian bombings. She saw Max Bell from across a crowded LAX lobby. She dropped her three handbags and sprinted toward him. She embraced him. “*There were gun fights, explosions, and romances!!*”

Max let go of Tricia. “Hollywood movie, *eh?*!”

Trish shook her head violently yes. “I had to tunnel twenty miles through sewage... an’ I befriended trolls who took care of me until...”

“*Nothin’ happened after the initial hijacking!!*” Max asked.

Trish tapped Max on his forehead with her palm. “Don’t say that word in *here!!*”

Max looked around. Two or three people might have deciphered “hijacking” from what he said. “Let’s go!!”

Tricia didn’t look back. She left her handbags on the floor behind her. She jogged with Max to a taxi outside. “*Fuck this place,*” she said.

The ride to *Channel Eight* felt strange. Max seemed different. Was it because of *MyDemigod*?! Was it because of the abduction!? Was there another woman!?! She didn’t care. The butterflies were strong. She gave herself fifty-fifty odds that she would quit her job when she spoke to Mort. *Things felt weird.*

\* \* \*

Mort waited in his office. He wanted to be cheerful but found himself grumpy. Tricia came through the door by herself. “The day after Walter Cronkite dies, they decide to send *YOU* back!!” He leaned back in his chair and lifted his feet to the table. He stretched. “*Terrorists!!* You were kidnapped... but ya’ felt like ya’ had a pleasure cruise!!!”

Tricia sat down across from Mort. “I barbequed chicken. They turned on a clunker television to receive updates of the Indonesia mess... *then they found out an American legend died!!* This to add to Carradine an’ the slew of others!! Then Hans—*actually a nice fellow when his belly is full of good eatin’*—says to me... ‘*I know who my enemies are!! They are holding rifles and explosives... They are not the ones holding cameras and scratch pads!!*’ Then we took photos...” Tricia three undersized pictures to Mortimer Wishum. “They’re small because they’re *avatars!!* They’re the pics we used for MySpace!!” She waited for a reaction. “I could blow ‘em up and it

wouldn't take but thirty seconds!!!"

"*Max is winning!!*" Mort smiled. "He's ranked sixth, actually, for popularity at *MyDemigod*... but he feels proud!! I've not been aroun' that exuberance since I was young!!!"

"*Rodan's coming back next month!!*" Tricia was excited. "One by one, they'll all come back!!!"

"*The other kids I don't care a lot about!!*" Mortimer grinned. "Between you and me!! I mean, I'm responsible for *PR* at this place... an' the other kids are pot-smokin' weirdoes whom *LIKE* that kind of stuff!! They'll probably skydive with those terrorists when all's said and done!!!"

"Whatever, *Mort!!*" Tricia stood up. She looked down on the desk at Mort's placard facing her. *MORTIMER WISHUM, PRES.* "I need that month off," she said. "I need to gather myself!!!"

"You have three options," Mort said. "I offered ya' a month off with pay to get ya' in *here!!*" He stood up and walked to Trish. "Option TWO... CNN!! I know people there!! Ya' had an international experience!! Maybe it's time to give it a try!!" Mort waited for a nod yes or no. He got nothing. "Option three... Ya' follow up on Daniel Abel!! Jasmine Zuniga called the office yesterday!! The guy's crackin' up and he blames Sam and Rodan... *partially!!* Paranoia!! She said the press gave 'im paranoia!! He keeps checkin' his curtains even though it's a dead story!! He goes out into his driveway yellin' at reporters whom aren't there!! *Mark Sanford got 'im off the hook!!* If we're going to cover someone across the country, it's *THAT GUY!!*" Mortimer Wishum had his first moment of temptation regarding Tricia Galley. He looked at her for maybe a quarter of a second. *Her neck.* Max Bell was a lucky guy for dating her. He thought about infidelity in public figures... *and he considered inappropriate behavior with Trish.* He butt stuck out a bit where a pastel summer dress caressed her figure. A half second. *Arousal.* Gamble. *Thought of GAMBLE.* A full second did not pass before Mort stepped back and said, "I'll DOUBLE your salary to get out of Los Angeles!!" He turned toward his wall and pretended to admire an oil painting. "Go with Max and get back on that bike!!" When he was six or seven feet away from her, he looked her way again and clarified, "*That figurative BIKE!!*"

"I'll give you an answer by six this evening!! Max and I are having lunch!!" She smiled. "I'll discuss it with him!!!"

Mort gravely said, "I don't need a kooky mayor blaming us for fuckin' up his life!!" Mort tried to return the smile but a crooked smirk protruded. "Get a good story... *but go there for diplomacy!!* We want to seal that encounter off so there's no loose ends!! Have a good time... *for a month in DC!!*"

\* \* \*

"The newest of our presidents stayed at the haunted *Hay-Adams Hotel* earlier this year!! Buck's Ghost... *if ya' can remember...* or if ya' know the details!!" Jasmine flicked ashes onto the lawn below. She turned around at

the house. She sat next to Tricia Galley under a large, white umbrella. Both were on lawn chairs. They were situated “inside the shoe” of the driveway. Jazzy looked down the street. “He sees Lois Monroe downtown almost every time he drives for groceries!! It’s been four out of the past five times!! She was press secretary durin’ the last administration!!”

“*Honey!!*” Tricia tried to calm Jasmine by putting her hand on top of hers. “You can be candid... and I’ll use discretion!! We’re not the *New York Post*!! But if YOU... are perceivin’ the same thing about the ghosts....”

Jasmine cut in, “It’s a statement of fact that people believe that that particular hotel is *haunted*!! I’m tryin’ to give you a psychology of Daniel as it stand right now!!” She looked back toward the house and expected to him staring at her through the window. No one was there.

“Okay?! And the smokin’?! Daniel never smoked before...”

“*Babe...* Give me forty-five minutes without questions and I’ll tell ya’ everything ya’ need to know!! He’s in trouble... and I think he’s close to snapping!!” Jasmine smiled at Tricia. Max set his camera on his shoulder and started to film.

Lois Monroe was a press secretary... but she must be working for the CIA or NSA. *Nonchalant*. Rita Nicholes was a local reporter and a celebrity of sorts in DC. *She wanted to have Daniel Abel as her lover*. Didn’t make sense. Thoughts jumbled. Every time Daniel went to wipe his butt in the restroom, “THE CURSE” would happen: He would feel Lois or Rita digging into his ass. *Lecithin*. Maybe if he took more lecithin as a mineral supplement, his brain wouldn’t be going. And what if it was Alzheimer’s disease?! Should he get treatment now and risk social suicide as a mayor?! The rice cakes!! Somehow, he knew that Rita Nicholes had a hidden blog about him!! If he would go to *Hardy’s* for a burger, she would surely spread it to PeTA!! *People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals* takes care of mice and houseflies... but they don’t take care of again politicians!! Not ones that butcher animals with every bite!! And the compensation with the smoking!! If he was buying rice cakes on the left end, he had to buy cigarettes on the *right end*!! He read *Cosmo* to stay in fashion... and he knew who paid for the magazines!! Cigarette companies and liquor manufacturers!!

“Okay!!” Tricia interrupted. She pointed at the door. “Is this... *what you’re talkin’ about*!?”

Daniel Abel was in a robe. In his right hand, he held a Marlboro near his mouth. In his left hand, an iced glass of some kind of whiskey. He stood there.

*Max took a cue*. “Celebrities do this in Los Angeles!!” He reached for his still-frame camera. He took a few rapid shots. “*Photo op*!! The guy believes he’s being marketed... and he thinks we’re going to make him look ‘cool’ to the corporations who we reach through our reporting!!” He turned his camera sideways and snapped some more. “He’s sick of working for ‘the people’... and believes there’s a payday if he handles things correctly!!”

“*What about the GHOSTS*?!” Jasmine asked. “He sees Lois’ face every time he opens the fridge!! She tells him what to buy and what the demographics want!!”

“*He lost his wife a year ago*!!” Max watched Daniel flick an almost-full-length cig onto the grass. He



drank from the small glass then headed inside. *No wave.* No acknowledgment. “His mind is filling an empty space!! He wants to believe in winged harp players in the clouds!! He wants to see his wife again!!”

“*So his cosmology is changing to suit his circumstance!?!?*” Jazzy demanded.

“Trial and ERROR!! If it ain’t broken, don’t fix it!! For so many years... *his life had been smooth!!*” Max smiled at Tricia. “I’m just a kid with guesses!!”

“You’re just like the *other* reporter from your news station!! He started talkin’ to me during the interview, too!!”

“*Okay...* So how much more do ya’ want!?!?” Tricia asked Jasmine. “The only important thing I wanted to ask about was *Asia!!!* How did the mayor conclude that he needed to get to *ASIA!?!?* Was it his wife!?! Somehow, ya’ told me that he knew *Rodan* was there!! Although the guess was wrong, we were in Australia... *and we planned to travel to Singapore!!* Tell me about that!!”

Jasmine Zuniga spoke for nearly a half hour. *Flies in the VASOLINE!!* Daniel began listening to nineties alternative music... and he started believing he was picking up “hidden codes”!! In the end, Jasmine explained to Tricia that he reminded her of a young nephew—a *kid whom played with imaginary baseball players in his backyard everyday because he was an only child.* She told Trish that the press was somewhat responsible for the predicament... but she wasn’t going to complain. Without using the words, she asked for a pardon. *She wanted to have parties and mixers.* She suspected it would fix things.

Tricia expressed that she was a reporter. *Her job was not to heal.* Her point was to tell the public what was going on—*anything that was relevant.* If the economy was in the black, there was no way she could *stop* the social functions. With the country being in states of turmoil here and there, there was no way to revive a situation. “*Get ready to take care of a child!!*” she told Jazzy before the interview wrapped. “Annihilation is real!! It’s the catch phrase with everything we do behind the scenes!! Politics of OLD?!? Annihilated!! The way we find out about infidelity?!? Annihilated!! The way that we lived with living legends?!? A thing of the past!!”

Jasmine seemed shocked. She felt as though she was listening to a lecture.

“You are living during an era of re-invention!! The wheel is here to stay... *and so is the internet!!* Have Daniel adapt to the new ways... *or have him sucked into the abyss of those whom couldn’t keep up!!*”

Jasmine stood up and shook Max’s hand. She turned to Tricia and hugged her. “*Help me, lady!!* I am two steps behind everyone!!” She looked back at the house. Daniel stood at the window in boxer shorts. “*Help me gain a step so I am only one step behind!!* I can fix that guy!!”

\* \* \*

Mortimer Wishum looked across the sea. He let the wind grab at his hair. The waves were choppy. He

turned to Max Bell, “*You guys have class!!*” He handed Max three one-thousand-dollar-bills. “This is the most money I’ve given anybody from *petty cash!!* You’re number three in the country, now!! I don’t care that you don’t win next week’s finale... *but that’s an issue on it’s own!!*” He looked at Tricia Galley. “You’ll see your salary doubled for the next two months!! It’s what the station could afford!! It’ll come on your paycheck!!”

“Jasmine Zuniga told me that the mayor had an episode with an ant!! Apparently an ant crawled through a cheesecake box while they transfered groceries from their auto to the house!! It couldn’t make its way through the tin container and was squirming and wiggling!! Survived twenty-four hours in the freezer!! Curled up... *but it’s front legs were movin’ in such a manner that Daniel Abel thought of THE FLY!!* ‘Kill me!!’ the ant seemed to be saying!! After years of avoiding the most radical political action groups, *PeTA* finally got into his mind!! Yeah, we could’ve put that in our report on him... *but it didn’t reflect the guy’s life!!* ‘Midlife CRISIS’!! It’s an understatement on what we saw... *but it was most responsible!!*”

“I promised Jazzy that I’d give her some time to straighten out!! If she attacks *Rodan and Sam*, it’ll prompt us to dig deeper in what *seems* to be the first signs of dementia!! No harm, no foul... *right?!* I think they’re actions backfired on ‘em!! Live by the sword, die by the sword!! Daniel was way too casual about dismissing waterboardin’ when Sam interviewed him!! But he knew guys in the CIA!! Something’s gettin’ to those guys that don’t get to the regular public!!” Tricia looked down the length of the fishing boat. A couple of Mort’s cousins had lines casted out to sea. They were half the way to *Catalina Island*.

“*Karma?!*” Mortimer asked. He popped open a Bud Light. He drank. He reached into the chest at his feet and offered a beer to Max. “We’re thirteen miles from the mainland coast... an’ we’re thirteen miles from the island!! International waters!!”

Max took the beer. Tricia asked for a wine cooler.

“*Karma?!*” Mort asked again. “*Do ya’ think he’s reapin’ what he’s sowed?!*”

“It’s all of DC!! They’ve prided themselves for so long with ‘individual accountability’... *then they became a town of teleprompters, speech writers, lobbyists, an’ straight-ticket voting!!* They don’t know who they are anymore!!! Even Daniel couldn’t say what he stood for anymore!!” Tricia struggled to open a cooler which was handed to her.

“*The photos hint that he’s tryin’ for a reality TV show!!* Those guys are sick of traditional politics!! They all want to be stars!! Blagojevich isn’t the only one!!!” Mort smiled. He was proud of Trish and Max as a team. Max even opened Trish’s orange cooler.

“Jamine told me that Daniel had a mathematical consultant—I guess the worst of the bureaucrats have them!!—and this guys tells Daniel *how many times* to vote against his party... ‘*cause people expect it!!* Three or four times a year... he ‘TAKES A STAND’!! But it’s so calculated that it’s the safe thing to do!! The general public doesn’t know it though!!”

“*Ya’ have to understand there’s intelligence in that!!*” Mortimer felt great. He hadn’t felt this way about

life since the eighties. “Knowin’ when to pick an’ choose!! Even the slowest of runners will try to steal a base a few times per year!! Ya’ gotta keep the competition honest!!”

“Dude!!” Tricia exclaimed. “You don’t fuckin’ *get it!!* Daniel doesn’t remember which were his policies... *an’ which were his statistician’s choices!!* Regret, *Mortimer!!* This is not a batcatcher who swipes one out of five stolen base attempts per year!!! This is a guy who screwed lunch programs for kids!! This is a guy who has skeletons... *an’ though they’re not as bad as others I’ve seen*, he strived for perfection as a young adult!! One blemish kill ‘im!! And three or four turns him insane!!”

“And his wife croaked a year ago!!” Mort offered. “That’s gotta eat ‘im inside!!”

The group sailed around *Catalina*. Mort’s cousins fished. Mort, Trish and Max bantered. Max suggested that astronauts should swing around Jupiter “just to go” in the same way they decided to head out to an island without stopping to walk around. Trish contemplated the move to CNN. Mort alluded to retirement. As the pack headed back to the main coast, Mort said, “It’s *GONE!!*”

“Annihilated?!” Max guessed.

