

ZoToN

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a novel trilogy

- Metaphor ZoToN
- Destiny ZoToN
- Manifest ZoToN

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by Eddie Corona

part of the Brick Jayne universe

Metaphor Zoton

Metaphor Zoton prologue

On a hot summer day, a girl passed a church on her bike. She was seven and oblivious to everything around her. She had a crush on a guy--Randal was his name and he was a seventeen year old *stud*--and she was going to pass by his house. That's all she wanted to do. If he was outside talking to his friend like he so often did, she would stop. She would pretend to fix her socks. After that, she would look up at him. If he looked back, she would pretend that he wasn't there. She was in love.

Randal and Bill went outside at eleven in the morning that day. They had a lot to say to one another. A girl's wish came true. Randal's didn't.

****Part One****

* one *

Caaaaa... tharr... siss, ...is the relieving of emotional tensions... Yeah! someone sang from the background radio--a *loud* one--as Randal and Bill left their houses and met in the center of the street. The music blared on. They walked over to a sidewalk after a quick, nonfag embrace. They were always careful about that. They couldn't let things go too far without thinking of themselves as pussies.

"I finally found inspiration, Randal," Bill said, after he thought in his mind about the subsided feeling of potential homosexuality. It was a fleeting one.

"I don't believe you." Randal talked to Bill. They were outside on a sidewalk. Randal sat over on the curb as soon as Bill told him that he had found some inspiration in life. The little girl he had been seeing around quite often strode along like nothing was going on.

"It's all about music," Bill continued.

“No it’s not. It’s those voices in your head.”

“You don’t like me. I *know* that already.”

“How?” Randal was perplexed at this.

“It’s the dreams, motherfucker.” Bill wasn’t mad. He just liked using cuss language a lot.

Vernacular language, if you asked him.

“What the fuck do you *want*!?” Doug Michaels came by. He hadn’t heard anything going on. He was on a rampaged. The old motherfucker was lost. Lost old man. That’s the way Bill saw him.

Daisy, his wife, followed slowly behind. She didn’t say a thing.

“It’s all about that *flag*, isn’t it?” Doug demanded.

“Fuck you, motherfucker.” Bill talked to Doug like he *knew* him. Doug had only been around for a couple of days. Prior to this, he had mostly stayed inside of this across-the-street house. He was a punk ass though. Bill didn’t like to *say* so—he *liked* the guy, as a matter of fact, and not in a *way*--but something was amiss. He didn’t know what it was.

“You’re a *novelist*.” That’s what Doug Michaels said.

“No I’m *not*. I’m a fuckin’ *journalist*.” Bill talked to Doug like he was a real journalist. He wasn’t. He was just a wannabe poseur *wanting* to be a journalist. “What makes you think so *anyway*?”

“You’re a fuckin’...” Doug couldn’t complete this part.

“Besides.. I’m talking to *Randal*. Why don’t you fuck off for a while?” Bill said this but didn’t know what to do. Ever since he started flying, people started looking at him strange. He took off one day and things were never the same.

“Why don’t you fuck *off*?!” Christina said with empathy. She was talking to Bill. He didn’t even see her coming. She worked as a secretary at the nearby *Miller Tribune*.

“What the fuck do you want me to *do*, Christina? I’m not getting *paid* for this, asshole!”

“I see.” It was a revelation to her. She skipped away and didn’t come back. She’d blow up later.

Bill skipped around. He got off the curb, where he had been sitting since *Randal* had joined him there, and he started farting around. “I’m afraid. It’s as simple as that. And *none* of you understand!”

“It’s that Superman song, isn’t it?” This is what Daisy asked. They all knew it was true though. Bill had started *listening* to it. That’s all it took. Oh. It took belief *too*. Anyhow, that’s the way the day went. Bill spent the next few hours explaining to them what had happened. Funny thing was that *he* didn’t know what happened. He jumped out of a three story building one day--*trying to commit suicide*--and then it happened. He started to fly... again and again.

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Anna Haredomm never knew what to do with life. She was a beauty. *Seeing* her knocked your socks off. They didn’t knock your socks off in the *literal* way in the way that Bill was literally *flying*. They knocked your socks off in the way that your mouth dropped *literally* whenever you saw her. Bill, over

time, knew that she would be his. Would it be a month? Would it be a *year*? He didn't know. He didn't know at *all*.

Anna had something interesting going on. She played racquetball. She was from *Holland*. She was a beauty from *hell*. She was playing racquetball one day and Bill saw her. This wasn't long after the time that he was chastised from Doug for not paying attention to him. Doug was *like* this though. He didn't understand. He was sixty-seven. In *his* world, you respected your elders. You *saluted* them when they came by. If it wasn't a *literal* salute, it was a figurative one. Bill wanted to be out of his grasp though. He had slept with his wife one time and things were never the same.

Anna came up to Bill after she played her racquetball. "I want to give you a voice, Anna. Do you *want* one?"

Anna started to say no. She shook her head. Very demur, she could be. Demur in the way that no one else had ever seen her. He didn't know what to do.

Alfred came around. This was Bill's alternate ego. They were best friends. He *looked* a lot like him too. They were very different though. Bill was in *touch* with the world, or so he believed. Alfred? He didn't really have a clue. All he knew was that he wanted to be *Bill*.

"How's she treating you?" Bill asked Alfred.

"Alfred *who*?"

"No. I didn't ask for your *name*. I asked, 'How is she *treating* you?'"

"Fuck you. Fuck *you*. You're not going to stop, are you?!"

"No. No fuckin' *way*. Why should I?"

"You're a fuckin' genius, that's all I know."

Anna stood around but she didn't say much. Bill liked her a *lot*. He wanted her. But he contemplated things. "I used to be a loser, you know?" Bill asked this to Anna, but before he could finish his sentence, she whisked away. She came back. You could tell that she didn't want to *talk* to him.

"You're all about me." It was a statement she made. Bill couldn't tell if she was talking to him or to Alfred. Bill wanted to get to *other* points though. Quite frankly, though he was in the presence of this beautiful girl, he didn't want to *talk* to her any longer. He had been thinking about *flying*. He had been thinking about flying *saucers*. He hadn't *seen* one yet. He was waiting though. Everything that had happened in his dreams the night before was coming true. It was too true to believe.

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"I'm tired. I'm goin' fuckin' *home* right now." After three hours of conversation with Alfred and Anna, Bill finally let the words rip out that he didn't want to say. He told them *everything*. The Koagulates. That's what they had called themselves in his dream.

They had said, "You will start flying. This is a sign. You're supposed to give a message to the rest of your people. Never, since Jesus Christ, has there been a man like you."

"What the fuck are you *talking* about?"

“There’s nothing we can do, son.” They called him son. That impressed him. He wanted to cry.

“What *are* the Koagulates?” That’s what Anna wanted to know from him.

“I don’t know. I don’t *know*. I really... don’t... *know*. It’s a fuckin’ *mystery*, as far as I’m concerned. Bill paused at this. It was then that he informed them--Anna and Alfred--that he was ready to depart. “I’m not going though. You’ll see me. I’m going to be *Superman*.”

Bill went home and spent some time to himself. He *thought* about making a costume. Bad idea, as far as he was concerned. He thought about the *nature* of what was going on. Were the Koagulates people to be *trusted*? Could they even be *called* people? No. Bill didn’t think so. He pondered things that they *said*. Things that made so much sense that he wondered why he hadn’t thought of it earlier.

“We come from a planet that is nineteen light years away.”

“So? Why are you *telling* me this?”

“We’re going to let you fly?”

“*What?*”

“Yep. We’re going to let you fly.”

“You’re *talking* like me. I *appreciate* that.”

“We’re going to let you fly. That’s all you need to know.”

Bill did his laundry. At the same time, he thought about what could be. *I can get some pussy with this. I can.*

He separated the colors from the whites. *I can get on any team I want to be on. All they need to know is that I’m fast. They don’t need to know I can actually fly if I wanted to.*

But Bill knew it was deeper than that. The Koagulates were going to give him a power for a *reason*. *Maybe Jesus Christ had this power. He probably fuckin’ did.*

Bill didn’t know what to do. He lit up a cigarette after leaving the house. Laundry would be done in an hour. That left him enough time to go to the corner store and buy a pint of booze... of any *kind*. He didn’t care what he *got* at this point. *Is it going to impair my flying? I wonder.*

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In the year 2024, there was to be a huge disaster on the planet. That’s what the Koagulates had told him. He sipped his booze--a bottle of E&J liquor--and thought about it. *Why didn’t I tell this to Anna? Why didn’t I do that? I told her about the Koagulates, funny as that was, but I omitted that there would be a future disaster... according to them.*

Anna knocked at the door.

“Who is it?” Bill didn’t know it was her. “I’m coming. Please don’t leeeave...” Bill felt crazy at this moment. *Did I fly? Is this going on?*

Bill opened the door. Anna was naked underneath her dress. How did Bill *know*. He peeked. He

knew she was lifting the front part in *front* of him--he could see that through his lower periphery vision--but he didn't want to look directly *at* it. "Fuckin' crazy." That's all he said. He knew that she knew that he knew. Anyhow, that's the way things went for a while. He screwed her to the bone. Nobody was home... and when the alarm went off to remind him that his load was done, he shot a load of his own.

"I'm going to bed now." Bill wanted to sleep. Anna let him. A half hour after he started snoring, Anna crawled into the bed next to him. She let him snore. She didn't wake him. She stroked his hair. There would be another day.

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By the time the cocaine wore off of Bill, he was ready to go again. The dreams had stopped. Cocaine induces dreams, and Bill had *known* that, but he wasn't really sure if the dreams that he was having were real. Not only was he to start flying again at his own will--in the days past the Anna sleepover, he wasn't *able* to fly and he didn't know why--he was to become invisible at times. The cocaine he had had led him to believe that it was all a farce. He wanted to escape. He couldn't, no matter how hard he tried. He had flown around the city just prior to sleeping with Anna. Why couldn't he fly in the days *past* that? Bill was thinking that it was virtue. The Koagulates had stripped him of his power. Or maybe, in his mind, it was simply that it was like riding a bicycle. In other words, when you first learn, you're going to fall. You're not going to ride the whole time.

Daisy approached Bill as he was doing his lawn. She didn't have a lot to say except that she was emotional. If showing your emotions was a form of talking then she had a *lot* to say. Either way, Bill didn't care. Daisy stood on the sidewalk where he had started to talk to Randal many days before. She stood there as if waiting for an invitation. Bill didn't give her one. He kept mowing his lawn. In his mind, we was a dick. But in his mind, he had *reason* to be a dick. No one in the neighborhood had flown before. Hell. In the history of human beings, the only known flyer was Amelia Earhart, and she died doing it. That was the joke that Bill used to say. "If she wasn't flying around the world *then*, she sure the fuck is *now*." Either way, Bill went about his business. By then, Bill was surprised to see that Daisy had started to leave. She was now across the street but she turned around every now and then as if expecting a conversation to brew up.

"What's *up*, Daisy? Cat got your tongue?" Bill yelled this to her as she passed a house catty-corner to his. "What's *up*? You afraid of me now?" Bill didn't know what to do. He was *intrigued* by what was going on. It had occurred to him that she found out. He didn't *tell* anyone that he had slept with Anna. He hadn't told a *soul*. But weird things were happening. Though no one else in the neighborhood was flying, strange things started to brew. His neighbor, for example, put custom plates on his car. They read "THE END IS NEAR". This is what they said on the outside frame in both the front and the back of the car. *No one does that*, Bill thought. *What's going on? Are the Koagulates starting to talk to other people? Maybe I'm not good enough for them. Maybe they're skipping me. Maybe they're blowing*

horseshit up my ass. Maybe the part of me turning invisible in the near future is bogus. I don't really know.

“What’s up, neighbor?” Bill had told them as they got in their car that day. He was talking to Cruz in particular. He didn’t expect a response.

“What’s it *to* you, freak boy?” Cruz surprisingly came back with.

That was enough for Bill. He went into a shell after that. He thought about Anna a lot. He thought about getting into the sack with Daisy again. *That* would have pleased him. But nothing was going his way. *What could he do?* he often wondered. He was thinking about Cruz. *Maybe he’s thinking about busting me.* The *neighbors*--the *other* ones--seemed good enough. Karma has a strange way of making itself through the grapevine. It was strange to Bill whenever he thought what could be. He would think about his older brother, Ned, now living in Montana, and how proud he’d be of him. He meditated on that for a while then thought, *What if I used my powers to help people? I know deep in my heart that Anna chose me because I flew. But we were tight before that. Why hadn’t we ever slept together?*

Bill wanted to die. That’s all he knew. Daisy made her way up and down the street. She wouldn’t come by Bill though. She went by. She pretended not to hear. Bill knew she wanted *something*. What it could be was beyond him. Maybe that’s why he started mowing his lawn to begin with. It didn’t *need* mowing. He just wanted to be outside though. He wanted to feel connected. He didn’t *feel* connected. “Fuckin’ Koagulates,” he said. He left the mower on the lawn running and went inside for some tea. At this moment, right after going through the screen door, Daisy finally spoke up.

“What the fuck do you *want* from me?”

“Just believe in me, okay?” She didn’t hear him. Bill was whispering under his voice. She didn’t hear him, she took off as if ignored, and Bill hung himself in the driveway ten minutes later.

* two *

On the planet Kliptor, a major celebration was being planned. Bill didn't realize it, but he wasn't going to Heaven. He wasn't going into a state of nibbana, either. For that matter, he wasn't going to Hell. People don't realize this, but the Earth's major religions don't carry with them the facts of the way things work out in the *real* world... or *universe*, per se. Bill's spirit left him about eight and a half minutes after he left dangling from the post that supported his outside basketball hoop. A child saw him and screamed. Paramedics showed up fifteen minutes later. It was too late. Bill was already on his way to Kliptor.

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Nothing could be done. It was too late. Bill's neck was snapped. Rigor Mortis started to set in. It was the end of the world for Daisy. She had planned to propose to him the next day. Her life was too crazy. She was going to leave her husband. She was going to make a case as to why she was the better person for Bill than Anna... or any of the *other* girls that had started to like him since his strange experience of flying around the Moon without an aircraft. Of course, he didn't get to the Moon. But he *pretended* that he did. On the day that her husband, Doug, started to whine about what he was doing, Bill fly right up into the sky, through the clouds, and didn't come back until five in the morning the next day. In all actuality what happened was that he went to see Anna and Alfred at the racquetball courts, but he told them that he was heading toward the Moon and he wouldn't come back without a moon rock.

Daisy was forty-three. She was ready to settle down. She had been married to Doug for a long time, but his temper was short. He didn't *understand* her. Bill wished that he did, but he didn't. Bill slept with her on a day that it was raining outside. She had a flat on highway fifty-seven outside the town of Hetfield, a small place of a hundred residents. No one saw her. Dusk had set in and she was a mess. Bill changed the tire, sparks flew, and he undressed her a half hour later in a hotel with the raunchiest stench in the world. No one noticed the stench that night. It was too late. Everything had happened wrong. The tire change was a success. It was nice to sleep with Daisy and even *she* liked it, but something was wrong. Adultery. It set into his mind. He couldn't sleep halfway through the night. In the morning, he prayed to God that he'd be forgiven. He wasn't. There wasn't even a God up there, or so it turned out. He found this out when his spirit landed on the planet Kliptor.

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"Welcome, Zigweed," a large man dressed in an alien costume said.

Am I dreaming? Bill wasn't sure what was going on.

"No. But you have entered a parallel universe."

"What the...?" Bill wasn't sure what to do. "Did I *tell* you what I was thinking?"

The Zigweed, also known as Bill at this point, didn't know *what* the fuck to do. He waited for a response from the leader. He *must* have been the leader because the other two in presence stood far back.

Am I dreaming? Bill wondered again.

“You are not *dreaming*.” The alien-looking man started to get mad. “You are not *DREAMING*.”

“Okay. But... I don’t know what to do. Do I *pinch* myself? What the fuck *happened*?” Bill knew at the moment. Suicide had kicked into his life. *That’s* what happened. He didn’t know what to do anymore. “Why am I here?”

“You’re *over*...” the alien-looking man said with disappointment. Bill was supposed to *know* something.

“Can I have a *beer*?” Before Bill could finish saying “beer,” one popped up. It was like a cartoon. “What am I supposed to *do*?” Bill asked after taking a sip.

“I don’t *know*.” Bill looked down at himself after hearing the *alien*--yeah, he was an *alien* and Bill *knew* by now--say that he didn’t know. What he noticed was that he didn’t *change*. He was wearing the same shirt. But the peculiar thing was that he could poke his finger right through his body. He was a ghost on another planet.

“Who *put* me here?” Bill demanded of the alien. No response. Bill took off at that time. He started to fly and discovered that he couldn’t. *These* aliens--unlike the ones in his *dreams*--didn’t know him. They were *guessing* things about him. There was a strange connection with the other ones. And it just occurred to him: The other ones were from a planet known as *Xeon*. These guys were *punks*. “Am I in hell?” Bill demanded.

“No. You’re not,” the leader said reluctantly. “But you’re not in...”

“You’re a *fake*. Get me off this fuckin’ place,” Bill said with authority.

“You’re a fake too, I must say,” the alien retorted with a quiet demeanor.

“You’re a *fake*.... Yoda? Is that fuckin’ *Yoda*? Someone wake me up!”

After the alien said that *Bill* was a fake, Yoda from the Star Wars movies appeared from behind a rock. This tripped Bill out. Dreaming or not, he fainted.

“You’ll get *yours*, Bill Swift,” the leader said. He was uptight now. He wanted Bill in Hell. Bill would later discover that Hell *exists*. It’s a planet called *Zoton*.

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“Tackle football is the *best* game you can play if you’re big and tough. We’re not talking about *pro* football in *this* instance. What we’re talking about is the *pickup* games. You know who gets the *women* though? It’s the *swift*.” Bill Swift’s friends around him laughed because of his name. “You can beat down on a guy if you’re two thirty and he’s a buck sixty... but to *evade* a man of that size? It makes him look *stupid*,” Bill Swift said as he cleated up.

Bill Swift was the *best* tackle football player there ever was. He’d never make it to the NFL with his *size*. At the age of eighteen though, he *knew* that he could experience things that only *other* people could *dream* about. On Kliptor, he wondered how things changed and what could have been different that day.

“Get up, ya’ fuckin’ puss,” Dirt said after tackling him. This happened on the day *before* he had his dream of the aliens from Xeon. “You’re going to *get* it the next time you come up the middle, too.”

Bill looked up into the stands that day. Lucy was there. She was still cheering for him. Though overweight, Lucy had a heart. She'd cheer for him no matter what. And when it came *down* to it, that's all he wanted.

"Skank *bitches*." Bill said this after glimpsing the girls *next* to Lucy. Anna was one of them. "What the fuck do you *want* from me?"

The game went on. Dirt had his day. At two fifty, he was *bound* to make his tackles. Adam Fleshman tackled *him* once and it brought a *tear* to his eye. It wasn't because the tackle was hard. It was because Adam was half his size. He took him down with the grace of an elk being taken down by a lion. Whatever the case, the game went on and they had pizza afterwards.

"You don't *know* me," Dirt said to Bill.

"You *tackle* pretty good. That's all I *know*. That's all I *need* to know." Bill paused then said, "Pass me a beer."

"You're eighteen, you prick."

"I know. But you can afford it, can't you?"

"No." Dirt looked surprised at his own answer. Mr. Toughguy who makes all the tackles can't even risk being caught by the *pizza* joint. "Don't say more."

"You *bite* me. You're twenty-one and you're a *pussy*!"

Bill wanted to say, *You're twenty-one and you're a pussy* followed by, *and you stink!* but Dirt picked him up by his collar. "You don't know who I *AM*!"

"I'll fuck you in a *month*. Just wait and *see*," Bill said through a loud whisper. He could hardly breath with Dirt's lock on him.

"I'm going to go now," Bill said two minutes later after he caught his breath and Dirt let him down. "You're a *prick* and I'll say it again tomorrow."

Bill never got the chance to say it to Dirt. That night, he had his dream. The next day, he was flying around town. The last person he wanted to see was Dirt Cassidy.

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"I'm out of inspiration again," Randal told Bill. They were leaving the pizza place and walking down the street. Bill got up on his skateboard and began to ride. Randal followed close behind. "You don't know what it's *like*," Randal told Bill. "It's like being *lifeless*."

"I know what you're saying. I'm there *now*."

"You *pray*." Randal made this observation as he skipped over a curb. "You *pray*, and you're not good. What *good* does it do for you?"

"Nothing. But you're a *prick*."

There was a slight pause. Bill didn't want to get mad. He *knew*, though, that people tend to hate what they can't understand. Randal wasn't understanding *him*, and in return, he wasn't understanding *Randal*. Bill wanted to say something about Randal's lifeless world without his inspiration. He held it in.

It wasn't important enough to bring up. He wondered *why*.

Anna passed by. This caught Bill by surprise. "What's *up*, Anna?"

"You're a..." she began but didn't finish. Bill could tell it wasn't going to be good. She *stopped* herself though. Bill always wanted to win her over. He was into *journalism*. It wasn't the journalism that *most* people are into. He wanted to work for *Grandma Earth*, an offshoot of a paper that he had read long ago. *Grandma Earth* was a paper that you could *rely* on. While people bought *Teen Tiger* and the like, you could count on reading *Grandma Earth* and having them *not* cram something down your neck. Actually, that was wrong. They tried to cram *environmentalism* down your neck. They wanted to get *young* people to do more than to buy Neekay's every week. They wanted them to *work*. They wanted them to *write*. They wanted them to stop watching so much *TV*. In the end, it was a paradox and an oxymoron. They were trying to *sell* you something, but it wasn't typical of what everyone *else* was sell. *Grandma Earth* was the best paper available. That's all he had to *go* on.

"You're a bitch, Anna. And I'm going to *sleep* with you..." Anna left. She started walking away. Bill *knew* he'd sleep with her. She was gorgeous. But that wasn't the *reason* he wanted to sleep with her. It was fourth grade and she passed him a note that he still remembered. The note read, *I like you*. Simple as that. He'd take *that* note over anything though. And she had no breasts at the time. That made him feel noble. *I liked you, Anna, before you were even gorgeous. Why won't you give me a chance now?* Bill knew that something was suppressed within her. *Had she forgotten the note? Nah. It doesn't work that way. Does it?*

Bill skated on. He wanted to finish talking to Anna. Randal was around. Bill was going to swallow his pride. Bill played Playstation for an hour after getting to Randal's house. He couldn't concentrate on what was going on. It didn't matter. Didn't matter at *all*.

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Not long after Randal and Bill stopped playing the Playstation, they heard a knock at the door. Bill had jabbed Randal in the back with the skateboard he had ridden home on.

"Answer it, you prick," he said to him.

"Nah. It's a newsletter from my pops."

"You fuckin' *prick*," Bill jibed. "You're a fuckin' *prick*. I bet it's Anna. I *know* it's..."

Thump, thump, thump.

"It's her. I *know* it," Randal said.

"You can see her?"

"No. But you're not *wrong*. It *might* be that little kid that keeps riding *around* here."

"I know. So..."

"I think she's going to leave *anyway*..."

"I know. Unless *I* answer it."

"You're the boss."

“Whatever.” Bill got up to answer the door at this last remark. “What the fuck do *you* want?” he asked Anna after seeing her. “I didn’t think you’d come. I *heard* you say at the game that you wanted to play with us--the *Playstation*, that is.”

“You’re a corporate raider.”

“No. I’m *not*. I’m *proper*...”

Anna left. She saw the Neekay swisher that Bill was wearing.

Bill *wanted* to chase her. He finally said in a loud and strong voice, “I’ve given *up*! I’ve given *up*! You can’t *beat* them!”

There was an awkward moment of silence in the house. Bill wanted Anna. The world was complicated to him. He didn’t know what to do. Finally, he exposed his man-boobs by taking off his shirt and going after her. “This is my *heart*. That’s my logo. You can’t *see*...”

“I know,” she said but she was bored by then.

“Does it *sound* good?” Bill tried to jibe her. He couldn’t. She was upset but she was feeling good. He could see it under the tears that started to form.

Anna took off at this time. Tears started streaming down. From down the street, he could see Daisy and Doug coming. “What are you doing *now*?” Doug demanded of Bill. He *knew* Bill. Bill even believed that he *liked* him before. He *knew* him but he wouldn’t stop harassing him... for whatever reason.

“You don’t *know* me,” is what Bill finally said to Doug.

“I know,” Doug calmly said back... but Bill wasn’t paying attention to him. He was watching Anna as she was going down the street. He paid attention to her while Doug looked on. He didn’t want to *deal* with Doug. “I know you know me,” is what Doug said.

“Fuck it. Doesn’t matter anyway.” Bill paused, paid attention to Doug for a while, then said, “Were you talking to me?”

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Bill found out *why* Doug had been harassing him. He was about to go to sleep when the phone rang. It was Daisy. “He *knows*, Bill.” *Knows what?* didn’t even cross Bill’s mind. Doug *knew* that they had slept together. Did Daisy tell? That’s what he wanted to know. “He knows. And he’s going to *shoot* you.”

“What?” Bill was groggy. He was ready for bed. He was *sleepy* from the earlier football game. Though it had been the day before, he was still getting over the aches and pains. “What the hell are you *talking* about?” Bill knew though.

“He’s going to talk to me tonight. I *think* he’s going to forgive me.”

“I don’t *care*. What we did, we did.” Daisy hung up the phone before Bill finished. “It was a mistake then. It was a fuckin’ *mistake*.” Bill held the phone in his hands. The words he had just spoken bounced off the wall but nobody heard them. He was alone. He was ready for a change in life.

“Milk. That’s what I need.” Bill got up not long after hanging up the phone--it was clutched in

his hands for about twelve seconds or so--and started toward the kitchen. *I've gotta stop talking to myself now.*

Bill fixed a bowl of hot milk. He intended to put Cheerios inside. He didn't though. He sipped it like a cat at first and then just drank it like a bowl of soup. "I'm going to bed now," he said. "Will you please stop *talking* to me!?" The words of Daisy were ringing in his head: *He's going to shoot you.*

* *three* *

Bill had these *fantasies* when he was younger that he'd die--a tragic *death*--and there'd be *women* that would be weeping at his funeral. There were no weeping *women* at his funeral. His mom had passed away the year before. She would have wept for him but she was gone. Daisy wept for him, but she wasn't at the funeral. Doug would not *allow* her to go. She wept and she wept and she wept. If Bill would have known what was going on, he would have been saddened. Anna was there. But she didn't weep. She shed a tear but, but that was in passing.

It was *Alfred* that wept for Bill's passing. He was at the funeral and he wept like a baby.

The year before, Bill had been admitted to a private school. Fezeare Prep Academy was the name. He didn't have much money but he had talent. He didn't have *extraordinary* talent but that was okay by him. He wanted a shot and they *gave* him a shot. They gave him a full ride scholarship for an essay that he submitted to them. It was entitled *The End of the World As We Know It*. He had wanted to be a journalist. He had talked about how his buddies were committing suicide left and right. They weren't doing it real *life*. They were doing it in life decisions they were making. He played guitar and that helped. Alfred used to play guitar with him. They'd switch off between playing bass and drums when they recorded on a cheap four-track machine that Bill's older sister had given him. He didn't want to be in the business though. Not in the *music* business. It was a cutthroat place. You'd be lucky to make money if you had *extraordinary* talent which he did not possess. He thought he could make it as a journalist though.

"What the fuck do you *want* from me?" Alfred demanded into thin air. "What the fuck are you *doing* right now, Bill? What the fuck is going *on*?" Alfred sat underneath the rain. The coffin was going to be lowered into the ground in fifteen minutes. He was going to have to go sooner or later. He didn't know what to do.

"Come on now," Anna said to Alfred.

"Come on *what*? You're not even *crying* for God's sake! Don't you *care*? Don't you fuckin'..."

"Don't you raise your voice to *me*!" Anna stunned Alfred at this time. He didn't know what to do. A moment of silence followed--*awkward* silence. "I don't know what to do," is what Anna finally mustered. "Let's go. I'll let you play your guitar at my house."

"Don't you *do* this to me, Anna." Alfred was thinking about what was going on. He couldn't *read* Anna. He didn't *want* to read Anna. He was hot. The rain trickled down on his skin but he was *hot* inside. He wanted a break. He wanted a break from life in *general*. He knew it wouldn't come. "I'm on the verge of joining him," he said to Anna.

She didn't respond. After a few moments, she laughed.

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The End of the World As We Know It was not the only thing that got Bill into Fezeare though he didn't know it. Fezeare was a prep school for the *rich*. What the rich do is to identify talent. They look for

gold. Bill was a nugget. He was an unrefined *nugget*. What Fezeare wanted to do is to *take* that nugget and to mold it into something *else*. They wanted it to look like a piece of art. They wanted it to look like a *statue*. That's what they wanted. And in the end, it would make them more money. The cheap scholarship in terms of what *they* were worth was to be an investment. That's all it was. Bill didn't know this. Above the arches of the doorway that led to the administration building was a plaque that read, "We accept everyone." They accepted him. He had no idea they wouldn't accept Alfred. Though they got along--he and *Alfred*--Alfred wasn't good enough to *them*. Besides that, they believed that they were getting two for the price of one. What *Bill* did for Fezeare, Alfred would do as well... because they were *brothers*. They loved each other. Bill knew it. Alfred knew it. But Bill wanted to blaze a trail. Alfred was a year *younger* than him. He wanted to get *Alfred* into the school as well. And he wanted *Alfred* to get his younger friends into the school years later. It was a chain, and as far as Bill was concerned, a chain is only as strong as its weakest link.

Alfred held the rejection letter in his pocket. He had received it not even two weeks before Bill started flying. Bill started *crying* when Alfred was rejected. He didn't cry in *front* of Alfred. He couldn't do *that*. But he cried. He cried at night. He cried in the day when no one was looking. It ate him inside like a cancer. He started to *question* Fezeare. He didn't know what they were all about. *Why would they reject Alfred but they accepted me?* Bill wondered. He cried night and day for about the next seven or eight days. He didn't let Alfred know. He *did* let him know, *I'm not going to Fezeare next year. They're a bunch of jerks. How could they see that you didn't belong there?*

What Bill didn't realize was that the school was in the process of selling out. They had *started* with idealism, but idealism doesn't pay the bills. The sign that said that they accepted everyone was a hoax, in the *end*. It was a hoax. It was idealism to the max. If they accepted *everyone* then the janitors would have been able to attend classes once in a while. There weren't any janitors in his *classes* though.

"Why'd you leave me, Bill?" Alfred managed, right before going to bed. He thought about crying at the funeral. He thought about Anna. He thought about rejection. He wondered where Bill could be. He had been an atheist, Alfred had been, but now he was starting to believe. He knew that the strange things in the days past were an *indicator* that the world was nothing like he ever believed. What was the *nature* of the universe? That's what he wondered. He fell asleep pondering it.

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Waldo Fleshman entered the room with his pocket protector. He was skiing the day before and still had a sunburn from not wearing any sunscreen. He had known Bill but was afraid to tell anyone about the way he was feeling. He stopped by the blackboard on the way to his seat and wrote in chalk, "We need to *live* now." Simple as that. Someone from the back of the room threw a paper ball at him. No one else cared. Waldo *struck* a couple of people at what he wrote but he was a *nerd*. You *can't* publicly cry out for a nerd unless you're a nerd yourself.

“Bill was a *nerd*, I want you to know,” Waldo said. His *friends* called him Wally.

“You’re a fuckin’ nerd *too*,” Danny cried from the back of the room.

Everyone roared, and then Miss Prits walked in. “Who *WROTE* this?” she demanded.

“I did, you fuckin’ *cunt*.” The class stood silent. It wasn’t *Danny* that claimed to have written the message. It was Wally and he was mad. He even called her a word that he hadn’t used since junior high. “You’re a fuckin’ asshole,” he continued on. He didn’t say it to Miss Prits. He said it to Alfred, sitting in the front row, center seat.

“You’re a *what*?” Alfred retorted. “You’re going to the fuckin’ *principal*. Why are you *doing* this?”

Wally didn’t respond. He had nothing to say. Miss *Prits* didn’t have a thing to say. When Danny finally broke the silence with a loud fart, the class busted up again. No one was sent to detention. They knew that Wally was affected by what had happened with Bill. They knew. They felt it. In the end, no one cared. Not even Wally. He was finally accepted by them--the *rest* of them, and not just Bill (*God rest his soul*, Wally would say later) and not just by Alfred. He was accepted by *all* of them.

“I don’t need this anymore.” Wally took off his pocket protector and threw it in the trash.

“Two points. Nice shot,” a girl from the back said. She liked him now. She had thought he was a fuckin’ *loser* before this. She liked him though.

“What in the *world* do you want me to *do*?” Daisy said.

She had entered the room and Alfred saw her first. “What are *you* doing here?”

“Come on. You’re going to go.” Alfred knew what she wanted. She wanted Bill, but Bill was no longer around. This wouldn’t be the *last* time that Alfred would realize that he had become an unintentional surrogate for Bill Swift. Alfred even thought she wanted sex. It was suggested in the clothes she was wearing.

“I’m *coming*, Your Hosebeast. Just wait up for me and I’m taking off.”

“Who *is* this?” Miss Prits wanted to know.

“It’s my mom,” Alfred said... then left the room.

“Who the fuck *are* you?” she screamed at him as he approached the doorway at the end of the hall.

“I don’t *know*. But I’m having fun. Ease up on my *ear*... please!” Alfred said.

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Alfred was still rubbing his ear as he passed Thirty-fourth Street in Daisy’s car. “I want you to *meet* someone,” she told him.

“Who *is* it?” Alfred asked.

“It’s none of your *business*.”

“If it’s none of my *business*...” he started to say. “My *ear* hurts!” he finally added.

“I *twisted* it for a reason,” she told him.

“Fuck you,” he told her.

“Get out.” She stopped the car and let him out.

“What the fuck are you *doing?*!” Alfred demanded of her. He was already sitting curbside when she whisked away in her car.

He started to walk down the street after getting up and dusting himself off. This was after her car was out of view. She knew where he lived though. He was sure of *that*. If she knew his class, she knew other things as well. *She likes me. I know she does. It's the Bill inside of me. I'm pretty sure of it.*

Ten minutes later, Alfred was near his house. He sat outside on the porch for a while. *I bet she comes back*, he thought to himself. He didn't know what to do. He *thought* of going inside. He didn't. He had a feel she would come back. It *ate* him who she wanted him to meet. He wanted to *meet* this person. Things were getting boring now though. It was nearly sundown when he finally decided to go in. *I have nothing to do anyway. Was that really a waste of time? I hope my teacher doesn't bust me tomorrow though.*

Alfred went inside and made a sandwich. This is when things started to get eerie *again*. It had been eerie before when Bill had first told him about *flying*. Things were strange now. Things started to shake around him. He was in California and things were *supposed* to shake. The world *knows* about the quakes that happen in the good, old southwest part of the United States of America. Things were different now though to Alfred. Things started to float. It happened for about five seconds. He looked at the Chex cereal in front of him. The milk started to levitate above the fuckin' *Chex*. It was strange but he knew it was a sign.

“Show yourself!” he finally demanded.

“What's going *on!*?” his mom demanded of him. She was in the other room, already going to sleep. “What's going *on* in there?”

“Nothing, Mom.” Alfred changed his demeanor. “Didn't you feel a quake right now?”

“Who are you *talking* to?”

“No one in particular.” At that moment, Daisy came to the door. “My other mom's *here*, Mom! She just came to the door.”

“You're out of your...” his mom began. She came out in a robe and saw an old lady at the screen. The lady wasn't *old*--maybe in her mid-thirties--but she wasn't young in the sense that her son *Alfred* was young. “Who *are* you?” his mom asked the lady.

“You're *old*, son of a bitch,” Daisy said to Alfred.

There was a pause. “Mom. Meet Daisy. She was one of *Bill's* friends.”

“God rest his *soul*,” his mom said.

“Mom. I want you to *do* something.”

“Yeah?”

“Tell her I'm not *Bill!*”

“Okay, sweetheart.”

Another awkward silence ensued. “What do you *want* from me?” the lady demanded. Another

awkward silence. Daisy had spoke mostly to Alfred's *mother* this time. "I'm going to go."

"I think you're *crazy*, you son of a whore," Alfred's mom said.

Another awkward silence. "Do you know I *loved* you?" Alfred asked Daisy.

"Why?" Daisy wanted to know. She was *genuine* now. No games.

"You're what I call a *doll*. And Bill liked you a *lot*. I think he still *does*, wherever the fuck he is."

Alfred's mom stood in silence. She wasn't sure what to do. Another awkward silence ensued before Nicole's husband came into the room. "Are you okay?"

"No, I'm not," Nicole said.

"Daisy, this is my mom, Nicole. Nicole--er, uh--*Mom*, this is Daisy." Alfred introduced the two ladies as he headed for the screen to let Daisy in.

"I *know* you," is what Daisy said to Alfred. She wanted him to stop talking.

"Say your *peace*," Alfred said to Daisy.

"You play *guitar*..." she began.

"And drums and bass. What's your *point*?"

"I want a friend like you."

"You *have* one." Alfred looked around and noticed that his step-dad wasn't comfortable. "This is my friend and step-dad, Homer. We *call* him Homer. His real name is..."

"...Lard ass," Alfred's step-dad said. Everyone laughed. They had tea, Daisy left (not without *fighting* though; she wanted to spend the night there), and Alfred slept peacefully for the first time since the prior week's funeral.

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In the days that *followed* the strange incident in which Daisy met his mom, Alfred would have strange dreams. He slept peacefully on the first night of the meeting, but disturbing images would keep creeping in his head. He stopped going to school. People would look at him strange. Not only had he lost his best friend to a suicide, there was the rumor that started that Bill had *flown* prior to killing himself. Initially, it was only a handful of people that witnessed it. Rumors are a strange beast though. They started saying that he had deathrays coming from his eyes. They started saying that he had see-through vision and he was checking out the cops while they passed in their squad cars. The popular rumor about the cops was that he was helping them solve cases. Nothing of the sort happened. Bill's father even lied and said that Bill had been secretly flying since he was six years old. Nothing was true but people even suspected that *Alfred* had the powers as well, being that he was a best friend. In the end, he couldn't handle it. He started praying at night as Bill so often did. He started praying and wishing for *signs*. He didn't get them except for in his dreams. In *one* dream, his father--not the biological one whom passed away in a train wreck in 1997, but rather the one he had known through Catholic catechism--told him that it was all nonsense. *Don't pay attention to your memories*, he said in the dream. *It's reality that counts. Reality is that you*

don't stand a chance against the government. They'll slay you if you don't handle things right. Tell them that Bill flew. Leave it at that. Tell them that you saw it once with a group of friends. Leave it at that.

Alfred was disturbed though. There would be conflicting messages. That's all he knew. In the end, he wanted to leave his church--one that he hadn't regularly attended since his confirmation the year before--and he wanted to go to Oregon. A *voice* told him to do so. It was his *own* inner voice that was saying it, but the *way* it said it was strange.

There was a new church that had started up there. It was a *cult* in many people's minds. It wasn't modeled after Jesus Christ. It was modeled after Kurt Cobain. *Go up there*, the voice said. A long time later, Alfred would learn that Bill himself was planting the seed in him, though not directly. Bill came across Kurt Cobain, himself. This happened on the planet Xeon.

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A celebration was being prepared for Bill at the moment that the inhabitants of Kliptor knew that he passed from his Earthly body. They thought that he would be one of *them* in time. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Bill wore out his welcome in the first minute that he talked to the nation's leader (being that the planet was considered to be a nation by the people that lived there). He wore out his welcome and was exiled. They sent him to Neptune in the Earth's galaxy. It's not inhabitable by people that walk the Earth as they are born. When they leave their bodies--their organic captors, as they are called elsewhere--they are free to be liberated of gravity and the lack of oxygen. Free flying is what most people get... unless they wind up on Zoton or a place like it.

From Neptune, Bill went other places. When he found Xeon finally, he came across Kurt Cobain by chance. They were both looking for the planet's leader. One couldn't be found. It was at this point that Kurt suggested to Bill that he send his friends on Earth to a place south of Seattle but north of Bill's earthly home: Oregon.

* four *

Anna strode along late at night. She approached Alfred's house, which had been located near a dairy farm since its inception, and she walked up the doorsteps.

Knock, knock, knock.

No answer.

Knock, knock, knock.

Still, no answer.

She went to the side of the house and ventured to peek through the window. The curtain was open a crack and she could see enough to witness pots and pans from an open kitchen cupboard. She stayed long enough to see Alfred's mom. She was in a nightgown. She was getting ready for bed, obviously. Maybe she was upstairs while Anna had been knocking and didn't hear. Maybe she was just knowing that late at night, you *ignore* these things sometimes. Most likely, it was the former and not the latter.

Alfred laughed miles away. He was on a Greyhound bus on the way to Oregon. He knew what he would see up there. He would see a lot of *flakes*. He might even see a couple of shysters. He didn't know what to expect in *specifics* but he knew he'd be blown away nonetheless.

Anna knocked some more. This time, Nicole came to answer.

"I don't *know* what's going on!" Anna said to her.

"Who *are* you?"

"Don't you keep track of your son's *friends*?"

"Which son's? I have two."

"Not the *mean* one..."

"Not *Jeremy* then."

"Yeah. He's a brat," Anna said. They laughed and then Nicole let her in.

"Do you *see* what I'm talking about?" Anna asked Nicole they after sat down and had a brief conversation concerning the whereabouts of Alfred.

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

"I think he's joining a *cult*. He was talking *weird*."

"I know. I *sent* him there."

"You *what*?"

"You're a stranger to me," Nicole said. No one was in the room but Anna. Anna knew that she wasn't talking to her though. She was talking to her son, wherever he may be. "You're a fuckin' *idiot*!" she said. "You're a... Oh. You're taking *advantage* of me!"

"What the fuck are you *saying*?"

"I feel him." Nicole told this to Anna.

"She..." Anna tried to change the subject but couldn't. "Are you *saying*..."

"Yep. I *feel* him. Sure as shit."

"And you're *okay* with that?" Tim came in the room. He had been sleeping. Anna spoke to him

as he approached.

"I told you... No. It was the other kid. Anyhow, my name's *Homer*. Call me Homer. My enemies call me Tim."

"You're *what*?" Anna asked.

"Who are *you* talking to now?" Nicole demanded of her.

"It's in this house. I know it is," Anna said. "I can..."

"Sure as shit my *ass*!" Tim screamed. Many miles away, Alfred logged onto a book that he had been keeping. *Sure as shit my am!* he wrote. "Sure as *shit*. That's... Do you *feel* what...?" Tim started a sentence and couldn't finish it. He looked at a picture of himself, dubbed "Homer" underneath, and asked it, "I *know* you know what's up, buddy. Why are you *there*?"

"You're crazy. That's all I know," Anna said. She was speaking to a picture next to the Homer one. It was dubbed "And the rest of the Simpsons" underneath. Alfred made a funny face in it--it must have been taken a few years ago because of the acne around his mouth--and he was the predominant person. "I don't know what to *do*." She looked at the picture. *All* of them were crazy by then, but they didn't realize what was really going on: The rest of the world was becoming crazy in a *heartbeat*.

Alien sightings started taking place two weeks before Alfred left to Oregon. People began calling the Air Force late at night. At first, the Air Force dismissed them. Then, the Air Force began to deny that people were calling in in mass quantities. After that, they began to fess up. They *had* to. TV stations and radio stations alike started voicing the concerns of everyday citizens.

"I don't feel so bad now," Nicole said.

"Bad about *what*?" Anna asked.

"I don't *know*."

"You're a fuckin' *Homer*," she said to the picture of Alfred.

"No. *I'm* the Homer," Tim said. He went back to his room. "I'm *sleeping*, ya'll."

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Alfred went to the Greyhound station with just enough money to buy his ticket and maybe a couple of meals. He *thought* about hitching a ride. That wouldn't do. He needed money. He needed money *bad*, but it wouldn't do. He had to buy food or *scrounge* from trashcans. That wouldn't be so bad. The *urgency* to get to Oregon... That's what drove him. He rode on the bus like a stranger. He looked at lovers. They looked so happy and oblivious to what was going on. *The world is changing. Bill knew this all along. I don't think he knew the magnitude of things.*

He scribbled something down: *Sure as shit my am!* He didn't know what it meant. Since the alien sightings had started, he got impressions--*strong* impressions--and he'd ignore them. He did this as first. Later, things would happen that felt like *deja vu*. He didn't know what to do because he couldn't control it. The best he could do was to log everything down that felt strong.

Sure as shit my am!

After he bought a log book, he jotted something down that seemed to come from the outside.

Buy a beer. It ain't so queer.

There was a billboard--a *new* one--that was being put up around the corner. Alfred didn't know this as he jotted down his idea. He saw it two minutes later. It didn't drop his jaw--he was already *expecting* things like this--but it made him feel less crazy.

I've gotta get me a beer. I hope it's not that advertiser working on me. That would suck.

Alfred thought about things a moment longer. He thought about Daisy. Somehow, things felt incomplete. He should have slept with her. He *could* have slept with her. But Daisy told him the story of Bill's final day on the planet as a living person. She said that she had sought him out. The *guilt* must have buried him. That's what Daisy thought. Doug was a good guy. He was an *old* guy. Bill made Daisy feel young, or so Alfred thought. *I could have made her feel young*, Alfred thought. A McDonald's passed on the left. Suddenly, Alfred was hypnotized. *What do I feel like doing? Eating a Big Mac or getting my work done?* When the bus stopped, he made his decision. A Fish Fillet and a bag of fries. That would do.

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Oregon's second biggest city is Duckton. Duckton's biggest claim to fame is that it started the shoe company, Neekay. There had been a small shoe factory in the center of town that made the state's shoes. Pretty soon, they were making the *nation's* shoes. When they got big enough, they opened factories in other parts of the country. At this point, they made shoes for the rest of the world. Later, they would move their factories from the United States to places unheard of. They would do this and they would branch out into apparel as well. On the day that Anna slept with Bill, he was wearing a Neekay sweatshirt. He did this not really caring that it made him mad every time he put it on. He had learned at Fezeare Academy that Neekay was an evil source. They were using slave labor on seven different continents. No, there were not penguins making shoes in Antarctica. No. None of that. It was only the *portrayal* of the company that they would indeed *do* that. Bill stopped caring though. Fezeare pretended to be something... and they rejected his friend, Alfred. If they did that, they *couldn't* be right about what went on. Though it still made Bill mad toward the end of his days to put on a Neekay shirt, it wasn't always because the anger was directed at Neekay directly. He was mad at Fezeare as well. He didn't want to *know* what he knew.

Alfred approached the city of Duckton at noon. It had surprised him that it took so long to get there. He was staring at lovers on the bus for a couple of hours. After that, he felt like a voyeur. The rest of the ride was long.

In the place where the old, original Neekay factory was, there was a museum. Next to the museum stood a thirty story structure. The Neekay swisher was on top. It looked like a spiral. There were no shoes made there anymore. Nonetheless, the city was thriving. Inside the building was a complex of various business offices. The most dominant and *important* ones belonged to Neekay. The rest of them were leased to buildings that wanted to feed off of the Neekay success story as far as financial wealth is concerned.

Neekay was tarnished. It didn't matter. What they *did* have going for them was that they turned the town into a thriving media center. In all the offices at the top third of the building were people that worked for Neekay Incorporated. Some of them specialized in the apparel department. Some of them kept tabs on where and what shoes were being sent in. Some of them dealt with contracts of megastar athletes. The most important of them worked for Neekay's budding television department. Neekay put out a product that rivaled Fox and the rest of the family of networks associated with it. They owned thirteen radio stations in Oregon alone. They were affiliated with ABC in markets that Neekay Broadcasting couldn't reach. In Oregon, NBN--the Neekay Broadcasting Network--reached ninety percent of all homes. The *only* homes that Neekay didn't reach were the ones without cable television or satellite hookups. This was a good deal of people to Neekay. That's why they partnered with ABC whenever they could.

Alfred looked up at the Neekay swisher at the top of the building. "What a goddamn *mess*," he said.

"*What?*" a lady asked from the seat in front of him.

"I'm in a mess. That's all."

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Bill lit up a cigarette on the planet Xeon. He was talking to Kurt Cobain, now known as *Zofer*, for about an hour, *Earth time*. He lit the cigarette and it didn't occur to him that cigarettes were exclusive to the planet Earth. He lit one up and he dragged. He didn't want to think of things. He knew that by now--his ability to communicate with the living from his former planet was becoming *greater*--Alfred must be deboarding his bus. Alfred looked around at his Oregon surroundings at this time. He couldn't *feel* Bill directly--he wondered what he must be *doing*--but he made a trek into his journal nonetheless. *I know I need money. I know I need to make a couple of friends. I need to avoid getting sidetracked by the business of this town. Please help me, God. Please help me, Bill, if you're out there.* That's what he wrote before going into a McDonald's. "Is there any way I could get some *help* around here?" he asked aloud. No one was in the restaurant to the best of his knowledge. "*Hello?*" Still no response.

Alfred jumped the counter at that moment. The grills were hot. Everything looked in place. Nothing was burning. Nothing was over-cooking. There was food around. He grabbed an Egg McMuffin when somebody came from around the corner.

"We were *robbed* a second ago. Who are *you*?"

"I'm no one. I'm looking for *help*," Alfred responded to a scrubby man.

"I can see that. You're a *mess*. Please, let me help. We've been *expecting* you." *WEIRD CITY*, Alfred thought.

"I just want to know where the bathroom is. That's all."

"What's with the Egg McMuffin in your hand?"

"*What* Egg... Ah. *This?* I'm hungry, you see? And I thought no one was around..."

"...so you just jumped the *counter* and had your..."

“No. It’s not *like* that. I’m hungry though. I didn’t come *in* here to steal *food*!”

“Goddammit!” Alfred heard from the back. More *weirdness*, as far as he was concerned. “I...” a female’s voice started.

“It’s the lady of the house,” the man said. “She *owns* this place now.”

“*What?*” Alfred wanted to know. “What’s gone *on* over here?”

“Fuck you!” The man was mean now. “Fuck you and go home to California. I can tell you’re *from* there. No one wears those canvas shoes up here but *you* guys... and the guys from New York. You’re all *pricks*. We don’t *want* you here.”

“I’m not here for Neekay. I’m not here for... *anything*. Who’s the lady, anyway? She don’t *look* like an owner.”

“Wish granted. You get to speak to her.”

For the next hour, Alfred talked to Lolita. She was an aging black lady. Oregon was ahead of the times as far as the aliens were concerned. The businesses still ran, but when they saw a stranger, they didn’t know what to expect. When Alfred convinced *Chuck*, the mean man whom greeted him, that he wasn’t an alien, he was let in. Reluctancy was on his face as he did it. He did it nonetheless.

“Okay now,” Lolita told Alfred as they ended their conversation. “You’re going to that church, they’re going to *tell* you things there, and in a month, we might have our *life* back.” The last part of her statement was nearly a question. She was unsure of herself and a *little* scared.

“I’m *going*. That’s all I know. I *don’t* know what else is going on. My *friend* is in that church. I *know* he is. He told me so in *dreams*. He said it’d be the best way to *reach* him.”

“I *get* you now.” Lolita let him go at this last statement. “There’s a hospice in town. Check in. You could use the rest.” By then, Alfred was out the door. Lolita hoped she was heard. Alfred needed the rest.

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Alfred arrived at the Church of Kurt Cobain at around dawn of the day following the day that he stepped foot in Duckton. He had spent a few hours napping in a park. After that, he set about on a twelve-hour trek. He found out from a homeless man that the church was due south, about forty miles. He stopped to rest once in a while. Beside that, he was on a mission. He took off at about five o’ clock and didn’t look back.

At the door of the church was a man that *resembled* Cobain. It was eerie and Alfred started wondering if it was a good idea to do what he’s done. *It’s too late though. I had to do something. Nothing at home was working.*

“Hello, sir,” the man said. “My name is *Shuster*. You can call me Clyde if you stick *around* long enough.”

“Huh? What? Is this *it?*” Alfred looked around and saw that the church could seat no more than eighteen people. The rest of it was a stage. He *didn’t* know what the stage was for just yet. It was dawn

and no one else was around.

“Yep. You bet your sweet *ass* this is it. Don’t worry. When it gets *big*--the *crowd*, I mean--when we get fifty or so people here, we go outside. Simple as that. That’s the way it *works*.”

“You’re *Shuster*? The fuckin’ Shuster I’ve been *looking* for?”

“Kid. It’s *Shuster* and not *shyster*. Keep that in mind, okay?”

“Yep. Lead me on.”

For the next twenty minutes, Mr. Shuster led Alfred around. He could see a *lot*. In the back of the church were bleachers. Behind them, was a wall that was painted green and orange, a rather odd combination if you were to ask Alfred. He didn’t know what to do at the end of the twenty. He had no place to stay and the service wasn’t going to start ‘til noon.

“What do I do *now*, Mr. Shuster?”

“You can *start* by...” the man began. He retracted himself. He didn’t like ignorance but caught himself whenever he got angry at detecting it. “You can *start*,” he said again, “by polishing my shoes and licking my boots.”

“I thought you weren’t a *shyster*.”

“Fuck off, kid. You’re not *ready*.”

“Every day is *Sunday*, for all I care. Don’t you guys *teach* that?”

“It’s a misnomer. We’re in it for the money. I *tell* you because you look poor, no one would believe you over me *anyway*, and you have nothing to give. If you shine my *shoes* though...”

“I’ll wait for the service.”

“And if it’s *good*? You’ll shine my shoes *then*, won’t you?”

“No, buddy. You can fuck *off*.” Alfred felt dejected at this. He didn’t know what to do. His *first* plan was to walk back to the city of Duckton. Maybe the people there would hire him long enough to buy a ticket back home. Maybe he could call collect and...

“Listen, man. I’m *sorry*. I come across people like you all the *time*,” the shyster said. “I *don’t* want to harm you.”

“You’ll listen to me, won’t you?” Alfred was desperate.

“No. I’ve heard a million stories. Kurt touched them in *this* way...”

“NO! That’s not *it*! It’s not it at *all*! I *talk* to him. He tells me things at *night*. He *says* something to me every time...”

“...Ah, buddy. You *don’t* understand. I *tried* to tell you...”

“...Listen man. You’re not *listening* to me. I walked all *night* to see you. FUCKIN’ *LISTEN* TO ME!!”

“Alright. You have an hour. After that, you have to go. I don’t even want you at the service.”

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At around the same time that Alfred walked up to the Church of Kurt Cobain for the first time in

his life, Anna was having a dream, many miles to the south of him. It was about cars. There were *fast* things in her dream. There were spaceships and drug addicts. There was a *lot* of things and she couldn't make sense of any of it when she woke.

At the time that Alfred sat down with Mr. Shuster for the first time, both of them sharing a bottle of homemade brew, Anna was starting to wake up. She pulled the covers over her face to hide the sun. She wondered briefly where she was at. Then she remembered... *I'm at Dirt's house. His parents are gone. I'm betraying Bill somehow. That's the end of the world as I know it.*

* five *

Randal was just getting used to the idea that Bill was out of his life. Did he *want* him out of his life? Probably so. He didn't admit it though. Bill brought *baggage* with him. He brought the people that were from the planet Xeon and everyone else. Randal didn't want to deal with this. He didn't want to deal with the fact that *everyone* was dealing with the same thing.

"You think I'm a fuckin' *loser*, don't you, Bill?" Randal asked him. He was dreaming and didn't know it.

"No. But you *are* a fuckin' loser. Did you know that?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I don't *think*. I know. They *tell* us this stuff up here."

"You *don't*..." Randal started thinking of his buddies. They'd kick his ass. They'd kick *Bill's* ass. "You're bold. I know," Randal said. That was the end of the conversation. He woke. Bill had a new realization at that point: They *could* get to him... in their *dreams*. Literally, in their *dreams*.

"I'm not going to end this so fast," Randal said aloud. No one was around. He couldn't hear Bill any longer. He knew that Alfred had taken off north. He didn't know why. He hadn't stayed in touch with Anna or any of the *rest* of the people that Bill had hung out with. "I'm going to *lose*," Randal said.

You're not going to lose, a voice from within him said. *You're not going to lose at all. I've lost, Randal. You can trust me on it. I feel great, but that's about all. They're going to send me to another planet next week.*

I'm hearing voices, Randal thought. *I'm hearing fuckin' voices!*

Bill was around him. He learned, by then, to be around people *all* the time. It wasn't just a chance thing anymore. If he wanted you to *think* of him, he could do it on command. It wasn't Cobain who showed him. It was Andy Worhol. Surprising as it may be, Andy Worhol showed Bill the ropes at reaching people on Earth.

I'm going to go now, Randal. Please trust me. You're the only one I've got. Alfred's a lost motherfucker. He won't listen to me. He rarely even listens to himself.

I got ya', bud, Randal said in his head, and then he cracked open a can of beer. He sipped it. *I hope my mom comes back okay*. Many parents were leaving. The government started quarantining certain areas. Other places, they would just *scare* you to death. Bill lived in a neighborhood where aliens were present. They weren't there in mass. This happened first in the big cities. The government tried to quarantine these areas in hopes of stopping a disaster. They didn't know that it was inevitable that they would lose. *I got ya', bud*, Randal said again. He finished his beer not even a minute after cracking it open.

* * *

The day before Randal had his mental conversation with the ghost of Bill, Alfred sipped beer with Clyde Shuster. He had a rather interesting conversation. In all, he thought it was worth it. He thought

traveling up to Oregon on a whim was *worth* it.

"I have something to tell you, Mr. Shuster."

"I know already. I can read your thought like anything else I can read."

"It's not that though. I know it's hidden or else you would have *done* something by now."

"You've *been* looking at my necktie. I *know* that. There's something about the necktie and I can *feel* it. No. I *can't* read your mind and tell you what it is. I know it's there though."

"It's your *neck*. Not your necktie. It's ready to be *hung*." Alfred barely got the words out before he was attacked by Mr. Clyde Shuster.

"I don't *like* what you're saying, little buddy!"

"I don't give a *shit*!" Alfred retorted. He could barely speak his words. He was being choked.

"All I was *saying* was that it's a pretty noose. Do you ever *get* that?"

"No. Fuck *no*. Why would I?"

"You're from Seattle, no?"

"Duckton, Oregon. That's where I'm from."

"You *know* of Seattle or else you wouldn't have..."

Clyde wouldn't have any more of the conversation. "I *know*. I know, I know, I *know*." He had stopped choking Alfred. He was sitting upright and looking for his beer. He couldn't seem to find it.

"I *forgive* you, you know?"

"What are you *talking* about?"

"You're a corporate raider. That's all."

"No I'm *not*!"

"Then why *dress* like..."

Mr. Shuster wouldn't have any of it and Alfred knew it.

"You live up the street from..." Alfred began again. Once again, he knew Mr. Shuster would *have* any of it. "I'd do it too, you know? When I'm over thirty and all. When *that* happens, all hell breaks loose, right?"

"You mean that as a matter of speech, don't you? The part about hell?"

"Of *course* I do. Me and you *both* know what's going on."

"Which *is*?"

"It's going on in front of your *nose*... The people that come here. *They* know and you don't. You *pretend* to know. That's all. It's sick, if you asked me."

"You're a...?" Mr. Shuster tried to figure him out. "You're a...? Come on. Help me out here."

"You're a corporate raider. I *hoped* you'd have an artistic flair in you. You *don't*. You're a sheep. You shouldn't be *running* this thing! You're a fuckin' *sellout*! You're a fuckin' *sellout*!"

Mr. Shuster took it all in.

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Anna laid next to Tim. She was becoming the village slut but she didn't really care. She *knew* the end was coming near. She dreaded the time that Nicole would come home early from a bridge game and find her with her husband.

"What do you *want* from me?" Anna asked.

Tim didn't respond. A moment passed and then Tim started to say something about Bill. It didn't matter to Anna. She couldn't understand what was going on.

Nicole came home at eight thirty that night. Anna had long since been gone. "You're a *slut*," she said aloud. "Tim? Are you *here*?" She wasn't talking about Tim though when she called someone a slut aloud. She may have been talking about herself. She wasn't really sure. She put her head against the door and *wanted* to cry. She couldn't cry though. She had some martinis with the girls. That's all she remembered. She wanted to go to bed early. Things *seemed* to be returning to normal. There hadn't been an alien sighting in a couple of days. There was collective amnesia going on. There was a lot of suppression. There was a lot of pretending.

Anna knocked at the door. "I slept with your *husband*," she said.

"That's good. Do you want to come in?"

"No. I really *slept*..."

"...I *know*." Nicole was starting to get mad. "Come over here, babe," she talked to Anna as if the fear and anger never surfaced. "Come *here*, babe..." Anna came close after coming through the door. Nicole got her in a headlock and started giving her a noogie.

"What the fuck are you *doing*?" Anna asked.

"He's over. That's all. He doesn't even *know* it yet."

"You're a loser *too*, Tim," Anna said after seeing him come into the room. "Who were *you* talking to?" Anna asked Nicole.