“*Yeah!!* I can’t put my finger on it... *but I thought we lost an economic or cultural war!!*”

“Life can be good!!” Trish felt good. “If we weren’t on a boat, I’d allude to *Murphy’s Law!!* But out here... *what the fuck can go wrong!?!?*”

They fried fish as they neared the harbor. Max had a great time. Tricia was dizzy from life’s possibilities. Mort thought about coming back the following day... *maybe by himself on a smaller vessel the next time.*

\* \* \*

Max finished second in the competition. *Daffodil Brooks*, an architect from Chicago, won the whole enchilada. She was a redhead designer of skyscrapers from Monday through Friday. On the weekends, her hair was pulled back, a bleached wig was put on, and she performed as Deborah Harry in a *Blondie* cover band. She had tried to become involved in the *Surreal Life* and other reality TV shows over the years but kept falling short. She managed to pick up a following through *MySpace*, YouTube, and Facebook... and it helped launch her to the top of *MyDemigod*. August 7, 2009 was a Friday... and that’s when the victor was announced. Daffodil was slated to appear on the late night television. NBC announced that her icon would be featured in *Headroom’s Legacy*. She would provide voice acting for a computerized menacing star. MTV approached Max and the number three, four, and five contestants for *Road Rules*. Somehow, the marriage between internet and television went along and nostalgia was the centerpiece of a lot of it.

Tricia Galley got “cold feet” as the days continued along. She wasn’t the same since returning from the south Pacific. She thought things *could* work out between her and Max... but *MyDemigod* and *CNN* were intruding.

Tricia became more and more serious about reporting after coming back from DC. She wanted to give Headline News a crack... *if anything*.

Rodan had a great time skipping around Pacific islands. He knew that at any given time, “things could get real” and the captors would be forced into using him as a pawn. *He fought for normalcy under the circumstance.* The summer was hot... but not many complained. Zach and Zane kept getting feelings that they were caught in international political maneuvers. “*We are LIVING ‘The Man Who Knew Too Little’!!!*” Zane yelled to Zach on the night he caught wind that Max placed as runner up in the system they had initiated.

## SECTION 9: IMPLICATIONS

“I’m goin’ to miss ya’, *Trish!!*” Max said.

Tricia Galley had her head on Max Bell’s armpit. She laid next to him on a *Motel 6* hotel bed. They were in Phoenix. “This is where LA’s influence ends, now!!!”

“Yeah, those studies were crazy!! It used to be that if ya’ left Los Angeles and wound up in Covina, ya’ were gone from LA!! That was back in the seventies!! Then it stretched out to Riverside and the rest of the Inland Empire ‘cause of color television, *the Lakers*, the Dodgers... and everyone else!! People took offense to ‘LA BASHING’ an hour’s drive away ‘cause of cultural reasons!! Now?! Fuckin’ INTERNET!! Who wants to say they’re born and raised in *Montebello*?! No one!!! For that matter... *INDIO*?! Not many people!! But ya’ set your *MyDemigod* account up... and ya’ list that your hometown is Los Angeles!! Even if you’re from Yuma, Arizona!! ‘Cause it’s the greatest city in the region, ya’ve been there a handful of times... *and world audiences relate to it better!!*” Max felt shameful that he could feel sweat start.

“The study was done at the University of Irvine!! They picked ten people to volunteer for a surveillance program... and they used *Twitter*!! These people were willing to travel and there was a challenge against amply social people whom had large number of email and social network connections!! The test was to find out when the subjects left Los Angeles!! Does law enforcement chase phantoms?! The ten people could consistently leave the official Los Angeles city barriers and get into Baldwin Park, Pasadena and Anaheim!! They could even get to Moreno Valley, Hesperia and Big Bear without many reports!! Once in a while, the people could make it to Blythe and Parker without a word!! It wasn’t until the subjects reached *Phoenix* that calls came in at high rates!! The study was done in conjunction with private investigators!! People wanted to know how much the world’s changed since AOL’s crept along... *and has seemed to pass away into a great black hole!!*”

“There’re ten to twelve cities that users of *MySpace* regularly gravitate toward!! Many people claim they’re from New York even though they grew up in Connecticut, Rhode Island, or any of the other New England areas!!” Max held Tricia a little tighter. “It’s not dishonest!! It’s a conceptualization!! As a matter of fact, it’s more dishonest to say you’re from Wilmington than New York... *if indeed that’s the case!!* Wilmington is not a ‘real place’ to ninety-nine percent of the population in the world... *and that’s who you’re connecting with on YouTube!!* New York is a real place!! It’s better to say you’re from New York!! It’s more HONEST to say you’re from New York... *in a philosophical way!!*”

“We’ve come a long way,” Tricia said. “This is what they were teaching me in New Zealand!! The United States IS NOT *REAL* anymore!! Rome started off as humble city on a lengthy peninsula!! It encompassed all of Europe at its pinnacle then retracted!! The United States had world influence which reached distant corners of the world!! They fucked off the United Nations, they willingly engaged in torture and primitive methods of authoritative behavior, and they began to stagger financially!! Ford, Chrysler, GM!! Fannie Mae and Freddie

Mac!!! The STATE OF *CALIFORNIA*!! The list is incredible!! ‘When they said *repent*... I wonder what they meant’!!! Ya’ remember the *Cohen* tune which got us romantic!! We were talkin’ about Mickey and Mallory... and *Natural Born Killers*! God, it was fun!!”

“Yeah!! I’m not sure a horrific administration should invalidate a nation, though!! We had two-hundred-plus great years as a country before *JUNIOR* fucked things up for everyone!!! Maybe we ought to give it another try in a few years!! It could’ve been a fluke!! Someday, I can feel it... *we’re going to have an OLYMPICS*... an’ everyone’s goin’ to be giddy about the red, white and blue!!”

“*France*!?” Trish looked to Max’s face and smiled. “Nous allons nous sentir heureux au sujet de Paris?! Je doute de lui!!”

“*Dois podem jogar nesse jogo*!!” Max said. “Two can play at that game!!”

Tricia Galley smiled.

“You’re talkin’ *IDEALISM*!!” Max got off the bed. “We’re goin’ to go to a *Phoenix Cardinals* preseason football game... and someone’s goin’ to ask me who’s flag is on the back of their helmets!! What am I goin’ to respond?! *DISNEYLAND*!?”

“*They should’ve only had those back there for a year after Nine Eleven*... just like a flag flyin’ half-staff for a limited time!! But this is what everyone’s talkin’ about *EVERYWHERE*!! If ya’ love somethin’... *you’re goin’ to have it*!! Tricia reached into the nightstand drawer. She pulled out a picture from her wallet. “We took this one at the Santa Monica pier when the new *FERRIS WHEEL* came in!! Don’t ya’ understand that no one told me to carry it?! I love you as a person, *MAX*!! You’ll hear me say that handful of times over the years... *and the rest of the time I’ll be tryin’ to show it*!”

“So all these flags are rooted in *fear*?! If ya’ don’t buy *OLD GLORY*... ya’ get run down the *road*!!! Is that what you’re sayin’!?”

“*There’s something weird goin’ on*!!” She walked to Max and held him from behind. “The United States is the product of *PAPER*!!” She couldn’t see Max’s facial expression, but she could see that he shook his head. “The *CONSTITUTION*!!” Max turned around and nodded yes. “Something new is at our *FINGERS*!! We are the New World Order!!! A hundred years from now it might be called something else!!! The flags are the indication that people want it the ‘old way’!!! There’re elderly people whom’ve fought in wars!! There’re teachers whom’ve told their pupils and buddies the same thing for decades!! There’re millionaires and *billionaires* who benefit from *STATUS QUO*!! But ya’ can feel it in *YOUR BONES*!!”

“Life won’t be the same in ten years!! It’ll be noticeable—the *change*—in twenty-five years!! Embrace Kodos and Kang right now... *or become enslaved with everyone*!!”

Tricia let go of Max and walked away a bit. She smiled. She didn’t want to let him know that she was happy. “I haven’t felt like this since I was fourteen!! When I first got my *breasts*, I felt empowered!! At eighteen, it wore on me that a hundred guys per day expected sex!! I feel empowered again!!”

“*We’ll find a way to beat the system!!*” Max told her. “If we have to break up right now to grow as individuals... we will win in life!!”

\* \* \*

Jasmine Zuniga walked into the kitchen and paused. She wanted to say something... *but waited* She hoped that Daniel heard her or *felt* her. Maybe he could see her a bit from his side vision. “*I’m puttin’ the finishing touches on it!!*” he yelled. “You thought it wouldn’t happen!! Why would ya’?! Personal project!! I didn’t tell ya’ I was doin’ it!!”

“*What is that? !!*” Jasmine went to refrigerator for a glass of cranberry juice... *except that suspicion was correct*. The Ocean Spray bottle was gone... and there was cranberry juice in the Sunny Delight container.

A paper-towel-role-cylinder protruded from Daniel’s contraption. “I’m gonna market this to *PeTA!!* That’s why I brought the disposable camera here!! Finishin’ touches!! Take a picture!!” Daniel held the device up to his head. “*Cheese!!*” He smiled. She took the picture. He thought it was funny that he said “cheese”... because that was the final part to be added.

“*What the fuck?!!*” Jasmine shook her head. “*Is...?*”

“A MOUSE TRAP!!” Daniel yelled loud enough that *IF* reporters were outside snooping around his shrubs, they could surely hear him. “*Fuckin’ A!! Motherfucker!!!* It was in front of me this whole time!!”

“*Explain yourself... ‘Cause it’s getting harder for me to tell when you’re being silly... and when ya’ really think that the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals truly has it in for ya’!!*” She walked tot he contraption and inspected with her eyes.

“The tube is to elevate the mouse above its own height... an’ there’s a small aluminum one-way door at the end... an’ with cheese or another bait, the vermin crawls up the passage, plops itself down for the food... an’ doesn’t come back out!! Whamo, ya’ know!! In other words, it’s a mouse trap that doesn’t kill!! The rodent squirms aroun’... *but then ya’ have the option!!* Let ‘im go deep in the backyard and chance comin’ back with *CATS* around!! Maybe *PeTA* could have a little ‘drop off’ place over there across town!! Or, hey!! Feed it to the snakes!! At least the cute animal’s not bein’ smashed for no reason!!”

“You’re in a hole... *politically*... and this is a ploy!! A gimmick... *almost!!*” Jasmine smirked.

“You call it what ya’ want!! Therapy!! More than anything else, it’s self-therapy!! I have a five-and-a-half-page speech in the den drawer!! Read it... *if ya’ want!!* City economy and environmental work!! No one’s going to listen to it!! I already know!! I feel it!!” He smiled Jasmine and believe he *could* be losing his mind.

“This’ll work!! People like visuals!! They like stories!! They like stuff they can relate to!!”

“Okay,” Jasmine said. “*Patent it?! Would ya’ like for me to check through patents!?!?*”

“Photo-op first, patent down the line!?” Daniel went to the fridge and poured himself cranberry juice from the Sunny D jug. He poured Jasmine a glass and added a couple of ice cubes. “*Square!!* I needed the square container so it layed flat!!!”

Jasmine smiled.

Daniel’s mood changed. “*I feel duped!!* I was told this could happen!! Life could be SO bureaucratic that no one believed anything!! But I’m not givin’ up!! I’m a smart man, an’ there’s still people out there I care about!! They want me center stage in a circus for a while!?! I’ll play their *game!!* Reluctantly, I’ll play their game!?”

“I understand you, *Daniel!!* If ya’ convince me that... *it was a slide and not permanent psychological damage...* I’ll even help you!!! What do ya’ want!?! Ten of these made!?! I’ll make ‘em for you... *and I’ll pass ‘em out!!* If those reporters show up outside in the bushes again... I’ll do it!! But... *please...*”

“I know!! I’ve gotta show I’m not Mike Dukakis!! Don’t mow the lawn in the middle of the night when it’s already cut!! I know it can go *too far!!*”

“My rational side says to ‘test’ you every day!! Ask you about state governors an’ so forth!!! But I have this other part that says to give ya’ a few months!! Work hard!! You don’t need any added pressure from me!! I won’t test you... *but let me know if it’s something physical!!* A tumor!! That kind of thing!?”

“I’ll see the doctor tomorrow!?” Daniel said. “After that, I appreciate your support!! Expect the unexpected!! I’ve been in a funk!! Trial and error!! Something’s bound to work!!!”

“I want to go to Florida again when all’s wrapped up!! That was good for us!! Let me know when therapy’s near its end!!!”

\* \* \*

“There was a prairie dog—a *TASMANIAN BASTARD*—which was brought back to our world... *a couple of years ago!!* I remember doin’ the piece on it an’ thinkin’ it was eerie!! But my name’s ‘*Rodan*’ and I’ve contemplated mutations and unordinary things for a *long time!!*” Rodan drank hot, black coffee. “Unextinct!! That’s the best way to say it!!! And we tied it in to *Jurassic Park* and all!! That was a given!?”

“So these people are *how* tall?!?” Daniel was angry. He put his right, skaking hand on Rodan’s left forearm. “I gotta know!!!”

“*Two feet!!* Literally!?” Rodan admired the Seattle sky. “Not the ‘figure of speech’ two feet... *like in ‘You’ve Got To Hide Your Love Away’!!* Dressed in regular clothes... *and not disproportionate!!*”

It was gloomy above... but it wasn’t altogether cold. “I’m sorry for the anger!! I’ve been fucked with by *YOU*—the press in general!!—for so long!?” Daniel cupped the hand which had been on Rodan’s arm. He looked straight up. *Rain again?* he pondered. “Zach and Zane are still out there... *makin’ deals with terrorists?!*”



“*Brother!!*” Rodan pleaded. “You are a terrorist... *according to them!!* Until heads roll for waterboardin’, you are a rogue nation!!”

“*Yeah!!*” Daniel bit into his pastry. “I understand *relativism!!* Henri Bergson!! Had to read it in college!!” He shook off a strange feeling to insult *Rodan* and walk away. He wanted to be back in DC. This was the first jaunt from home without Jasmine since he lost his wife. “I’ll call them ‘terrorists’ until I feel safe in my country again!!”

“*They were quite kind,*” Rodan noted, “but the issue is South Korea!! Annihilation, *remember?!* Every time I think I know what Sergeant Renkter was talkin’ about... *I come across somethin’ new!!* The dogs!! Buttering up the public!!! A California cop, last year, had one of his lost dogs *cloned* in Asia... and it was given to him as a gift!! But I sat in this room with Zach and Zane... *and they’re thinkin’ things that regular kids are thinkin’...* about ‘body doubles’ and so forth!! They figure they’re *RICH!!* Why not do it?! And a guy comes out with a catalog and pops in a VHS video!! Strange, the *VHS* part!! And it could’ve been computer animation—I *know that*—but they put the stuff together!! The Tasmanian prairie dog, the two-foot guys... *and a few other things...* and the catalog featured saber-toothed tigers which hadn’t been around for thousands of years... *or however long!!* And Zach turns to Zane and realizes it’s a *financial* pitch!!! The terrorists, *as ya’ call them*, are all together waitin’ to see if the sale’s been made!! Zane shakes his head... *then a Korean guy in a business suit comes and brings another glossy catalog!!* This one partitions the United States back to New England, *basically!!* By 2025, Asia shall have control up toward the Mississippi!! In 2035, the United States knocked by the original thirteen colonies!! And by 2050... *New England!!* Just New England!!”