Tim didn't say a thing. The two women were fighting but they didn't want to kill each other. Bill was fast leaving from their minds. At the very least, he was being pushed into an area known as the subconscious. Some people would call it the Twilight Zone.

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Bill was having a dream of Randal--that's right--and he woke from a slumber that lasted twelve Earth days. He was dreaming that he had been too hard on him. He didn't know what to do. He didn't know that there were ways, by the way, to avoid sleeping when you're on other planets. Some people--or *things*--have it mastered. There are beings that have been awake for twelve millennia without even *trying* to sleep. Bill was finding out *fast* that life was different elsewhere. He could imagine certain things. A lifespan? Well, to Bill, he would have thought that two hundred years would have been a good number to rely on if betting on the *longest* surviving alien. He was wrong. It's twenty billion years and more. You see? A *housefly* doesn't know that everyone else lives *millions* of times longer than them... on *Earth*. Is

that a literal figure? No. But you *could* get the picture if you were to ask Bill after only a few weeks after his passing from Earth. He didn't know. It's all relative. That's what he learned. Bacteria used to live on Earth and lived for a short period of time. It *still* lived on Earth and had the same short lifespan. Things evolved. The first living being didn't last seventy-five years. Over time, things *evolved*.

Earth had been around for four billion years. This gave it a good head start on planets that were just forming. Nonetheless, in the *universe*, there are galaxies and planets that have been around for much longer. Xeon, for example, had been around since the Crab Nebula was formed. What's the Crab Nebula? Bill didn't know. He was told it by Kurt Cobain when they had their conversation. Whether or not it was true was beyond him. He was still *learning*.

"What are you *talking* about?" Nicole asked her son. Alfred had come back from Seattle two days after his stop in Duckton. He went up to Seattle to ask around. The conversation he had with Mr. Shuster was an interesting one. They were able to channel Bill directly. With him, they channeled Kurt Cobain as well. This *surprised* Mr. Shuster. He *had* been a shyster. He *had* been duping people. The church wasn't his idea. It was his *brother's*. *A tax shelter, you see, is the perfect place for a church!* he had told him. *Your product can't go bad! How can you lose? If your promises go bad, you tell the people, 'You just didn't have enough faith!' It's a no miss situation. How about I help you set it up?* Mr. Shuster was surprised at the revelation. He never *knew* that things could come true. He played "...*Teen Spirit*" at the beginning of every sermon. He didn't even know that *Bleach* or *Incesticide* existed. It didn't matter to him. Whenever a believer would come and approach him on his *knowledge*, he would say to him or her, *Don't worry about me, kiddo. You're faith is what brought you here. I could tell you all the answers you want--and I will--but you have to give me time.* He was a shyster. Sometimes he didn't even know it.

"What are you *talking* about?" Nicole asked her son again.

"Huh? I was thinking about this past week. That's all. A lot's happened. I *don't* feel like talking about it right now."

"Talk to me," his mom said.

"I'd *like* to. I will. Not now."

"Go home."

"I *am* home, mom. Do you mean to Seattle? Is *that* what you're talking about?"

"No. Stay here."

"Okay. I'm ending this now. Good night." Before he finished saying the word "good", his mom gave him a peck on the cheek. It made him feel good.

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Wally Fleshman was getting more and more popular by the day. With it--the popularity--came tasks. He had been an outsider for so long. He bottled in his emotions. Very few people knew what was inside. Alfred had a poem of his. He wrote it down, rewrote the verses, put music to it, then decided that the *world* ought to know what was going on inside that guy.

“We’re going to *win*,” Wally said to Alfred on the day after his mom had kissed him on the cheek. “We’re going to *win*. I can feel it now.”

“What are we going to *win*? I don’t know what I’m *aiming* for. I know I want Bill back--he was a lot of fun--and that’s all I *know*. I know...”

Marie came into the room. She didn’t know what was going on. Wally’s garage was wide open. Alfred’s amplifier was facing Marie as she approached. He strummed a couple of notes. That seemed to settle Marie. He didn’t know what to do after that. He didn’t know what she wanted. She was going to *say* something. She didn’t complete her sentence. Wally wasn’t even sure if she *began* a sentence. Alfred knew though. She wanted to talk.

“We’re going to *win*, I say,” Wally said again.

“I don’t think Marie cares,” Alfred casually mentioned. “I don’t think she cares at *all*.”

Wally didn’t say anything. Alfred was uncomfortable with the silence. He knew no note could even bring him up. “You’re a *star* now,” he said to Wally.

“Since the pocket protector thing. I know.”

“No. You had it *brewing*.”

Concha came around at Marie’s request. She had been hiding around the hedges.

“What do *they* want?”

“Answers, buddy,” Alfred said to Wally’s question. “I think I’m going to start calling you *Bitch Ass*. It’s not a bad *name*,” Alfred finally said to Wally. He observed Concha and Marie looking on.

“They’re going to *cheat*!” Wally said about them.

“Cheat *what*?” Alfred wanted to know.

“Cheat me and you *both*.”

“Nah. It ain’t set *up* that way. You ever hear of critical mass, Waldo?”

“No. Fill me in.”

“Well...” Alfred went on to tell him what it was all about. “There’s a certain point in chemical reactions in which a reaction can’t be reversed. If you add water to chlorine, you’re bound to explode. But chlorine is what you put water *in* to. In other words, if the elements are *wrong*--if you don’t get it right--kaboom. Simple as that.”

“Critical mass, huh?”

“You bet your *ass*. You see...?”

“...don’t tell me about Jesus--*Hesooos*, okay?”

“No. I’ll *stop* there,” Alfred said. Wally got up and looked a little mad. “What’s the problem, Wall?”

“Don’t ask me. Ask *them*...”

Dirt Cassidy came around. Nonetheless, Alfred *knew* that Wally could have continued his train of thought if he really *wanted* to. Wally was scared. It was new to him.

“It’s about chemical reactions, Marie.” She had approached him. “It can’t be *reversed*. Can’t you

see that?"

"Yep. And I'm happy."

"I'm glad you are." Alfred took Marie aside and put his arms around her. It wasn't sexual. "I'm fine. Everyone's fine. We're all going to be fine. Things are going to be normal. The players are different. The game is still the same."

Alfred never got to tell them the sociological implications of what critical mass is. "Jesus? He can't be reversed. He's forever in our minds as one thing. Same thing with Gandhi. Same for a lot of people. Some people don't have it so well like Judas Iscariot. He has his followers, sure. But you never get to worship him in the same way. He'll *never* be seen as a leader. Not in *my* lifetime."

Alfred talked to himself all the way home after hugging Marie. He continued his personal sermon by telling himself more things he had learned the day before in a dream from Bill. It was all incredible to him.

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A storm was brewing on the horizon. It wasn't the type of storm that you would expect to see every day after a cold front meets a hot one. Far from it. It was the government. They wanted to hush people up. Wally and Alfred wrote a song the week after Marie and Concha started scouting them out. Dirt laid back that day. He was afraid for his life. He knew he could physically harm nearly anyone he wanted. He was afraid of the forces that started to take hold in Alfred's home. He knew these forces were spreading. Alien invasion was imminent, as far as he was concerned. He wanted to do something about it. The thing he wanted to do was to *learn* about them. He would have to kiss up to Alfred. He was willing to do that. It was to save his own skin. The thing that bothered him the most was that Wally--*Waldo*--was a nerd in the past. He didn't know what to do. He'd have to swallow his pride. He didn't know if he *could*.

"These *changes*...you see..." He was uncomfortable talking to Alfred. He had gone to his home and began to talk to him at the screen door. "They're changes that are...?"

"Worse than you imagine," Alfred finished for him. He wanted to cry at that point. He picked a scab from his finger. "Fuckin' *thing*!" he said.

"They're changes that you *know* about...?" he asked inquisitively.

"No. They're *not*. Get the fuck out of my *house*!" Alfred spoke to Dirt at the beginning before he saw Swartz come up the steps. That's who he was talking to about getting the fuck out of his house.

"They're changes that...?"

"Fuck it all, Dirt. I'm having fun. I'm having fun for the first time in about eight years. I was always overshadowed by Bill. I'm glad he's gone."

"But you *talk* to him, don't you?" he asked inquisitively again.

"No. I *talk*. He doesn't listen. Does *that* matter?"

Dirt started to say something else then chose against it. "I don't know what to do," Alfred said.

He was surprised the conversation began to begin with. It *shouldn't* have surprised him. He'd seen loonier things over the past few days and weeks.

Bill told Alfred the night before about how life was structured. He told him that atoms aren't the smallest particles. This was news to Alfred but it wasn't news to anyone that's studied modern physics. He went on to say, though, that the modern physicists were still billions of years behind in their understanding of things. He said that in the same way that the fly doesn't know that *his* life isn't long compared to the human's, modern physicists on Earth don't understand the smallest *known* particle in the universe in a millionth the size of the one that *we* know about. We have organic captors on Earth based mostly in carbon. In Xeon, there's a known substance known as *schlaclak*. That's the equivalent to the hydrogen atom because it begins the charts in United States' schools and universities. Carbon is still bigger than that in Earth's chemistry, and that part Alfred knew about for whatever reason.

After Bill spilled this knowledge onto Alfred, Alfred said to him, "It's doing me no good here."

You don't know what's up then! Alfred wasn't in a seance. He was talking aloud in his room. It's something he became accustomed to. The voices from Bill and others would surround him but he didn't know where they were coming from. He *had* started to believe that he was bugged by the CIA and that they put tiny microphones and speakers all over the place. He couldn't believe what was going on. More so, he was naive to the way things really worked in the United States of America. There was an relatively unknown agency known as PIA, only known to the few hundred people that ran it. It was a spy man's spy game. It stood for Periphery Intelligence Agency. They were like a sieve. They picked up things that the CIA couldn't.

"Bill. *Tell* me then!"

No. You're going to fuck things up.

"Why are you *mean* now? I never *did* anything to you."

It's a fuck up. That's all. I go through them too. A pause ensued and then Bill started to speak again. *It's a fuck up. I can't tell you more. I will. I'll tell you one more piece. It's for that fiction you've been writing since you got these voices. I'm going to tell you something to throw them off. Okay? You can tell them that I know who they are. I don't know. Don't tell them that though. I just know they'll be coming after you. They'll hit on you in busses. They'll do a lot of strange things. Watch your mom, too. I think she has a thing for you. Tell my brother, Ned, in a letter that you talk to me.*

****Part Two****

* one *

“The most secretive place in American psychology is a place called *Area 51*. There’s a place more secretive than that. It’s not in American psychology in *general*. It’s in the places of minds that dupe the masses. It has a physical location. It’s in Siberia.” Jeff paused to see if there was any questions. None were asked. One man eventually raised his hand but he was ignored.

“The world doesn’t know that Americans financed the Russian Revolution,” Jeff continued, “At the turn of the twentieth century... Only a few historians know about it, and their knowledge is rather bleak. Americans had a plan for Russians many years ago. These plans were lost in the archives. As people died off, the secrecy was not kept. It’s like losing your keys. You remember where to put them one day and they get stolen. You find a secret hiding place for them when you remake a new set. Over time, you lose them. Why? Because you make the spare set and you don’t need them. You keep them there. In the back of your mind, you’re assured by the fact that they’re there *someplace*. On the day that push comes to shove, you lock your keys in your car while you’re getting ready to go for groceries or whatever, you think about the secret set of *keys*.”

A man farted but no one paid attention. It didn’t smell too bad or else there would have been shuffling and that would have disrupted the mood. Professor Jeff Splifer continued, nonetheless. “You remember that they’re there--the keys. Funny thing about memory is that it’s not *perfect*. Sometimes secret things get lost. Sometimes even the *hiders* of secret things forget what they’re doing. What a stupid world we live in.” Jeff paused again. “I have nothing more to add. If you have questions, it’ll have to wait until tomorrow.” He was pissed that someone had farted during his lecture. No one noticed or *seemed* to notice. In the end, it bugged him.

“Wait, Slif... I don’t know what your *name* is. I’m sorry. Can I ask a question before we *leave*?” It was Edward Hand, the one that let one go on accident. He had a question that was burning inside him for the last hour. Jeff Splifer wasn’t going to leave and he could see that, although he looked a little discomforted. “I want to *know*...” He paused and looked around. “Where’s the nearest bathroom?”

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“Butch Jackson was sent to an area known as Sector A1263166. The Reds called it Red Sector A, after a Rush song that they had heard over and over and over and over. Butch wasn’t ready for the truth. He knew that alien invasion was forthcoming. He didn’t know when it would happen.” Edward Hand spoke at a convention and relayed a message he had heard not even twenty-four hours prior.

A few people rustled through the crowd. *Tens of thousands would like to hear this message. I’m pretty sure of it*, he thought after getting a drink of water from a cup in front of him.

He continued, “Red Sector A was a place in Siberia--Jeff Splifer had it right--and they were to

prepare for these alien attacks. The sightings in New Mexico, California, and Arizona were the tip of the ice berg. They had radars in the Red Sector--so it was *known* as--that made the Stealth Fighter look like a flying piece of tin. They could pick up a sand storm and tell you how many pieces of sand flew through a tree foot box per hour. They had technology that good.” He continued on after seeing a friend of his sit down in the front row. “Where did the technology come from? It came from the aliens themselves. They started financing revolutions throughout the Earth. For some reason, they picked the United States to be their major recipients. The *reason* was simple: Faith. The United States had faith in them. In the same way that the Russians forgot how they got in power, the United States did also. The Russians forgot that the *Bolsheviks*... Ah, Let’s not go there right now. What I *want* to tell you is that everybody eventually bites the hand that feeds it.”

Edward paused for a moment. It was a *dramatic* pause but it was unintended. He started to stutter a word, “I... I... I’m not sure. I really want to tell you. I *want* to tell you.” Music played from the background. What we’re going to do here is pass around a plate. I want you to donate. Make it good. Make it really, really good. I have to go on and *share* this with other people, you understand?”

“You’re a *fraud*,” Butch Jackson said. He was the Secretary of Defense in the country. No one had noticed him in his street clothes.

“Go *on*, Butch. State your peace. I’ll give you the mike.” Edward handed him the microphone.

“I have this to *say*, people. We don’t *need* freedom of speech. We don’t need...” He paused.

Edward looked around at the audience. More and more people were coming by the minute. He could sense people leaving. They weren’t getting up just yet. There was an unrest though.

“I have this to *say*, Butch said again.

“Speak *on*, brotherman,” Edward retorted. He wanted him to have *speech*. If they liked him, they would listen. If they didn’t, they’d ignore him. “You can’t beat the *truth*!” Edward yelled as he reached for the microphone back. “I’m not on his *side*,” he said after giving the microphone back apologetically. “We can’t *stand* for this!” he said at the top of his lungs.

“They got him,” Glory said from the back of the room--a small place, it was. No one heard her but her husband. She was making an observation about what the government was doing with their officials.

“I can’t *stand* this,” Butch said to Edward. It wasn’t loud enough for the mike to register.

“I *won*!” Edward yelled. He was happy. “I’m going to take a shit now,” he said through his mike. After brief laughter, Edward went to leave. It was Jeff Splifer that came into the room next. He had a look of consternation on his face.

“You don’t know what’s *up*.” Edward could read his lips but not hear him.

“*Why*?” Edward asked him as they met on the floor of the convention center--a *small* one, keep in mind. “Why, Jeff? *Why*? What are you *telling* me?”

“I’m not Jeff. I’m *Fido*!” Once again, the group broke into laughter. Jeff and Edward hugged. It was a joyous moment.

“I’ve gotta take a shit still,” Edward said. He left the room squeezing his butt cheeks tight together.

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For the first six months since Alfred came back from Mexico--a trip he had wanted to take since recently coming back from Oregon--he played guitar a lot. He talked to Wally a lot. He even talked to Dirt on occasion. No one would play with him though. He wanted to be in a band. He *couldn't* be in a band. Bill was right. The government didn't come down on him. He was right about people coming on to him in unexpected ways, most of all his teachers at school that were female. He was shocked. There were no more alien sightings around but you could *feel* that something was brewing.

“Twenty, twenty-four,” he said aloud. He practiced his guitar. “Sounds like a good name for a song. I think I’ll *write* it.”

Many miles away, Edward Hand returned from the restroom after relieving himself.

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Cindy Dalton, a follower of Edward’s for a while, came into the convention room about thirty minutes past the time that she had *said* she’d arrive. Edward was expecting her but things were getting late. Things had softened up a bit in the crowd after Butch decided to leave. Edward spoke about sports. He told jokes that no one had heard. He was on top of the world at that time. And he was tired.

“Cindy. I want to *tell* you something...”

“*What?*” She wanted to know.

“First, understand that I’ve been doing this all day.”

“I know.” She agreed with him without telling him in words that it was okay to be tired.

“I have to tell you something. I feel a *charge*! I think...”

“We’re getting our nation back?”

“No.” A nervousness seeped into him. “It’s not that...”

“I *know* what you want to say. Sleep at my house,” she said.

“Are you talking to *Tom*? Tom fuckin’ *Cruise*! My *God*! What the *FUCK*!”

“I have reservations with you, dog boy,” Tom said to Edward. Edward couldn’t hide his joy though. He was *happy*. He was happy, happy, happy, *HAPPY*. “I have reservations...” Tom stopped. “You get some rest. There’s *bags* under your eyes.”

Edward stopped. He felt let out. He felt victorious. He felt greet. He wanted to go home, close the blinds, and beat his meat ‘til the cows came home.

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In Mesa, Arizona, a lady pumped gasoline. She did this because it was her job. She got funny looks from some people. When she explained that it was a family-owned business, they usually went about their business as usual.

"I don't know what to *tell* you." She was wearing a crystal around her neck and she was talking to a scrubby, old man.

"Listen, lady. I've been working at McDonald's for most of this past year... I don't know what to tell you *either*. A lady working at a *gas* station. It doesn't *jibe* with me. I don't care *who* your dad is or what he owns." The man was surprised to see that he hadn't boiled over into an uncontrollable anger. "Do you have anything to *say* to me, or are you going to just let me go without a comment on it?"

"You're *nothing* to me," the lady said. The man would *swear* later on that it was Stevie Nicks at the pump. It *couldn't* have been. No way.

In Mesa, Arizona, there were signs that reported the previous alien sightings. They would advertise beer. They would advertise restaurants. If you didn't know any better, you'd think that you went straight to Roswell in the New Mexico sector of the country. "Have a nice day anyway," the man said. "I wish you the best."

The man sped off. He was leaving Oregon. He had enough of that town. He thought that exploring the American Southwest would do him some good. He felt like a cowboy. He was going to *be* one... in Irving, Texas where the Cowboys play. He'd be one as a fan. And he'd start a new life. Little did he know that alien sightings were still going on in Mesa. It was the only part of the country where they still existed on a regular basis.

"I get it," the lady said with joy. "You're *mad*. You're not *crazy*, like I thought you were. You're *mad*. You're mad about *me*!"

"Don't be so vane, lady. Can I have a picture with you? You look a *lot* like Stevie Nicks!"

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Jeff Splifer wasn't ready to teach. He was mad. He was angry at Bucky Holdwater and what he had done to Edward Hand. He didn't *want* to teach. He could. He'd be effective. Rhetoric has incredible weight. Most people don't even care to notice whether or not you *care* about your subject. They don't look into your eyes. They don't pay attention to how your body language is. They turn on their tape recorders, they listen, they jot down notes, and they don't even know if the teacher is thinking of a *burger* while he says that we shouldn't slaughter the cows. There's a lot of hypocrites in the world. Jeff Splifer didn't want to *be* one. He felt like one. It was because he was paid to perform. Every day, he'd have to go into class and *say* something. It was all rhetoric to him sometimes. Sometimes, he'd even forget where he was at in a lecture. At that point, he had a trick. He'd say to the class in a generic way, *Can someone paraphrase what I just said?* It was a trick. He knew it. No one else did.

Bucky Holdwater jotted down notes in a mean fever. He worked for Ameriway. He knew that Ameriway was *threatened* by what Jeff Splifer taught. He didn't know what to do. His only solution was

to invade the beast.

“Do you know what he’s *saying?!?*” he yelled in class to Bucky. He was talking about Edward Hand. Edward was taking the notes from what he was learning and he was *using* them. He used them so well the week before that he met Secretary of State, Butch Jackson, and he met movie star, Tom Cruise. There’d be others. Edward wasn’t *into* it though. He wanted to make people happy. He didn’t like the people he was around. He *liked* them, but they were ineffective for his cause. They helped him sleep, yeah, but when it came to *shove* the beast that you wanted to change, they were ineffective. Why? It didn’t matter to him. All he knew was that if he kept talking *truth*, someone would come. It was Tom Cruise the week before. It might be Butch Jackson in the future *again*. He didn’t know. As far as he was concerned, Bucky could fuck off because he was the undermining authority in his world. At least his friends that he grew up around *humored* him. Bucky wouldn’t do that. He’d undermine. It was his way and Jeff was mad about it.

“Do you see what he’s trying to *do*, Bucky?” Jeff asked. He was genuinely concerned. He had *hope* for Bucky. Edward could detect it in his *tone*. He wasn’t one of the people that just turned on the taper recorder and started listening without connecting other dots. Bucky argued. Most the time he’d argue, it was something that Ameriway told him to say. He didn’t know what to do. In the end, he didn’t know if he was equally as bad. He listened to KFRE FM. It was a liberal broadcast station. He thought that they were *freeing* people. If KFRE told him to show up to a rally, he *went*. No questions asked. He’d go. And if he found out that one of KFRE’s directors turned out to be a fraud? He’d give the station the benefit of the doubt. “Exception to the rule” is what he always said. He had a conversation with an irate man from a small town one day--*Michaels* was his name. He didn’t know what to do.

Do you think I’m a fraud now? he had said. *Look at my credentials.* He showed him paperwork that was sent from KFRE. It was to establish him as a *Listener...* with a capital L. It established him as a *certified* liberal. *Do you think I’m a liberal?* he asked Michaels.

I don’t know, Michaels slowly replied. He looked perplexed. *I want this to end though.* He looked sad when he said it.

I’m not even on my own side, you son-of-a-bitch, he said. *I don’t know what is going on in the world. But I have hope.*

You’re a drop dead son of a bitch yourself, Michaels said. He didn’t look convincing to Edward. Edward continued the conversation, but deep down, he *didn’t* know if he was right. He went by their dogma and it felt *goood*. It felt sooo *goood* to him. He wanted an orgasm everytime he touched the dial to put the station on. It was that good to him. It was like stroking his pecker.

You couldn’t imagine, he would say to Michaels before leaving. *You don’t know shit, you son of a bitch*, he said to someone else when they tried to chastise Michaels in his presence.

“You’re missing the *point*, Bucky,” Jeff Splifer continued. “You don’t *know* what’s up.”

Edward wanted more information for his speeches. They were a hit. They made people *feel* good. That’s all he knew.

"You stick up for *your* people. I'll stick up for *mine*," he said to Bucky and then left the room. He came back to peek his head in. "I *like* you, Michaels. Wherever you are. You let him know that if he ever comes to your class, Jeff?"

"Nope," Jeff said.

"Good enough." Edward split

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On a day that wasn't so hot--there were clouds all over the place--a little girl mustered enough courage to speak to her friend that she made in her mind. For a year or more, she would think of him. He was in high school. She didn't know what to do. She rode past his house every day that she could. She waved when he wasn't there and *pretended* that he saw her. He'd wave back, in her mind. She saw him one day fixing his car--an old Camero--and she decided to stop.

"Your name is Ron. I know you well."

"No, little girl. You have that wrong. The name's *Randal*."

"No. It's not Randall Flagg like the man from the scary movie. You're *Ron* to me. I'm going to marry you."

There was an awkward silence as the young man continued to polish his rims and didn't know what to say.

"You're not too young to me. You're *calculated*. I don't like that."

"You better run off then, miss. I'll see you another day."

"What can you tell me about the stars? I know you *know* about them?"

"I know *nothing*." Randal became frustrated, stopped his cleaning, and tried to hide his emotions.

The little girl went about her business. She'd remember that day for a long time. In the end, she thought he was a jerk. Those things would *happen* in life. She'd learn that the hard way when she met her first boyfriend in sixth grade. He was a punk ass loser to her. That was all she needed to know about Randal. She stopped riding by his house the following day.

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Edward taught a convention--that's what he always called them no matter how *small* they were--at a coffee house in his home town. He had gotten on the internet and pretended to be someone he wasn't. He let the rumor spread that the *real* Edward Hand would be in Los Angeles. He tried to get a small group of people to come to the coffee house to talk about his implications. In the end, he thought he was getting too big. He didn't want to see Tom anymore--he called Tom Cruise by his first name when people were around--and he didn't want to see Butch Jackson. He wanted to see people like himself. He had become a celebrity of sorts, and not by his own choosing. He had become popular. He thought that if he could pull

this off, he'd get back to his roots. It was as simple as that.

He waited at the coffee house--he wore a mask over his face at the beginning and told the server behind the counter that he was getting ready for a costume party--and he sipped on his mocha until the first of the visitors showed.

"Are you the..." Dirt began.

"No. I'm not. I'm the real *deal*, buddy!" Edward said. There was a moment of disapproval that he had for himself after a moment of embrace. "I've been waiting for this though. I've been waiting a long *time*."

Ten people showed up that night. Edward had a good time. An Italian by the name of Stephanie showed up and had a thrill. In the end, they shared knowledge. What Edward got out of the conversation was more than he wished for. He thought that *he'd* be the one doing most of the talking. It was far from the truth. Stephanie told him that she learned through the grapevine that Bill still talked to people. There were things of interest. He didn't know if half of it was true and none of them did when push came to shove. It was intriguing. By the middle of the conversation, Edward had enough of the talking and decided to go. He drove home. On the way, he thought of the new concept of micro particles. Physicists didn't know about it. The analogy that Stephanie gave was that scientists were looking at atoms like a *giant* alien would look at the Earth from far away. You couldn't *see* the small particles of dirt that made up the planet. You couldn't *do* that. An alien from far away might think that the Earth is a big piece of solid rock and nothing more--a self-contained *unit*. He didn't think of the implications he was telling her when he said to slow down a bit (she was on a *rant* at the time). He didn't do that. But on the way home, he thought, *I've been thinking of hydrogen like it was the smallest thing available. Dirt and Earth. Makes sense. Scientists can't see the "dirt" that makes up the hydrogen. It's as simple as that.*

A million balls tied together. That's what Stephanie had said. *It looks like a giant ball from far away. How weird, huh?* she asked. Edward felt out of place at the time. He wanted to tie in with his roots. He felt like a fraud when he talked to them. They didn't know shit and neither did he. But they were trying to figure things out. That's what mattered to him.

Edward crossed the street at the intersection before getting to his house. He was somehow glad that he was alive. He scratched his balls. He believed that he'd leave the preaching in the future to the kids. They had more passion.

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“Do you *think*,” Zotar began to ask, “that the *reason* that Bill wrote the poems was for us to *do* something with them? I *know* they were lyrics he was working on. He left them on his *bed* though. Was it a coincidence? I *wonder*.” Zotar finished his sentenced, sipped a beer, and then kept asking questions. They lasted about fifteen minutes. Every time that he would say or ask something too deep, Candy would shrug. She didn’t know. She didn’t care.

“Why do you call yourself ‘Zotar’ again?”

“It doesn’t matter. It came in a dream.” Zotar had a funny streak about him. He liked a girl named Lizzy. He wouldn’t stop until he had her. Dead or not, he saw a *threat* in Bill. Dead or not, he wanted to get Bill out of people’s consciousness. He didn’t know what to do so he kept asking the questions.

“I’m *Candy*!” Candy finally yelled. “I’m not *Hoopla* or something like that! Call yourself something *real*!” She calmed then added, “Ya’ fuckin’ *prick*.”

It wasn’t all that bad in town now. People began to *mock* the aliens. Dirt was now going by Zotar. No one even knew his real name when he was going by *Dirt*. It’s a funny world.

“I don’t know what to say,” Alfred said. He was quiet most the time. He strummed his guitar in the background and tried not to think too much about it. He *didn’t* know what lyrics Bill had left behind. That was one of the many rumors. Rumor had it that there was a suicide note as well. Deep in his pocket, Alfred hung on to the rejection noticed that he received from Fezeare Academy. Without that sometimes, he’d go mad and start to wonder if any of it was true. It’s the only tangible thing he had *connected* to Bill besides the pictures that they took over the years. “Do you see how it *works* now?” he asked Randal.

Randal was quiet though. He was in trouble at work. No one knew why. He wouldn’t tell. “I have something to say,” Randal said after a stint of five minutes. No one talked in between. They listened to music--mostly the radio--and they listened to Alfred tried to mimic tunes that he had picked up. “I *want* to say...” he began. There was a quiet hush when Alfred turned down the radio. He wanted to *hear* what Randal had to say. “You’re all washed up. That’s all I have to say.”

“Okay. Go with that,” Zotar said. “Go *with* it,” he said to Alfred. “Can I make a *song*...?” he began. He was writing lyrics. They were *all* writing lyrics. They were in the epicenter of where all the alien sightings took place in California. Though the government only recognized Los Angeles as the only town in the golden state with problems in the past, *everyone* knew that it was in a city that was located far to the east. It was called Miller, a town of only fifteen thousand residents. That’s where they all grew up. That’s where they would all die, as far as most of them were concerned. No one left town. The only person to make it big was Bill Swift, and that was because he was flying around town in the days before he died. There was Edward Hand too, but he was a speaker. He was nothing of legends.

“You’re a *bullshit* artist,” Randal said to Alfred. “I think you’re a bullshit artist and I want people to *know* of it.”

“Okay, *Randal*. Go with that. Do you see what he’s *doing*?” He shook himself off. “I don’t have any pride.” The last part he said more to himself than anything else. It was tense, but Zotar was working through things. He was working through things pretty bad.

“Does anyone want to talk about *Spit Face Racer*?” Alfred asked. It was a poem left by Bill--or so it was *rumored*--and they had it before them with about five *other* poems.

“Here comes *Lizzy*,” Randal teased. He saw her at the door.

“Can I come *in*?” she asked without knocking. She simulated a few knocks but they didn’t connect on the door.

Alfred bowed... and then he got up to get the door. “You’re my *God*,” he said. He opened the door for her. “It was open, you know?”

“I know,” she said. She was beautiful, probably the most beautiful person on the block, and that was counting Anna Harcdomm. She didn’t say anything after that but she looked uncomfortable after an discomfited silence.

“Welcome to the human league, my doll,” Randal said and opened his arms toward her. She gave him a quick, nonchalant hug. It was Doug that she was there to see. He was the owner of the house. He opened it to the kids while his wife was sleeping. The neighborhood had become more communal. It was a great place to be if you were a late teen. There were no suspects as far as gang members. No one was worried about getting robbed. No one suspected that Doug was a meanie anymore. No one did this.