“And through finances, culture, and art!? A lot of land holdings!?” Daniel felt confused. He continued to fight urges to walk away.

“The head guy says to Zane, ‘*You get to pick what’s annihilated first!!*’ Zane looked uncomfortable... but I could tell he was intrigued. ‘That school ya’ went to?’ The terrorists were always quite in tune. ‘We could buy that *first!!*’ But you have to realize that the United States of your childhood is not a possibility any more!! If ya’ see a state cop, ya’ have to avoid ‘im... *no different than a crip avoided bloods in LA during the eighties!!*’

“So we have a simultaneous government!?” Daniel figured out the lesson of the day. “One in which the ignorant and poor still have to recognize the United States coast to coast... *and another which disregards everything traditional!!* I came here because you said you could help me with a *reality TV* program!! I want to show people the heck I go through!! They won’t be so biting... *if they knew it’s difficult!!*”

“It’ll take a few days for me to believe the United States exists!?” Rodan finished his coffee. “We kept listening to Fleetwood Mac’s ‘*Dreams*’ everywhere!! Love’s a state of mind!! The country’s a state of mind!! Your *name...* is a state of mind!!”

“We’ll stay in Seattle for the week... *and we can work through some of these issues!!*” Daniel waved past Rodan. Sam Johnson was coming up with a few more coffees.

“Once you’re rich, *sir*, ya’ can buy countries and people!! The things I have to say don’t apply to ninety percent of the population!! But it took a couple of weeks for Zane and Zach to tap into their corporate accounts... *and then we started to live!!*”

Daniel looked at Rodan with bewilderment. He accepted his hot caffeine fix from Sam and thanked her. He asked Rodan, “*What’s to say that ya’ won’t be taken again?! Do ya’ guys have guidelines or agreements?!*”

“*Evil,*” Rodan explained. “There was nothing *evil* I could feel about what was goin’ on!! Endurance!! Persistence!! Survival!! These were people whom took a *whacked out* chance before hitting pavement!! Now... those rabbis that got busted!? Perversion?! And the Jersey connection?! Forty-four people... *and I’ve only been back since last night!!* Mayor Dennis Elwell of Secaucus is *why* you can travel without horns goin’ off in DC!! There used to be a saying for us when we were teens and learnin’ to drive!? ‘Where did ya’ buy your license?! Tijuana!?’ Mexico’s had a reputation for government corruption... *and people’ve known of it...* but it is *REAL* in the United States beyond what I ever hoped would happen!!”

“I’m here for that reason, *too!!*” Daniel smiled. “I’m only a brick in the wall... *as you guys say!!* But I’m not with them!! I felt guilt within these past few months... *but I want to fix things before I retire!!* Let me know if I can end no lower than I began!! I want that as my goal!!”

“You’re on a sinkin’ ship... *many would say!!*” Rodan put his hand on Sam’s whom had just pulled up a chair and joined. “If everyone does their work, *we’ll all be better off!!* I’m not here to help you as a mayor, I must say!! That would be compromising my profession!! But we’ll do the documentary which *could* lead to a reality TV situation... and if you’re real, sincere, and *strong*... everything’ll take care of itself... *correct?!*”

“*I like you, Rodan!!*” Daniel said. “We can start whenever ya’ want!!”

Sam drank a gulf of coffee, Rodan pulled out a medium-sized video camera, and an interview began which Daniel Abel felt better about than anything he had done in many years.

\* \* \*

One week after mayor Daniel Abel spoke with Rodan and Sam at *Pioneer Square* in Seattle, Trish and Max found themselves there as well. Word of mouth was reason enough, but there was more. *Channel Eight* was on shaky times and it looked like life as it had been would be different in a matter of weeks. One of the major networks was making a bid at the small station and they planned to replace the nightly newscast with its own programs. Mort Wishum would not disclose more. Trish and Max travelled to the Northwest to catch what Sam and Rodan were going through. They were in high spirits. They were glad that they were around Daniel Abel instead of “the guy from Hoboken”... and they realized that the United States might live after all. *California* finally passed its budget... and even though corruption was rampant in Jersey... and *Madoff* was still in conversational circles at coffee houses

for ripping off billions, the mood was up. By night, the group had drinks at *Kinnear Park*. The drank from brown bags. There had been a “Beer Summit” in DC because of yet another racial controversy... and locals had started coming to the park to hash out differences. It was cool to do and reminded Daniel of how his life had been while studying as a youngster. No one was sure where life would lead in the months ahead... *but that was okay*. Daniel considered retirement. Rodan, Sam, Max and Trish considered permanent relocation to the northern areas. Of the fifteen anchors and field reporters whom *Channel Eight* had on staff, Sam and Trish seemed to care the least about staying in Los Angeles. Zach and Zane stayed in the Orient, and every now and then, Trish would receive text messages. Life was rocky... *but it was settling*. As the dust settled, each seemed to know what would be best: A break from the past. Tricia Galley called it “*MILLENNIAL FRENZY*”—the way that people, corporations, and countries jockeyed for position. It seemed to be going around. “Right before *two thousand*, there was a swell of emotions I couldn’t control in my own body... but I wasn’t alone!?” Though dark, there were still many people at the park. “Then the *TOWERS*... then the war in Iraq and Afghanistan... and I couldn’t tell heads or tails for *soooo long!*?”

Rodan drank beer from his paper bag. “*And now twenty ten’s coming up and people are thinking in decades again!*?”

“No one wanted to admit it!?” Daniel said. “In Washington, it was a large ‘social snapshot’ and everyone wanted to know what the other was doin’ at the *MILLENNIUM!*?”

Sam drank and cut in, “But now that we have... *uh...* You know what?! Fuck the *MILLENNIUM!!!* I didn’t have a good time!!! The most over-hyped night of human history was New Year’s Eve of *nineteen ninety-nine!!!*?”

“*Too much corporate involvement... my opinion!*?” Rodan agreed. “This is good beer!?” It was a large bottle of *Rainier*.

“Hey, man!?” Trish became a bit excited. “It was tight... *and it sucked in parts during these past few years...* but I felt I had meaning... for some reason!?” She looked around and everyone seemed to think she was kookie. “THE FUCKIN’ *MILLENNIUM!*?”

“I think I know what you’re saying!?” Sam felt reflective. “We came together, better or worse... *AROUND THE MILLENNIUM...* an’ now it seems that we’re drifting apart an’ NOTHING can keep us together—*not for too long!*?”

“With that said... *Max and I might get married!*?” There was silence around Trish. “I’ll tell you what happened!! We went to Phoenix to straighten things out and get perspective... *but we got home and realized...* Ah!! Mort said the station might be folding!! It was like fate!! I mean, we were gonna break up to grow as individuals... *then we find out we’re bein’ bought out!*?”

Max held Trish and kissed her on the cheek. He explained, “*Channel Eight* was all she had left... but I had that psycho experience with the *MyDemigod* thing... and since *Channel Eight’s* in the air... we figured... *I’m not the*

*best at...*”

Sam interrupted, “*CHEEEERS!!*” She raised her bagged beer above her head. “To love!!”

“*To love!!*” Daniel and Rodan agreed. Everyone drank.

“*This seems so tacky!!*” Trish smiled. “Thank you for bein’ here!! I think things are lookin’ *BETTER!!*”

“*To the future!!*” Daniel rooted. “TO THE FUTURE!!” The group clanked bottles, drank, then Daniel  
texted Jasmine. He wanted her to be around.

## SECTION 10: THE DECISION

One thing led to another and the group drinking in a Seattle park found themselves in a British Columbia venue watching a mixed martial arts fight. The place was Richmond, not far from Vancouver, and Daniel Abel let everyone know that there had been a vote, earlier in the year, to ban the brawls. “Here I am with two reporters whom had me petrified to the point I would not leave my home... *and I’m watching an event that would have me crucified in the STATES!!*” It was Daniel’s idea to attend. “There’s a reality in that octagon that’s different that everyone else’s I know!! I was watching tape on this a few months ago... *POW!!* Ninety-nine percent athletics and less than one percent showmanship!!”

“*You’re deceived!!*” Rodan disagreed. “I grew up with karate!! You have to have respect... *an’ you have to know your limits!!*”

Daniel wanted to debate but he was too taken by the action in front of him. He silenced Rodan with a hand gesture and continued to watch. The ladies, surprisingly to the men, did not contest participation a bunch. Trish had been part of an armed abduction and this was a *step down* to her. Sam was simply giddy with life and hardly cared *what* they did together. The matches went on. Two knock outs by fist striking and one mat submission. They went to a strip club afterward. “*Slippery When Wet*’ was recorded here in BC... an’ Bon Jovi frequented this very club... *during those sessions!!!*” Daniel was happy to tell them. He was pleased with his life for the first time in what seemed like decades. “Jasmine probably will not make it... *but she texted me that George Renkter was tryin’ to reach me!!*”

“That could be good!!” Rodan felt unexpectedly at ease around nude women with everyone. “I’d be great to have you on film together!! We can start the documentary *NOW* if you’d like!!”

“*The footage in Seattle?!!*” Daniel asked. “That wasn’t the start?!!”

“It’s good for me in the editing room... *but the people want something dynamic!!* You an’ Renkter’d be a hit!!”

“You’re *right!!!*” Daniel drank whiskey from his glass, swirled the cubes, but cut himself off. He ordered a seltzer water from hostess when she came around.

“*Do you think women usually come into these places?!!*” Sam asked Tricia. She felt embarrassed.

“Hollywood has these *GREAT* loves scenes!!” Daniel said. “So many angles!! Shadows!! Lighting!!! The music!!! Body doubles!! An’ ya’ come out of a movie jealous of a guy who’s really gay in real life!!”

“*This is why we’re here?!!*” Sam asked. She ordered a beer.

“Sex and violence, folks!! The V-Chip!! I remember debates about that one ‘cause of the town I’ve done business in!!! And what’re we fighting?!! Wrestling!! I remember one lady saying her child was too much violence and ‘*Steve Austin had to go*’!! But it’s theatrics!! Granted... these people really get slammed to mats and they land on each other!! But...”

“*The mixed martial arts is real?!?*” Rodan asked.

“No... and *yeah!?!?*” Daniel felt a tad out of his league but continued, “I’m a politician and I look into people’s eyes to know what they ‘really’ want!! These guys... *when they fight...* do the same thing... but I noticed something different!! A snap!! A point when they seem possessed!! A knowledge that bein’ cute in an interview is not goin’ to improve the psyche!?!?”

“*So boxing’s in the middle?!?* I mean, Leonard had showmanship... but he took real punches during his career, *especially at the end!?!?*” Rodan fought urges to cut the conversation for a trip to the men’s room.

“*Yeah!?!?*” Daniel watched nude women on stage. “*This!?!?* I couldn’t watch this as a child... but with internet, ya’ have everything I was shielded from!! Authentic sex and violence!! A twelve-year-old can watch man gettin’ pummelled or a lady doing the WILD *THING!?!?* That V-Chip doesn’t matter!?!?”

“Annihilation!?!?” Rodan said. “Over and over... These past few months have broken from everything I was ever part of!!! Renkter had it right, in a lot of ways!! He thought Disney had mind control over everyone... *and it’s partially true for the masses in the suburbs...* but I think he was a couch potato tryin’ to retire as a military general and he just got caught up in...”

Sam cut in, “CNN!! Happens with CNN too!!! If ya’ rely on only one source of information, you’re bound to be trolled around like a sheep by a herder!?!?”

“Anyway,” Rodan said, “life will never be the same and the point is to adapt!! We’ve covered that... *but it’s gotta be repeated!!* It’s no different than findin’ out that your father dressed as Santa Claus!! Your mind is blown, your reality destroyed... *an’ ya’ go into denial!?!?*”

“Alright!?!?” Daniel was confused. Another drink might turn him gloomy so he fought the urge to order another. “*What are the implications!?!?* You watch ‘Die Hard’... *ya’ get kidnapped...* but ya’ don’t care!! Desensitized!?!? Is that what ya’ are!?!?! My generation was different!?!?”

Rodan almost felt offended. “*Too Fast For Love’...* Ya’ ever hear of Motlëy Crüe!?!?!?”

“*Of course I’ve heard of MOTLËY CRÛE!?!?*” Daniel retorted. He actually *was* offended.

“*That’s our generation!!* I mean, right before I was born, the California Constitution was changed, giving half to each spouse!! Made it easier to divorce!! Our generation gets around... *and we’re TOO FAST FOR LOVE MOST THE TIME!?!?*”

Daniel was embarrassed.

Rodan humbly added, “It’s a blessing and curse, ya’ know?!!?” He saw a look of surprise on Daniel’s face. “I’d love to find the ‘right girl’ and live ‘happily ever after’... *but it’s not in our cards ‘cause of finances and social circumstances!?!?*”

Sam hit Rodan with rolled flier.

“Max and I will last five—*maybe ten*—years!!! We already talked about it!! Unless our first child is a star!! Then we might stay together!?!?”

Max noticed a disgusted look on Daniel's face. "*Your generation gave us these rules and expectations!!*"

"I'm still coping with the internet!!" Daniel ordered another whiskey and told the waitress to send the bill after the others made their own choices. "*Guilt!!* I have amazing guilt about what I *didn't* do in office!! Give me a few weeks and I'll know how to tell DC goodbye!!" Daniel felt stress, he felt a bit queasy... but he believed things were getting better. "I'll make up ground before all's said and done!!"

"*Cheers!!*" Tricia said. It was lukewarm but everyone countered and drank.

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"Mayor Abel took off to DC again!!" Rodan told Mort Wishum. The sat together in the *Channel Eight* conference room around a circular table with Sam, Trica, and Max. "*Cold feet!!* I'll admit that we all would've taken jobs in Seattle or Vancouver if they were open!!! Is *Channel Eight* still goin' under?!!"

"That guy's a pussy!!!" Mort smoked a plump Caribbean cigar and could care less about second hand smoke. "The mayors of Secaucus and Hoboken are goin' under... *and he figures he's part of dominoes, right?!!*"

"At the beginning, it was the opposite!! He figured he could do *ANYTHING*... because everyone's diverted to the recent scandal... but then Sam starts asking the questions about infidelity, strip clubs, and UFC fighting—*just normal stuff 'cause it's what we were talking about an' participating in!!*—and he gets this weird look like he's talkin' to the enemy!!"

"Yeah!!" Sam bellowed. "The fucker had this idea that we'd go to these strip clubs but the interviews and documentaries would be about his work as an upstart politician!!"

Tricia laughed. "We have pictures with him and naked ladies—I *don't think he cared about the images for some reason*—but he wouldn't answer certain questions about his faithfulness to his departed wife!! Maybe it was lewd to ask... but the public wants to know these things!!"

"I have him listed at eight falling to nine... *right now!!*" Mort handed half sheets of paper around. "He'll be out of the top twenty by year's end... and I doubt mid-America remembers his name in two or three years!!"

"*Annihilated!!*" Rodan exclaimed. He cocked his elbow to his waist like Kirk Gibson when he cranked his memorable World Series home run against Dennis Eckersley. "Another guy gone from the public's consciousness!!!"

"You guys almost had 'im meet with Sergeant Renkter, I understand!! You'll notice on that top fifty list that *Renkter* is down to twenty-one as far as news priorities!! The Hoboken kid, the Secaucus guy, and... *Blagojevich!!* They're our top three... for this week!!"

"*Rod?!!*" Tricia demanded. "Why?!!"

"Hair, lady!!" Mort smashed his stogy in to a crystal ash tray. "I don't want you *following* him... but if he

winds up at an NBC studio again...”

“*Got ya’!*” Tricia said.

“In grates!!” Rodan startled Mortimer. “The last thing Daniel told us was that we were in grates!! He was kidding, I believe, but... *he compared himself to the Beatles!* He said they were on tour during the sixties and they ran out of gas!! A hundred and fifty shows or so... *straight...* around the world... and they didn’t have enough energy to meet with Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines!! Kids cried in the streets and tore Fab Four pictures!! They were all over the news!!”

“*Yeah?!!*” Mort wanted to wrap the meeting but sat back to hear the remainder of the tale.

“He said every good politician eventually runs out of gas!! At that point, you’re judged by what you DON’T *DO!!!* You didn’t come to this birthday party!! You didn’t come to this business opening!! You didn’t attend this fund raiser... and there’s so much to do, ya’ couldn’t do it if ya’ had five or ten body doubles!!”

“*True!*” Mort said. “That’s why ya’ gotta be savvy with the press!! Then your image can be thousands of places at once!!”

“But he said that took the *heart* out of everything... and some cheat more than others knowing they only have to do two or three things a year that mean crap to anyone!!” Rodan noticed that Mortimer was a bit restless. “So we’re going to ride it out here... *as long as it takes!!* At the end of the year, we’ll evaluate our feelings and thoughts again!!”

“*Yeah!!* Channel Two runs Channel Nine!! Ya’ guys know that!! I won’t say if it’s Four or Seven... *but one has a serious inclination to want to buy us out...* and the other has mild interest!! I’ll fight to keep things ‘status quo’ if you fine individuals want to remain here for *years...* but I believe they’re gonna want to run their own shows... and that means replacing me as head of our news department!!!”

“*That’s life!*” Sam said.

“Nothing lasts forever!!” Mort said. “Sometimes, ya’ wake up and realize that you’ve won!! The dust has settled... but ya’ cognate that it’s been *months* since stress has been real!! I started fishing again recently and rediscovered certain parts of my life... and with a couple of ya’ being kidnapped... *then a few of ya’ possibly defecting to Vancouver or wherever...* I grasped that I’ll land on my feet!! If I have to retire to the sea... or if I have to move on to another network... I’ll be okay!!”

“*DESENSITIZATION!*” Sam said. “It was a big topic up where we were!! We watch all these horrific things happen to everyone around us at the news station... and at some point... *we believe we’re not part of it!*”

“I think we hooked with Daniel Abel because we had that in common!! He believed he couldn’t be at enough birthday parties or business inaugurations... and we believe we can’t shine enough light on the good and expose the bad!!”

“*Take a vacation, Mort!*” Tricia pleaded. “Go to New Zealand!!”

Mort thought for a moment. He held in a thought. He said, “*You’re all excused!*”



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Tricia Galley and Max Bell found themselves in the apartment they had moved in to so long ago... but now it felt different. Tricia had been gone to the South Pacific and Max had been involved in the *MyDemigod* phenomenon. “I got an email from Zach Rouss,” Max informed Trish. He was sitting in a humble living room while she was in the kitchen stirring mac and cheese. They had the *money* to go out and eat—Mort became *more* generous as *Channel Eight* treaded bumpy water—but they wanted to spend moments together “at home”... and they still had catching up to do... *or so they believed*. “I tried to sign on to my *MyDemigod* account to retrace the last weeks of the battles I went through,” Max told Tricia. She pulled garlic bread out of a toaster oven and listened. “It’s over... *and I don’t think it’s coming back next year!!*”

“*Annihilated?!?*” Trish asked. “So many things come and go these days!?”

“It’s funny,” Max said. “Missile Command!! Remember how that game ended when all cities were crashed!?!?”

“I’m the same age as you... *yet you chose to play retro games!!* No, tell me how Missile Command ended!?!?” Trish grabbed cloth towels for napkins and gathered utensils.

“*THE END!!*” Max said. “*Crude!!* Kinda like in a hexagon, or something!?” Max laughed. “That’s how *MyDemigod* is when ya’ log on!?!?”

“*No explanation!!*” Tricia came with the mac and cheese. She sat next to Max. “Nothing?!”

Max showed her the screen. “There’s a disclaimer that *MyDemigod* went well... *Z And Z* is not over, according to this!! Zach sent an email about the Bermuda Triangle!?”

“*Rich dudes!!*” Trish reached into her bowl with her fingers and fed Max. “We had this conversation in Invercargill... *right before we headed to New Zealand’s southernmost island!!* There’s American, British, and Spanish interests in those islands!! Florida, Bermuda, and Puerto Rico!! Ya’ get planes flying over and it pisses people off!! That’s what we guessed... *an’ ya’ create...* I can’t really say because it’s a phenomenon!! Ya’ have people whom trace their stakes back centuries...”

“You’re not making sense,” Max said. He ate from Trish’s hand. “Zach says that in the fifties and sixties, the US government created airplane-sized pterodactls to scare people from the place!! They had senators and stuff staying in the islands and I guess it worked... *to a degree* and they created a few flying saucers to fuck with people too!?!?”

“*He’s in Asia still?!?*” Tricia asked.

“That’s not all!!! A floating city!! Before people figured out that hydrogen is flammable in zeppelins, There was a plan to loop five thousand together... *to have a floating town!!*”

“I wonder about geniuses!?” Trish ate from her garlic bread. “The games they make are good... *but wouldn't ya' think he'd write to you about touring foreign countries with terrorists?!!*”

“Oh!?” Max laughed. “That’s funny!! They slit a week and a half ago!! They visited the bombed building in Singapore and felt weird about remaining in a group!! Zach and Zane went to Cambodia with Gretel under she rendezvoused with a contact... *and the other guys split in pairs and threes!?!?*”

“*Think I'll see 'em again?!*” Tricia asked. “The terrorists—*not Zane and Zach!?!?*”

“I don’t think they’ll see *each other*,” Max said. He kissed Trish on the forehead. “That’s how ya’ get busted!! Return to the scene of the crime!!?”

“*You’re smart*,” Trish said. “I don’t think anyone’ll ever understand that I wasn’t afraid!! It wasn’t like the *MOVIES!?!?*”

“We’ve come from a weird era... and your story beats mine, actually!! You can go CRAZY, though... *Trish...* if you don’t tell more people what happened!! I was a *MyDemigod* champ and the envy of every teenaged guy in California!! No one acknowledged that you vanished!! Security reasons!! Fear!! Who knows why you’re not on *Sixty Minutes* right now tellin’ your side of things!?”

“*Well...* I thought to blog about it... *but...*” Trish changed her attitude and clicked on the TV. “I’m gonna let television hypnotize me!!?”

Max smiled. He ate. They watched the tube but both secretly wished love making was going on. A few hours later, they found themselves talking about their summer. They spoke until sunrise and went to work together in the morning without sleeping for a second.

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Daniel Abel was back in DC. He moved garden furniture from his back patio to his front lawn. He situated a table, chair, and umbrella on the inner portion of the driveway’s horseshoe. *Invitation*. It was an invitation for the press to come, sit down... *have some tea...* and talk half the day.

Daniel spoke with Jasmine in the den after all was set up. “*Memo number one...* I will not run for another term when election comes up!! Palin had a good idea!!! I think she’s *kookie...* but America likes her deep in!! They just don’t want her in OFFICE!!! *Memo number two...* I’m writing a tell-all book!! I know Peter Cammarano personally, I’ve come across Louisiana’s William Jefferson *enough* on the HILL... and every feels like they know *Blago!!* I want to retire... and I want money when I do!!! This town is set up so ya’ make your payday *after* all is said an’ done!?”

Jasmine took the notes. She didn’t seem interested.

“Stop writing,” Daniel told her. “Tricia and Rodan—the *guys from the West Coast*—were brainwashed

while being held captive in the Pacific!! Rodan was almost convinced that the United States had collapsed as an entity!! I mean, for practical reasons!! They cited the financial messes of lenders, car corporations, state legislators, and so on!! They talked about the corruption in Jersey and the Cajun area!! They were taken by people whom believed that the prior president committed international war crimes by disregarding the UN and the Geneva Convention!! I had guilt for shortcomings!! But when all is said and done... *is there something better?!* The Beatles went through this!! ‘Revolution’ was the song!!” Daniel sang. His voice was raspy and off key. “*You say you got a real solution... Well you know we’d all love to see the plan!! You ask me for a contribution... Well you know we’re all doing what we can!!!* We were in a strip club talking about Bon Jovi and we started talking about rock ‘n’ roll’s past... and that’s when I remembered where I picked up my idealism!! Clinton goes to North Korea and frees Ling and Lee!! Takes a photo with *Kim Jong Il!!* Who saw that coming?! And that’s the history of our COUNTRY!! A bunch of fuck up outcasts mixed in with a few flakes who could get the job done!!”

Jasmine remained silent. Secretly, she considered leaving Daniel for something new and possibly better. She shook off the confusion. She set her pad and pencil on the table.

“Zane Wilson and Zach Rouss are still out there in Asia somewhere!!” Daniel sprinted to the kitchen and poured two glasses of water. He had a purifier and disdained his contemporaries whom drank from nine-fluid-ounce bottles. A waste of plastic. It irked him. Daniel gave a glass to Jasmine and continued, “They want to start a university in Pasadena!! When they come back to the US, they want to purchase five-to-ten Victorian homes near a strip mall!! That’s where they believe ‘real learning’ goes on in this modern era!! Each home would house a different discipline from math to history to science!! Each living room would provide a classroom setting and the bedrooms would act as dorms!! The strip mall would be converted in to classrooms, as well, and other needed facilities... *like administrative offices!!*”

“Is there a point with this?!” Jasmine drank.

“Yes!! Peaceful!!! America!! No car bombs!!” Daniel walked to Jasmine and put his hands on her shoulders. He faced her and looked in her eyes. “Zane Wilson got yanked around at the *Claremont Colleges* in California and this is the response!! Rodan was wrong!! America is HERE!! If ya’ look for it!!”

“So you’re writing a book instead of bombing *Capitol Hill!!* Is this your point?!” Jasmine finished her water.

“*Let’s check,*” Daniel Able whispered into Jasmine Zuniga’s ear. He pulled her up and they walked to the living room window. Daniel pulled the curtains aside a bit. “*Two reporters on the chairs!!*” He felt good inside. “At the airport... *I knew it would happen again!!*”

“They want to know about Vancouver,” Jasmine offered.

“*Fuck,*” Daniel uttered. “Annihilation!! The most over-used word this year!!” He turned toward Jasmine. “Rodan wanted me to do a ‘reality-TV-show/*slash*-documentary’ with Sergeant George Renkter!! A comparison/contrast, if ya’ will!!” Daniel walked quickly to his den and poured bourbon for himself and Jasmine. “That’s when

I knew I had to leave the group!! It's not me!! I'm not theatric!! On paper, yeah, I *can* be!! That's why the book is a great idea!! But 'annihilation' was *Renkter's* word when he believed we had to physically invade media outlets to regain our country!! 'Annihilation' has become the shattering of old concepts and ways of doin' things!!" He sang more from *Revolution*, "*When you talk about destruction don't you know you can count me out!!*" He gulped a swig of his liquor. "Renkter is a lonely man, now... 'cause violent revolutions aren't as effective as cultural ones!! Not in this modern era!!!"

"There's so much going on right now that you're not part of, though," Jasmine suggested. "I mean, it's more than a revolution of the cultural sense happening!!! Technology!! It's changing!! Even if ya' didn't want to break apart these old, *corrupt* systems... they would vanquished anyway!! In a matter of time!! The techology doesn't let people lie anymore... and it's hard to cover tracks!!!"

"Okay!!" Daniel was happy. He finished his drink and cut himself off for the moment. "But if there was a bunch of monkeys behind the iPods and laptops talkin' about *soaps* all day... these guys would slide for years or decades!! But there're bloggers!! There're people that *talk*!!"

"Twitter and Facebook were both cut off for a few hours last week 'cause of some mean writer in Russian *Georgia*!!" Jasmine lightened up. "Your *right*!!" She raised her glass as a salute. "Write your book!! I'll stay with you until it's finished... and until ya' complete your final term!!!"

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Samantha Betsy Johnson prepared sushi for Rodan Brock at her *Marina del Rey* place. Rodan asked about her credentials and suggested that it was one of the worst plates a novice could attempt to serve. She assured him that she had enough experience from working at a Japanese restaurant during high school. Rodan, during the course of dinner, explained an email he received from Zach Rouss. He was in Myanmar with Zane and they considered immortality. An underground scientific network established "Project Annihilate"—*the name was coined by Zach after a hefty financial contribution*—and it was to use sperm donations, skin cell cultures, and neutron bomb technology to impliment a "perfect" reincarnation. The neutron bomb was began by the United States as a "clean" alternative to hydrogen explosions. When detonated, buildings remained by organic bodies did not. If used in tight quarters with thick lead walls, one could theoretically vaporize a human with *no* evidence whatsoever of the person's existence... hence the skin cell cultures and the sperm viles. A rich person, when old or physically maimed, could offer skin cells to clone. Their bodies would be vaporized. A skilled biographer would make sure to "reprogram" the cloned being to become *nearly* identical as the subject left behind. Sperm samples would provide children.

Sam and Rodan spoke about issue over dinner. Three thousand miles away in Washington, DC... *Daniel*

*Abel received a visit from Sergeant George Renkter. “I’m the most influential third-party candidate since Ross Perot according to US News and World Report!! Even Nader didn’t rank above me ‘cause, according to the article, Gore should’ve at least won Tennessee in 2000 an’ that would’ve been enough for him to win the enchilada!!”*

*“Good to see you, George!!” Daniel Abel poured three bourbons.*

Jasmine remained quiet in the corner until she felt too uncomfortable. She finally approached one of the heroes of the Kosovo conflict and offered her hand. “You’re very controversial!!” she said. “The way the TV portrayed you this past election cycle was one hundred and eighty degrees away from how they showed you in ninety-nine!!”