“I want to do something before I go,” Randal said. He was hoping for a hug from Lizzy. She hugged him after she noticed his discomfort. “I want to leave, and...” He didn’t know what to say. He got his wish. He got Lizzy, for the time being. No sex. No kiss. A hug. A *good* one. His dreams were made true. He made something up. “I want to play *scrabble*.” He was joking. They knew it. They could read him. The atmosphere had become a lot better around town.

“I’m not happy,” Zotar said. Everyone laughed. They knew things would be made better. Awkward and discomfited silences is what they were used to. It was okay. Things were going to be okay. They could feel it. Zotar wasn’t happy though. That was the main part. Lizzy hugged him. She was a master of it. Randal’s heart longed for her. So did everyone *else* that laid eyes on her. She was new to town. It was a great break from what had been going on. A breath of fresh air.

Alfred cried on the inside. He wanted her to belong to *him*. These were fleeting moments. If you love something or someone, you set it free. That’s what he was taught. It’s a lot easier said than done he found out.

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“Ah, shit. Here comes Francine,” someone said aloud when they saw her. A crowd of people gathered at Nicole’s for a barbeque.

Francine Cross was an old lady that lived down the street. Everyone else was having cookouts with one another. They *wished* that Francine would behave. She didn’t. She got a crush on all the young

boys--Alfred in *particular*--and she wouldn't let them go. It sounded like he was whining to many people, but at *one* of the cookouts that she was present at, Alfred was talking to three ladies at once. One of them was the newcomer Lizzy, another one was Anna, and a third was a girl by the name of Monique. All of them were attractive. All of them wanted his company. For once in his life, he felt *good*. He felt he could be somebody. Granted that it took his best friend's passing for this to come about but it felt good to *talk* about.

Francine approached him while he talked to the girls. She was forty-five years old and starting to gray. Her eyes were baggy and she was secretly on cocaine. She had an abusive father that lived in the next town over. People felt *sorry* for her. With that sympathy, she tried to get many favors. Bill had come back from Fezeare Academy one weekend with a revelation for Alfred. *It's about* empathy, he had said. *Don't feel* sorry for people, Alf. *Feel* sorry, but don't let it rule your world.

Francine, after approaching him at the barbeque, said that her car tire was flat.

"Okay. Fix the tire, Homeboy," Jill said. She was standing near the three ladies that were talking to Alfred and heard Francine's distress.

My God, Alfred sighed. The three girls scattered and Alfred went into the front of the house to take care of the poor lady's tire. He wasn't *mad*.. yet. He wasn't mad because he thought he was doing something right. Something was amiss about Francine and he knew it long ago. She started talking about leaving the barbeque.

She looked at her car. "Oh. It's fixed," she said. "Someone must have come along..."

"...and fixed it... I know." Alfred knew what was up. It was a lying, old lady, probably coked out as he *spoke* to her, making up lies. Why? He didn't know. He didn't *want* to know.

The prior day, while the barbeque was being planned, he got a rap on the door. *Thunk, thunk, thunk*.

Who is it? he had called out.

You'll have to see for yourself, Francine said. *I'm in a robe. I'm not...*

...I know. '...wearing anything underneath,' is what you were going to say. He let her in. He knew her ways and they sickened him. She talked for about five minutes. He felt captured by a dying bitch. That's how he felt. It wasn't the first time. When *Bill* passed away, long before this started, she was at the funeral and crying fake tears. He felt sorry for her *then*. He should have run. He should have never let her in his life. He should have never let her in his door many months later. He would regret it right before dying. A carbon monoxide whore took him down. That's what he called her. How she did it was beyond him. *Why* she did it was beyond him. He even wondered things he'd never find out, and not because he wanted to.

The three girls wouldn't talk to Alfred after the barbeque anymore. Lizzy later would, but things wouldn't be the same as they had been when he first met her. *She started spreading rumors*, she would say the following week. *That you're sleeping with all the girls, Alfred*. She pouted. He didn't know why. She was cute though.

I am. It's not like that though. I want you. It sounds like a line, but if I had a choice... He cut off. She *knew*. Social pressure was going to be strong. And when you have a dying bitch with nothing to live for... in the name of Francine Cross, you have a whole *world* to contend with.

Think about this... he began to say to Lizzy that day.

I know, she said stubbornly. *I know already she said*, disturbed. *He's not going to stop*, she said to Zotar when he rode up on his twelve-speed. *She's already after you. I can feel it*, she told Zote, as he was being called. She spoke to Zote. He should have known though. Maybe she harnessed the spirit of an evil dwarf from another planet. No one was really sure. Maybe life was like the Buddhists say and shit just happens. Observe it, learn from it, move on. *I know she's going to have you*, Liz said to Zotar. It was Alfred that she was thinking of. No one knows why. *Alfred* didn't even know why.

"Throw another shrimp on the barbie," someone said to Alfred when he returned from the front of Nicole's house.

He wasn't sure what to do and people could see it on his face. "False alarm, people. She only wanted *me*." People laughed.

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Francine had a friend that worked at the post office. Junior was his name. He would do favors for her. He worked for the CIA but no one in town knew it. He was unaware of the PIA's status. He opened letters though, read them, sealed them. Simple as that. He wouldn't *tell* anyone what he was doing besides his superiors. The people that worked along side him didn't even know. They had it rigged.

It wasn't a big post office that Miller had. It was an *important* post office. Ever since the sightings had started, they *needed*--the government felt the *need*--to check on people. There were a lot of letters they had noticed going to Roswell, New Mexico. There were others going to Washington, D.C. Special interests were the main targets. There were letters going to towns surrounding Area 51 in Arizona. People wanted answers. They wanted to talk to people that were like themselves. It was as simple as that.

Junior was fifty-one--an ironic if you asked any of the alien buffs in town--and he was lonely. He had worked in Montana. This was when there were cults forming that planned to declare their sovereignty from the United States of America. He was a master of manipulation. But he was alone. He couldn't say it enough. *Someone get me off this planet!* The words echoed in his head at night.

Francine was the perfect friend he could make in town. They were two of a kind. Together, they would become one. His life would be justified. He wouldn't harass people anymore. Maybe he'd fall in love with her. If *Alfred* knew everything that was going on in his mind, he'd wish it would happen. He was oblivious though, just like everyone else. Francine kept his secret. He needed *one* person or else he'd go crazy. He knew *she* had a reputation for being crazy herself. If the shit exploded in his face, he'd *blame* it on her. He'd be sure that the CIA would back him up.

The most interesting thing that Junior got from the post office was a letter that was written to Waldo from Chelsea Clinton. Whether or not it came from Chelsea herself was beyond Junior. It was a red

flag. The First Family--the *former* First Family--had to be kept in the dark. There are only so many things that they are allowed to know. They get a tour of Area 51--Bill Clinton did, at the very least--and they're shown the secrets that are leaked to the media anyway. They're kept away from Siberia. They're kept away from the *real* secrets. The CIA is smart like that. The PIA is not, and Junior would later find that out. It was Junior's job though to make sure they *stayed* smart like that.

"What do you want me to *do*?" Junior asked Francine one night. Francine had been laying off of Doug. He was the first target that she went after when she realized that Alfred wanted Liz and wouldn't settle for anyone else.

"What are you *talking* about?" Francine asked Junior.

Junior didn't speak. He was a *chickenshit*, inside and out. He was a follower, as so many spies are. Rarely do you get a spy that cracks the mold. Sometimes, it's better for the agency. *Do you know that some of the best intelligence our country has comes from defectors?* Bill had asked Alfred one night during a seance at his house. He didn't know. He didn't care. It was getting too *stupid*, the seances and the like.

No, but I'm sure you do, Alfred said aloud and everyone involved got a chuckle.

Junior didn't know this as well. He was oblivious. He was in the dark. He didn't care. He took orders. It was as simple as that. Every now and then, he'd go too far. He'd take an order to the T. He wouldn't quit.

Watch this guy night and day, Butch Jackson had sent an order to Junior through constituents. *He's a mean guy. You'll know him when you see him.* It was Alfred he was talking about. He watched him night and day, as ordered. Pretty soon, Alfred caught on and wrote a song about it. He sent it on the internet to New Mexico and pretty soon he had a network of people that believed him. He didn't *trust* the internet though. There were pirates. He trusted the postal service though. It was a mistake he shouldn't have made.

Chelsea wrote in a poem:

I know you're out there

I know you see me

I'm over here too

And I'm not too dreamy

I want to save your life

I want to give you hope

I can't do either right now

I'm tied with my own rope

It was laced in perfume. Junior liked it a lot. He liked it so much that he didn't report it. He thought he got the real thing. He was *sure* he got the real thing.

Francine looked at Junior's dazed look and knew something was wrong. *What secret is he keeping from me?* she wondered. She thought about her *own* secrets--the one about cocaine and her father--and she thought that *she'd* be that same way with the same *look* if he were asking her about *her* problems.

He wasn't though. He was asking for advice.

Boredom filled the room. There was no awkward silences as there were around the kids sometimes. There was none of that at all. It was pure boredom. Something they both got used to. They figured that if they could experience their boredom in each other's company, then things wouldn't be so bad. They were far from the truth but they went through the motions any way.

* three *

Alfred channeled Bill one night after he couldn't get a hold of Lizzy. He wanted to be with her. He felt lost. He wanted advice. Not on what he should do with Lizzy. He wanted advice about how to handle the pain when she was gone.

God, are you out there? Alfred stopped believing in God in the conventional sense. He referred to Bill as God. The *reason* was that for all *practical* reasons, he *was* God. He was the source of ultimate knowledge. He was the source of pain and strife. He was the source of healing as well. A Hindu would tell him that Bill was merely the top level deity in his particular pantheon of worship. This would happen later in the year when comparing notes on their various beliefs. The man wasn't Indian that he would meet. He was an American converted to Hinduism. A strange thing, but it happened in life.

God, are you out there? he'd ask again.

What do you want? He heard a sarcastic voice and knew it wasn't from Bill. It was Kurt Cobain, part of the pantheon he had chose. *I'm what?* Cobain pressed. He didn't know what to do as Alfred's deity. *I don't know what you're up to...* he began.

Alfred began to speak aloud. "I know you're *out* there... *God!*" He was being sarcastic now. "*I know...*" he started and he heard a near echo of the same words in his head from Kurt.

I don't know, Kurt said apologetically.

"Too much apologies. Is that all you *are*, Kurt? Are you sarcastic now?" He knew he wasn't and wanted to chuckle in spite of himself. One of Nirvana's major songs was "All Apologies". Everyone in town knew that Kurt fronted the band, Nirvana, in the nineties except for Francine and Junior. It *seemed* like everyone knew.

I don't know, Kurt said. This time with a little more authority.

"I forgot my question now, you punk *ass*. Where's Bill?" He could *feel* Kurt now, and it made him laugh. Kurt was in *joy*.

You're going to talk about that religion, huh? he asked.

"No. *You* are." Alfred still thought about it. He wanted to talk about Lizzy but was uncomfortable talking to Cobain about her.

You're a wreck, Kurt observed.

"I think I'm going to Hell now," Alfred said.

No. It's Zoton. You can join me.

"Can I write that down?"

Nope. But you did already.

"Where?"

In your book.

"Okay. You caught me. I'll look you up when I need you. I need to go."

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Jeff Splifer started to lecture. “I’m going to *open* this talk with a letter that I just read not too long ago. It reads, ‘I have a carbon monoxide whore on my case. How do I get her off?’ Naturally, I’m *not* Dear Abby. I don’t know why this person wrote. He goes on to say, ‘I’m hemoglobin, man. How do I get her off? I want oxygen in my life. Her name is Lizzy.’ Interesting, don’t you think?” Barny raised his hand from the front row. “We’ll have none of your kind, right now, Bernard,” Jeff continued. “We’ll just have to wait and see what you have at the *end* of the session.”

“It’s about *love*. I can do this.”

“It has a *point* though,” a sir said from beside Bernard.

“I’m *not* Bernard, either, teacher. I’m *Barny*. My parents raised me as *Barn...*”

“Whatever you say. Righteo.”

“Go on, bud. I want to hear what the man has to say with Elvis sideburns,” Edward said. He had vowed not to return to the guest speaker lectern. He wasn’t going to quit going to class though.

“Well. You see?” the man with the Elvis sideburns said. “It’s like this...” He continued on with hand motions. They were making humping motions. People laughed. It was amateurish. Didn’t matter. People laughed. They got it. Even Jeff Splifer got the joke: Teen moments of anxiety get you high laughs if you know how to duplicate their humor.

“Anyhow, we’ll carry on. I have a point, by the way.” Jeff spoke this night in an English accent. For a little while, Edward wondered if it was his *real* accent. He didn’t *know* him too well. “I’ll carry on and then we can have some *dough nuts*.” The “dough nuts” part was especially exaggerated. He was starting to sound like an Englishman on drugs.

“I don’t know what to do,” Edward said. He *didn’t* know what to do. He was in class and he just wasn’t *feeling* it anymore. He started falling in love with this Lizzy girl and he didn’t even know her. She was oxygen; the other lady was carbon monoxide. What a strange thing. An intriguing analogy to him. “I’m going to go,” Edward said. “Like any of you care.”

They didn’t. They let him go. He got home, spanked off, and thought about this Lizzy girl. He was almost sure he might have *known* a Lizzy or two. Was it the new girl from town? Probably was. Too young though. Thank God for true love, right? Yep. As far as he was concerned, it was the only reason the world went around and people *knew* about it. He spanked off, and when he was done, he threw away all of his porn magazines. He felt filthy, but that wasn’t why. It wasn’t guilt. The *reason* he did it was “void”. There’d be a void in his life that those magazines left behind. He hoped it’d be someone *like* Lizzy. *Chip monks fuck and they don’t care how old one another is. Why don’t humans do the same thing?* he wondered. He then thought, *I’m starting to sound like this carbon monoxide bitch that resembles, in my mind, that wicked witch from Cinderella. Or was it Snow White?*

He drifted off to bed. There was a pain in his heart he could remember just before falling asleep. *I worked for you though*, he thought. Who was he working for? Mrs. Right. He never found her. In the morning, he found a thirty-two revolver under his bed and blew the shit out of his mind.

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“FIVE INCH COCK” is what a poster read in town square. It had a picture of a chicken--a *rooster*, actually--on top of it. “GOES BY THE NAME OF ALFRED” is what was written below the first line. Then, “CALL FRANCINE AT 555-2120 IF FOUND”. Alfred knew she was messing with him. She started to do this since the time at the barbeque. This was the worse one though. Funny thing was it made him laugh. He witnessed the sign for the first time with his girlfriend. Liz was her name. He didn’t want to break up with her though. They had gone together for two days. Something was awry. It wasn’t Liz. It was him. She was a good friend but that was about it. He had no drive to kiss her. He wanted to touch her boobs and her other thing--the one down *there*--but he was afraid. It didn’t matter. He felt that he was on a mission and Liz helped him see clearly. The *funny* thing was that she was nothing like he thought she’d be. Actually, she was *better* then he thought she’d be--a *lot* better--and he really couldn’t handle it. Someday when he was old, maybe thirty or so, he’d feel proud of himself that he even went out with her for a day. She was on her way. That’s what he hoped. They’d help each other out though.

“It’s in the stars, Liz. I can *feel* it.”

“No it’s not. It’s in your brain.” She was perfectly serious.

“Yeah. But it’s in the stars too. Don’t you listen to music?”

“The Steve Gabriel, or whatever his name is?” she wondered.

“No. Not that. That *one* song. You know the one that goes...”

“We are made of stars. I know. I *knew*. I was teasing.” She laughed. It was as simple as that. There was something empty in it though. It wasn’t why Alfred knew he had to break up with her.

“I know I’ve said a lot...”

“It’s in your *brain*. Trust me.”

“What?” He waited for a response.

“You’re an asshole,” she said to him solemnly.

“I’m *older* than you. I’m a full year and half *older*. Don’t you get it? I’ll be graduating this next month. Don’t you get what I’m trying to say?”

“No.” She shook her head when she said it.

“Oh my God,” she started to cry. Alfred wouldn’t stop and she knew it. “The worse part is..”

“Do you *know*, Lizzy? I’m trying to break up with you now.” He waited. Nothing awkward about it. He *wanted* to cry. She began to. That was why. They were going out for a couple of days. He wanted to feel what she was feeling. If she pricked her finger, he wanted to feel the hurt. He *wanted* that. His mind and everything else couldn’t do it.

“You’re lost,” she said solemnly. She was in that kind of mood now.

“I don’t *want* to break up with you. I’m not going out with anyone else.”

She heard the last sentence and thought it was a lie. “You think that...” she began. She was furious in a way that he had never seen her and couldn’t even *imagine* her. He wanted her happy. It was a dream come true. It was... for a while.

"I *want* you. And I'm not selling these ideas to record companies."

"Oh." She was assured. She looked pleasant. He wished she could handle the pressure because she flew from one end to the other. She looked like a girl on TV that he had seen. This girl had broken up with a skateboarder and didn't mind... until she found out that he was dating someone else.

"I'm going to go."

"You go." She wasn't happy. She wasn't upset anymore, either.

"What do you think about the poster?"

She grabbed his cock. "It's not four inches, is it?"

"Nope. It's five. She'd know. I bet she has cameras in my house."

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Jim Blackstone and Bob Gomer came into town one day wearing their suits. They were ready for some action. Their operative, Mr. Junior Spinner, wasn't doing his job correctly. How did they know? They sent letters. They would send letters ranging from Fran Tarkenton to Lady Diana. Though Lady Diana had passed on, there was a postmark from England stating that it came from her estate. The CIA had figured that it would be too obvious to send a letter from a living person. They tried *many* letters. Many, many, many letters. They wanted to get to Junior... or they wanted to figure out if he was loyal enough to send on another mission.

Francine's home was bugged. As soon as informants started to report that Junior was spending nights there, the CIA kept tabs on him. At some point, he was deemed a danger. He had gotten drunk the week after opening Chelsea Clinton's letter--an *authentic* one, in this case--and started babbling about it in a corner bar near his house (it was located two blocks south of Francine's). He babbled and babbled and babbled. *Sooner or later, they are going to find out anyway*, he thought. *I might as well make the most of it.*

The PIA took over the case from the CIA when they deemed him not to be enough of a threat to the people of the town. So long as he kept quiet about his association with the CIA, all would be fine for him. The PIA thought different about sending operatives to take him out. They let him do it himself. He babbled so much that they portrayed him as a turncoat. It was the end of his life as he knew it.

Jim, being an agent for more than twelve years, saw the worst of these cases. The CIA wouldn't find out that the PIA was on the job for another fourteen years because agents Jim Blackstone and Bob Gomer were *known* as CIA agents and nothing more within the agency. Most people in the public didn't even know that the CIA had operatives in the post offices across the country. They were going to be really shocked when they found out that Junior was one of them. The papers were leaked information. When the stories broke out, one of the headlines was from the *Miller Tribune* and read, "CIA Operative Caught In Miller Post Office." A subtitle read, "Agent in Drug Division Caught Snorting Cocaine During Lunch." The story went on to say that agent Junior Spinner was a defector of sorts. He was planning to steal all the cocaine that he could (it was reported that the reason he was there was because people were getting mail-

ordered coke from unspecified areas of the country through the mail service; and Miller was a hotspot of *activity*) and he was going to sell it one day (once again, to an unspecified person) and planned to leave the country. Nothing was said in *any* article about the government using Junior in the past to open letters and find out what the town was communicating.

Jim Blackstone and Bob Gomer weren't sent into town to *arrest* Junior--they would send the local police to do that--but rather to get a *feel* of the town. They would go door to door for an hour at a time and interview people. Jim was to work the first day and a half while Bob gained intelligence. On the third day of the mission, Jim was to fly to Washington D.C. and leave Bob behind.

Jim dropped off Bob at a local hotel and then started his rounds. "Hello, ma'am. How are *you*?" he asked his first customer (they were known as customers to him). It was a lady of about sixty-seven years old and she wore a dress that looked like it had once been a curtain.

"Hello, sir? Is there a problem?"

"No. I *see* though."

"See *what*, sir?" the lady asked. She was kind. She knew something was up.

Jim Blackstone wanted to say more but he couldn't. He was brought in the house as far as the door opening--two steps *past*, actually--and was awestruck by what he saw inside. There was a big picture of Jesus on the wall. He was laughing though. He was having a beer with the Buddha and Gandhi. There were no aliens. He would find that in the city of Miller, unlike Mesa, Arizona, there was *suppression* of things going on. People would talk. On occasion, they would write. They didn't *care* about the aliens though. They didn't worship them.

"Are you going to *say* more?" the elderly lady asked. Jim was quiet. He expected the lady to keep talking but she didn't. She fixed him a glass of lemonade from the kitchen without asking.

Jim took the glass from her--ice was filled to the rim and a little above--and took a drink. "We have a *problem*," he said to her. He was surprised when he didn't continue--*end*--his sentence with the word "ma'am". It was a way that he kept his distance. It was a way that he didn't get involve.

"I have something to say," the lady bellowed. "I'm forty-five years old... forty-six... Excuse me. I'm old, I'm decrepit, but I see a loser when I see one. Please leave my presence. I don't want anything to do with you." She reached for his hand and squeezed. She wasn't decrepit at all. She was coming *on* to him. The bellow was to throw him off.

Jim wouldn't have another experience similar to that until the next day when he came across Francine's place. The elderly woman was *nice*... compared to her. Francine walked out in a bathrobe when Jim approached. Rumor had it that he was interviewing people in town. His partner stayed in a hotel, as always. He was there for backup though. Two men coming to your door made people scared and that was the reason they didn't operate together at the same time. They took turns.

Underneath Francine's bathrobe, of course, was nothing but a wrinkling and aging body. Jim's job was to feel the pulse of the city and make evaluations thereafter. When he met Francine, he felt a lot more than just the pulse of the city. He felt her entire wrinkling body and more. She was decrepit, alright, but it

didn't matter to him. *Did the PIA have a watchdog agency after it? I doubt it. What do I have to lose?*

"The Periphery Intelligence Agency never had a finer moment, and the CIA was not there to witness a *damn* thing," Jim told Bob the next day.

"I know, bud. I know," Bob said then drank a beer through the bottom in a hole he had punctured through a can on purpose. "This shotgun's for you, Jim. By the way... Call next time you're going to be late."

Saul Folstiklar was a member of ELF, Earth Liberation Front. He *was* a member, and it has to be emphasized. Whereever he had gone in life, he faced rejection. He had brown teeth, but they weren't from tobacco or tea stains. Some people were born with blue skin. It's a deficiency in the blood, of some kind or another, or so he told people about on occasions. When asked why his teeth weren't white, he simply replied, *Genetics. Simple as that.*

Saul was a madman though. He was tired of being rejected by society. The only people that would accept him were the ones that accepted *nature*. It was *natural* that people were born with blue skin. It was natural that people were born with a tendency to have brown teeth as well.

Saul made a point over his years to associate with people that didn't watch a lot of television. On television, you're only allowed to be there if you're *beautiful*. They didn't let people like him on TV and it was as simple as that. The rest of him was normal, though. He had normal build. His penis was even seven inches long when erect. You couldn't go into a club in California, though, and expect to bring home a beautiful person with you unless you looked like the people on TV in Saul's mind.

There was an irony in it all. He learned, in his study of the world--the *natural* world--that giraffes, baboons, and many *other* animals tend to have a stud population. In other words, it's the *strongest* males that are accepted. It's the ones with the build. One would even argue that *intelligence* would play a role. Animals don't have TV though. They're not bombarded with images. In Saul's mind, if a baboon had brown teeth, it didn't matter as to his mating capability. He'd still be dominant because the necessary traits in that field are based on physical superiority and *maybe* a little psychological coercion.

Baboons, you see...? he told a friend one day. *They're not wired like us. Actually, they are.... but we're layered with civilization. Do you know that one baboon typically has eight to ten female mates? Do you know what that means?* he demanded.

No. What? Tell us, the bored friend replied. She gulped some of her Slurpee and then made a waving motion to a passing friend. *Go on. Tell your story.* She had just gotten back from the corner store and was waiting for cheerleading tryouts. He friend, Saul, was going to try out for the high school football team even though he was underweight at the time.

We're just like them! Don't you notice in our circle friends that the same guys get the same girls? I'm looking forward to about ten years of male bonding, at the rate I'm going. If I can make the team... He paused and then made a slashing motion with his finger across his neck. *...They'll all be over. That's all. We're just like them though.*

Go on, the friend said, a little more interested.

I like you, Sandy, he told her. *I like you a lot. But who do you like?*

I like that Gomer Pile motherfucker by the name of Butch Jackson. He's the one I want.

Okay. My point made. The dominant male wins again. He tried to test her. *Will you sleep with me tonight?*

No. No fuckin' way... She realized it was a joke though. It was an illustration, but it was still a joke.

Unless I'm a stud, I'm going down... but I'm not going down without a... He was going to say "fight". He didn't get the chance to. She kissed him on the lips and never turned back.

Butch Jackson became Secretary of State in 1994. It happened mid-term because of a death in the government. He lasted two years, retired, and then was wooed back to office in the year 2000 when Ralph Connors was elected President of the United States. It was something he didn't regret. Saul Folstiklar, on the other hand, regretted not taking him out at the knees when he had the chance during football tryouts. It was something that burned him... ever since the day he was cut from the squad.

I told you, he told Sandy one day. *We're going to be something, me and you...* he told her. She didn't believe him. He wanted revenge. He could see in Sandy's eyes that it was *important* that he not be cut from the squad. He could see that clearly.

When he blew up his first building--an oilman's personal office--he celebrated. Sandy wasn't there with him. He was with a few friends from ELF. They *liked* his brown teeth. It reminded them of a society that was real at one time. They wanted to see more brown teeth on TV. They wouldn't. They knew that the powers-that-be wouldn't allow it. They knew it from the bottom of their collective hearts. They knew it *well*.

"I'm going to blow something up," Saul said aloud. He had heard, *through the grapevine*, that the government was under siege in the city of Miller--a place he hadn't heard of until recently, since he had no television--and it was ironic that he was sticking up for the government now. No, it was not the *national* government he was fighting for. It was the local city council that was passing an ordinance that banned nuclear weapons from passing through their town. Though no nuclear weapons had ever *passed* through Miller, to the best of the council's knowledge, it was a statement to the government that they couldn't *rule* them so badly. The backlash from the PIA had hit everyone swiftly--of course, they had believed that it was the main CIA that was operating there--and they wanted to send a message: *Leave us alone*. That's what they wanted to collectively say. They couldn't do so without a symbol. The symbol, in this case was legislation. They *knew* that if the government ignored them, everything was okay. They *didn't* know that the government was already officially stepping back. Jim Blackstone, and his buddy Bob Gomer, made a *superior* recommendation of the city to their higher ups--the ones that had liaised between them and the official CIA. The backlash was incredible though. As soon as the legislation was passed, it made headlines news--*front page*--in the relatively nearby *Los Angeles Times*. The Chandler family--the ones that *started* the paper--had a field day with it.

Saul Folstiklar came to town to blow up a building. He didn't *like* the headlines that were being brought about. The *reason* was that they portrayed the inhabitants as cooky--and it set a fuse in him; touched a nerve--but they were proactive, according to the paper. He didn't like to be portrayed as anything less than serious, sophisticated, smart in all respects, and more than anything else, *right*. He wanted to be seen as right. Cooky? Nah. This was going to end. The *LA Times* were too big to be taken on. The little

Miller Tribune? It was small. It would be blown to pieces.

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Alfred and Wally were the only two people from Miller that went to Edward Hand's funeral. Three and a half months later, they talked about it. They had since graduated high school--a nothing event to them considering what had been going on in town since Bill's passing--and they wanted to get to the bottom of some issues.

"Do you ever *notice*..." Alfred began. He saw Anna walking up the steps. Their conversation was going to have to wait. They *planned* on talking about Edward--it had been suppressed by them and others--but it was going to have to wait.

"What do you *want* with me," Anna wanted to know.

"I called you for a *reason*," Alfred told her. Wally felt up her boobies a little. She was good with him like that. "I called you for a *reason*," he began again, but he began to laugh instead. "I have some time to fill. That's all it is. I don't *need* to..."

"...talk?" she answered for him.

"No. Bounce. *Yeah*, talk. That's what I mean, Wally. Every time she comes, something gets messed up. They had both kissed her in recent times on different occasions. Never were they all together at the same place. Wally wanted a "minage de twa" though. On the last day of school, Alfred looked at him... then at her. She looked back. Wally passed the note that said it all. It didn't matter if he couldn't spell the word. He was right in *other* respects though. He wanted something that *everyone* wants in his or her heart.

Wally was willing to ask now. "You want to fuck, or *what*?" he asked Alf.

"No. It's not time for that yet. *She* might want to fuck though. Britney had come up the steps thirty seconds after Anna.

"It's because..." Britney began. "It's because..." she said again then waved Alfred off. "It's because of people like you that I lose *money*!" she finally spit out.

"What are you? A *whore*?" Anna asked her. It was funny. To Alfred and Anna, it was *hilarious*.

"Come *here*, Britney," Wally said to her. He wasn't laughing with Anna and Alfred. He wanted to *get* some from her. Ever since he started writing poetry--and ever since Alfred started up words in his mouth about what to *say* about certain things concerning the *women*--he came around. He wasn't Waldo the Nerd anymore. He was Wally the Stud and most people knew it around him.

"I'm going to break down and cry," Britney said. Nothing was further from the truth.

"Did you get a tummy tuck?" Anna asked Alfred. This caught him by surprise because he was checking out Britney and the way she handled things.

"No. What's it to you *anyway*?" he asked her. Things weren't so serious at the moment and he wished they were a *little*. "I'm going to talk about Ed now, Wally," he said then went inside the house from the porch. "I'm going to talk about him. Listen if you *want*..." he could tell that Wally didn't want to hear.

He wanted to say, *He didn't die in vane. I still think of him. I want to write a song about it and I want your help. He was a loser, yes. But what kind of loser was he?*

Edward was buried in Corona. That's why most people didn't go to the funeral, in Alfred's mind. He was well liked by a lot of people. They didn't *come* though. Why? Corona wasn't far from Miller

"Have you ever thought that...?" he began again after coming back with some tea. No one wanted to hear. Sometimes Alfred would get on an agenda and try to *stay* there. He wanted to say, *Have you ever thought about how close Corona and Miller are to each other? They should do a beer commercial around here.*

No one would think of Edward though. He said inspiring words. In the end, it's the people with the big cocks that are remembered. Why that was, was beyond Alfred and Wally both. They spent eighteen minutes *exactly* talking about cocks to Anna and Britney. The wall clock struck on the hour right after they started and Anna checked her watch when they stopped. She *knew*.