*“Fourscore an’ seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent... a new nation... conceived in LIBERTY!!” George drank from his glass. “The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavour will light our country and all who serve it—an’ the glow from that fire can truly light the world!! An’ so... my fellow Americans... Ask not what your country can do for you!! Ask what you can do for your COUNTRY!!” Renkter’s eyes were distant. “From Lincoln to Kennedy, ya’ don’t go anywhere by making a typical speech!!” A sniffed his bourbon but didn’t drink. “When the common American cowers in fear in regards to terrorists, *annihilation is upon us!!* When a armed forces commander from a military conflict cannot arrange for a face-to-face conversation with his congressperson... *our government has been hijacked!!* When Disney has more command over your children than you have as parents... we are in trouble!!” George Renkter grinned and complimented Daniel Abel on the choice of bourbon. “Those were my words!!” Renkter laughed and believed a buzz might be hitting him early. “A year ago, roughly... *and I’m not equivocatin’ myself to Lincoln an’ Kennedy by opening with their lines!!* Why would I want that?!! They got shot!!” Renkter bellowed. He did not hesitate to grab Abel’s bottle of bourbon and pour more for himself. “I was on the line, a year ago!! I wanted it over!! They superimpose me with Miley Cyrus on ABC!! They do that shit on purpose, ya’ know?!!”*

Daniel Abel laughed and wanted to talk about the reporters whom hung out in his shrubs.

*“Those goddamn fuckers match me with MICKEY FUCKIN’ MOUSE!!” Renkter drank straight from Abel’s bourbon bottle and apologized quickly. He continued as if it didn’t happen, “My fuckin’ speech—a serious one—followed by a Hannah Montana promo!! Like they’re in the same ballpark!!”*

*“You can’t do that anymore!! The ‘revolutionary speeches’!!” Jasmine consoled retired veteran. “They’ll cut ya’ off... *they’ll splice ya’*... an’ they’ll compare ya’ to morons!!”*

*“Okay, lady!!” Renkter said to Jasmine. “I know that... now... but I wasn’t media savvy when I started this stuff!! I mean, when I spoke of Kosovo in ninety-nine, the press had my back!! I could screw up... *which I didn’t do*... an’ they’d cover it up!! I was sure of it!!”*

Daniel Abel walked to a wall cabinet and pulled out Southern Comfort whiskey and Smirnoff vodka. “Give me your keys, sir!!” Renkter reached into his right pants pocket and pulled out a ring of nine-to-twelve jinglers. He looked to Jasmine. “Lock these in the cellar with my stock certificates until morning, madam!! Renkter’s stayin’

with us!/" Daniel watched George sluggishly make his way to a deep recliner. "You exaggerated, didn't ya"?/ I mean, part of ya' *wanted* to storm Disney and Fox with troops!! But ya' had to compare to the dudes of history!! An' ya' knew they wouldn't air ya' if ya' sounded like *Ralph Nader!*/"

"*Yes!*/" George spittled a bit. "BUT THAT'S NOT THE WHOLE THING!!! I'm not a phony!! It was mid-to-late ninety-nine when Kosovo was over that I realized my America was dead!! The America, as I remembered as a child, was long gone or hidden in deep pockets!! No more *BEAVER!*!! No more FATHER KNOWS BEST!!! I wanted to play football catch with my nephew and he suggested that we play Madden '99!! I reminded him that I've been in tip-top shape for decades and I could handle ourdoor activity!! They youngster almost had a heart attack from *thinkin'* of recreational activity!! And there was a billboard sign not far from his house!! It was from ABC, incidentally, and it read, 'Six hours a day... That's all we ask!/' Somethin' along that nature!! An' I realized it was true... *partially!*!! Mind control!! Disney an' the giants!/"

"So it took eight years for you to prepare a national campaign?/" Daniel asked.

Renkter poured himself a glass of vodka and apologized again for polishing off the bourbon. He explained, "It's a ripple thing, sir... *and you would know it as mayor if ya' didn't campaign on the same subjects all the time!* Education... the environment... *crime!*!! You city leaders talk about the same things EVERYWHERE!! But I was around zombies!! I used to like *Scrabble!*!! I asked my sister to play!! We played thousands of times as children!! She told me I could find a partner on AOL!! Fuckin' bitch!! I won a couple of medals of honor in my life... *and I thought I was a war hero!*!! If I couldn't get company, who could?!! I guessed these media outlets jacked the heads of people an' left everyone as mush while I was away!/"

"Okay, dude!/" Daniel said. He genuinely liked Renkter and was surprised. He had seen him face-to-face once many years before when Kosovo was over but had never exchanged words. "I was in the middle of a life crisis when I asked ya' to come over!! I reporter whom had harrassed me, ironically, suggested we get together... *but the idea was to be in front of the camera!*!! I dismissed the concept—the part of filming—but figured meeting might be good!/" Daniel blushed. He wanted to run as Renkter's VP in the next election cycle. He knew DC from the inside out and it never appealed to him. *Lobbyests* got paid more than the president in certain circles. The presidency, according to Abel, was thankless... but for a glittering second, Daniel could picture Renkter in the Whitehouse like a contemporary *Eisenhower*. Daniel shook the thought. "You have passion!! You have intelligence!! You came across as a nut by the time November rolled around!/"

"*Bro!*/" Renkter said. "You know the system!! Don't talk shit about George Washington!! Don't portray Jesus as a loser!!! Never pretend that kids can't get it done and always say they are our future!! Even if nuclear war is imminent and the world won't be around in a week!! Pretend the kids are our *FUTURE!*/"

"Cop out, *bitch!*/" Daniel Abel was catching a buzz. Since he had been in Vancouver, he'd been doing a good duty to cut himself off before getting tanked. He let himself go a bit from being around Renkter. "You're hiding something!/"

Renkter wanted to cry. “I hate America, *bro!!* I learned in Kosovo to say the opposite of everything I believed!! I hoped loved-ones could pick up drabness or sarcasm!! Zombies, man!! Who gives a rat’s ass whom Kelly Taylor is boning from *90210!*? Those were the letters I got from home!!”

Daniel laughed. “Love/ *HATE!!*” Daniel smiled. “That’s why we go into politics!! Thin line!!”

“Yeah!! I could love America if I didn’t have to hear how bald I am every day!! I have buy this drug or join this hair club!! Fuckin’ stupid!! When I was a kid, ya’ looked beyond the surface!! If ya’ look beyond the surface today, ya’ get a cutout of the girl next door... *who’s really a programmed lady from the collective media powers!!* No individual opinions anymore!!”

“Jasmine’s good to me!!” Daniel smiled and thought to cut himself off because of queasiness more than an induced lifted emotion. “She dilly-dallied in radio durin’ college!! She listens to radio more than she watches TV... *even now!!*”

“I’d like to leave and get a hotel... but ya’ have the better idea!!” Renker walked to the living room sofa. “I’ll crash here... we’ll have lunch tomorrow at noon *exact...* and we’ll talk about a co-biography!!” Renkter saluted Abel. He was mildly surprised that Abel saluted back.

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“There’s *another* thing that’s been annihilated!!!” Max Bell tossed an LA Times at the coffee table in front of Tricia Galley. She had pastries, orange juice, and decaf laid out.

“*The newspaper?!*” Tricia grabbed it and smiled. “*Yeah...*”

“You’re right!!” Max agreed. “The paper *happens* to be on the way out... but look at the cover story!!! When we go to work today, I want to do a follow-up!!”

Tricia and Max had spent a romantic evening the night before in Oceanside dining and walking along the Pacific shore. They rarely attempted to watch *Channel Eight* news on their days off. The story was no doubt covered. “Ah!! The man gets doused with four tear gas grenades from robots and gets *hosed* by pepper spray... before being tazed by many large men!!” Tricia laughed. “I’m desensitized, hun!!”

“When ya’ were away being kidnapped in New Zealand, we had a homeless man that got canistered by a load of tear gas!! He was trapped in a drainage pipe—*somehin’ like that!!* I was a kid when I was taught the *evils* of early New England!! Public ridicule by clamping suspects or offenders to wooden devices which fastened their heads and arms through holes!! Dunkin’ women declared to be witches!! Somehow, we’re back there again!! HONOR!!! Honor has been annihilated!!”

“Put yourself in the shoes of...” Tricia saw Max tense up.

“I can’t imagine doin’ what they do!! Those people are overpowered!! I’m having a hard time making

sense out of who's the good guys and who the bad guys are!/" Tricia stood up. She held Max. He went on, "It's about winners and losers now!/" Max kissed Tricia near the side of her mouth. She sat down. "I'm not the brightest guy in the world but... *I remember a few things from education!!* Logos, for example!! The WORD!!! That's what it means!!! 'Cruel and unusual punishment'?! Out the door!! No self-incrimination?! Long gone!! Right before our eyes, the words of our government cease to matter!! Mort told me, right when I was hired, that there've always been winners and losers in society!! The 'haves' perpetually fend with the 'have-nots'!! I had asked him why the news doesn't help homeless people when stories are done about them!! He said that if I could show him a point in history when plight was eliminated, he'll start givin' a hundred bucks to all homeless people we come across!! Besides, he said, the job of reporters is to *expose* a social ill... and hope legislators or private firms do their duties accordingly!! I hate thinking about when I learned in school, but Jack Kemp spoke of '*Two Americas*'—this is back in ninety-six when he was a vice presidential candidate. He talked about socialism in the inner cities and capitalism practically everywhere else!! '*I fought the law and the law won!!*'/" Max sang Bobby Fuller as best as he could. "'What I really want to know... has it always been this way?/'" He sang a line from a Santa Monica band who'd split in the nineties. "I was a kid and I wanted to be a major league baseball player... or a cop!! Or a fireman!! Or an astronaut!!/" Max laughed. "I didn't want to be president 'cause my mother said they had to study harder!! Doesn't make sense, now, 'cause I think astronaut training *might* be harder... be she encouraged me to think in the heavens!! But I remember the public services!! Officers coming to school... and me seeing them at malls!! They taught about green curbs verses red ones!! They gave us a semblance of law!!! And they gave us lollipops!! And they had a giant dog posing with kids!/" Max looked to Tricia. She hadn't eaten a bite while he spoke. He appreciated her attention. "I remember the first time I got a speeding ticket!! Pissed my pants!! The officer was *nothin'* like the cop who'd given me a few lollipops as a child!! Mean!! The fucker was mean... *and treated me like a criminal!!* Six miles over the speed limit!/" Max shook his head. "A-list stars are gettin' fucked up in front of us!! We are D-listers at best!! You think they'd hesitate to hog-tie me?!/" Slowly, Tricia shook her head yes and Max chuckled. "What about blast me with a stream of pepper juice?! It's a matter of time before they do that to stars!/"

"Max," Tricia got up again. She held him. She backed up to see his face. "We are not stars!! We are reporters!/" She turned away and walked toward their window. "Our weapon is stronger!! On a good day, the camera beats the bullet!! She opened the curtains. Light came in. "If you think we *co-exist* with those guys, they ought to be afraid of us more than we of them. She sat down and ate from her pastry. With her mouth full, she casually suggested, "I'd rather be in the media than law enforcement nearly any day of the year!/"

"*Okay!*/" Max finally reached for a bite and drank the glass of juice which had been poured for him. "I think I know where ya' stand... *but why do I feel this way?! Why do I believe it could happen to me?!?*"

"You said ya' wanted to be a baseball player?/" Tricia asked. "Ya' watched *Matt Bush* hogtied an' figured it could be you!!! Don't drink an' drive..."



“Okay!! No speeding... *no dui's*... don't hit anyone in defense...” Max was happy. “I'm giving up crime before I start!!”

“When we finally move out of *LA*, I promise we'll go to a place where police officers wash the cars of hip people durin' their free time!!” Tricia gathered the food in front of her and headed toward the fridge.

“*Dog eat dog world!*” Max followed Tricia into their kitchen. He rinsed his juice glass. “Dog eat dog world... an' I just have to get along!!”

Tricia and Max headed to work ten minutes later.

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“I spoke with Max for nearly four hours last night,” Rodan told Sam. There had been romantic feelings between the two when they were in DC tracking Daniel Abel months back. They stayed in hotel rooms together. They made sure “professionalism” superceded everything. Rodan started staying nights at Sam's place in Marina del Rey. They slept together... *but it did not become sensual*. They kissed each other goodnight on the lips... but there was no “tongue exchange”... and they behaved like a couple in a PG movie. “You're one of the last people I know, by the way, who still pays for traditional phone service!! Ya' even have *rotory!*”

“Must've been after I dozed off!!” Sam Johnson brought Rodan Brock a plate of freshly-baked chocolate chip cookies. It was eleven in the morning. “I used internet a lot... so I kept my in-wall service!! The touch-pad phone broke last week, some time... *and...*”

“It's nice!!” Rodan looked at the bieve phone. “Reminds me that *some* things remain in this modern world!!” Rodan admired Sam's shape. Her pajamas were sheer. “I bought my iPod and wondered if it'd be obsolete in two years!!! Max, though, said he was finished believin' that *Demolition Man* has arrived!!”

“The scare from the cops?! The hog tie?!?” Sam sat next to Rodan and ate a cookie.

“*Yes!*” Rodan took a bite of his treat and enjoyed. “Trish convinced him that folks in the media have a layer or two bufferin' us from strange instances!!”

“*We have more than that!*” Sam smiled widely. “We have bank statements!! We know where they purchase homes!! We can spread fear faster... *and it hits 'em!*”

“As a kid, doesn't it seem that the adult world is much more cohesive!?” Rodan sprinted to the kitchen and retrived two cans of generic cola. “We covered the analogy of the major league pitchers a while back!! I can't tell a ninety-three-mile-per-hour fastball from an eighty-seven one!! I've watched minor league games that feel as good as Angel or Dodger games!! These colas?! At the park, I prefer 'em!! Why do I feel compelled to purchase name brand drinks at fast food joints?!”

“And ya' fell in love with *Gretel*, I remember!!” Sam giggled and knuckled Rodan on the leg. *Charlie*

horse!! “You can’t tell a terrorist from a airplane attendant!?”

“*They were desperate people... an’ they didn’t want to kill!!*” Rodan rubbed his leg. “The same thing happens to domestic prisoners, ya’ know!!?” Rodan’s pride was now more hurt than his leg. “I’d bone *Karl Rove* in the ass if I’d been away from women for a year!! Those riots in *Chino*?! What do ya’ think they’re fightin’ for?! They’re sick of nothin’ but *DUDES* bein’ around them!!”

“I was jealous!! I admit it!!” Sam rubbed Rodan’s thigh. “That lady had the gall to do somethin’ about a slipping life!! Not many people have that!! They watch their lives deteriorate!!”

“We’re required, as reporters, to not portray *Gretel* and her buddies as heroes!!” Rodan shook his head. “*Domestic tranquility!!*” Rodan pushed Sam’s hands off his body. For a split second, his leg pain transformed into slight arousal. “If I could turn the camera on *myself* during half of our stories, people would be looting!! I’d tell ‘em who the assholes are!!”

“That’s why I get paid to do what I do!!” Samantha was happy. “Fifty years ago, we had lunch with Tricia and Max on Wilshire!! Annihilation!! We talked about the *mantra*!! Concentrate on the word and we can watch all unfold before our eyes!! So many things were changing!!”

“*I thought about that!!*” Rodan pushed the cookies away from him after popping a couple more in his mouth. “My parents are *Shinto*... but I couldn’t tell ya’ what that means because they let me raise myself with any ‘Western’ thought!! Buddhism was practiced a lot in Oregon!! You remember!! The West Coast is full of these ‘nuts’... *as they’re called from the Atlantic*!! *Mantra*?! I never cared!! I heard the terms!! Bad karma is when ya’ cut in a line at a taco stand an’ get food poisonin’!! Never took it seriously!! But ‘ANNIHILATION’ had a ring!! Reagan said ‘bombs away’ on the air... *when he didn’t know the mike was on*... an’ people were shocked an’ perplexed!! We have a military general sayin’ he’s going to invade media outlets ‘to take back America’... and I can remember this mantra easily!! Personaly meaning!! But what’s it going to be next year?! Lunch?! Is that going to be our mantra?! How laughable that we go from fearing military rule to nonchalantly speakin’ of other people’s problems in a three-hundred-and-sixty-five-day cycle!!”

“*We survived an emotional scare!!*” Samantha Betsy Johnson rubbed her forehead. *Sweat*. “I wonder about it!! Thin ice!! How many times are we a degree or two away from obliteratin’ everything we’re part of?! Lunch?! As a mantra?! Sounds good!! Moods’re up an’ spirits are better!!”

“Okay... *I know how to get Max and Tricia involved in our expectations!!*” Rodan spoke for about ten minutes regarding personal and work affairs. They’d give up “status” at work for a more integral schedule at home. Sam would invest in a yacht and would allow Tricia and Max to hit the seas on their own every now and then. Rodan wished for normalcy in his life. With so much changing in the past few months and with odd experiences, he didn’t mind taking a back seat to newcomers. He wanted something better.

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Seven days after they first met each other at Daniel Abel's home in DC, Renkter and Abel showed up to Daniel's favorite coffee house on *Canal Street*. It was twelve-oh-three. They had been consistently prompt at arriving every day at noon. When they were situated with their drinks and goodies, Abel began the conversation. "So those kids that I said I spent time with in Vancouver told me about a BIG ONE!/" Daniel always started with a plain, black coffee and followed it with an iced, French vanilla mocha. The first was to pick him up and the second was to set him at ease.

"That's when ya' were at the strip club?/" Renkter drank his latte and had whipped cream on his lip. "That could get ya' in trouble!/"

"Bein' a boring fuck gets ya' in trouble, nowadays!! The mayor of Los Angeles was at a topless resort in Vegas recently!! No one said a word... and they have budget problems!/" Able gestured to his lip area to give Renkter a hint. Renkter wiped his mouth. "That's what I learned over these past few months, and... They point about the Europeans is that their proton accelerator is a GLOBAL SUICIDE MACHINE!/" Daniel Able looked around to make sure no one became hysterical. He whispered, "You watch *The Princess Bride*?! The torture machine with the dials?! Twenty-four hours after the first test, there were earthquakes everywhere!/"

"News said they were coincidental!/" Renkter said. He looked around. Usually, it took fifteen minutes before eaves droppers and bystanders would come around. Daniel Abel was attempting to get George Renkter over the fear which he had of heavy media. They were photographed on the second day of coffee lunches. On the fourth and fifth days, students came by and asked for autographs. "I know that..."

"Yeah!/" Daniel waited a couple of seconds. "You, of all people, know the news is not accurate!! Not with heavy issues!! Hitler said that the masses fall prey to big lies easier than small ones!! Ya' watch the *Tarentino* flick about World War II... by the way?! We'll hit that next with Jasmine... if ya' haven't seen it!! Heard it was somethin' else!! But in real life, those guys figure they'll hit the 'self-destruct' if things get as shitty as they were in the first half of the twentieth century... over there!/"

"That's the difference between us!/" Renkter drank his latte and relaxed a bit. "You listen to those kooks!! I couldn't run battalion if I entertained every looney thought!! Strange thing is that I've done crazier things!! I mean, war isn't hospital surgery!! People get killed!! And it's hard to believe it was a year ago that I was publicly advocating invading the media outlets!! The direction of our country, after *Nine Eleven*, pointed to martial law!! In my mind it did!! If it were to happen, we'd have to take the airwaves!/"

Daniel Abel laughed. He motioned for Renkter to follow him outside. The place was filling up and he wanted to light up cigars. "One of the kids has a boss who smokes THESE!/" Abel gave a Renkter an *Ashton Heritage Robusto*. "So you're a doer... and I'm a talker!/" Daniel laughed some more. "I wonder if my words have any effect!! I mean... when I was younger... it felt that way!/" Daniel smiled. "Somehow, no matter how much I hate the populous, the lights still turn on... and water comes out of their tap!! No matter how much I love the

people... *I can't help children from cryin' in hospital lobbies!!*"

"Well..." Renkter took a few seconds to moisten his gift. "I can't say I would've been the nicest president... *but things would not have been done the same way as they had been done before!!*" Renkter allowed Abel to light his cigar.

"I'm starting to get apathetic... *is the problem!!*" Abel looked past the nearby makeshift fence. It was temporary and pulled back into the store after closing. "I'm starting to believe that it's always been this way!! I started to believe, sometime last week, that America reached a point of efficiency after decades of democracy!! I mean, *the egoists believe they're gettin' it done!!* The ones with the zany personas believe everything's going to fall apart without them!! That fruitcake of a mayor in *New York!!* Tryin' to change the term limits legislation... *'cause the Big Apple can't operate without him!!* The more I see this, the more I believe I was wrong!! I really thought I made a difference... *is all!!*"

Renkter laughed. "My brother was that way!! We were both in the military... I was better than him at baseball, and he was better than me in football!! I ran for president out of conviction!! I swear I did!! An' to honor both major political parties, *I ran INDEPENDENT so as not to tar-and-feather anyone with threats to invade this or that outlet!!*"

"Jason!?" Abel tried to recall the sequence of events. "You made your *ANNIHILATION* comment... and he entered the race within a week... *for the Democrats...* to almost apologize for a mentally retarded brother!!" Mayor Daniel Abel chuckled and almost expected George Renkter to become angry. "The media spun you as outcast of the family... *and they reached into the archives to exaggerate your brother's military career!!* Then, before I knew it, neither of ya' were on the radar 'cause the conventions were going on... *and I forgot about ya' for a while...* except when nutty reporters started tailing me for any-which-thing!!!"

"Annihilation!! Yeah!! You mentioned that the kid from LA informed ya' that it's their mantra at his news station!! I might not've gotten through to many people... *but I got through to THEM!!* Maybe 'cause their next to Disney in Anaheim an' all!!!"

"It's been that kind of year!!" Daniel Abel pulled out his blackberry. "I'm getting an iPod next week!!" He sighed. "I was technophobic a few years ago!! Everything's chaning!!"

"*Here's one for you!!*" Sergeant George Ulysses Renkter dragged from his cigar deeply. He made sure that their table was full of smoke when he exhaled. "Fruition!!" He leaned back. "For a *MANTRA!!* I can play that West Coast New Age shit too, *ya' know!?* How about we pick two or three promises that we've ever made to the public... *and make sure they come true!!* Wouldn't that be a treat!?"

"Lunch!!" Daniel Abel leaned over the smoky table as if he was giving a pass code.

"*WHAT?!?*" George's face looked as though someone had hit his butt with a dart.

"The kids at the news station in LA are going with *'LUNCH!!* They texted ME!!!" He looked around to make sure photographers weren't listening.

“Got it!! That’s what this is all about!!” Renkter stood up. “Some kids are playin’ mind games in *California* and it effects me way out here!!”

“*Listen, brother...*” Daniel Abel stood up next to George Renkter. “You tell the press that our word for next year is ‘*FRUITION*’... and I’ll do the best I can to make true on a couple of vows as I head out of politics!! But this is the eighties again!! Spin doctors and sound bites!! If ya’ don’t know the word... *ya’ don’t get by!!*”

“*Lunch!*” Renkter smirked. “*Word up!*” He sang. “*Everybody say... when you hear the call... ya’ got to get it underway...*” George Renkter started dancing around the patio like a chicken. He poked out his elbows out and flapped up and down. “*Word up, it’s the code word... no matter where ya’ say it... ya’ll know that ya’ll be heard!!*” Daniel Abel smiled. A man from the inside reached into his backpack and pulled out a *Nikon* camera. Abel and Renkter were featured in the paper the following day. Daniel Abel began to become satisfied with the screwball world he found himself living in. George Renkter couldn’t make heads or tails out of his emotions. He felt like a private in boot camp.

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“I know what I want to be when I grow up, *sir!!*” Max Bell sat back in a deep office chair. He looked on Mort’s wall and observed a new framed photo of Jimmy Carter. “What the heck’s *this*, sir?! If ya’ don’t mind me asking!!”

Mortimer leaned back in his own chair across a fine, wooden desk. “I have to be nicer!! I have to be in control... but I have to be nicer!! That guy... *was a nice man!!* Couldn’t run an economy... but he was NICE!!”

“Yes sir!!” Max leaned forward for a pitch. “I want to be a screen writer!! I know ya’ have connections!! I’ve been here a couple of years, now... and... I *need* to be a writer!!”

“Sitcoms?!” Mort Wishum looked over at Jimmy Carter. *Presidential pose*. It would be there for a couple of weeks, no less. He wasn’t sure if he could handle more. “I like that!! I like your choice... and I like *AMBITION!!*”

“I have all these, ideas, sir!! Right before I go to sleep!! Tricia was kidnapped and taken to the southern Pacific!! *Zane Wilson* and *Zach Rouss* are still out and about in Asia... and I get text messages from them!! I told ya’ they wanted to clone themselves... *but I didn’t tell ya’ about a crackpot strategy to get their clones to MARS... or the beyond!!* A hundred-year plan!! They figure we can genetically alter human growth to be six to nine inches *tops!!* A Mars landing becomes feasible!! A shot to Alpha Centari in an aircraft-carrier-sized vessel?! Not gonna happen for centuries!! But a Cadillac-sized cruiser?! That’s somethin’ we can do in twenty years!! If you’re six inches...”

“Those are nice ideas!! I used to read *Cavalier* when I was younger!! It’s how a dude named *Stephen King*

got his start!! They had all these peculiar stories about this, that and the other!! I like your idea to be a writer!! Ya' gotta strike when the iron's hot... *but ya' gotta learn format!!* Enroll in a class or take a seminar!! If ya' show me ya' already know *form*, I'll recommend ya' tomorrow!! But ideas alone aren't goin' to get ya' anywhere!!"

"I was in Office Max last night," Max said. "*Wizards For Word!!* They didn't have any in stock, but... I took English in high school... *and...*"

"Give me a twenty-page pitch a week from today and I'll pull some strings!!" Mort began to stand up... but he could tell there was more. "*What's on your mind?!*"

"Abdelbaset al-Megrahi," Max said with clarity. "I helped Tricia memorize the name because she wanted to cover the story!! Why can't we be more compassionate as a country?! The guy's about the die... *and...*"

"There are gray areas, *Max*, and I believe ya' know that!! End of the day, our job is to give the public a well-rounded portrayal of an event and/ or person!! This guy, a terrorist... *but near his own death...* Great TV for ratings if ya' didn't care about the politics in between!! But for you to have an opinion... *I understand why ya' want to go in to writing!!*"

"Renkter!!" Max said. "He met with Daniel Abel in Washington... *and now he's on YOUTUBE!!* He looks like Jesse 'The Body' Ventura!! And he says he's gonna make all the wrongs right... *and so forth!!*"

"Our world is becomin' fruity!!" Mortimer agreed. "I can't help you with your strife!! Time's going to have to do that!! Write... *though!!* That would be great self-therapy!! Don't give away your friends and don't invite your enemies in too often!! In other words, *YOU* tell the world what the story is!! Never let the antagonist take over!! Not in your mind!!!"

"How do ya' do that?!?" Max was excited. He had enough of the conversation, but he was thrilled he'd be given a chance.

"*Time!!*" Mort reached into his desk drawer. He handed Max a cigar and a stenciled pen. "I got the pen from college graduation!! Ya' don't have to write with it... but keep it as a reminder that someone's trying to help you!!!"

"*Time!!*" Max reiterated.

"Time... and multiple perspectives!! Make yourself a Abdelbaset al-Megrahi mask tonight!! Take his picture from the newspaper or internet... and tape it on to a paper plate!! Write as that guy for ten or fifteen minutes!! Explain your plight!! Imagine how your future is!! Then pick a couple of more people!! The queen of England!! The president of the United States!!"

"*Put the stories together?!*" Max asked.

"I can't give ya' all the answers!! You're goin' to find process of your own!!! You'll be proud when ya' do it on a regular basis!! You could be an anchor, someday... if you're objective enough... and if ya' don't *shit on our sponsors!!*"

Max laughed at the final comment. "I'll give it a crack." He accepted the pen and cigar. Part of him

wanted nothing to do with writing. *Too consuming of leisure allotments.* Another part wanted to tell the planet that *his world... in his head...* was a fuckin' trip. He wanted to explain it.

## SECTION 11: HOMEWARD BOUND

The great American Southwest housed a nuclear accelerator. The public believed it was not finished. *Funds*. Lack of interest in the government... but the thing was built by public workers to the degree that army engineers could complete it without a problem. *Belo Horizonte, Brazil*. Similar situation. A project unexplained by the government believed to be petroleum drilling. Europeans and Americans working endlessly believed to be drilling and providing oil pipelines. *Yueyang, China*. Three Gorges wasn't the only colossal project undertaken in recent times. *A nuclear accelerator*. A private one. American and European supervision.

*Four points are the minimum needed for a pyramid.*

The European accelerator provided nearly perfect geometry. The kidnapping horde which held Rodan Brock and others hostage stumbled across knowledge... but it was incomplete. Rodan passed the information to the mayor of the United States prime political city. He, in turn, spewed it to a military commander set on world control.

*Look at your dollar. The PYRAMID. Trigonometry. The Greeks knew that the Earth was round two thousand years ago. They knew it could be blown up with correct pressure from opposing points.*

Any accelerator, by itself, could set off earthquakes and tsunamis for months on end while operating at full capacity. When the four accelerators worked *in concert* with one another... the core of the Earth would invariably become effected beyond comprehensibility.

*Art is a reflection of life. The fact that Hilary Swank stars in a cinematic feature in which the Earth's center ceases to spin validates that leaks of confidential information occur. A moron would believe that scientists receive their ideas from pop culture movies when the opposite is actually happening.*

The date was picked out. *December 21, 2012*. Almost arbitrary. The Mayan calendar. Impeccable synchronicity.