"If Edward played *guitar* though..." Alfred said.

"Or wrote *poetry*," Wally added.

"Yep. I would have fucked him," Britney said. They laughed. Britney never knew when she was funny... and loved.

Alfred loved her. He had her in his last day of class in a corner. Everyone else had left the room. *I'm going to fuck you someday*, he had said to her. He was joking, of course. Somehow, he knew it's what she needed to hear. She was like that. It was strange to him.

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Saul Folstiklar arrived in Miller while Britney was saying her funny lines to Alfred, Anna and Wally. He was wearing khaki pants--no one would see these 'til later--and a hat that suggested that he was an artist from maybe France or that part of the world. It was a Barret. That's what it was. Wally recognized it as Saul drove by in a beat up, old Datsun 240z. It had paint that was falling off as he drove, or so it seemed to Wally. It was in need of a wash job, but that wasn't going to happen soon, or so Wally thought. He didn't call it to the attention of the people around him. He thought it was a curiosity though.

Phil McOaland was the head of security at a nearby warehouse that stocked and shipped grocery goods. He was responsible for overseeing twenty-eight people during shift change--those were the good times--and as many as three hundred when the company was in full rush. He worked for *Darber*. It was a food company that was responsible for a third of the state's food products. The regional warehouse where he worked covered three counties. He was responsible for a *lot*, in his own mind.

He worked for the fire department in years past but was fired (*Excuse the pun*, he would say at times long afterward, *but I was fired from LAFD*) when he helped a lady lift a fifty-pound weight over her head and onto some boxes as part of a physical exam. It wasn't the first time he had done something like that. He got favors *back* from the ladies in most cases when they were hired on. It was worth it to him.

At Darber, he had twelve monitors in front of him, at any given time, that would scan the whole place. There were twenty-two cameras set up in all. He could select any various one at the push of the button. Known to him and management, there was a hidden camera in the men's room as well (there was not one in the lady's room for reasons that even *he* agreed with). He looked at the cameras twelve hours per day sometimes. Adam Fleshman, Wally's brother, got a job there as soon as he turned eighteen. He was a star worker. Most people were not. They'd steal. They'd lie. They'd cheat. They'd do a *lot* of things and most the times, Phil would turn his head. It was the *big* thieves that he wanted to catch. It was the union organizers that didn't know they were being filmed and taped in the bathrooms during breaks. *This* is what inspired him.

Everyone is good at *something*, or so Phil reckoned. Being that he had been fired from the fire department in Los Angeles, he wanted to be good at something else. Fire work was a drag, *anyway*, to him. It was boring all year round except in the summer. Then it was a bitch.

Phil bought a book entitled *The Secrets of Remote Viewing* when he was hired on at Darber. He thought it would be good fiction. He was watching cameras all day. What could a little New Age nonsense do to him? Nothing. That was his attitude.

For those that didn't know, *New Age* is a term that became *Old Age* to Phil. He started to *believe*. Remote viewing is a term that the CIA coined--or so it was lodged in his *head* that it came from the CIA--after experimenting with psychic techniques of checking on people. The book that he bought likened a remote viewer to one studying karate. A remote viewer that was a black belt could draw in detail the things he was seeing from thousands of miles away. Though the CIA later officially renounce remote viewing as being ineffective, they still practiced it.

Phil saw Saul coming into town. He didn't see him through a monitor on his desk. He saw him in his *mind*. During the time that he worked at Darber, he learned to see things that the twelve screens in front of him *didn't* see. He was secretly attracted to Adam Fleshman. He would follow him into the bathroom after seeing him go in through one of the screens. The cameras weren't fixated to catch the glimpses of employees' peckers. They were there to watch social behavior, like union organization. Phil though, had learned to be a black belt in the remote viewing area. A *white* belt--if someone got off the block and began to *see* things--could see things like a person sees with severe cataracts. He could draw squares if buildings were around. He could draw blob-like shapes if he was witness a stadium or something that vaguely resembled it.

Phil followed Adam Fleshman into the bathroom one time--it was a time that he was using his black-belt-like technique--and discovered something peculiar. On Adam's pecker were four small words: Don't Look At Me. They were written on a *paper* that covered his pecker, in all actuality. Phil was a confused man though. He was really confused and he didn't know what to do about it. He would harass people at night in their dreams, not knowing that that was when people *knew* that they were being spied on by him. He would do this, but it wouldn't stop him from doing what he did. At that point--when he first realized that people knew they were being *watched*--he stopped for a while. In the same way that a young,

teenage male might try to stop masturbating, Phil tried to stop spying on people. He found he couldn't.

Saul came into town--Phil was fixing himself a glass of Kook Aid; something the grandkids liked when they came over--and all of a sudden, his life changed. He had a realization that something was going on. This man was going to blow something up and he *knew* it. He looked on the seat of his car and he could see the explosives. He looked on the man's face and saw confusion, pain, and anger.

Phil was at a crossroads. He could use his power--his *ability*, if you will--to continue spying and maybe *catch* the guy. Maybe even turn him in.

He could ignore things.

Phil drank his grape-tasting liquid and sat down on the couch.

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Randal went by Phil's house on his moped as Phil down to drink his grape Kool Aid. He didn't have Phil on his mind though. He was on his way to Francine's. They were going to do the horizontal they were going to do the horizontal mombo. After that, they were going to do the *vertical* mombo. It didn't really matter to him. He was young, full of hormones, and life was a blur to him. *Bill passed away things got crazy everyone's lunny no one knows what to do the paper is crazy there's agents everywhere mombo mombo mombo she called I'm going to get some I'm going to get some.* Horizontal mombo is that he was going to be doing. There was too much to think about. *Horizontal mombo et cetera she likes me she's going to take care of me she's over Alfred she's over Phil she's over the rest of the neighborhood I might get crabs horizontal mombo...*

Boing. It stuck up. It wasn't through his pants though. He got closer to her house and he could *feel* her. She said that she had slept with the agent from the CIA. That was probably a rumor. *Horizontal mombo.* Boing. Boing, boing, boing. He didn't know if he was going to get there.

He rounded the corner and he could see her house. He got closer. He could see her at the screen. *Am I desperate? Horizontal mombo. Damn fly in my mouth. Horizontal...* Boing. That was it. He didn't feel like doing it anymore.

He parked his moped in front of her house. Not in the driveway. He parked it right where she could see it in the front. He was *mad*, by now. *Horizontal mombo? Why don't I feel better? She looks good. Decrepit? Is that how she felt on the phone? Decrepit? She looks like she put...*

Music blared from inside the house. *I saw you yesterdaaaay*, it said. *I want you to take a burger to my hooooouse*, it continued.

What kind of shit is this? Randal wondered. He didn't care. Francine was on the other side of the screen. *I thought she'd be naked*, he wondered with frustration. *They all said she'd be naked.*

Anna had become the village whore for about the first two weeks after she slept with Bill before his passing. If whore was what *she* was, there was no word for what Francine had become.

I'm naked, Randal thought. *I'm naked*, he thought again. His clothes were on. *I'm naked*, *nonetheless*, he said to himself after looking down at his jeans. *She's going to win*, he thought. He was

thinking of Bill and Alfred. He was thinking of Bill in Heaven--or *wherever* they said he was now--and he was thinking of Alfred because Alfred tried to put a *stop* to it all.

"You *can't* stop me, Alfred!" Francine yelled.

"What are you *talking* about?" Randal wanted to know... but he *knew*. She read his mind. It was like *Tommyknockers*, the movie. The town started reading each other's minds... after the *aliens* arrived in the form of a spaceship. "You're a rip off artist," he said to Francine.

"You are a *dog*!" she yelled back. They didn't even know if they were communicating with one another.

"Let me strip off your clothes," Randal said.

Surprisingly, Alfred came out from the other room. "Don't *do* that," he calmly said to Randal. "You're being set up, buddy. We *know*..." he began. He knew that Randal knew what he was going to say.

"I'm a *dog*, huh?"

"You said it, buddy."

"I'm a *weenie*," Randal said back to Alfred.

"It's over," Alfred said. Randal wanted to know what he was talking about but he *knew*. "It's *over*, I said."

"What?" Randal said. He didn't know. He really didn't *know*.

"It's *over*," Alfred repeated.

"What *are* you," Randal asked him.

There was no response. Alfred waited for Francine to say something. She wouldn't. She wasted all his time and *nearly* fucked up his teenage years... but he *forgave* her. It took a long time, but it was there. He *waited*. All she had to do was behave. She wouldn't... until now. And even then...

"I'm going to go now, Randal," Alfred said.

"You're a *loser*," Randal retorted.

Alfred got on his bike--it was sitting outside around the corner--and thought, *The sucky thing is you were the only one I trusted. I like Waldo--everyone does now--but you had potential. You're a let down. What a fuckin' drag!*

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As Saul approached the *Miller Tribune* building in his 240z, Bucky Holdwater was preparing for a birthday party across town. No one would come except for Ameriway friends and a few relatives. At that moment, Alfred was telling off Randal and getting ready to leave Francine's house. Inside the house, Randal reconsidered that he may have been set up, after all. Francine was taking off her clothes and crying. Randal stayed. *What do you want me to do, Bill?* he asked. He found that he was reaching for a higher power though he claimed to be agnostic at school. *What do you want me to do?*

To his surprise, there was a response in his head that seemed to be foreign. It came from his dad, Randal Meyer Senior. *Don't do a thing, son. Don't do a thing.*

What are these voices? he wondered. He undressed himself and started to look Francine up and down. She was feeling better. Though she didn't have Alfred there--he was still the one she wanted--she had *someone*. It would do. They screwed and at the moment that Saul approached the editor of the *Miller Tribune* with a package in his hand--one he had crafted together five minutes before entering the building--Randal shot his load. It wasn't the first time he had sex. Anna was sleeping around for a while. It was the first time he had a *lady*. He called her a rocket queen--everyone *did* speak this way of older ladies at his school--and soon, he began to fall in love. It wasn't with her. It was with his dad. It wasn't homosexual. He felt loved. He felt looked-out for.

Saul approached Marlin--he was the editor of the paper and formerly from Daytona Beach, Florida--and gave him a gift.

"What's *this*?" Marlin wanted to know. It was a nickname--one he was given after covering games for Florida's major league baseball team of the same name. "Is this for me?" Inside was a ticking bomb. He didn't know it. He *sensed* it--anything could happen--but he didn't know it.

Alfred flew over there on his bike. Phil McOaland had yelled to him, "There's a crazy man on his way to *Marlin's*!" He knew just where to go.

Right before the bomb exploded, Alfred got close enough to catch shreds of brick in his head. He didn't know *one* brick had hit him, let alone many pieces. Neither did Marlin. Neither did Saul. They visited Kurt Cobain, his buddy Bill, Edward Hand, and many others on a planet known as Xeon. As soon as Alfred saw Saul on the planet--he knew what had happened immediately because of planning for this kind of event through Bill--he said, "Who the fuck *are* you? What are you *about*?!"

He got no response. The man he talked to looked confused. He was now a ghost on another planet, and he didn't even look happy for what he had done. *What a waste. What a fuckin' waste*, Alfred thought. He went to Bill and tried to hug him. Bill didn't respond either.

****Part Three****

* one *

“You see, class? The Koagulates are a band of people from another planet,” Miss Kidman said to her second-graders. “They are a class of people and people believe they exist.” She paused. “But you and me? We *know* it’s not true. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes, Miss Kidman” was mixed with “Yes teacher” throughout the room.

“So we’re going to teach you today...” She was interrupted by Phil McOaland. He was blamed for Alfred’s death. He didn’t really care. He liked telling the story. More than this, he liked telling people that he *talked* to Bill... and Alfred... and *other* people from beyond. Some people thought he was crazy. Others had remembered the two. They knew that Bill had flown, though it had been suppressed in people’s minds since it happened a year ago. “I want to *tell* you something, Phil,” Miss Kidman said. She was his wife-to-be. Her name was Nancy Kidman and in a year, it’d be Nancy McOaland. It was a crazy world.

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Bucky Holdwater’s party didn’t go as planned. This was a year before Miss Kidman was interrupted by her future love interest. It didn’t go well because of what had happened a few blocks over. Here he was, trying to celebrate his twenty-first birthday, and all people would talk about all night was the explosion that took place. Five people died that day and Christina was one of them. She was Marlin’s personal secretary. Bucky had a mild interest in her but that was about all. She was a Seventh Day Adventist and he knew it would never work out between them. She was rich. Bucky wanted more. He wanted someone that ate, drank, and *slept* money. That’s what he was in to.

Bucky was interrupted by Randal earlier that day. Randal knew what happened and it wasn’t long before word got out from Phil that Alfred had been speeding toward the scene of the atrocity. Parts of his bike were found. There were human remains but no one got close enough to identify who was in the remains. Paramedics and police closed off the scene anyway. Bucky had known Randal because he had started going to Ameriway meetings. It was something that Bill and Alfred would have deplored. It didn’t matter to Randal. He didn’t have a friend on the Earth. He knew it. He didn’t have a friend elsewhere, as far as he was concerned. He was an extravert to the Nth degree. He didn’t care about deep relationships. His boat was knowing people--*many* people--and that was fine with him.

Bucky invited Randal to his party after they had a brief conversation about the wreckage. Bucky wasn’t too fond of Alfred--he didn’t care much about him--but he felt for Randal for some reason. He looked lost. He didn’t know what to do. Bucky invited him to his party--one that was to be held later that night--and he assured him that all would be fine. Things weren’t. Randal started to die that day. It wasn’t suicide. It was an ulcer that he couldn’t control. Feelings--*massive* feelings--ate him up from inside and he couldn’t identify their source. He had slept with Francine. That was a good thing to him. He had lost

Alfred, and prior to that, he lost Bill. That was no big deal. He *knew* people. He knew a lot of people. He knew a *lot* of people. None of them filled him. At the same time, *all* of them filled him. It was one of those things. If he decided to go to college later in life, he may have come across theories presented by psychologist, Carl Jung. Randal was an extravert. That's all there was to it.

Bill and Alfred started getting along in what's known as "the afterlife" on Earth. This was not long after Bucky's disappointing party. They started getting along. Alfred started to learn. Bill had been mad at him at times. He wouldn't be mad anymore. It's like trying to teach your kid calculus. If he's too young, he's just not going to get it. It's as simple as that.

Alfred started to understand what he was telling him about the Nebula that was near by. If Alfred were to turn around and try to contact the people on Earth, they would have *NO* idea what he was talking about.

"Ghosts are said to be fiction in many parts of modern day America," Bill had said to Alfred seven days after he got to Xeon--*Earth* days. "They're *not*. Humans are made of carbon and the like. Carbon is made up of a substance that you don't need to know right now, but it goes beyond protons and neutrons. There's *smaller* things, and I think you know about it..."

"From our earlier conversations. I know."

Bill was getting mad at him again though. "The humans had it right about photons. It's like light with weight. I won't bore you with the details. Things can simultaneously exist in different parts of the galaxy, you see? That's all you need to know right now. It's a matter of physics, that's all. But it's not Physics 101 like is taught in high schools and colleges and the sort."

"Why are you *telling* me this?" Alfred wanted to know. It had become a common question he asked Bill since he had passed on. "*Why?*" He knew why though. It was about religion. Even as ghosts--that's what they were for all practical reasons--they couldn't forget their pasts if they *wanted* to. It's a hard thing to understand no matter *what* alien race you are, and they came to believe that firmly.

"Let me tell you something," Bill began again. "That Church of Kurt Cobain that you visited while you were on Earth..." He paused. "We could *do* something with that. I've been working hard *without* you... but the Earthlings--I can't believe I'm *calling* them that--are stupid. They just don't know."

"Say 'ignorant,' please. Say 'ignorant,'"

"I'm not going to talk to you any longer. We have work to do, my son."

It wasn't odd to Alfred that Bill called him his *son*. It was odd to him in *retrospect*, but when it rolled off his tongue, it was the right thing--"tongue" being the operative word here.

"I know what to do," Alfred said. He didn't tell Bill though because he was already making his way away from him. There was a game on Xeon that's likened to baseball. That's where Bill was heading. The game had nothing to *do* with baseball. It just made him feel that way.

A year later, Phil McOaland interrupted Miss Kidman's class and Alfred's plan would finally manifest itself. He didn't think it would take so long, but it did.

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Six months before blowing up the *Miller Tribune*, Saul Folstiklar was a lead member in Earth Liberation Front. He was exiled. The *reason* he was exiled was because he sent another member to jail. How did he do it? He *lied*. He lied a lot. This member who had been sent to prison didn't have a lot of money. He was down and out on life, and because the members did a lot of magic mushrooms in their meetings, he started showing signs of being disconnected from the real world. During one of his trips, sitting around a camp fire with the rest of the members, this guy said aloud to Saul, "I want you *dead*! You're not doing enough to help our cause." When he sobered up, he was regretful. He remembered doing it. He had seen horns coming out of Saul's head. That's what set him off. He was wasted out of his mind and the thought the *universe* was giving him this great revelation. It's *somewhat* funny what can come out of people's mouths sometimes when they escape sobriety. That's what the guy would tell his friends many years later.

Saul was carrying a tape recorder when the mystery man said it. They would later learn that the mystery man was a CIA informant but he wasn't in the CIA directly. He was an informant because he had *relatives* in the CIA. It's like being born into the mafia. You really don't have a choice if you're in or you're out. If your family is taking care of you, you're in. No doubt about it.

Saul carried the tape recorder because he secretly worked for a petroleum company. It's funny. All of these guys were sitting around the camp fire telling each other how *dedicated* to the cause they were. Some worked for corporations. Some worked for the government. Others just didn't know and were caught in the cross fire. They were the idealists. They were the ones that didn't know.

If the mystery man had known that Saul would eventually turn him in to the authorities--it's ironic because ELF *fought* the authorities--he would have never let down his guard. He wouldn't have said what he did. He would have seen the horns on his head during his trip and ignored them. He had that much control but he thought he freedom of expression mattered more. Girls were dancing around the fire. They were on the plain as well. The mystery man was Bill's older brother, Ned.

Saul took the tape to the authorities in his hometown of Clearwater, California--it's a place about a half hour's drive from Miller to the east. He took the tape there and swore that Ned had a knife. No such thing happened. It was fabricated. When Ned was initially jailed, he thought to call Saul. He didn't though. You're given three calls and that's it. Every call after that requires a collect calling acceptance. He didn't think *anyone* would believe him at the time and didn't *waste* his time or his energy. On the stand, Saul said that he called Ned while he was in jail. *The transcripts are there for anyone to see*, Ned told his younger brother one day. *If you don't believe that people can lie and put you in jail, you have another thing coming*. His brother shook his head but knew he was serious. *Watch yourself. That's all*, he finally told Bill.

Bill watched himself fine. He didn't get the transcripts from the court before his passing--he had intended to do it *someday* or another--but he *did* believe him. He didn't know that you couldn't receive calls in jail if you were an inmate. He planned to find that out, too, in a more concrete way.

They should have thrown the case out as soon as he lied about calling me in jail, he told Bill. They didn't do it though. They should have done it. They had the hard evidence though--fuckin' OJ Simpson. Because of him, people think that we need to be scared of verbal threats.

Sticks and stones can break your bones, right? Bill agreed with him.

You damn right! He paused and then said, *And only the government can hurt you!*

It was a child's saying the year after. He taught it to all his kid cousins. It was a blast. He liked hearing them say it.

Saul Folstiklar stood on the planet Zoton--he had been banished from Xeon because he was a jerk and Zoton accepted nearly *anyone*--and he confessed his sins to a saint.

"Mother Mary is my name," she had told him. He couldn't tell if she was an Earthling or not. She was glowing from around the edges. She *looked* like a saint. That much he knew.

Mother Mary tried to give Saul some food--it was bread--but he didn't take it initially. She was saddened. She had a heart but it no longer pumped blood full of iron. She was saddened. Saul took the food and went away.

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Randal meditated on a picture of Alfred and Bill that he had in his room. It was quiet. He knew he wouldn't be disturbed for a while. He felt lonely. He had started to hang out with Bucky, but that became a drag after a while.

He meditated.

What do you WAAANNTT? He heard a voice from beyond. He didn't respond because he was saddened. Alfred wanted to impart some knowledge on him. He didn't know if he would. *You're going to be taken up, Randal,* he said. This time, he wasn't joking. That tone had left him. *I already told a couple of people. Just like Enoch before you... and just like Elijah after him, you'll be...*

"Give me a break," Randal said. He believed it though. He didn't like the religious allusions, true as they may have been.

I'm trying to bust your chops, buddy, Alfred said from the beyond. *Phil already knows. I didn't want him to know... but he has powers I can't really control. He can read minds just like you can now...*

There was a silence in Randal's mind now. Alfred hadn't left but he could sense that other beings wanted to talk to him. They were demanding his attention.

Randal summoned Bill instead. *Do you hear me?* he tried, through pure telepathy.

No, a voice said. It was a foreign voice but not one that wasn't originally from Earth. He could tell now. He could *see* quite often the things we was hearing.

The voices left the room. Randal was left to his silence once again. It didn't last long. He played the radio, and he played it loud. The theme to "The Greatest American Hero" played on. He liked it. Made him feel good. He got it from the internet. It was a good buy at ninety-nine cents. He got it from one of his web sites that he checked out on a regular basis.

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Father Thompson was a man that had thought the Church was a great place. He had affairs over the years and kept this from his brethren. He never thought God would find out. He didn't care. He didn't even *believe* in God. He did his mass every week, and the whole time, he was the biggest unbeliever in the building. He thought Jesus was a great man... if he ever *lived*. He even thought he was an *inspirational* man... if he ever walked foot on this planet. It didn't matter to him though. The Church, in his mind, was a great social institution. He prayed to see Saint Mary Magdalene at times but he never did. He often prayed to Saint Mary, Mother of God in his world... but she was a no show. He stopped believing. It was as simple as that.

Phil McOaland got Miss Kidman out of her second-grade class in time to stop a miracle. Father Thompson was sent on his way to a park in the middle of Miller. He was told to meet a boy--a *young* boy--and that was good enough for him. He was told to go through the park whistling Dixie and he would be approached soon after. A miracle was waiting for him.

Randal was to fly that day. He was to do more than fly. He was to take off into the sky and never come back. Enoch had done it in the Old Testament and so had Elijah, except that Elijah took off on a fiery chariot, never to return. That chariot was a flying saucer but there was no such word at the time. We got "fiery chariot" from the ancients' understanding of their primitive world.

Phil showed up with Nancy. He was frantic. Nancy told the principal beforehand that there was a family emergency. Phil knew the miracle was coming because of his foreknowledge abilities. No one else tipped him off. Randal hadn't said a word to a soul.

Father Thompson started whistling Dixie in the park. A few kids turned to him and were afraid. He was in street clothes and feeling a little out of place. From behind the bushes, Randal popped out.

"It's *time*," he said. "Give it a moment or two. I'm supposed to see a sign myself. You've been waiting for this for a *long* time. I've *heard* about you... and don't ask how. I got my secrets right now."

"I have *what*?" the priest wanted to know. He misunderstood what Randal said or pretended no to know. "I have *what*?" he said again, then he calmed. There was no response from him. The world tried to help him out. He was bitter. He wanted to see the sign though. Randal got the feeling that even if he saw it, he'd be an unbeliever the next day. He'd rationalize it somehow. He'd want to see *another* one. He'd want to do this 'til the day he died, and even then, it might not be enough. He'd probably be on his deathbed with Mother Mary and Mary Magdalene right above him and *not* believe it. He was a doubter. He really was. And he was full of *some* bitterness that was starting to subside.

Phil and Nancy rushed in. They wanted to stop the miracle. Why they wanted to stop it was beyond Randal's and Father Thompson's comprehension but they sensed it nonetheless. They knew they were sniffed out. It didn't stay so secret.

So be it, Randal thought.

He said it aloud and then Father Thompson said, "Likewise. Let's get on with it, shall we?"

“I have to wait still,” Randal said. At that moment, he got a sign, but it wasn’t the one he wanted.

We have to wait, he heard from inside his head.

“The guy says we have to wait,” Randal told Father Thompson.

“What do you *mean* we have to wait?” the father phenomenoned.

“We have to wait because he doesn’t *like* you. He thought you were worthy though. He changed his mind. It’s too bad, isn’t it?”

Father Thompson began to feel duped. Randal would later find out that that was why Phil and Nancy rushed to stop them to begin with. Father Thompson was a fraud and there was nothing anyone could do about it. It made Bill sad in the sky. It made him sad beyond belief. This man had baptized him when he was a young child. Now? He wasn’t ready for the miracle. Maybe he’d never be.

* two *

Clyde Shuster was doing well outside of Duckton. He became a *believer*. He stopped wearing a suiting and tie to work. He started wearing clothes that Cobain would approve of. *Come as you are*, Cobain had told him one day in a seance at his home. That's how he knew what to dress in.

So as not to scare off the people that were already coming, he *slowly* changed--that was his style--and he was chastised by Cobain whenever he would summon him on a personal level. He started wearing a beanie to his sermons. That's what he always wanted to do. His steady parishioners--there was only two or three that could be called *really* steady--thought it was a little strange... but they accepted it. They *nearly* thought of him as a fraud before but they were starting to see the changes and they *liked* them.

When Clyde couldn't get a hold of Cobain, he'd get a hold of Bill. And if he couldn't get a hold of Bill, he would talk to Alfred (he was *really* comfortable when it was Alfred but Alfred knew less than the other two). He would talk to different people. Pretty soon, his small church couldn't handle the amount of people that came. There were bleachers in the back--that was a given--but people were sitting on the surrounding lawn at times. Shuster was so successful that he decided to cash in his chips--that part of him still existed--and he moved to Liverpool, England. He thought he was going to hit the jackpot. He was wrong.

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Jeff Splifer stood behind his podium. He was ready to give a speech that would affect *one* person in the crowd so much the she decided to change her entire life because of it. It was no big deal to him. He made speeches like this all the time. Some teachers say, "If I could only change one person's life, I'll be happy with what I've done." Of course, they mean changing the student's life for the positive. Jeff wasn't like that. He had too many things going. He *thought* that the things he was teaching, people should know anyway. He saw himself as an agent. An agent of *what*? An agent of *truth*. He believed that truth was out there... and *that's* what was changing people's lives. It wasn't him. He was the messenger.

The girl who's life he changed was Stephanie Venezia. She was schizophrenic, but few people knew about it. She hid it very well from the public. Her family was somewhat supportive of her. They would have been *really* supportive if she could have managed to be *normal*, in their eyes. Stephanie let her schizophrenia take off. If she saw something in her head, she would paint it. If she heard people talking to her at night, she would get up and write poetry about it. That was okay for the family. What *wasn't* okay was that she thought it was all real. It was, but they didn't know it. Jeff Splifer was about to say *how* it was real.

"Let me tell you something, people. *A Beautiful Mind* won an Oscar. You remember the picture, right? If you don't, no big deal. It's on video. You can watch it. I'm going to talk to you about what van Gogh went through. I'm going to talk to you about what a million people are going through right now that are *documented* in this country. I'm going to talk to you about that character whom inspired the movie, *A Beautiful Mind*. It's schizophrenia." Stephanie cringed in the front row. She didn't say a thing though.

Jeff looked at her--he knew he would do this, as far as scanning the audience for certain reactions--and he *knew* that she had it. He could see it on her face.

"I'm going to continue on. If you have any comments..."

"I have schizophrenia." Stephanie had shyly raised her hand and volunteered the information. Jeff Splifer expected a gasp from the crowd. He got a fake one. Zotar--now known as Dirt again--gasp in the community college classroom. He didn't gasp too loud for Stephanie to hear. Jeff saw the fake gasp though. He was infuriated and stopped the lecture.

"We're going to take a break--make it ten minutes--and we'll come back. Dirt. Think about what you've done."

"What? I was *joking*."

Eddie Macral sat next to him. "I think he was joking teacher. Need we be so serious?"

"I guess not." He looked at Stephanie. She wasn't hurt. She was ready for the next lecture and he could see it.

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While Jeff Splifer's class took their break, Anna approached the house of Randal Meyer. He had flown in his dreams since the incident with the priest. He hadn't flown otherwise and was quite put off by it. He *wanted* to fly.

Anna was there for a reason. It wasn't sex. She wanted to *talk* to him. "Do you still talk to the people from the beyond?" she asked him as he opened his door for her.

"No. I don't. Why do you ask?"

"I was just wondering." There was a pause and she didn't know whether or not he was going to invite her inside. "Are you going to let me in?"

"No. I'm not," he responded to her. He didn't seem mad. He was bitter ever since the time he was set up the year before. He didn't know who was doing it next. It created a strange paranoia in him, but not that kind that would drive him mad. "I'm not. What are you doing here?"

"I don't know anymore. I thought you were like the rest, I guess." She was talking about Alfred and Bill. Waldo hadn't been coming around town anymore. He moved to Florida with his grandparents.

Moments passed. The two stood in front of one another. Anna began to leave when she realized Randal wasn't going to play with her. "Come on in," Randal said when he saw that Anna was about to leave. "I'll let you in... on one condition."

"That I have sex with you?"

"No. Strange, but no."

"What *is* it?" she wondered aloud. She was thinking about Bill in particular. Things weren't going her way. She wondered how it would be if things could be like they were with Bill... so long ago.

"I'm letting you in because..." he began. "Forget about it." He could see she was still in a dream state of sorts. She wasn't thinking of him and it *bugged* him. "I'm letting you go, okay?"

“Nope. We have to *deal*. You’re in the same boat with me.”

“Could you at least look into my eyes when you talk?”

“No. Eddie has a friend--he’s a new guy I met--and *she* doesn’t look him in the eyes. I don’t think I need to look at *you* while I talk. Can you deal?” She looked him in the eyes at that time. He was on the verge of tears.

“I’m going to... *go*,” he managed. He was emotional. Nothing was going his way. He wanted to fly but was unable to. He could *talk* to her about it. It would open new wounds though. Those are the things that you suppress, according to him. You suppress them and they go away in time... with hope. That’s what he thought of things. “I’m going to go,” he said again as he collected himself, “So you *can’t* come in.”

“I’ll have *sex* with you,” she said. She didn’t look into his eyes. “I’ll have sex and then we can talk.”

Randal felt mad. He was getting over it. Feelings are ephemeral. He didn’t know where he had heard it, but it was lodged in his head.