*The Capulets and Montagues paled in comparison to what would become. Art is a reflection of life, keep in mind, and Shakespeare picked out feuding families of his time to describe how life events transpire. The Hatfields and McCoys were a legit deal. The ultra-rich are sick of fighting. When the under classes begin to usurp their centuries-old clout, wealth, and lifestyle... they will respond.*

One chance left. The markets and banks. *The stock markets in particular*. Hypnotize. Make them believe that they belong lower. They need not fly. They need not have much money. They need one another in small doses. Electronic devices could provide acceptable interaction.

*The buzzer. That SOUND. It's already happened... and there was no warning.*

*Shaking. Movement. Struggle.*

*You're late. Hurry. Run.*

*Fuck. Why THIS!?*



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“Honey!! You’re *LATE!!*” Trish shook Max. “If ya’ don’t jump in that shower *NOW...* you’ll miss your appointment!!”

“*Great dream,*” Max yelled. “I’ll use it in pilot I’m developin’!!” Max scurried around and grabbed clothes he’d wear.

Tricia Galley got up and made her way to the kitchen. “I’m making you toast and orange juice!!”

Max showered, dressed, and made his way to the kitchen. “How many times did I snooze?!”

“*Three!!*” Tricia frowned. “You wanted sleep!!”

Max took the buttered toast, drank juice, then kissed Tricia. “I feel good about what I have!! You didn’t remove the script from the car!?”

“It’s there!!” Tricia waited until Max was at the door. “You’re a winner!! Even if they don’t hire ya’!!”

“*Meet me for lunch!!*” Max yelled. He was happy.

“Lunch!!” Tricia smiled when she saw Max back out of the car port.

The presentation went well. Mort Wishum set Max up to interview with a personal friend from New York. The *sitcom* idea was put aside and Mort’s pal decided to hire Max as a soap writer. *His reactive scenarios are mind-blowing!!* the executive had said about him. It rang in Max’s head. *Corporate housing*, the executive stated. *After a couple of years with the soaps in New York City, you’ll be back in California!! Down the street from NBC studios, there’s great corporate housing on Riverside Drive... and it’s better than the CBS places on Fairfax near Farmer’s Market!!* Max thought about it... but he didn’t think about Tricia during the haggling. A meeting was called that evening to discuss Max possibly leaving *Channel Eight*.

“Tricia,” Max said. He stood in front of a group of nine people in the news conference room. “I’ll miss you more than anyone else!!”

Tricia cried... but she smiled. *Tears of happiness*. Rodan and Sam sat next to one another. Mort twiddled a pencil. A few other staff members were present.

“This is a dream of mine... *to be a writer!!* I already have a plot picked out for next week’s drama!!” Max listened to laughs. “A biker gang takes one of the young girls captive!!”

“Annihilation!!” Rodan barked out. “The biker gang’s name’s gotta be *ANNIHILATION!!*”

“No!! True Toughness!! It’s gotta be corny... like so many soap things are!!” Max witnessed glee in the room. “I was ready to marry Trish... *and I still might...* but Luke, Mort’s TV buddy, said he wanted me to have *HEAVY WRITING* under my belt before giving me sitcom power!!” Luke Knotts was not present due to a busy schedule. If all was working as clockwork, he was on a flight east. “After a couple of years, I’ll wind up back here in *Southern Cal!!*”

Tricia wanted to scream at Max for not allowing her a part in the decision... yet she wanted to hold him for

“making it”... and she blurted, “Were you going to tell your *GIRLFRIEND* about this?!”

*Laughs.*

“Yes!! Of course!!” Max’s mouth became dry. “Once in a lifetime opportunity, ya’ see... *and if she can get a job with a New York station...*”

“*Third person!?!?*” Tricia asked. “I am *THIRD-PERSON NOW!?!?*”

*Laughs.*

“*Well it’s been buildin’ up inside of me fooooo... oh, I don’t know how long!?*” Max sang. His voice cracked. He motioned subtly to the onlookers to join in. “*I don’t know why but I keep thinkin’ something’s bound to go wrong!?*” Half the people did not know what Max was trying to croon. “*But she looks in my eyes...*” It hit Mort.

“*AND MAKES ME REALIIIZE!!!*” Mort Wishum stood up. Two staffers one either side stood next him. Mort whispered to the one on the right. “*When she says...*”

The staffer, a weatherman whom resembled Barry White, sang, “*Don’t worry BABY!!*”

Mort pointed to the one on the left and he backed up, “*Don’t worry... BAAAAAABEEEEY!?*”

The Barry White one went on, “*Everything will turn out alright!?*”

By now, half the room joined in, “*Don’t worry, baby!?*” Sam and Rodan giggled through it. “*Ooooooh-Oooh!?*”

Max started the second verse, “*I guess I should’ve kept my mouth shut when I start to brag about my car...*”

Tricia interjected, “Did you *PLAN* this, Max!? What is *THIS?! My Best Friend’s Wedding!?! Are there camera’s hidden!?!?*”

“*But I can’t back down now ‘cause I pushed the other guys tooooo far,*” Max sang. He was pleased a few held “Ahhhs” and “Doot... Doots” behind him.

“One verse is enough,” Mort said. “I’ve karaoked with Herb a couple of times, Trish!! Not a set-up!?”

Some of the people didn’t stop, “*She makes me come alive an’ makes me want to driiiiive... when she says...*”

Mort couldn’t resist, “*Don’t worry baaaabeey!?*”

Herb, the staffer on the right backed him, “*DOOON’T WORRY, BABY!?*”

People clapped.

When the applause were done, Trish got up and ushered Max out of the room. “*What the FUCK are you doin’?!?*”

“It’s easier to say no to them than it is to you!?” He looked her in the eyes. “If I said no when I was offered New York, maybe I piss him off, piss you off for not growin’, and piss myself off for letting of a dream!?”

“Okay!?” Tricia looked down at Max’s feet. “I can’t do this frickin’ work without you!?” She waited for anything—a comment from Max or someone to follow them from the conference room. “I’ll move with my family near Fresno if you move to New York,” she finally said.

"I'll be faithful," Max clarified. "I know it sounds like a fifties cliché but I'll be faithful an' *TRUE!*"  
 Something wasn't connecting. "This is a crossroads!! I stayed loyal to you when ya' were kidnapped!! Why would I lose ya' NOW?!!!"

"*Annihilation*," Trish said. Max shook his head. "That's the year!! The year of the *OX!*! Next year, THE TIGER!!! It's more than superstition!! It's the way we've been plannin' our lives and events!!"

"We can be strong enough to break it!!" Max held Tricia's hands. "*There are exceptions!*!"

Tricia pulled a neon-lime rabbit's foot from her purse. "You know what these words and symbols do to me!!" She cried softly. She wanted to be held... but she wanted to let Max go.

"I'll be in New York for two months!! In mid-December, if I know it in my guts, I'll return!!" Max reached for Tricia's shoulders but she backed away.

"The new decade matters!! If ya' aren't there for me, don't come back!!" She cried. "The millennium was horseshit!!" She wiped her tears and slowed her sobs. "I can't take one other landmark night where I feel alone in the *UNIVERSE!*!"

"*Twenty ten*," Max thought aloud. "I will be there for you!! Fired or not, I'll come back before the New Year to spend good time wherever ya' want!!!"

"I'm going to put in my two weeks right now!!" Trish said. She wiped her nose and gently pushed Max to the side. She quit *Channel Eight* that evening and prepared to move in with family.

\* \* \*

"Mort announced his retirement," Rodan said to Sam. After Trish and Max stepped out of the conference room, Samantha Betsy Johnson prepared for the night's news. Due to an unexpected call-in—the *scheduled lead anchor called in believed she MIGHT have contracted a wave of the swine flu*—Sam had to cover in front of the studio camera instead of being in the field. Rodan, having no field reporter, took off to Sam's coastal condo. He prepared spaghetti, which wasn't fascinating, but he also touched up the table with a cloth cover and candle lights. Wine was prepared, as well. "It wasn't formal, but he said he wants to get out before he begins to hate the business!!" Sam's wine was sparkling champagne, actually. Rodan lifted his burgundy in cheers.

"*You remembered my favorite!*!" Sam said. "You guys went where... after Max spoke alone with Trish?!"

"Down the street to a pizza joint!!" Rodan bit his garlic bread. "*Too crowded!!* We were outside!! Trish said she's gone when Max leaves... and Mort said he wanted to leave 'on top'!!"

"He started enjoying life again, he told me!!" Sam twirled her spag on a spoon and ate. "Fishing every weekend, almost!! What doesn't kill ya' makes ya' stronger!!! The MILLENNIUM... everyone keeps talkin' about!! And the wave of terror afterward!!" Samantha knocked on her table—*wooden table*. She even scooted the

cloth to the side so her knuckles hit maple. “Even though there was the abduction this year, that was isolated... *I’m pretty sure!!*”

Rodan wanted to laugh. “Isolated!! Max said that Trish helped quell his fears of cops!! Why was he afraid?! He was on a motorcycle during the *MyDemigod* contest!! He could see it in his head!! He could be a local hero, break the law by dueling... *an’ re-emphasize that LA has great entertainment!!* Or he could fold!! He could be a mamma’s boy!! Four separate incidents this year in Inglewood alone of policemen shooting unarmed guys... *as reported by residents!!* He could let the fears of tazers make him step off the bike and run down the road like a chicken!! But the cameras were on him... *and he chose valiance!!* The jingle he sung tonight was about car racing!! Always been goin’ on!!! Right when his fears were subsided, Trish had to do the story on the kid from San Berdoo whom got shot while in *cuffs!!* I’m not sure that NYC’ll be any better... but Max’ll have a chip on his shoulders for another two or three years!! Sow your wild oates!! Everyone has somethin’ to prove!! It’s not just Max!! It’s those unexperience cops, too!!!”

Samantha Johnson twirled her spad on a spoon.

“Did your parents teach ya’ that,” Rodan asked. “I mean... I think you’re the only one I’ve met that...”

“*Europe,*” she said. “They eat this way in EUROPE!! Not sure if it’s true, but I was told!! I thought it was exotic!! Became a habit!!!”

Rodan Brock dashed to the fridge. He brought back two pieces of chocolate cake. “Got these at a drive-thru!!!”

“To the victor goes the spoils!! We won!! Our freedom, I mean!!! I think that’s what’s going on!! We battled together at *Channel Eight* when everything was falling apart!! UPN an’ WB!! The lenders!! The car companies!! Politicians!! And we managed to fight through and make it!! If we sell, it’s not because of financial instability!! Someone likes our program and is willing to pay a price!! Mort is smart to leave if he really refuses to put another five years in!! Get your piece of pie and run!!” She looked at her cake. “Figuratively, I mean!!”

“Max’ll make it in New York... but I got used to them being our understudies!!” Rodan ate his cake without utensils. “I hope he winds up with Trish!! They’re not a regular pair!!”

Sam looked at the spaghetti on Rodan’s plate. She thought to abandon her own but took one last twirl. “When all’s said and done, I want to remember that we had close calls!! I was outside of the mayor of DC’s house for a week and a half... and I wondered who oughta feel sorry for *whom!!* He had been high-profiled and began what seemed like scandalous behavior... *then there were a handful of worse politicians around the country which made his deeds seem like chicken crap!!* I was part of a salvaged hodgepodge of a studio tryin’ to get the cutting edge on the nation’s news!! I wondered if we were delving into sensationalism and tabloid reportin’, though!!”

“You’ve always had good pulse!!” Rodan said. He went to the fridge, again, and brought back two glasses of lowfat milk. “You’ll want this after your cake, by the way!!” Rodan drank half of his glass. “You’ve always known what was best!! Tact!! You have it!! Time and a place!! You know what’s right for separate situations!!”

Sam felt full... but she ate her cake and drank some milk. “I want to celebrate with Max and Trish tomorrow!! Make sure they’re invited here!!” Samantha got up and hugged Rodan. “You’ve been great and I need to see them together at least once more!! It’s not fair we’re losing them!!”

\* \* \*

One week after announcing that he’d be travelling to New York to write for soap operas, Max Bell was on a tiny island which was situated off a small island. Jeju-do, South Korea was fifty miles due south of mainland Asia and spanned thirty miles wide. Gapa-ri, South Korea was the size of a village and was a mile south of Jeju-do. Tricia Galley was at Max’s side. They waited in a decorated hut. Zach Rouss and Zane Wilson were to come in and speak with them.

*A Tasmanian tiger ran through the room.*

Trish looked to Max as if she had seen Mickey Mouse in Disneyland.

Zach Rouss and Zane Wilson entered the room a few seconds later.

“What the fuck, bro?!” Max asked Zane. “Immortals?! That’s what ya’ think ya’ll become?!”

Zane Wilson gleamed. He wore thick glasses. “My contacts fuck with me!! I can get plutonium out here in small amounts, believe it or not... *but I can’t seem to get my prescription of contacts correct!!* Maybe it’s my eyes!?”

“Ted Williams,” Zach Rouss beamed. “We almost named the dog *Ted Williams!!* But cryogenics is not what we’re really in to!!” Zach smiled... but it felt to Max like he was listening to a man whom had been alive for four hundred years on Mars... *alone...* and now he was on Earth to tell his story. Zach sat between Trish and Max on a three-seat couch. Zane sat across from them on a tiki chair.

“Michael Jackson was euthanized!!” Zane stated. “We’re ninety-nine percent certain!! The oxygen chamber!! The rumors around the islands!! He has a similar plan as us!!”

“I was in New York for two days!!” Max said to Zane. “*Empty!!* We—*me and Trish*—had dinner with Sam Johnson and Rodan Brock before I flew out!! Nice couple, they are!! I think they’re gettin’ cozy!! But I realize... *it’s a sex move...* and I’m not ready!! I love Trish, ya’ see?! And on the first night, two chicks were pourin’ raspberry schnapps down my throat an’ feelin’ my crotch!! We were at the producer’s house—*some penthouse*—and I thought I was dead!! I got your message and it wasn’t hard to head out here!!”

“My family hates ‘im ‘cause they think he’s a dick!!” Trish said. “But you’re ready for your next phase... and you think we’re ready!!”

“It’s comprehensive!!” Zane Wilson said. “Buddhist monk!! They’re trained to know when we’ve reached

a detached stance from the physical world!! Ever since my school turned on me, I can't seem to fit in!! Billions of dollars through computer designs and investments... *but what's going to happen if I get a Maserati?!* Do ya' see how they treat Gummy Bear Davis on TV?! It'd be like that!?"

"You said ya' could prove that the United States is in default... *as a nation!?!?*" Max asked Zach "What's your evidence!?!?"

"You're going to have to use your memory for part of it!! When's the last time you've been to a truly great house party!? When's the last time you've walked past an officer of the law without fear in your spine?! Who ever stands up and says, 'The United States is great'... *without bein' paid!?!?*"

"That's not enough... but I understand your method!?" Max said. He looked at brochures on the table between them. "Fifty-year plan!?" He looked at some of the glossy prints.