She was using him somehow. It was a codependency. He relied on affirmation from the public. She depended on affirmation from him. *Sick cycle*, she thought. She left. She didn’t say a word. It didn’t matter to her what had been said. She wanted a rise and she got one. She wasn’t sick in that way. It was just that the rise she wanted was different from the one she anticipated. She didn’t want to be alone. That was the bottom line. She could think about the for an hour or two. It was better than if she didn’t come over at all.

“I’m going to...” Randal began as she made her way down the walk. “I’m going to treat you better in the *future*, Anna,” he finally said near the top of his speech.

“The future is now, you son of a bitch,” she muttered under her voice. It didn’t matter if Randal heard or not. She was going to write Waldo in Florida. Little did she know that he’d be on his way back in forty-five days.

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Miss Kidman returned to her second-grade class on the day after the incident in the park. When asked what the family emergency was from the school’s principal, she replied, “Don’t worry,” as in *Don’t worry about it, you nosey bitch*. She continued on teaching and all the kids would ask about the rumors. There wasn’t yet a strong rumor that *she* had been involved in anything peculiar. Regardless, she had been baffled by what was going on. She strode up and down her walkway in front of class during recess. She didn’t want to go into the teacher’s lounge. They knew she was dating Phil McOaland and secretly going with Tim Clarke, Alfred’s step-dad when he was alive. They knew all of this and they couldn’t *help* but stare. She felt like Jesus, in a way. She knew something that they didn’t. They had rumors about her. The kids had rumors about *them* because they were suspicious of *any* adult in town by that time... with the exception of Miss Kidman. She was nice. That’s what mattered to them.

After one recess, she called the kids to the center of the room. “You’ve been asking about Zotar a lot. I’m going to *tell* you about him.”

Clifford raised his hand and wanted to know something.

“Go on, Cliff,” she said to him. “Ask your question.”

“I want to know what Zotar was *up* to?”

She didn’t know. She didn’t *want* to know. Everyone knew that Dirt became Zotar the year before. He got made fun of and that’s what Clifford was probably asking about. It happened in time. Zotar--when he *called* himself that--thought it was rather cool at the beginning. He shed his jock-like ways and started taking up art. He was riding a wave. He was *preaching* the liberal gospel and everything else. Then something changed.

“People *oppose* you, in life, Clifford.” That’s the best that Miss Kidman could do. “And he named himself Zotar after something you guys have been asking *anyway*.”

“Zoton. That’s what you’re talking about, huh?” Nadine wanted to know. “That’s what it is, huh?”

“Yep. You *got* it.”

Nadine had had the most serious look on her face before asking and Nancy Kidman was surprised that it didn’t change after she had given her the affirmative response that she was looking for. “Then why am I *lost*?” Nadine wanted to know.

“We’re *all* lost, Miss Nadine. But no one wants to admit it and those teachers in the other rooms don’t want to *talk* about it.” She paused. She said, “Do you ever wonder why they walk so fast to their teachers’ lounge when they get ready for their breaks? They’re scared like you.”

All of a sudden, no one was scared in class anymore. Then didn’t know how Zoton became Zotar in Zotar’s head and that didn’t matter to them anymore.

“Zoton’s a metaphor, people. That’s what you need to tell them on the outside, okay? It’s important.”

“What’s a mettacal, Miss Kidman?” a young girl asked.

“A *metaphor*--that’s what it’s called--is when something isn’t really true. It’s what we adults do when we can’t think of answers. It’s ‘pretend,’ okay?”

“Yes, Miss Kidman,” the class collectively said. They nearly got it right this time. They were getting good.

* three *

After the lecture in which Jeff Splifer started talking about schizophrenia, a few of the students went down the hill to a cafe known as Moonbeam. Stephanie was one of them. She was joined by Eddie Macral, Dirt Cassidy, and a couple of other people that had a mild interest in the day's discussions. They weren't going to stay long. They were going to talk about the implications of what was being said.

Dave Barley was one of the other people to join. He was joined by his girlfriend, Glen Sobner. Dave was adamant atheist and scoffed at the things that Stephanie had to say when the class came back from break. *Remember, class. This is sensitive stuff we're going to be discussing*, Jeff Splifer had said when he resumed the lecture. It wasn't much of a lecture though. It turned into open discussion, mostly between Stephanie and the rest.

"I want to *talk* to you, Dave," Stephanie had said to him.

He didn't want to talk though and she could see it. He had some whipped cream on the top of his lip from sipping his mocha--a *grande* one. "I want to talk to you *too*, but leave it alone, okay. We don't have to *discuss* it anymore."

"I agree," Eddie said. He was surprised. As he drove down the hill, it's all he wanted to do. There was an aura of seriousness though. That much he could tell.

Kevin was a jock that played for the school's football team. He saw Stephanie, hugged her, then asked where she was coming from.

"Class," she said. She was happy. He was a good guy. Eddie knew Kevin *vaguely* from another class. Dave didn't know him at all.

"I want to *say*..." he paused. He was one of the cooler dudes on the campus. A lot of jocks have a reputation for being stuck up. Kevin was different. He had personality. He didn't know *why*.

Eddie had been on a field trip with Kevin from the class he had had him in. He was fun, and he knew it. *We're both moral guys*, Kevin had said to a girl about the two of them. *We're not in it for the fun. We're in it for the sex*. The people cracked up. It was further from the truth and the people around knew it. Simple comic relief. Kevin was a master of it.

"What are you guys talking about?" he asked Eddie at the cafe--*Cafe Moonsomething*, in his mind. "What *is* it, Marie?" he asked Stephanie. He didn't know her name was Steph. He had forgotten or he was joking again.

"I didn't *know*," Stephanie told someone that was passing by. It was someone else she knew. She knew a *lot* of people. She was artistic, people gravitated toward her, she knew it, she *played* it sometimes, but most of all, she had heart. Now, after the lecture, she had understanding too.

"I'm going to get up and leave," Eddie said. His mood had changed. He *wanted* to talk about things after leaving class. He couldn't manage to do so. He knew everyone else didn't need him. Kevin wanted him to stay, but that wasn't enough. He'd leave. He'd go home. He'd ponder.

Dave stood up and left before Eddie could leave the table. He wasn't mad. It was a mood change that he sensed as well. They went to their cars. In front of their cars, they talked about all that had gone on.

Eddie told him that he thought Jeff Splifer was right about a lot of things. He talked about the brain and how psychology and psychiatry *both* were shifting away from the Freudian model and into something the Europeans had been teaching for a while. It dealt with the brain itself more than it deal with abstracts.

Kevin approached the two guys as they were talking. “You guys are *hosers*,” he said to them as he waved his hand at them in mild disapproval. “What are you guys talking about?”

“The booze,” Eddie said. It was a lie. He didn’t want to be seen as a nerd to this jock. That could ruin his reputation as *anything*. *Anything but a nerd*, Eddie thought. “We’re talking about booze...” Eddie began before being interrupted by Dave. Eddie was going to invite Kevin to a pub down the street.

Dave interrupted Eddie, though, and said, “It’s a lie.” Kevin knew it was. Eddie looked at Dave with disapproval, Dave noticed it, and Dave tried to play it off. “It’s a lie. We’re talking about gin rummy. It’s just that Eddie, here, is thinking that gin rummy is a drinking game about drinking *gin*.” Boring conversation, but it would suffice.

Eddie thought about Pete Nonarcker. He wasn’t there with them. He was in the class with Kevin though and he’d know that Kevin was a pretty cool dude. At this point, Eddie really *did* want to go to a pub. They wouldn’t go though. God, and Bill on Xeon, would know why. The conversation they had had in Jeff Splifer’s class had turned in the direction of Bill Swift for a while. Some people knew who he was, and others didn’t. The people that *did* know who he was weren’t solidified about what they believed about him. It’s a strange world like that, or so Eddie was coming to believe.

Kevin left Dave and Eddie. He hopped in his truck and made his way away. Eddie admired him, not in a homosexual kind of way--he was *careful* about those things--but he was one of the few people that he’d actually want to trade lives with if given the chance.

Eddie said to Dave, “Let’s talk about this some other time. Can I have your number? It’s going to be a long semester. We ought to talk more often.”

“*Fag!*” Dave said to him and blushed. He gave Eddie his number. Secretly, he hoped they would have sex someday.

“What the fuck are you guys *doing?!?*” Stephanie demanded. She left her table at the Cafe Moonbeam and joined them close enough that they could yell back.

“Fuck off, you people. Tell them that, Steph. I’m on *your* side now... I *think*.”

The conversation ended at that in Eddie’s mind. She didn’t tell them. She stood around Dave’s car--a Honda Passport--and talked for about fifteen minutes. Eddie didn’t remember what they talked about when he reflected on it right before going to bed that night. He’d remember what was said in Jeff’s class though. It was interesting to him.

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In the mid eighties, there was an asteroid that was heading toward Earth. It was an asteroid with the name of *Donovan*. It was named after the scientist whom had first discovered it and people started calling it *Donovan’s Rock*.

There was a cult of people, at this time, that had started to form near a large lake in the state of

Minnesota. They were fed up with the world and where it was going. They were led by a charismatic leader by the name of Greg Lauler. He preached the end of the world and he was a genius--a *suicidal* genius. His wife had left him because she couldn't understand him. He *thought* too much. He wasn't in touch with her feelings. Those were the common gripes that she gave him.

She left one day without notice. No one would see her again from the family they had formed. She played on her turntable Bruce Springsteen's "Hungry Heart" right before she went out the door. Greg was on a business trip. He was selling vacuums and thinking that his wife would be *sooo* proud of him when he returned the following week. He was wrong. She wasn't proud of anyone but herself. She didn't even care that she sent her three children to her sister's house the day that she left without any forewarning to *any* of them that they'd never see her again. She was *most* proud for that, as a matter of fact.

Greg became disillusioned with life. He stopped selling vacuums. He started selling the fact that the world would end soon. When Donovan's Rock came by, he saw a moment and seized it.

"The great rock, you see... is going to *change* everyone, people. It's going to hit the Earth. We can't trust the government. We can't do that... and we can't trust the media either. They're *both* saying..."

"We *know*. We *know*," a man from the back said.

"I have to tell everyone else, sir." Greg wasn't upset. It happened all the time. His crowd was getting bigger. Some of them heard the same spiel many times. They *trusted* him, but they knew in general that he had to *keep* saying it. There were newcomers all the time. "Will you step up, my friend, and talk your piece? We call it *witnessing* around here."

A lady in the front row nearly tore her garb. *Witnessing* was a word that she heard when she was growing up... in her *church*, about Jesus Christ. How could this man be *talking* about witnessing? It applied to *Jesus*, for Christ's sake!

"Anyhow," a different man spoke up. "I *agree* with what Greg's doing here." He wanted to go on but he noticed Greg getting uncomfortable. He looked on and the crowd was still in the mood. The lady had even settled down a bit.

A man with an Indiana Jones hat spoke up. "I have *nothing* to say to you," he told the man whom had just spoke up for Greg Lauler. He didn't know what to do and neither did the man he was talking to.

"I *want* to believe you," the man whom spoke up for Greg said. "I *want* to." Greg had found that you get a *good* following if you go to mental institutions and talk to the people that were being released. Those people would *really* follow. They already had other things going on in their heads that weren't quite right, according to him, *anyway*. He'd follow on to the art district in the bigger towns. He knew them well because he had been a salesman all over. "*Wait* a second," the man finally said. "*I* know what's going on." He *didn't* but felt uncomfortable, nonetheless. He was going to leave and not come back.

A month later, Greg took a trek with his followers--the most *devout* of them--and they went to theme parks, they took a lot of pictures, and they wore Neekay apparel all the time. It was done on purpose. He was making a statement. They didn't know it though. His adherents thought that Greg was saving them from *potential* disaster. He told them that Neekay was a god on another planet and that's how the shoe

company was named. They didn't know it and they didn't bother to look it up. He said that if they *wore* Neekay, that the god would eventually have mercy on his crowd and he would steer the asteroid clear of the planet they lived on. He did this and had great joy.

The asteroid came and went. It missed the planet. By then, Greg had the crowd--there were more or less fifty of them that did everything together on a continual basis--and he had a final proposition to them.

"Do you want to go someplace *better* than the place where we're at?"

The man in the Indiana Jones hat--he had stopped wearing it all the time out of guilt that Greg and others had *put* on him--nodded his head slowly in the direction of yes. There were no opposers. Greg *knew* he had something at this point.

"I'm going to take you to Zoton." It was a word he had heard on the streets one day when he was speaking to a palm reader about buying a vacuum or two. She wouldn't have anything to do with him. She did have a message though--an unsolicited one. *You're going to take people to a place you never dreamed of in your wildest dreams.* It was true... but he didn't believe her at the time. "I'm going to take you to Zoton. We have to go to New York, so get ready."

The people saved money for Greyhound tickets. Fifty of them made it on the dot, not counting Greg Laufer. They went to New York, Greg used his lifesavings to rent a houseboat, and they trekked off into the sea. At the midway point of their journey--they're *expected* journey--Greg went to the far end of the boat, lowered an explosive down with a rope, and set it off through a remote device.

The boat began to sink. They didn't make it back to the shore. Fifty people made it made it to Xeon on that day. Greg Laufer made it to Zoton.

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Dave and Eddie became good friends in the months following their class with Jeff Splifer. They had met Randal Meyer and decided that the three of them could start a musical group. Randal was inspired by what Alfred and Waldo had been doing, and since he wasn't *good* friends with Waldo, he looked elsewhere to start something that he thought could be really big. Eventually, it turned out, that Waldo would join the band. He brought to it the *name* that they would use: *Freight Train*. It rang pretty well. A freight train was something that *moved*. Anyone could jump on and jump off at any time. It was unstoppable in *another* way: If you got in its way, *watch out*, motherfucker!

Randal thought it was a bad name for the band and preferred something that Dave had suggested. "Let's just be Eddie and the Whistlers. I don't *mind* being backup in the band. If Eddie has the fire, let him use it." The thought was shot down but Eddie Macral would later use that name for a solo project that he worked on.

Waldo wrote poetry and learned a thing or two about guitar and bass while Alfred was still around on Earth. Randal learned keyboards. Dave and Eddie took a class together about musicianship and one of them focused on the drums while the other played the saxophone. In the end, they taught each other music. They would be like the Beatles, or so they *wanted* to be. If you listened to a Beatles' tune and you were

one of *them*, you never knew if it was John, Paul, Ringo, or George that was singing, according to Freight Train. In the end they learned each other's instruments and they took turns singing, like the *Beatles*.

One day, they went to a festival concert known as *Ozzfest*. It was headlined by the madman himself, Ozzy Osborne. They didn't have good seats. They didn't have *any* seats, if you really thought about it. They were in the grass at a place that was once known as *Irvine Meadows*. Midway through the set, they became upset at where they were sitting and decided to *try* to get closer to the stage in a collective drunken stupor.

"What's the worse that could happen?" Eddie asked Dave as he downed some whiskey that he had snuck in.

"They could throw us in concert prison, *dudes!*" Wally said to the group. They all got good laughs and set on their way to the front of the stage.

All got close but they still weren't happy. By then, it didn't matter to them. The *story* wasn't going to be how good *Ozzy* was to them. No. That was *not* going to be the story at all. They were gonna get up front--the *very* fuckin' front--or they were going to be disappointed and stroke off around a spooge cookie when they got home. The story had be about *them* in religious fervor. They were still bonding and they didn't even know it.

They got thrown in concert prison, alright. Not all of them, though. It was Eddie that took a dive toward the front. Randal followed behind in a stampede of what became many people that had seen their *own* opportunities to get up front. It is *always* the first that gets caught though, and Eddie knew it but didn't care. Randal made it to the front, though. He had followed Eddie and one security guard was not enough to catch two (or thirty, in a matter of seconds) people going in opposite directions. Eddie made it into a cage (made of regular wire fence on all sides) and didn't care when he started puking all over the ground. Waldo saw that Eddie got busted and made a choice. It was a big choice to him, and a bigger choice to the band when they reflected on it later. *I could go up front with Randal and Dave... or I can go with Eddie and share in his pain--his misery. What the fuck?*

He chose the latter. Randal had a good time, as Dave made it with him. When Wally saw a security guard, he said, *You're a fuck up!* then punched him in the ear and said, *What do I have to do to get in concert prison???* The story was a hoot when told later because the security guy was a weak ass to them. They compared stories afterwards. Dave was doused by Ozzy Osborne when he, the madman himself, threw water into a crowd. He would later say that he was *baptized* by him. Eddie and Waldo didn't have such a bad time in the concert prison (that's what they started calling it *automatically*). They made fun of a security guy then saw him tear up when he realized that he'd rather put up with their shit than to lose his job by fighting them with his buddies. '*Concert Prison*' was the later result from *Eddie & the Whistlers*.

* four *

Bucky Holdwater was a young buck on the *move*. He became a speech writer for Ralph Connors

during his reelection bid in the year of 2004. Butch Jackson took a bow this time. He had enough with the government. They were going in a different direction than he wanted them to go. That wasn't all though. He wasn't seeing enough of his family. For the second time in a decade, he refused to continue on as the country's Secretary of State.

The politics of everything didn't matter to Bucky. He did what he was told. He had ideas of his own, but he was willing to wait to have them thrust into the limelight. He didn't do *everything* he was told--he was too smart for that--because he realized you *couldn't* do everything you were told. *I can't do what ten people tell me to do, so I guess I'll remain the same*, was a common lyric that he thought of. It was from Otis Redding and Bucky didn't care that he was a nigger in his eyes. He realized he couldn't please the liberals. He was going to please Ralph Connors. That's what mattered to him.

Bucky planted an idea in Ralph's head during his reelection run at a campaign stop. *People love the state!* he said one day. *They're all for anything that's happened since nine-eleven. It matters to them!* he said. He wrote a speech for Mr. Connors that day that implied that the nation would be better off if there was an anti-flag burning amendment to the Constitution. Ralph ran on that premise and he won the election.

During this time, Freight Train was learning their chops. They were getting good at what they were doing. Dave contributed lyrics about things he had learned at school. Waldo contributed lyrics about having experiences with two of his town's legends... and losing them both to death. Randal talked about the experiences he had with Francine, Anna and others in the songs *he* wrote. Eddie didn't care what he wrote about. None of mattered. He could write a song about tying his shoe laces and it would be just as good as something that moved people to arms. It was the *experiences* he was after. He wanted some brotherhood, and for a period of his life, he finally got it.

Bucky stayed in touch with Randal during the election run. That was the funny part about it. He wasn't as significant anymore in the city of Miller but that didn't really matter to him. He had Ameriway buddies that got him in the presence of the United States of America. That mattered a lot to him.

Ralph Connors managed to get his Republican constituents to *easily* pass an amendment to the Constitution against burning the American flag. There was a funny stipulation to it all. It didn't just preclude people from burning the flag. It precluded them from reproducing it without license. In a land of freedom, it didn't strike many people as odd.

Neekay was the first corporation that bought rights to the new flag licensing concept. They would *use* this to promote their products. In the places of stars on the flag, there would be the swishers that were associated with the company. People would *burn* these flags... and they would be arrested. This went on for two years... until Freight Train finally did something about it. They wrote a song that rocked the world.

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The song that rocked the world in the summer of 2006 was called "Greg Laufer the Visionary". Many people caught the sarcasm off of the bat although most people *thought* of him as a visionary, during

his time, at the very least. Randal had the idea to write about him.

“We can use his experience--you see?--and we can make it our *own*.”

Greg Lauler, before he sank on his houseboat with fifty other people, had started to send pictures of his group to all the news magazines. *Time* ate it up and put him on the cover. They ate it up because he was wearing a Neekay sweatshirt. Greg smiled with pride, in the picture. He knew he wouldn’t be noticed unless he did something like that. Neekay supported *Time Magazine* heavily, and vice versa. They paid *millions* of dollars to have their shoes and apparel advertised in between world events and current entertainment news. The world ate it up when Greg Lauler did it. Randal had an idea that they would eat it up again a half generation after it had become public news. He was right.

“What can we *do* with this?” Eddie wanted to know. He was the guy in the band that *questioned* the content of the songs but didn’t do anything to stop it.

“We can *use* it. People are going to *relate* to it. They’re seeing the Neekay flags everywhere. They’ll *know*.”

Randal thought it was a good idea for a *business* reason: More knowledge of them meant more record sales. On the inside, Eddie went along with it because of brotherhood within the band. There was *more* though. He hoped people would *think* about it.

In the year 2008, there was a swell of emotion from what was going on. Law enforcement had taken the amendment too literally and they were throwing *good* people in jail. There were housewives. There were school teachers. There were *doctors*. There were a lot of people that believed that two hundred dollar Neekay shoes shouldn’t be worn and *coveted* by their children. In the end, the swell changed the world. Ralph Connors’ vice president at the time, Daniel Quartz, was the recipient of backlash. He was easily defeated. Not by a Democrat. He was defeated by a Libertarian by the name of Robert Wisdom. He had successfully campaigned that our nation needed to go back to its roots. He was right. Seventy-five people percent of the people that voted that year thought he was right. He won by more than sixty percentage points in the polls.

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Stephanie Venezia got a hold of mental illness and turned it into an asset. The conversation that began in Jeff Splifer’s class helped her do so. She *had* thought that when she got voice impressions from the outside, that they were a real thing. She *thought* that she was communicating directly with stars from Hollywood and with world leaders from around the globe. She *even* thought that she talked to Abraham Lincoln and Mahatma Gandhi a time or two. She was going crazy but her poetry and her paintings kept her *somewhat* sane. She sent these poems and some of her drawings to the stars that she thought she was talking to. In the end, she got a new belief.

Jeff Splifer was fired for what he believed. It would be an enigma in retrospect to Eddie, Dave and the rest of the gang in the year 2009 as they reflected on it.

How could you get fired for what you believe? Eddie asked Dave one drunken night.

I don't know, Dave replied. They were getting ready to call it quits at their hotel. They were on the road with a band called *Destruction*. It was a great tour for them.

I mean... We had *freedom of creed all along, didn't we?* Eddie asked as he downed a martini. Waldo had come into the room and didn't feel like joining in the conversation. He was *beat*.

Obviously, we didn't have freedom of creed, Wally finally said. It appeared that Dave was too perplexed to answer. *We OWN this country now*, is what Wally added. He was beat though. Eddie could tell. As Eddie thought of it, he wanted a beer and then some rest himself.

Stephanie got her hold on her mental illness in Jeff's class. He *taught* that the brain was like a nation. Sometimes you have world leaders that speak to one another. That was the *conscious* mind. He said that individual cells had *souls* though. That was the kicker that got him fired. He said he was working on a thesis that he wanted to print.

"They have *souls*," he said that day in which they all went to Cafe Moonbeam to talk. "They have souls. Some people talk to people in France from this country. That's what's going on in your head, Stephanie. You're not talking to Catherine Zeta- Jones or her husband. What it *is* is that you're a nation of your own. You're world leaders--the cells in the brain that *control* you--are talking to her little people. They are in her subconscious. Stop writing those letters to her. She *doesn't* know that you're talking to her. It *feels* that way, but you're not."

"I *might* be though, right?"

Jeff Splifer thought about it. "I *guess* it's possible. It's not likely though. Do you know how many things she has to *think* about? She's communicating to a *billion* people right now as we speak. They're all around the globe. You're not *special*."

At that, Eddie decided to talk to them afterwards at *Moonbeam*. The conversation would never surface between them, but he knew inside that he had a revelation of his own.

Dave fell in love with Stephanie. When Freight Train started to make it big, he asked her out. Later they would marry. They would be a driving force in the world to come... and neither one of them would ever hold an elected office.

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* *Epilogue* *

Lizzy Shulton, the girl who Alfred loved with all his heart and unexpectedly broke up with near the town square, married a man by the name of Dirt Cassidy. She called him Zotar for the rest of their days. He was a good man and he was tired of searching. “Zotar” was in her heart. “Dirt” wasn’t. It turned out that it wasn’t in his heart either.

They had three children and raised them well. She voted Robert Wisdom in the election of 2008 and her husband voted for the Democratic candidate (no one knew his name in the following years anyway). They had a good life. She worked as a doctor. Dirt--*Zotar*--got a job promoting bands. They did well. Zote was good friends with the guys from Freight Train and that helped him out a lot.

The Church of Kurt Cobain never flew again. Clyde Shuster returned from Liverpool after an unsuccessful attempt to create a Church of the Fab. He didn’t know that the land was a holy ground. He didn’t know it was a mecca. He didn’t know that people in that town didn’t *need* him.

He returned to the states and tried to look up Alfred Newman, the young man he had met that looked for answers. He went to the city of Miller and found that he had died a tragic death. That didn’t stop Clyde. He erected a church known as the Temple of Bill Swift. It worked for a while. People went and tried to channel him. He channeled back for a while. In the end, it wasn’t enough. There were stained glass windows, but they didn’t depict saints. Clyde Shuster thought that he could make some money if he played on the city’s emotions. The stained glass windows depicted the members of Freight Train. He thought the he could do this in every town. He thought that the Temple of Bill Swift could belong to a network of other places collectively known as the Church of Rock an’ Roll. He didn’t know that people already had their own churches. They were homes where the stars had lived before getting big. They were places they had been when they were becoming discovered. They were *amphitheatres* that they had played in. He didn’t know Graceland was a mecca as well. He *knew* it was a place where people went. He didn’t know it was a holy place to the visitors when they went. He was trying to *create* this. He didn’t know that religions just *happen*.

Lizzy returned from work one day to see her husband--she didn’t have to stop because she was going out of town to visit her mother, anyway--and found that he was talking to Clyde Shuster on the steps.

“He’s going out of town today, Liz.”

“I *know*.” She could sense it. “He’s leaving town because he knows that what he did was wrong.. and people don’t want it anymore.”

“At least he’s not getting *arrested* for it.” It was 2010 and the new amendment of flag burning had been repealed. Everyone was getting their freedoms back. This man, Clyde Shuster, practiced his freedom of creed, freedom of religion, and right to free speech. He was being run out of town, but not in handcuffs. He was being run out of town because people didn’t want him anymore. He couldn’t stay because he couldn’t *afford* to stay. The donations had dried up.

Lizzy kissed Zotar on the cheek. “I think I’m going to love you forever,” she said. She was thinking of him, but she was thinking of Bill Swift as well. She didn’t know it, but he and Alfred Newman were playing marbles in a galaxy far away.

Destiny Zoton

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Destiny Zoton prologue

On a cool, spring afternoon, a little girl of nine years of age strode past Randal Meyer's house on her new Schwinn miniature beach cruiser. She didn't think of him though. She was on her way to church, right down the street from him. She thought about the pastor. She thought about God. She thought about what he was going to say next.

Randal was inside his house practicing his guitar. He was writing a song. He was oblivious to the little girl. He was oblivious to the church down the street, though he passed it nearly every day on the way to work. And he was oblivious to what was going on inside the church.

A girl's wish would come true that day. She was getting ready for a sermon and she heard one of the better ones she'd ever heard. Randal's wish didn't come true. He was coveted by a good friend's wife but he was coming to grips with the fact that he was losing touch with everything around him. He'd write a song about it that day. It wouldn't make him feel much better. It'd make the girl feel much two years later. She'd fall in love with him again when he hit the charts with it in his band *Freight Train*.

****Part One****

* one *

I really don't know why I'm here, Alfred said. Stephanie could hear him in her head. She *knew* that certain things were real. She stopped sending the stuff to Hollywood movie stars. Secretly, she *hoped* that some of it got through. She hoped Christina Ricci had gotten a couple of her paintings and put them on her wall. She didn't think it happened though.

There was a *time* that she was convinced that all this was taking place. It was painful. "What do you *want*, Alfred?" Alfred was on Zoton. He was separated from Bill. It was ironic. Bill had committed suicide. Alfred had it in his head that *he* would have gone to Zoton for before him. Zoton was Hell, for as far as anyone knew. It wasn't painful. It was full of *void*. It was full of longing. "I'm asking you a *question*. What do you *want*?"

I want nothing at all. Alfred, being on Zoton, was not in a good mood. He wasn't in a good mood at *all*. He wasn't hostile. He was sad. And he wasn't on a trip. Alfred later learned that Mother Mary and other saints *visited* Zoton. Whatever force that was controlling things allowed it to happen. He didn't believe he was on Zoton for that reason. There was pain in the air. Alfred couldn't manage much more. He was hurt. He was surprised. He wanted to talk to Stephanie. She had already married Dave Barley. They were going to have children. Dave had yet to promote his new song, "Greg Lauler the Visionary." It was still time before Robert Wisdom would initiate the changes that would be necessary to repeal the flag-burning amendment. He was sad. *I want nothing*, he reiterated. Nonetheless, he wanted something. He just didn't know what it was. *How is Daisy?* he finally asked.

"She's *nothing* to me," Stephanie said, and was glad with the question.

I know. I know a lot. It sucks. She's Republican now, you know? It's sad.

"Why are you political?" she asked him. He was afraid to answer. He wasn't *sure*. He didn't *want* to be political. He *knew* things. It bugged him. He started to feel like *Bill* must have felt when Alfred was still alive on Earth and Bill was delivering him his messages.

I want out, he said. He wouldn't *get* out. There's no turning around in these kinds of events.

Alfred reflected on his home journal that he left behind before taking a few pieces of brick in the head. He *thought* about it. He wished it wasn't there. It was his dad that got a hold of it. He used it at the beginning and then let things go. Alfred didn't want it there at all. The *reason* was that he wanted to be forgotten. If he was forgotten, he wouldn't have to think of Earth anymore. He was still wrapped up in politics, and the funny thing was that he wasn't old enough to get wrapped up in *too* many politics at the time of his passing.

Alfred thought about Daisy. He couldn't get a hold of her. He didn't know why. He knew she turned Republican and he didn't know why.

Stephanie blew out the candles she had lit. Dave came into the room and they forgot about things for a while. Dave wanted to write a new song. Alfred, on Zoton, wanted to talk to Stephanie about her purported schizophrenia. He wouldn't get his wish.

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Bill Swift was holding his own of Xeon. On Earth, in the year 2005, Phil McOaland was returning to his old ways. He had been a liberal, on the inside, for a couple of years. He married Nancy Kidman, a school teacher, and he supported her PTA associations as well as her attachment to *Murmur*, a political action group that was responsible for getting petitions signed that would eventually help repeal the amendment to the Constitution that had recently been passed. She still wore Neekay sweatshirts. She added to them though. One could say she *amended* them. She drew, in red ink, a large circle around the swisher and she had the classical bar that crossed it out. It was classic. It was dumb. It was a statement.

Phil had always turned his head when petty thievery was going on. He continued to work at Darber and being associated with Alfred in the past changed his attitude on life. He stopped reporting union activity when he saw it on the monitors. It was easy to do. He had no boss that was pressuring him to hand over evidence. He stopped the remote viewing too, but it wasn't by his choice. He stopped talking to Alfred a year after he left the planet. After that, he lost his ability to *see*. He could still see through his eyes. He lost the ability to see through the invisible one that is pictured on your forehead, in so many people's minds. He lost these abilities.

This is fuckin' boring. He heard it clear as daylight. Bill Swift was talking to Phil.

What do you want? Phil was at work, and though no one was around, he dared not speak aloud. He *could* have been electronically bugged. That was always a possibility.

I'm just going through the motions, you homo, Bill said to Phil.

Phil didn't know what Bill wanted. If Alfred was still able to communicate with the two of them--he was on *Zoton*, after all--he would have thought it had something to do with union activity. Bill thought things were boring though. He was checking on Phil. He did things like this on occasion. He *tried* to check on Alfred once in a while but the powers-that-be that *control* the universe wouldn't let him.

I'm going to go, Phil said to Bill. He thought he could escape him. He couldn't. Not if Bill didn't *want* it to happen.

Nancy Kidman became Nancy McOaland a few years back and was thinking of divorce. *Why* she was thinking of divorce was beyond her. Phil still went through the motions. He said the right things. In the end, she didn't know if it was enough. He used to *bust* union organizers. She thought a part of it still lived within him. In the end, she was right. She was scared, but she was right.

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By the year 2005, Anna Harcdomm became Anna Swift. She married Bill's brother, Ned. It made

Bill laugh in the sky when he thought about it. Bill and Anna had had sexual relations and it led to turmoil that eventually led to Bill's suicide, though indirectly. It was actually *indicative* of what was going on, when Bill reflected on it. He had tried to commit suicide *before* the sexual relations. The reasons? He wasn't sure. He couldn't put a finger on it. He had mysteries of the universe down pat in regards to physics, chemistry, biology, and a few *other* things. He couldn't understand human *pain*. He couldn't understand it at all.

Ned married Anna Harcdomm. She had been with Wally Fleshman prior to this. Ned wondered where her heart was at. Sometimes, he wondered *if* she had a heart. He knew she did though. She was a little dumb... but smart in *some* respects. He was confused. In the end, he married his brother. Anna lived inside of Bill. Bill lived inside of Anna. He wanted his brother still around. Anna was able to light up a room with *stories* of him. Ned liked this. He would die knowing he did the right thing. Funny thing was that he expected it to only last a few months. He wanted to know that he *had* her at a time though. That was enough for him. His brother was a little more religious. He wanted that "one and only" thing. That wasn't good for Ned. Life was too short. If Anna worked out though? It's a bonus. That's what he thought.

"I have this to *say* to you," she told Ned. "I have no *underwear* on."

"Fuck you, cunt," Ned told her. He was mad when he said it but the feeling faded quickly. He believed in letting stuff out. *Don't bottle it in, let it out*, he'd say to people. He believed it. In the end, he hoped it would keep him with Anna. *People appreciate truth, you know?* he had once told Bill when Bill was still on the planet. *You could tell them they're an ape... and if they believe it, they'll appreciate it in the end.* "Hey, cunt. Come *here*," Ned said to Anna. She did. She was reluctant, but she did.

Ned held her tight for a moment. She resisted lightly. Ned thought about Bill in Heaven--he no longer believed Bill was on Xeon or anywhere else--and he thought that life could be better. *Maybe if I have a kid with her*, he thought about Anna. It would happen, at least in his dreams.

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"Government, in its *best* form..." Stephanie Venezia-Barley said. She was interrupted by a raised hand in a seminar she was teaching of schizophrenic students.

"You have no idea who you *are*," the troll-like student said. His name was Ben Murphy.

"Thank you very much, Ben. I have to move on." A voice must have told Ben to raise his hand. She continued on, nonetheless, in spite of Ben raising his hand again, getting fidgety, then walking around the room after leaving his seat. "In its *best* form, it is a necessary evil. Can anyone tell me who *said* that?" No one responded. A depressed lady looked like she knew the answer but she wouldn't say. Her name was Francine Cross. "I'm going to move *on* then. It's Thomas Paine..."

"...And he *also* said that..." Ben said, after rejoining his seat.

"...That it is an *intolerable* evil... in its worse form. Thomas Paine wrote *Common Sense*. They preceded the Constitution. Actually, it was the *Federalist* papers that preceded it. Thomas' did too, but it

was a book.”

“I *remember*, teacher,” Ben said. He was a smart aleck. He had dreads growing because he refused to wash his hair. He had done too much LSD in his past. People believed it induced his voices. “Do it matter that...” Ben began. He was making fun of people. He had a knack for it.

“I’m not sure I want to do this,” Stephanie continued. No one heard her but herself. She was barely audible when she whispered it. “I *want* to tell you...”

“I *know*,” Ben said. “The tree of democracy needs to be watered with the blood of *tyrants* every now and then. Jefferson. *Thomas* Jefferson, right?”

“Nope. It’s not what I was going to say,” Stephanie said, but it was a lie or else she was trying to hold back the truth because of other personal reasons. “I *wanted* to say that the *tree*...”

A bell rang. It was time to go. They weren’t in grade school. It was how the night course was set up.

“I’ll see you all tomorrow,” Stephanie said to the class. “I don’t think this is going to fly,” she whispered under her voice. The students didn’t leave until she said it. Ben stuck around but didn’t say a thing. “I’m going to *go*,” Stephanie said. She thought about Dave. She thought about what he was doing. She thought about the band. She thought about their dreams, Eddie Macral’s in particular. He wouldn’t voice his opinions in lyrics. He had a lot to say when he was *drunk* though. Funny stuff. Disturbing though, some of it was to her. “I’m going to *go*, Ben,” Stephanie said when she realized he wasn’t going.

Ben had started to raise his hand like class was still going on. “I’m going to beat you *up*!” he yelled at Stephanie.

“You and what *army*!” Stephanie demanded into thin air. She didn’t want to challenge Ben. He was a retard, in her book. *I had been a retard once too*, she thought then left him in class by himself.

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In the years before Stephanie Venezia-Barley became a councilor for the county of San Quixote in the state of California, she had bouts with depression. This happened in *conjunction* with voices that she had. She used to listen to the voices, she would paint what she could see, she would write poetry, and she would send her work to the people that inspired it. In the end, she thought she would get a response. She never did.

Stephanie took a class, before she was Venezia-Barley--it was only *Venezia* at the time--with Jeff Splifer. Jeff was later fired for what he taught. It was outside of the state curriculum that was set up for him. She didn’t find this out until later. He shed light on her though. He was wrong, in her assessment, of *what* he believed the voices were. Her husband, Dave, would later tell her that *no one* has a soul. It’s all made up. Nonetheless, Jeff Splifer gave her a *model* to work with.

In the times after she had a conversation with Dave for the first time at *Cafe Moonbeam*, she had *serious* bouts with depression. It happened because of an internal struggle. She *had* thought that she was communicating directly with stars, and the like. She *had* thought that they were doing things for her in

return. They were clearing a path.

Eric Clapton was the frontman for *Derek and the Dominoes* during the nineteen seventies. She wasn't too familiar with him. She knew that he sang a song called "Tears In Heaven" during the nineties as a solo artist. She had heard of "Layla" as well but was more familiar with the acoustic version than anything else. A voice came from a man that identified himself as *Derek Springoffor*. He said that he was the inspiration for the *Dominoes*, though he wasn't directly in the band. Stephanie had stopped sending her art to people. She *thought* that they would understand.

"You have to understand, Dave," she told him during their first date. "This guy *talks* to me."

"No he *doesn't*. You *think* he does. I don't even think he exists."

"Maybe. Maybe so. But he *told* me some things..."

"...Like?"

"Well. He *told* me..." She began and then thought of a lie. "He *told* me that you and me were to be together."

Dave blushed. He bought it though. Deep down, he bought it. In the end, he rationalized to be that *she* wanted to be with him and was saying it in a roundabout way... *or*, it was really happening. After all, they *were* getting voices from Bill Swift at the time. Anything could be *possible*.

"He told me to stop dating you after *today*," she said to him. This time, she wasn't lying.

"I bet you made that *up*!" he told her. He wasn't mad. He was teasing. Inside, he knew she got a sudden voice from her. It *intrigued* him though.

"So stop making shit *up*! He's telling me...!" she began. She was getting hot and didn't want to.

Dave took it all in. He was fine like that. In the days after their meeting, Stephanie decided to *listen* to this Derek character on a whim.

Go into that laundry basket, he said to her. She was passing a laundromat, at the time, and the basket didn't belong to her. *There's a note inside one of the pockets that says the date you were born*.

Stephanie did it. It was the first *crazy* thing that she did like this. Writing to the celebrities *paled* in comparison. She *figured* that if she was going to *stop* listening to the voices per Jeff Splifer's revelation, she might as well give one last hurrah.

The *note* that was in the jeans read, "You don't belong here, honey. It's a setup. Please go away." It was signed by a fictitious character by the name of Hoser the Loosey. It was a joke. It *didn't* say what Derek had *told* her it'd say--there was nothing about *dates*--but she figured that he was setting her up. *Maybe* he knew that she wouldn't have listened to him otherwise.

The next day, she went into a Rite-Aid, per Derek's request, barked like a dog *loudly* upon entering, asked for the manager, then asked him for three kittens painted *blue*. The manager stared *strangely*. He didn't know what to do. He *asked* her for her papers. *Are you new to this area, son?* he asked her. *What are you doing barking like a dog?*

I'm not a son, Stephanie said rather madly. *I'm not a son. I'm here for my kittens!*

In that case... The manager had left and returned with *one* kitten from the back. It was black and

white in spots. Stephanie was *convinced* at this time that her powers were true. She stopped trusting *Eric* though. She would later find out in 2024 that Eric Clapton was the one that was pulling the strings. She lost trust in him. She didn't want to see him again.

"What are you going to *give* me, if I listen to you?" Dave asked Stephanie during their first date at a Denny's. "What are you going to *give* me?"

"Just *listen*, pal. That's all I want." Stephanie, in retrospect, didn't consider it a date--not their *first* one. Dave did. That was the day he decided to marry her.

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Ned Swift had moved back to Miller from Montana in early 2005. That's when he hooked up with Anna. Three months later, they were engaged. A month after that, they got tired of waiting and they married. Ned knew they would get divorced not long afterward. She *wanted* a divorce. She wanted a divorce before they were even *married*. The *reason* she married him to begin with was that he was smart. *Maybe she wants some little smart buggers running around. That's it*, Ned had concluded one day. She wanted that. She didn't want *Ned*. He was *too* smart for her.

Ned thought about Bill. He was still talking to him on *occasion*. It was few and far in between by the time that he married Anna. Bill had no jealousy of Anna, and that was the ironic part of it all. He had wanted her *bad*, and he eventually got her. In the end, he was glad that Ned Swift, his brother, was able to share such a lovely lady. She really *was* lovely. She had slept with half the town, but she still was lovely. In Bill's mind, as he observed on occasion from Xeon, he'd always think of her as the fourth grader that passed him the note that said that she liked him. That's the way he'd always *remember* her.

Ned thought about Bill and asked Anna about him one day during dinner. In Montana, Ned had become a school teacher. It was too much for him. He wasn't into the children as much as he *thought* he might be. He thought he could teach--and he *did*--but it was too much. *Frustration, frustration, frustration*, is what he'd always say. He got a job at a warehouse and didn't care that he was making a *fraction* of his old salary.

"Are you okay?" Anna asked Ned during dinner. This was after Ned brought up Bill's name but didn't go on talking about him.

"Nope. He's stealing the show."

"What *show*?" She was a little mad.

Ned didn't know what to say. In spite of Bill's understanding, *Ned* was the jealous one. Sometimes Ned thought that *he* should have hung himself. Maybe he would have become a town legend. Maybe it was the *feelings* that led to his suicide that led the Koagulates to pick him as a subject to fly. "I want to fly. That's all," Ned said to Anna. She didn't respond. Ned looked down at his soup, played with the alphabetical letters in it for a while, then sipped it like a cat. "Bill used to..."

"Hush," Anna said. She wanted Ned to be quiet. Ned couldn't stop thinking of Bill. He didn't know that Anna's words would eventually ease him. They eased him. He was satisfied for the time being.

She stuck her foot under the table and put it on his crotch. That made him feel *really* good. He didn't want to have sex, but she liked him. He could tell.

Ned looked up at Anna. She blushed. Ned finished his soup then went to bed. Anna joined him a moment later. While he was up there, he got undressed, got ready to take a shower, then started singing as the water started to pour through shower spout. He felt like shit. He thought the music he was creating would ease him. It didn't.

Anna fell asleep on the bed while she waited for Ned. She wasn't too happy with life.

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"Jesus Christ--you see?---was a schizophrenic." Clyde Shuster was in Liverpool, England, starting his new *Church of the Fab*. His brother had heard about Clyde's previous experiences outside of Duckton. He became a *believer*. He dropped his accounting firm, took *some* of his life savings, and went to the heart of the beast where *he* thought it was. It was a place called Miller, California. He was at the podium contemplating life and about to give the sermon of the decade, at least to himself and his adherents, in *his* mind. "He was *schizo*, and you have to believe me." He had started a radical Christian denomination by the name of *Christ's Brothers and Sisters*. He would live to regret it. He lost all of his money in the passing years. It was something that he never imagined would have happened. In the end, he was at a crossroads because he didn't know where his loyalty was held between money and power. He was learning that he was gaining *power* in his new church. He wasn't gaining *money* yet. He thought it'd come in time. It didn't.

"*Why?*" Mr. Fugallih asked from the front pew about Clyde's brother's assertion that Christ was schizo and he'd have to believe him. "*Why... the fuck... should I believe YOU!?*"

"*Why? WHY???* What do I *look* like to you, my friend?"

"A piece of shit."

"Why do you *follow* me, my dear person?" Clyde's brother calmed down. His name was Jerry. Pastor Jerry Shuster. He thought his brother in Liverpool would be *proud* of him. In all actuality, his brother would not find out that he *tried* something so radical for another year.

There was no response from Mr. Fugallih at Jerry's question. Mr. Fugallih was an English teacher from a local junior high school. He didn't know anything about religion though. He knew what *sounded* right though. This, which Jerry Shuster was saying, didn't *sound* right.

Jerry Shuster continued his sermon, nonetheless, but he was a bit displeased at the way things were *turning*. Ned Swift sat ten pews back from Mr. Fugallih. He didn't say anything. He was *intrigued* by what Jerry might say. Had Clyde, his brother, not left Duckton for Liverpool, he might have liked doing his sermons in Miller, Jerry thought to himself as he contemplated his next tale. Later, Clyde *would* do his sermons there, but it would be with Bill Swift as the main medium as to what's ultimate in the universe rather than "Hesoo Del Cristo", as many people in town called him.

"I'm going to tell you a *story...*" Jerry began. He wiped his brow.

"Tell the real *thing*," Mr. Fugallih said. "Tell *it*." He knew that Jerry was changing his tone. He

wasn't going to talk about his beliefs on *Jesus*. If one person spoke up, like Mr. Fugallih did, then *others* might follow. Jerry didn't want any of that. He was going to move on to a story about Sodom and Gomorrah, though his heart wasn't into it. He wanted to go onto a course that was a little *safer*, in other words. It was the path of least *resistance* in his mind. In the end, Mr. Fugallih steered him back to where he wanted to go. Jerry could see it in the man's face that he was regretful for speaking up. When he said to tell the real thing, Jerry let it rip the best he could.

Jesus Christ was assisted by aliens when he walked the Earth. He had multiple personalities. When God took him--it wasn't *God*, but rather the dominant force that oversaw the *Earth* at the time *known* to be God--he let him go back and practice his gospel. At the beginning--for about the first millennium, there was only one *church*. It was the *Catholic* Church. It split off at the turn of the millennium into two branches. And then, the *Anglos* split off from there. Eventually, the printing press was invented, free thought was going around like a *plague*, and new churches were formed.

Jesus had said that he'd never leave his church. He meant it when he said it. It was an honest *statement*. Jesus didn't know why his father in Heaven--so he was *called* by him--had forsaken him on the cross. He didn't know why he was unable to keep his own promise of not leaving his church. He didn't know why he wasn't able to keep them as *one*.

"Jesus was schizophrenic, I tell you," Jerry Shuster said in the middle of his sermon. Most the people in the audience were buying what he was saying. "He had a *multiple* personality disorder. He started the Baptists. He *had* started the Catholic Church. He even started the freakin' *Mormons*!"

"Hallelujah!" someone yelled from the back.

"What *are* you, a Unitarian?" someone demanded of the man that had yelled. She had thought it was rude that he spoke out. She *didn't* know that she meant to ask if he was Pentecostal.

"Jesus takes many *forms* though...." Jerry began.

The man who had yelled out, said something. It wasn't audible to Shuster. He *knew* that this man had something to say so he invited him up to the mike and let him speak.

The man wore a top hat and had a little mustache, like Charlie Chaplin. One would think that he was trying to *be* Charlie Chaplin if it weren't for his loud colors that he wore beneath his neck in the form of a tie-dye shirt. "Okay, the man started..." He paused in a moment of nervousness, said, "I can't *do* this," then he regained his composure. "Pastor Shuster has a *point*," he said to the crowd. "Can I call you *Jerry*, pastor?" he asked Jerry Shuster quickly, to the side. He shook his head yes, then the man began to speak again. "I have *no* idea if the things that Jesus said were *true*--the *miracles* and *all*--I wasn't there. I have this to add... You are the *man*!" The man in the top hat pointed to the ceiling. He was thinking of Saul Folstiklar, whom had tried to blow up as many things as he could while he was on the planet. "You're the *man*!" he said again. He noticed something strange up there. There were *cameras* that were pointing down. He didn't know that they were being used to sell images on the internet. They never *would* be used though. Jerry had *intended* to sell his sermons worldwide. In the end, it wasn't because of the man's discovery--the one whom wore the top hat--that kept Jerry from refraining. It was guilt. It was guilt, and

the fact that he started to *like* these people. He would take the cameras down a few months later and never have any regrets.

Jerry regained the mike from the fucked-up-looking dude in the tie-dye shirt. “Don’t pay attention to *those*,” he said to the man in the hat. He addressed him under his voice then began to address the crowd. “Jesus *loves* you, people.” He said this and *meant* it. “Go to your *churches*. Keep coming to mine, for that *matter*. When you think you’re *right*--and you probably will be--know that Jesus was on your side at a *time!!!* Just *know* that!” Jerry ended his sermon. Thunderous applause had *started* to be heard but the crowd quieted, as if collectively embarrassed that they were listening to something fuckin’ weird. “Thank you, people,” Jerry ended with whisper. He didn’t realize people could hear him. His mike was still on and he had thought he turned it off.

Poor thing, the man in the top hat said. It would be the last time he’d show up to Jerry’s church. It wasn’t because he didn’t like what he heard. It wasn’t even the *cameras* that bothered him. It was too much *intensity*. That’s what he felt. *Poor thing*, the man said again in his mind. He left, *not* before looking up into the ceiling again, then thought, *Surfing’s going to be good! That’s what I’ll take up!*

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On a night that Lizzy Shulton was having ice cream with Zotar Cassidy at a *31 Flavors* in Santa Monica, California, Nessy, “The Lochness Monster” to many that have seen her before, swam to the surface of her lake after given birth to two children. Little did people know that there was a male “monster”. They never surfaced at the same time. Miles to their east, a man was in a car and contemplated suicide after having to return to his family once again after having his ass chewed at work.

Bill Swift would never meet Nessy. He would never meet the man that was ready to commit suicide on any given day. He’d meet Lizzy Shulton and Zotar Cassidy years later on Zoton and lead them to Xeon. They had a good time. No one was sure where lochness monsters went. It was a mystery to the very end.

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Lucifer was a fallen angel from Heaven. This was Alfred's understanding of things *before* he passed away and before Bill Swift had started telling him everything he knew about the universe. He was a real *being* though. He lived on Zoton. He had been an angel--a *being*--from another planet. The planet wasn't Xeon, and people were surprised to find out in Miller that Xeon isn't even the best place in the universe. Bill Swift *talked* that way. There were better places though. It would take a billion years or more to *get* to them. Were they planets? Bill believed that there was a point that *life* stopped needed physical locations to exist. He believed, through his talks with Cobain and others, that you could reach a state *like* nibbana... or Heaven... or whatever you'd call it. It was the same place. People on Earth would say that it was a matter of semantics and a few people would argue philosophically that it *wasn't* a matter of semantics. In the end, you got higher and higher in your state of being. Or you became *lower*, much like happened to Alfred.

Zoton was not Hell, after all. It was *like* Hell. It was dreary. Just the same that Xeon was not Heaven, it was the only place he could *liken* to it. Alfred was in Hell for all *his* purposes. He met Lucifer one day, not long after the sermon in which Clyde Shuster claimed Jesus to be a schizophrenic. He was a *gentle* being, in all actuality.

"What is it, Lucifer?" he asked him the first time he had conversation with him. Lucifer didn't respond. He didn't look mean when the question was asked. He could *tell*, Alfred could, that there was a mean streak in him. He became infuriated after Alfred started prying with his *vision*. He wouldn't give up any answers. *Maybe he's ashamed*, Alfred thought. He ate a dough nut. They were readily available on the planet, as was so many *other* junk food items. "What *is* it, Loos?" Alfred asked again. Once again, no response. Alfred wasn't scared though. He wasn't even sure he was talking to the real *Lucifer*. He didn't care. He was bored. He was scared, but not of Lucifer. He was afraid that he'd never reach Bill again. He was afraid for people on Earth.

"I'll tell you what it *is*," Lucifer finally volunteered. "Me and *you*..." He conjured an image of Bill Swift and pointed to him. "We have a *problem*," Lucifer said. He wasn't talking about Bill, though. He was talking about Alfred. He didn't care. It reminded him of what *prison* might be like. He was *stuck* with Lucifer and his type. There was really nothing he could do.

Alfred was expelled from Xeon for reasons that he didn't *know*. He wanted to be back there. He didn't know if he ever *would* be. On Earth, you're supposed to get saved before you die. That's what he was taught. You're supposed to die to the real *world*. You're supposed to die to material possessions. Alfred wasn't sure if he *achieved* it. He went one step further. He died to the *universe*. He stopped caring if he'd end up in Heaven or Hell. For that matter, it didn't matter to him where he landed in between if there *was* an in between. Why did it happen? He wasn't sure. He just didn't care.

"I want to *summon* you, Bill Swift," Alfred said aloud. He had saw that Lucifer was able to summon his *image*. It didn't mean that Bill acknowledged that they were talking. Alfred tried to summon

him to the point of having direct contact.

I hear you, Bill said from within Alfred's mind. *What do you want?* he asked in a frustrated tone.

"I don't *care*... anymore," Alfred said. The last word wasn't spoken. It was said within his mind. *I don't care*, he continued, *and I want you to give me some answers. Why am I here?*

You're a fuckin' retard. He heard Bill clearly. It was like doing LSD, from what Alfred learned of it. He hadn't done LSD on Earth, but he was told in the beyond that all the blinders are taken off when you do it. You *see* the world differently and things are never the same.

Alfred's blinders were off. It didn't take an LSD trip. It took him dying and going to the other side. It took strange instances--the rumor that Mother Mary visited the planet of Zoton, for example--for him to *see* things. He didn't think he'd see things like this in the past.

I feel liberated, Alfred thought. He wasn't directing the thought toward Bill but he could sense his response nonetheless. Bill was mad and surprised.

YOU'RE ON ZOTOON! You fuckin' idiot. Stop pretending it's a dream.

Fuck you, Bill. I don't like you anymore. You just want to control me, anyway. Just like on Earth.

Alfred thought of a girl that he met on Earth. It was at a concert--the only one he had *been* to. It was Winger that were playing but that wasn't important to him. He was there, he was *vibing* with her after smoking a little doobie. Strong stuff, in his mind. Still a league behind LSD, from what he would be told. They were the only ones in their *world*. It wasn't great. He just felt he made a connection.

We never made that connection, he told Bill in his mind. *We never made it. I'm sad*. Alfred really was. Lucifer was loafing around like nothing was going on. Alfred was surprised at his demeanor. It was very *humanistic*. Maybe even *hardened* criminals break down after a while. Alfred wondered what it was that he *did* that was so bad. He had heard, through his aunt while on Earth, that Lucifer was a master at music. *Maybe I'm with you*, Alfred thought. He could tell that Lucifer was thinking the same thing.

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Stephanie Venezia-Barley was on her way home. She was thinking of her husband. She was thinking of Randal as well. Randal was a little more *free* than Dave. She wanted to be with him. It was a passing thought in her head.

Stephanie thought about Ben Murphy, from class, and she thought about the things they were teaching. She thought about the times that she had while in Jeff Splifer's class. She thought about the cells of the brain and believing, for a while, that they had *souls*. She thought about the *other* things that she talked about in the days after that. She had a conversation with her dad. It was two years before she's be married to Dave. It was two years before she had the job in which she looked after people that had been like *she* had been: Lost and without a clue.

Her dad had said, "I want you to stop thinking about this *mess* you're in."

It was dinnertime, Stephanie was finishing her spaghetti, and she replied to her dad, "What mess are you *talking* about?"

“The one about the *voices*.”

“It’s not a mess anymore.” She paused, thought about telling him about the *resolve* she felt, then passed the bread to him. “Do you want more spaghetti with this?” she asked. Her dad didn’t respond in answer aside from grabbing the bread and nodding in agreement that more spag would be good.

Stephanie drove home from her seminar and she thought about that conversation. Another conversation ensued in her mind. It was with Jeff Splifer, himself, one day after her conversation with her dad.

“I *don’t* think I have schizophrenia, you know?”

“I *know*. I can tell.”

“And I’m not *lying* to you about the fact that I *thought* I had it.”

“Explain,” Jeff said. He was intrigued. They were in his personal office--a small one--not far from the class where her initial revelation took place.

“I *think* I just have an artistic mind.”

“I *know* that. You’re very talented.”

“I *think*...”

“...Wait. Let me *guess*. You think now that the *artistic* brain cells in your head... or *mind*...”

“...Yep,” she said. She nodded in agreement. She thought that she was just *seeing* the world differently. People that were *right-brained*, in her mind, were the ones that thought logically to the *bone*. Her mind though? In *her* mind, as she thought of it and explained it to Jeff Splifer, she was getting cross-communication up the *ass*. The artist cells of her mind were crying out, *Hey bitch! Listen to us! We have something to say to you!* She didn’t listen at *first* and then she felt powerless to *not* listen. When logic would surface--when her right brain would *control* things--she wasn’t sure what to do. It was the *boring* part of her brain. Life was too short to be boring, so she started to listen to any part of it that would cry out and make *some* sense of the world.

“So I’m telling you *now*, Stephanie,” Jeff had told her that day at the end of the conversation. “I’m not teaching anymore that brain cells have souls because I don’t *know*. It helps to talk to people like *you*, though. Believe it or not, you give me new *insights*. I really like that.”

Stephanie kissed him on the cheek. She didn’t know what else to do. Jeff didn’t think for one moment that it was a sexual come on. He went about his business, shuffled some papers before leaving the small office with her, then offered her a smoke on the outside.

“I don’t smoke,” she told him. She’d regret saying that later. She should have tried, or so she thought. She should have tried and she should have talked to him further.

“Well. Thanks for the conversation,” Jeff said. He lit up as he walked outside, then waved bye to her.

Stephanie thought about these things that happened over the past couple of years and thought about how she’d get across to Ben Murphy and people like him. It’d take years. It took *her* years. She didn’t know what else to do with life though. In art, they teach you to write what you know. She was going to

teach what she knew. She was going to apply that concept to the world, if she could. She'd rely on Dave, her husband, to get the messages across to the masses through his music. He'd listen a little. In the end, he knew that life couldn't be so uptight and a rock 'n' roll crowd doesn't like to be *preached* to. He liked Eddie's song about tying his shoes. It meant nothing... and it was fun to do. *People like fun*, he had told Stephanie one day. She liked fun too. That's why she wanted to be with Randal someday. He seemed like a *lot* of fun.

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Alfred looked down on Phil McOaland and he *knew* he was getting ready to sell out. *I thought I told you you were a punk ass*, Alfred said angrily to Phil in Phil's mind. He heard it clear as daylight. Phil was looking at the monitors and getting *sick* of seeing people organizing in the parking lot after they ended their shifts. He *knew* they were organizing because of the visitors that would be seen with them. They wore union badges. They weren't afraid. They were *stupid*, but they weren't afraid.

I don't want to talk, Phil said in his mind, slowly and timidly.

Bill spoke up at this time. Recently, Alfred regained the ability to see and communicate with people on Earth again. *Lucifer*--the one *known* as Lucifer to him--taught him. In the end, though he didn't know if it was the real *Lucifer*--the real Prince of Darkness--he learned and had no qualms that it *came* from such a person or being. The reason? *Bill* had turned on him. *Bill* had turned on him. He never expected *Bill* to turn on him. And the people at home? They were *forgetting* him. He didn't *care* anymore. If it was Medusa that was talking to him on Zoton, he would have listened. If she was telling him the art and craft of turning people to stone, he may have *tried* it on a person or two... just to see if it *worked*. In the end, Alfred was no Lucifer.

Alfred waited for a response from Phil. Though he knew Bill was communicating with him *also*, he had no idea what the conversation was. *These things take time*, Alfred thought to himself. *You're a sellout loser*, he thought to Phil. Phil didn't respond. He watched his monitors.

During the eighties, there was an oil company in California--Alfred didn't know if it was *other* places--by the name of Union 76. In his experiences on Zoton, he didn't *know* reasons for changes (there weren't too many reliable people or *beings* there) but he knew *vibes*. He'd feel them, try to figure them out, then relay messages when he *could*. He talked to a being by the name of *Zaktak* one day. Was it a female? Was it a male? Alfred thought it was neither. Nonetheless, this *being* seemed to know Earth pretty well.

Union 76 changed its name to Unocal 76 for a reason, the being said. By this time, Alfred was getting interested in *any* conversation. He would later see that this *seemingly* trivial conversation had relevance in his real life as he remembered it on Earth. *They changed it--you see?--because they were selling out*.

What do you mean? Alfred had wanted to know. He knew sellouts. Britney Spears was one. She sang about *Herbal Essence*, a shampoo, like she was having an orgasm.. That disturbed Alfred because he used to *like* her. He didn't believe in his *wildest* dreams that *ANY* shampoo could have that effect on a

person. He was wrong. He learned from Zaktak that it *did* make her have an orgasm... when she signed on the dotted line and *thought* about it. Her pussy exploded with enthusiasm.