"Weaken the economy!?" Zach said. "It's already shit, but we can paralyze the US in phases over the next forty-to-fifty years!?"

"*You don't mind turning on your fellow man!?*" Max asked.

"My fellow man?! The goop that sits in front of television for hours on end doin' nothing with life?! I didn't respect 'em before college, during college... *and I don't respect 'em now!?*"

"Brainwashed!?" Max yelled. "Don't ya' feel *brainwashed!?!?*" The Tasmanian tiger came up to Max and Max petted.

"Washed!?" Zach screamed. "Washed!! In the BRAIN!?! Why not have a clean brain!?! TV dirties IT!! Why not clean it through education and critical observations!?!?"

"Okay!?" Max looked around. "I was kidnapped, keep in mind!! You two guys... *and Tricia...* have a headstart on me!! Whatever those terrorists put in your mind!?"

"Max!! Flip to page three on that catalog you're holding!! This fuckin' animal's been extinct since the mid-thirties!! We don't have Michael Archer, but we have many of his colleagues!! Hwang Woo-Suk!! We don't have him... *but we have a few of his confidantes!* He cloned the first dog, an Afghan hound named Snuppy!! That's *Flip*, by the way, and Tasmanian tigers are known as Thylacine... *technically!?*" The pup squirmed around. "We have humans, bro!! Level three!! It's like Scientology... *but we're not L. Ron Hubbard people!* You are welcomed in to the first level... and if ya' like it here... *level two might suit ya'!* Tom Cruise?! Kirstie Alley?! Ya' won't see 'em around because we don't draw attention to ourselves!?"

"*Unless I find out at level four... that the first three levels were all lies!?*" Max reached across Zach to hit Trish's leg. He wanted her to laugh at his joke.

"Listen, man!?" Zach said. "Brainwash!! You brought up the word!! Look at that dog and tell me it's your imagination!! Tell me if you're lookin' at a spray-painted hyena!!"

"If you believe... *they put a MAN ON THE MOOOON!?*" Max said. He didn't sing. He toyed with a lyric in his head. "If you believe... there's nothing up this sleeve then nothing is cool!?"

“*Something like that, hun!!*” Trish said.

Max shook off a couple of uncomfortable ideas. “They put a man on the Moon... and we’re to believe the government and scientists ‘went stupid’!! They went underground!!” He looked at Zane. “Is that IT!?!?”

“A good scientists does not for nationality,” Zane Wilson said. “He works for integrity and the advancement of knowledge!?”

“Okay!?” Max said. “Money talks!! That’s part two, *right?! I’m Sherlock Holmes and figurin’ out what should be obvious!?*”

“I have billions,” Zane explained. “Z And Z did well... but I went to school with people who masterplan—”

“*WHOM masterplan,*” Zach muttered.

“—politics, media, and... *yes... sciences!?*” Zane wanted coffee. “But why am I going to give free health care to masses *WHOOOOOM... hate me!?!?*”

“Thank you,” Zach said. He referred to the proper pronoun agreement.

“*¡Sí, se puede!?!?*” Zane Wilson said. “Ya’ ever hear that?! There were these farmworker advocates at one of the colleges we went to in Claremont... *and they swore by certain rights...* but I think it was a competition thing!! They called us racists if we didn’t show up to leafletting and petition-signing!! The easiest thing to do is cut yourself off!! Bite what ya’ can chew!! The girls are pretty... but don’t let it effect your workload!?”

Tricia Galley did not know where Zane was heading with the speech. “There are three levels, no less!! The council—the *staff*—you’ve put together checks us for intentions!! They check us for wordly attachments!! They check us for their own physical safety to make sure the military’s not goin’ to be on their asses!! You have it sequenced so the public doesn’t *know* what’s happened!! When the United States falls in forty years or so... *we come back!?*”

“*Cosmology!?*” Zane Wilson said. “Metaphysics!! Your ULTIMATE REALITY!! This does not happen if ya’ think JESUS is here to save ya’!! Life it seems will fade away!! Drifting further every day!?” Like Max, Zane did not sing. He explained a situation through lyrics. “If you think everything ends with a fade to black, you are made for *THIS PROGRAM!?*” Tricia looked scared. “You get a biographer!! You get zapped into a different dimension!! It’s just like we began to discuss in *New Zealand!!* You might come back three-feet tall because H1-N1 might knock ninety-nine percent of humanity away... *or a strain of it...* and the council might decide that smaller versions of ourselves would be better suited for planet EARTH!! Haven’t we done enough DAMAGE!?!?”

“We can back out if...” Tricia wanted to cry. She looked at Max. Somehow, she knew she had to cover all the ground to have peace of mind.

“*Back OUT!?*” Zach said. “The program is designed so that IF ya’ back out... ya’ think we were puttin’ you on!! Sure, we’ll do photo-ops with the dog an’ send ‘em to ya’ in the STATES... *but...*”

“Here’s somethin’ of interest!?” Zane added. He felt like a professor. “If ya’ reach level two, ya’ can back out to level one... *and you’ll think level three was the hoax!?*”

Tricia laughed. She forced a smile... then listened.

“So we take video of ya’,” Zane continued. “You tell *yourself*... who you are!! We have biographers on payroll... and they write down childhood memories, personal habits, places ya’ve gone... *and the DEAL!!!* Here’s where it gets weird... and that’s why we need distinct tiers!! At the third level, we delve in to mysticism!! Age old practices opium and other aids for channelling prior lives!! Buddhists’ve believed that attachment to this WORLD causes pain, invariably!! The reason we reincarnate is because there’s unfinished business!! Life will fade to nothin’—*NIRVANA*, in other words!!—when cease to long for anything here!! But we have had breakthroughs!! We have heavy machinery which feed our people!! We have reason to stay!! At this point?! No!! Not in the United States where there is so much hatred!! If we can eliminate the evils and create the world we long to live in... *we can come back!!* The council will bring us back!! Flip... the Tasmanian dog!! They brought him back!! They’ll bring us back!!”

“Why do we have to go so far with annihilating our bodies through neutron bomb technology?!” Trish asked. She was interested. Part of her took offense to the assertion of so much hatred in the US.

“*Obliterating!!*” Zane Wilson said. “I prefer ‘obliterating’ because you guys started using that ‘annihilation’ word for every fuckin’ thing!! Women, in third-world countries, still give birth in shacks an’ sheds—*non-sterile by Western standards*—but we’ve become accustomed to turning every stone and not leaving anything to chance... *if possible!!* Clean mind!! When ya’ come back, you won’t be looking for your bones in a grave!! *Brand new start!!!* You won’t be wondering who burned your bones and who was looking at your genitals as they disposed of your body!!”

“The plan, for me and Max... is that we have a baby!!” Trish looked over to Max. Zach took a cue, got up from sitting between them, and stood next to Zane. “We have this baby that’ll be ready when our clones’re ready in forty or fifty years!!”

“*Could be two hundred years,*” Zane clarified. “When there is not a *MONSTER* of a country which beats down independent, strong minds... we will go through with the next stage!!” Zach gave Zane a chummy thump on the shoulder. “Your clones will not know how much time has passed!!”

“It’s funny, ya’ see!!” Max said, “because I was in New York City as a writer because of you guys!! All these crazy thoughts!! But I see the *TAZ DOG!!* They Thylacine!! When do we get to see the vaporizer!!? Is that level two... *or is that now?!*”

“*Level two is the plan,*” Zach Rouss responded. “But if we think you’re gettin’ cold feet... *we’ll step it forward!!* We want ya’ to spend time on the island!! Think about what it is to be YOU!! Go to the bigger island when you’ve appreciated the culture here on any level... *and maybe ya’ can learn Korean on some level!!* You can see dogs, you can see medical advances!! You can see limbs that are replaced from this... *breakthrough!!*”

“We’re trained to hate this!!” Max said. “I have a religious family!! They were religious until I was eight or nine—*when my parents separated!!*”



“Page five,” Zane said. “*Religious!!* These people are religious... *too!!*” Zane recited from memory, “*Having undertaken for the Glory of God and advancement of the Christian Faith and Honour of our King and Country, a Voyage to plant the First Colony in the Northern Parts of Virginia!!*” He saw that Max read along. “The Mayflower Compact!! Yes, *religion in America!!* Christian by design!! Moses takes the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt!! An EXODUS to to present-day Isreal!! But the exodus never stops!! A flow of people and ideas reach the New World in the name Christianity and everything the centuries gave Europe!! But where does it stop!?! Are Buddhists and Hindus wrong for havin’ different beliefs?!? I believe it’s a *LOVE* issue... and if ya’ call the United States a loving an’ Christian country, I want to know why babies scream of hunger in the inner cities!! I want to know why it’s more important to hold on to capitalism than rational compassion for one another!! Why can’t we *FEED* each other without losing face!?!”

“So you’re sayin’ we’re Christian in name at best... *and at worst, we never were Christian because they were just WORDS people threw around!?!*” Max thought about the subjects. “Even if the US is Christian, it’s *moot* because these guys in Asia have valid religions!?”

“I’ll make a deal with you, Max!?” Zane got off his tiki and motioned for Max to scoot closer to Trish. Zane sat next to him, “Over the next two weeks, you convince me that there’s not too much red tape in the States!! You convince me that I can have more freedom there... *than here!!* You convince me that I’m a mad scientist!! Convince me that I’m wrong about starting a university!! Tell me how much bureaucracy I’m going to have to go through!! Billionaire!! How much formalities to just to get city hall to talk about me!?! And the labels!! Drop-out!! I had pig-headed screwballs make life impossible!! But they’re goin’ to undercut me!?”

“And I suppose you’ll try to influence me with Zach that a MINIATURE MAX on the way to Alpha Centari in a Cadillac-sized bullet is the way to go!?” Max looked to Trish. “I’ll give this place two weeks,” he said. “I know they’ll hire me back in New York if ya’d rather have me felt up by strange gals!?”

“Tell us more about speculations and what ya’ think is possible!?” Tricia said to Zane and Zach. “I’ll stay for two weeks if ya’ don’t have me write or commit to anything!?”

\* \* \*

“Millionaire, *bro!!*” Max said to Zane. Three weeks after arriving to South Korea, Max and Trish were on larger island of Jeju-do in the town of Seogwi-ri. “You’re worth two point five mill with Zach... *according to numbers that Rodan’s sent via text!!* The billions are linked to terrorists organizations... *as the US government has it classified...* but it’s there!! And the fourth level, we find out... is North Korea!! We believe Lee and Ling were part of a scheme like this!!! A ‘filter program’!?”

“*Yeah!?*” Zane asked. He didn’t seem amused. “Four billion is what we have to work with!! Yes!! It’s no

different than the SECRETARY OF STATE... or *PRESIDENT*... sayin' billions are goin' here or there for the war against terror!! Doesn't make 'em billionaires as individuals!/"

"I guess ya' didn't report yourself as a billionaire without *Z And Z Enterprises*... so I diverge," Max said. They were outside admiring a tropical forest which was walking distance away. *Halla Mountain* was ten miles north in the middle of the isle, and the *East China Sea* was directly south. "I just don't know about this whole experience!! I'm not here to save you!! I want to know about LIFE myself... and I'm starting to believe that a lot of what you've said was hoax or wishful thinking!! The language?! I think I'm catching on at times!! I could stay here for months... just to admire the scenery!! So different!/"

"I'll tell ya' the truth!/" Zane took off his glasses and wiped them. "I'm not suicidal any more!! I'm not saying I ever was!! I wanted to know what was at the edge... and when you're living at a place *devoid* of LIFE... it seems suicidal what goes on!/"

"*Going through the motions!*/" Max agreed. "I went through that before I got together with Tricia!! She won't let me be ordinary!/"

"Where are they?/" Zane asked. "They're supposed to be here with fruit and drinks!/"

"She'll get here!/" Max said. Three minutes later, Zach Rouss and Tricia Galley arrived on a golf cart. Oranges. Lemons. Cantelopes. *Fresh fruits*. Paradise.

Within the hour, a decision was made. *No level two*. Instead, another cult-like motion was enacted. Tricia and Max became man and wife through *MOONIES*. Tricia Bell outlined their plan for the next couple of months. They would *feign* to prepare for level two... all the while, they would say goodbye to trusted ones. The group would head to New Zealand until Americans celebrated Thanksgiving. This would allow "social decompression" and they would not return to the STATES until there was no suspicion of working for outlaw organizations. Max suspected that Zach and Zane got as close as two degrees separate from *Kim Jong Il*. Rodan assured the duo through text messages that they're *Z And Z* money was still available at home. As a matter of fact, Mort Wishum would hire the two as researchers "to keep busy" if they wanted to come back. Max was happy with the outlook... and advised his newlywed wife not to inform anyone of the marriage when they returned to *Channel Eight*.

Annihilation.

The "suicide dream" was dead. Max would never know if human cloning was taking place. Zach and Zane, for that matter... *really weren't sure*. They watched videos... but they could've been computerized.

## SECTION 12: ARRIVAL

November 27, 2009. *Friday*. The day after Thanksgiving. Sam Johnson and Rodan Brock met Tricia, Max, Zach and Zane at LAX. “Heeeeeey!?” Sam yelled to Trish. They squeezed each other. “I heard ya’ were in a SUICIDE CULT!?”

“Bullshit!?” Tricia said. “I was there to save *these* fagboys!?”

“*That would be us!*?” Zach said. He raised his hand.

Max spotted their luggage on the circular conveyor. He grabbed the bags. “*Let’s GO!*?”

Luke Knotts was not angry with Max Bell. He told his compatriot, *Mortimer Wishum*, that the boy showed “balls” and “tenacity” to go after his dreams. Luke absolved Max of his two-year agreement to write in New York for soaps. He figuratively pushed some buttons and got Max and Trish free corporate housing for a year.

There was a fish bowl set up. “Annihilation” had been the word of the year. Banks, car divisions, and politicians fell by the wayside. *Channel Eight* was not supposed to last the year. By December, no one wanted to hear about anything “annihilated” anymore. The word for 2010 would be “LUNCH”—*that was agreed on through vote*—and if anyone was heard saying “annihilating”... “annihilation”... or “annihilated”... a dollar would be put in the bowl. George Renkter and Daniel Abel travelled around DC to push for universal health care. Both had been advocates of government programs securing vibrant lives for poor, young, and underprivileged... *at least when they were younger*. They went to town halls and bantered with the public. As the clock struck midnight to bring in the New Year, Trish and Max kissed one another in the *Channel Eight* news room. Mort agreed to keep the cast together for another year—*no selling to “the highest bidder” if he had his way*—and when Labor Day came in 2010, the fish bowl money was ready to be spent. Forty-three dollars had been collected and the crew went to a pizza joint and watched football with one another. Life could be better... *but most of them knew it could be worse*.