Zaktak went on to tell Alfred how unions had been a *good* thing in American history. For that matter, they used to be a great thing in Christianity in *general*. Moses had a union... and he took his people out of Egypt. He withdrew their *labor*. Jesus had a union of twelve people and they had a goal. A *mission*. These twelve spawned seventy-two, who in turn, spawned another four to five thousand people, who then in turn spawned enough people to change the face of the planet in *time*. They pooled their *resources*, Zaktak had told Alfred--it was *new* to him--and it could be found in the Book of Acts, if he were ever interested in relaying the message to people on Earth who *needed* verification.

The United States, Zaktak told Alfred through telepathic powers, *was a union at the beginning. You remember the Union Army from the Civil War, right?*

Alfred nodded yes in agreement.

Do I need to say more?

Zaktak had started a union of species--*beings*, as they were to Alfred--on another planet and was exiled. It knew that Phil was heavy on Alfred's mind, in the past, because it--it was an *it* to Alfred--could *read* his mind. It thought the union thing would be pertinent to Alfred. It thought Alfred could use the information.

What the fuck are you, Zaktak? There were tentacle-like things coming from what seemed to be a head and Alfred was *slightly* afraid of it.

Don't worry, moron. That struck Alfred as strange but he was no longer scared. He thought he'd use his powers the best he could and *talk* to Phil. He did his best. In the end, it was *Phil* that was the moron... at least to Alfred, he was.

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The man that saw the cameras in Jerry Shuster's went to the beach and tried to start a cult. He was a *leader*, and he knew it, but he didn't know *how* such a thing was done. He wanted that power that Jerry had in the church. He was too *poor* to start his own church. But to have adherents? That was the key.

He saw the waves breaking. He saw homeless men here and there. He thought that *they* would be the perfect people. *What is the purpose of this all?* He thought. He knew the answer though. Power. Simply *power*. He had things to say, but that was secondary.

He approached one man--he was black and aging--on a bench. "Do you know who I *am*?" he asked the kind man whom looked like he had a little too much to drink that evening. There was a bottle wine bellow him--*Thunderbird*, it was--and he *knew* that he had a lot to drink. He was prodded from the inside to continue. This man he was talking to--that aging *black* one--didn't look like he'd respond, but there has to be a beginning *somewhere*, or so the man thought that backed up Jerry Shuster in his church a while back. "My name is James. My friends call me Jimmy," the man with the tie-dye shirt said. "Can I have a moment of your time?"

The man on the bench struggled a bit then retorted aloud, as if woken from a deep slumber, “What do you *want!*?”

“I want your time,” James said. He was a little scared at the man’s response. He didn’t know if he’d continue on. He could *tell* after a couple of moments that the bum on the bench was intrigued.

“What do you *want*, I said,” the bum said. “My name is Lawrence. I’ll have a moment of your *time...*” he started.

“My time?” Jimmy asked a little startled. “I’m here to talk to *you*, my friend.”

The bum lit up a cigarette--Jimmy wondered where he had *gotten* one since the bum looked like he had no more than a *quarter* on him. *Surely he’s gotta spend all his money on booze and food, right?* Jimmy thought. He was wrong. He’d later find out that the bum found enough money on the beach to score heroine on occasion.

Jimmy recollected himself, *thought* about giving a sermon, then decided to wait for something else to happen. This man had said that he’d give him some of *his* time. *What could this guy possibly have to say?* he wondered. “Talk *on*, please,” he finally mustered to the bum on the bench. He was sitting upright by this time.

“I’m not *over* you,” the bum said aloud, but Jimmy could tell that the bum was not talking directly to him. Maybe he was a mental patient whom couldn’t find a job and was stuck on the streets because of it.

“Fuckin’ *loser*,” Jimmy said under a soft stench from his breath. He had eaten onions in his hamburger prior to this and breathed into his hand after he realized that his breath must be as bad as the bum’s on the bench.

“Fuckin’ loser, huh?” the bum quietly asked. Jimmy didn’t want to acknowledge him. How could he have *heard?* Was it that loud. The bum had nothing more to add though. He laid down on the bench and *tried* to ignore the man whom had tried to approach him about joining a cult. “*WHAT CULT!?*” Lawrence finally mustered. He sat upright again.

Jimmy didn’t register that his mind was being read. He didn’t register that at all. He wanted to tell him about the world. He wanted to tell him how Jesus was schizophrenic and how he believed that *he* was becoming schizophrenic. He was learning that things were different in the world. They were different than the bubble that he was in. He had learned, in the past before meeting Jerry Shuster, that Jesus was the only person to ever talk to God. Of course, *Mohammed* later thought that he was talking to God, or so he was *taught*, but it didn’t occur to him until recently that *other* people might be talking to God or *angels*, as well. It didn’t occur to him at all.

Jimmy sat down next to the bum on an adjoining bench. He was startled, not by the fact that his mind was read because it still wasn’t registering to him on a conscious level, but that things were *different* in the world. He thought this bum was going to roll over, hear everything he had to say, and be having a Big Mac with him in fifteen minutes.

Life was different. That’s what he was coming to believe.

Thirty minutes after initiating the conversation, Jimmy Contrell was sitting with Lawrence

Smythers and he was doing the listening. He listened to a story of hope. He listened to a story of despair. In the end, he listened to a story of apathy. “They have *nukes*,” Lawrence told him. “They have *nukes*. We can match them gun for gun... but in the end, *THEY* are the ones that control the nukes. Your revolution is not going to work. Try to work on someone else.” He felt a bit of pain at this. He could see he wasn’t getting through to Jimmy. He wanted to add more but he was too emotional to do so. He wanted to add stories about his mother and how she treated him like an *angel*. He wanted to change the tone of the conversation.

Jimmy hugged Lawrence. He thought about becoming a bum at that time. He wouldn’t. He had too much to say to other people.

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Anna woke up next to Ned and she was thinking about leaving him. Her back was in pain. She still played racquetball and thought of Alfred and Bill every time she did. She thought about the day that Bill told her about flying. She wouldn’t *quit* playing racquetball because of that reason. She gave up her dreams of ever making *money* when the pain set in, but that was about it. For all she cared, she’d play racquetball until she was forty-five. That was a long ways away. Beg Gay would have to do for her. It’s all she had that she *wanted* to take.

Ned woke up next to Anna and didn’t realize that she was having thoughts about leaving him. He was thinking of the band. *Freight Train*, was the name. Indirectly, it was the progeny of his brother in Heaven and he knew it deeply. He *knew* it deeply. That’s what mattered to him.

Anna spoke. “What *are* you doing, honey?” Her mood changed. If Ned had woken up a minute earlier, he might have gotten a different response. Something might have happened that resulted in a fight, albeit a small one. It might have resulted in *doubt* between the two. Anna pushed her prior thoughts aside and kissed her husband. She wasn’t thinking of Bill. She was thinking of his brother, Ned.

“I *like* you, Anna,” Ned said. He sensed something good about her. He wanted to brush his teeth because of the smell he could feel. He didn’t. He sat on the bed, thought about Bill for a while, then thought about Anna next to him. *Does she know I love her?* he wondered. He wondered, he looked at her, and he knew. He *knew* a lot of things. He didn’t believe. He would never use that word. He *knew* things, and that’s what he expressed to people.

Anna sat on the bed next to Ned. He thought about the band and he thought about telling her the ideas he had. He wanted to talk to Waldo. He couldn’t and his heart dropped. Waldo was a friend of Bill’s. He didn’t share the same beliefs as many people. The people in *Freight Train* were a progeny of Bill, he knew it, people *loved* them because of it, but in the end, it wouldn’t substitute. Not for him.

Anna left the room. Ned presumed she was going to make breakfast. He had insecure feelings all the time and this time was no different. He wondered when she would finally leave him. That thought would resonate for a while before getting up to join Anna in the kitchen.

“Can I make some coffee or something?” he asked her. She didn’t respond. She went about

preparing breakfast by washing a frying pan--they only had one--and getting eggs out of the refrigerator. Ned looked at her, wondered how he got in his situation, then prepared the coffee.

"One eggs or two?" she asked him.

"I'll have four," Ned said. He kissed her and she smiled. He was joking about the four eggs but she made them anyway. He ate all of them and savored the fact that he had such a beautiful woman with him. *If she only knew I was a loser*, he thought. He sipped his coffee then saw her out the door. She was on the way to work. It was early, still, and he'd get ready for work in an hour.

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Stephanie Venezia-Barley thought about how the sound of "Stephanie Venezia-Meyer" sounded in her head. It sounded *better* to her. It was sad. Really, really sad. Her husband was on the way to making a hit record--she didn't *know* it at the time--and it occurred to her that the things that rockers really sing about are true. The heartbreak. All of it. *All* of it. It doesn't just *sound* good on record. *It is* good. It's good because it's real.

She pushed the ideas of leaving Dave out of her mind. She had to get ready for another seminar class with all the quacks. That's what she had to do. She'd have to see Ben Murphy again--he was the biggest quack of them *all*--and she felt bad for thinking of them in a derogatory manner. She was *one* of them. Ben could be one of *her* some day. He *could* be. He showed promise. He *listened*. He remembered. But he still thought strange things that even *she* didn't think about.

Ben thought he was going to be the president of the United States of America someday. In her mind, it could happen but it was unlikely. There was a vice-presidential candidate who had mental problems when he ran before she was even born. She had *heard* about him because she kept her ears open for stories like that. He was found out, the Republicans *ran* with it, and he was easily defeated along with his running mate. *Eagleton* was his name, or so it was lodged in her head.

"What *is* it, Ben?" she asked with frustration at first sight of him. She couldn't hide her emotions. He had threatened to beat her up the last time that they spoke. She didn't know if it was real. She didn't know if she hadn't been on the job long enough to report something of that kind. In the end, it didn't *matter* to her. She didn't want to be chickenshit. She wasn't a male and she was unable to whip any councilor she had ever had. Nonetheless, she didn't want to narc on him because she had *been* like him. "Do you have something to say?" she asked Ben after he didn't respond to her initial question.

"It's *wrong*," Ben said flatly. She didn't know *what* was wrong. Ben was supposed to be the president of the United States of America, in his delusions. He was supposed to be filthy rich and he *wasn't*. It didn't bother Ben. The CIA had stopped him. That's what happened. In his mind, all of his *failures* were because of the CIA. They had wiretapped his phone. They put transistors in his computer. Everything he typed would be sent to them. It was a conspiracy: "Keep Ben Murphy down. He knows too much."

"What *is* it, Ben?" she asked him again as if not hearing him the first time he spoke.

“It’s wrong that *you...*” he started, then he shook his head in frustration and took his seat. He thought about the CIA. He thought about his thwarted plans. He thought about a few other things then asked Stephanie Venezia-Meyer (it was -Meyer at this time in her head as she drifted off to another place while the class settled) while he raised his hand, “You don’t know what’s going *on*, do you Steph?”

“No.” She said in seriousness, but tried to hide it because she was teaching. She was supposed to know *everything*, or close to it... at least compared to them. She wanted to ask him what he was talking about, refrained, and waited for him to continue.

Ben talked for about five minutes about how the CIA had him bugged. He talked about how they have satellites in the sky that were now able to read people’s *thoughts*.

Stephanie didn’t believe him about what he might know but she humored him anyway. “Class! We are talking to a future president of the United States of America.” She wanted to cry, but she wanted people to listen. She knew that more than anything else, people had to be *heard*. The jails are full of mental health patients that were not heard. She would listen to Ben, she would take it into consideration, and in the end, she would *hope* that she wouldn’t be threatened again by him.

“I want to tell you about a spy satellite named *Zotar*,” Ben said.

“I have a *friend* named Zotar,” Stephanie said with amusement. She riffled Ben and he didn’t want to speak anymore. Things riffled him that don’t riffle a normal person. He wanted to tell her about the satellite by the name of Zotar. He was making it up, of course, but he heard the name before. It riffled him that she interrupted his train of thought. In the end, Stephanie was saddened by this, but there was nothing she could do.

A colleague of hers came into the room and pointed out that Francine Cross would be late. She was having car troubles. Francine entered the room a few seconds later wearing a blue bonnet. It reminded Ben of a chicken that he had seen on TV when he was younger. It was a hag, old lady chicken. Francine was even wearing the spectacles that the chicken wore. *Maybe she’s trying to be her*, Ben thought. The chicken--the one in Ben’s mind--was a hen that had a crush on a rooster. The rooster was tall, spoke with a southern accent, and stuttered a lot. By the time the bell rang to end class that night, Francine would confess to doing it on purpose. She *felt* like that lady hen from the cartoons. It was her way of expressing herself.

Stephanie thought about Ben on her way home. *Was he supposed to be president?* she wondered. She didn’t think so. It made her wonder. *She* had thoughts like that, but it was of being a movie star. It never crossed her mind that she’d be first lady of the United States. It was an odd thing.

Stephanie got home and Dave was in bed asleep. She didn’t wake him. She thought about life. She thought about Randal. She thought about Greg Lauer. The band was writing a song about him. She thought it was going to be a hit. She had no idea how much it *would* be.

Dave entered the room when Stephanie was leaving the kitchen. He wanted to know what was going on. *He knows, Bill*, Stephanie thought to herself. While she fixed a mocha five minutes prior, she had started *talking* to him. And he was responding.

“He knows *WHAT!*?” Dave said. He was mad. He was infuriated and started busting up furniture. “HE KNOWS *WHAAAAAT!*?” Dave asked again but got no response. He knew it was happening. The mind-reading was going on again. He didn’t want it to happen. *When will the aliens come?* he wondered.

“They’re not coming, *hun*,” Stephanie said to him. She had remained calm during his tirade.

They wrote a song that night. It became number one on the charts two years later. It was the only love ballad they would ever write together. It would be the only love ballad they would ever *want* to write together. It wasn’t worth it to *go* through it in order to get to that point.

Dave made love to her. Stephanie thought about Bill Swift the whole time.

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Ned Swift went to work on a day that he and Anna were getting along to his satisfaction. The insecurity was mostly gone. Nonetheless, he wasn’t happy that he was still working at a warehouse. He didn’t want to be a school teacher ever again in his life and he knew that he’d have to make his life better *somehow* in order to suit his bride to the best of his ability. The only option, the way he saw it, was to start a union at the warehouse where he worked.

Phil McOaland watched Ned Swift approach Darber’s parking lot through one of his many monitors. He saw that people were gathering around and he detected a union organizer--a *professional* one--mixed in with the employees that were getting ready to start their shift. He had been called a sellout loser by Alfred in previous days. He didn’t care. Alfred *cared* for the man at a time because they were neighbors. Alfred’s death on Earth was *caused* by him, though indirectly, through something that Phil had yelled to him prior to the crazy man’s explosion at the Miller Tribune. Phil watched and thought in pain. He didn’t know what to do. He summoned Bill Swift--he was the more *rational* of two--in his mind. Bill didn’t give him any advice. Phil knew that *sooner* or later, there was going to be a crossroads and he’d have to make a decision.

Ned Swift approached the crowd of organizing people with joy. He was quickly saddened because the organizer, Raymond Latche, said something to him that was disheartening. Phil couldn’t read what was said. He knew that Raymond was in control of the bunch and Ned Swift no longer was.

Ned walked away from the crowd--Phil still looked on through his monitor--and went inside the Darber building. Phil’s last look at the monitor was seeing Raymond telling a joke. It must have been funny. He could see people chuckle in the crowd.

Ned got inside and he had second thoughts about joining the union movement. He didn’t know what to do. He talked to his brother, Bill Swift, in his mind completely unaware that Bill talked to Phil as well. Bill saw himself as a go-between. He no longer saw himself as Ned’s brother. He had been gone from Earth for a while and started to adopt a more objective look at things as they stood on his former planet. In the end, he thought it’d be good for karma.

Raymond Latche continued to tell his jokes. They were about poverty. Some of them were about the arts. He had them laughing. He had them joining, one by one, in their minds. He was going to

convince them all.

Ned went into the men's restroom before beginning his shift. He looked into the corner--the *far* one--as he washed his hands. *They know*, Bill had told him. *They have cameras all over the place*.

Ned didn't care. What mattered was that he was going to be comrades with his workers. As things were turning out, he felt left out. He had *started* the movement and now he wasn't feeling he was part of it. It was ironic in that sense.

After clocking in, Ned approached Bill's office. He didn't say anything about the hidden cameras. "I think you know what's going *on*," he said to Phil.

"Oh. I *know*," Phil responded.

Ned didn't know if Phil was going to sell him out. Bill said he *might*. Alfred, the night before, warned him that things were starting to change again. "I need to know..." Ned said. He expected an answer from Phil but got none. He changed his mind and his tone. "Can I have an extra pair of work gloves? Mine are kind of ragged."

Phil handed Ned the gloves that he needed or *said* he needed. "Have fun, Bill Swift," Phil added.

What? Phil thought. He left the room. "*Fuckin' dickhead*," he said about Phil. No one heard. Not even microphones that were stationed in random areas around him. "I hope you hear this *too*," he added. He felt like a coward and he felt lost.

"It's all about politics," Phil said to himself as he watched Ned board a forklift.

Ned crashed into a crate of Gatorade on purpose in front of a camera. He thought it would be his out. He thought he'd get fired and a big headache would be avoided about choosing between his coworkers and the funny feel that he couldn't shake about the person that had started organizing him. He was wrong about the headache. The only thing he had to worry about was Raymond Latche. Darber put Ned on workers' comp and Raymond Latche began spreading rumors about Ned being a traitor.

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Ned Swift approached his pastor, Jerry Shuster, right after he was put on leave by Darber. He told him about the funny feelings that he was getting from the union organizer that had taken over the place where he had worked. He told him about feelings of hopelessness. He confessed that it wasn't an accident that he broke his arm after slamming into a crate of glass beverages when his frustrations reached a head. His pastor didn't condone it too much but he wasn't will to judge more than he was willing to listen. He told him, "I'll *tell* you something. I *know* a thing or two about those unions..."

"...Go on," Ned said.

"I don't want to *say* what I know," Jerry told him.

Ned had already known a lot. He talked to Bill, in his *mind*, and he talked a little to Alfred. He didn't know if Jerry Shuster was channeling these same guys or not. He wasn't sure at all. Alfred had relayed the message that Zaktak had told him. It meant a *lot*. He talked to Jerry Shuster about it.

"Communism--you see?--is a *religion*," Jerry said.

"Go on," Alfred said.

"It's a *religion* and..." Jerry went on to talk for about fifteen minutes. He talked about the paradox that communism became. It was a *religion*, in Jerry's mind, that was out to snuff out *other* religions. But when existential philosophy was taken into account--it was something that Ned wasn't *too* familiar with--you could see patterns. The holy days. *Everything*. Holy texts. Sacred shrines. *Prophets*. "What's the holy text of Christianity?" he finally asked Ned. It was a rhetorical question. During his speech prior to this, he had said that the union organizers are like zealots. "It's all a matter of semantics," he had said to Ned.

"What are you talking about with the holy text, pastor?" Ned asked him. He *knew* it was the Bible. There wasn't any question. He just wanted to know where the pastor was going with his questioning. It was a *leading* question that he was being asked. Ned had been involved with cops in the past during various protests. He *knew* what leading questions were: *How long have you been beating your wife?* Those kinds of things. They didn't ask *if* you beat your wife. That wasn't their way. It was a leading question.. "I *know* you're talking about the Bible, pastor. Where are you *going*?"

The pastor looked uncomfortable. He didn't know what to say. If it was his brother, Clyde, who was doing the talking, he would have spit it out.

"The Communist Manifesto! You fuckin' MORON!" he finally yelled out.

"Oh. I *get* it." Ned was hurt but he didn't want to leave the conversation. He started to *get* it. Now, he wanted to see if the pastor had the balls to go all the *way* with it. He wanted to see if he'd have the balls to say it in public during a sermon.

That night, pastor Jerry Shuster spit it all out. He didn't name Ned. He told them--the congregation of about seventy-five--that *someone* had approached him about a godless religion. He went on to say that Lenin's body was embalmed. Since the fall of *official* communism in Russia, it had since been removed from the site that seemed *holy* to many. He talked about *paradoxes*. He talked about the

statues that they made of men. The Catholic Church did the same thing... but they didn't *hide* that they thought they were men of God. They *taught* that.

It was going on right before the eyes of people in Russian. They had a day, like the Americans, in which they celebrated their statehood... once per year. He confessed to his listeners that he didn't know *that* for fact or even what the day would be. He just let them know that he *knew*.

He drew no responses in protest over it.

"We have *Easter*--you see?--and we celebrate it *ONCE PER YEAR!*"

"Hallelujah!" someone from the back chided.

"We have *Easter*. They have a day... and though I don't know what it is... it's religious in *nature*, folks. It *is*. It feels the same to them as a Christian celebrating the resurrection of our Lord and Saviour."

"Hallelujah *again*, pastor," someone chided from the very back row.

"I have this to say, people. Our Lord and Saviour? His name is Jesus Christ," Jerry said. He was going to continue without a pause before he saw the first lady that chided the hallelujah shift in her seat as if ready to leave. "Go *on*, you skank whore!" he said to her when he realized she wasn't going to stay.

A doctor by the name of Richie Waterloo smiled and nearly laughed from the third row when the pastor spit it out about the lady.

"Go *on*..." he said. He wanted to feel full of energy but he felt it leaving him like a busting dam. "Go on," he said without much emotion when he saw that the doctor--one whom seemed to be on his *side*--decided to join the old lady.

I'm not going to make much money at this, Jerry thought to himself. He ended his sermon with a story about Jesus, mustard seeds, faith, and a generic anecdote about *TV* evangelists.

The man who had nearly laughed at the *whore* came back and took a seat where she had been sitting. "I wouldn't miss this for the *world*," he told Ned Swift that night. "I wouldn't miss it for the *world!*"

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Ben Murphy sat in class. He was getting used to not being treated the way he *wanted* to be treated. He was still the president of the United States, in his mind. People weren't *treating* him like the president. He said to himself, *I'm going to get over this. I'm going to be presidential. How? Be not whining.* He stood up in class one day--it was a day after he had a revelation of the universe--and he said to Stephanie Venezia-Barley, "I *know* what's going on."

"Go on, Ben," she said. She was a bit nervous and contemplated not working there any longer. She wanted a *safer* job. She wanted a job that didn't make her *feel* so much. In the end, she *knew* that she was at the right place because she didn't want to be a robot *more* than she didn't want to feel bipolar. "Say your piece."

"I have this to *add*," Ben said. He wasn't into it though. He was as bipolar as any of the ten that

regularly attended the class. Francine came in. She wasn't wearing her blue bonnet any longer. "Look at *that* duck," Ben said about her. Why he said it was a mystery to Stephanie. She didn't ask him to elaborate. "I want to tell you about the *universe*, Miss Barley," Ben said after drawing his attention away from Francine. "Poor bitch," he said about her. Stephanie didn't hear. Ben didn't say it loud enough.

Stephanie didn't respond to Ben's assertion that he knew something new about the universe. She was getting sick of it. The spy satellites. Everything *about* it. Had Jeff Splifer said it, she would have drooled. She didn't do that for Ben and it made him mad on the inside. He didn't want her to *fall* for him. He wanted to be respected. He *wasn't* respected.

Ben had come across Zotar on the internet. He wanted to meet him. It was easy enough. Zotar spilled a lot of information about what *he* knew. Ben wouldn't pass on the information to Miss Barley. He was sure of it. She didn't care, and neither did the bozos that went to her seminars.

"I'll save it for later, Miss Barl," he said.

"*Save it*," she said. "Let's talk about the dead." This intrigued Ben. It was strange. They talked for a half hour about how the dead still reach people, it was taught in the *Bible* that they reached people, the United States was *built* on the Bible... but she was supposed to suppress that belief as an agent of the state. "How ironic, huh?" she said to the class at the end of the discussion.

Ben forgot about the conversation he had with Zotar on the internet. He didn't start thinking of it again until he boarded his bus to go home. *I'm going to win*, he said to himself.

Zotar told him that atoms are *alive*. He said that he heard it from Bill Swift. He said that carbon-14 atoms take roughly five thousand years to degenerate into carbon-12 atoms. That wasn't a revelation to Ben, but he listened anyway. Ben actually corrected Zotar. He said that if you have a *pound* of carbon-14, roughly *half* will degenerate into carbon-12 after five thousand years.

Zotar962: Yeah. I know. I got ahead of myself :)

Troll1043: So what's your point?

Zotar962: A scientist can't predict exactly what carbon-14 atom will turn into carbon-12, you see?

Troll1043: So you think it's a choice?

Zotar962: I don't know. I just know what Bill tells me. He says that some physicists on Earth claim that they could predict everything if they knew the unifying principals.

Troll1043: What is that?

Zotar962: I don't know. It's in my head that way. Just think of that carbon atom. Think of your life and the will to live. If you wanted to live, you'll live longer. You'll take care of yourself.

Troll1043: So it's a cult?

Zotar962: No. It's not. Some of them just can't hold out. It's as simple as that.

The conversation continued. Zotar told Ben about the model that many people have been talking about since his passing. He said that modern physicists see the smallest element known like ancient astronomers used to look at Mars or Venus through their telescopes. It wouldn't occur to them what the planets were made of. They could be blown to bits. Sand dust would circle the Sun just like asteroids did for many, many years, likely after two planets had collided with one another. This was Zotar's recollection of things.

Troll1043: So you're saying that's what GHOSTS are made of?

Zotar962: Yep. You hit it on the button.

Troll1043: Oh. I see. :(I never thought of that.

Zotar signed off before Troll1043 could thank him. He was tired. He didn't want to continue the conversation.

Atoms are alive, Ben pondered as his bus reached his stop. *I wonder if they know... Nah. They can't know that.* Ben wanted to know if they knew the mysteries of the universe or if they were as stupid as a mushroom. Ben didn't know it, but mushrooms were one of the brightest creatures that the Earth held.

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Don Michaels--he was the twin brother of Daisy's husband, Doug--caught wind that Jeff Splifer had been teaching that atoms were alive in his class. That went okay with him. He was a colleague of Jeff's and he taught philosophy. Jeff taught history, and he taught it in many forms. He taught *History of Science 101*, *History of Religion 202*, and *History of Western Civilization 91*, just to name of few. To Don, Jeff looked like a goof every time he would open his mouth with one of his new dissertations. He wanted Jeff down though. He would *take* him down. He was jealous of him. He was jealous of the men whom slept with his sister-in-law, Daisy. He was jealous of a lot of things.

Jeff Splifer recanted his statement that individual brain cells had souls. He didn't know that he was *right* in asserting such a suggestion. Nonetheless, his relationship with Stephanie enabled him to see that *maybe* brain chemistry was at root for explaining psychological phenomena in which people believe they are telepathically communicating with one another. Jeff was a work in progress. Don was not. He was in his late sixties and he was stuck on what he believed. He was old-fashioned. He didn't believe there should be a cult following behind every person that opened his mouth with a new idea.

Jeff didn't know what was going on. He taught about Russia involvement in the fall of communism in their country. He taught that there was a secret agreement between the United States and the former Soviet Republics. He taught that there was a compromise. He taught that United States secretly agreed to hasten their state control of their own citizens in exchange that the Soviet Union disband, join the capitalist sector (as it was known to them), and they wouldn't ever have to *fully* release their own state control of their own population.

Professor Jeff Splifer wasn't fired for this, though it was his latest theory and it *was* based on some factual evidence that he had acquired through his leads. He was fired because Don Michaels hit the hot

button with the rest of the school faculty. “Brains to *not* have many souls, for Christ’s sake!” he yelled one time.

“I hear you!” an old lady that taught English yelled.

“We have to *do* something about him,” Don said. He thought about how people *like* Jeff Splifer--the free *thinkers*--were sleeping with his sister-in-law and causing his brother heartache.

Jeff was fired. The reason he was fired was that he was teaching outside of the state-mandated curriculum. It was farther from the truth. Jeff *always* taught what the state wanted him to teach. He led people to believe that they should consider *other* things. In the end, the students he taught didn’t come out of their classes with the knowledge the state *wanted* them to have. It was enough to send him to window *P*. It was enough to send him collecting state payments of unemployment.

Jeff wrote a book about his beliefs a year later. It cracked the top ten. He didn’t regret a thing.

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Ralph Connors won his reelection big in 2004 pretty easily on the premise that America needed to be more united. He argued that a ban against burning the national flag--*Old Glory*, to him--would be the best way to do it. He had hired Bucky Holdwater of Miller, California, to be his speech writer. Bucky had been part of Ameriway and he was triple star. This meant that he reached the third of five possible tiers, according to their accounts. Daniel Quartz was in Ameriway and he was Ralph Connors’ vice-president at the time. He was a quintuple star. There wasn’t getting any higher than that.

Ameriway was a strong supporter of Mr. Connors’ Republican party. They suggested to Bucky that he plant the seed in Ralph Connors’ mind during dinner. He did. It worked. His vice-president concurred that it was a good idea.

“Do we need another Black Crowes incident?” Bucky asked Mr. Connors. He *always* referred to him as Mr. Connors and didn’t dare speak his first name in his presence unless told to do so.

“No. We *don’t* need...” Ralph Connors began.

“They destroyed the *FLAG!*” Bucky said. Ralph recoiled a little. Had Bucky used that tone in public, he would have been fired. They were at dinner and only close constituents were present. “I *don’t* think we need another lady... with her *pubic hair!*... coming out of the American flag!”

“Wait. You’re for this *too?*” Ralph asked his vice-president. He was at the table eating caviar on salted crackers. It’s the way he liked to prepare himself for a hearty meal.

“No. I’m *not*,” Daniel Quartz said. “But...”

“They’ll eat it up, Mr. President,” Bucky said. Unlike Daniel Quartz, Bucky Holdwater *was* in favor of amending the Constitution. “I *think*...” Bucky began.

President Ralph Connors was awestruck. He knew the boy scouts--being that he was *one* in his youth--are taught to burn soiled flags. It was their way. It was in their credo.. “You’re *saying*...” Ralph Connors began to Daniel Quartz, “...that we *need* this?!”

“No. We don’t *need* it. It’s a rallying point. It’ll *work*.”

“By God, *YES!*” Ralph Connors said. He saw the light.

He didn’t like that Bucky Holdwater actually thought it should be something that should be done. He kept quiet about it while he ate his meal. Bucky spoke up and *elaborated* on a plan. “We *need* to put in stipulations. They’re *riders*, and you know about them well.”

“Pork barrel,” Ralph Connors agreed.

“I ask my mom, hypothetically, for a hundred dollars...”

“...And she gives you five. I know.”

“It’s what I *want*. We *sell* them on the fact that *RESPONSIBLE* corporations can reproduce the flag. No one else.”

“I *got* you,” Ralph said, but he was uneasy.

“It’s pork barrel, okay?” Bucky said. He believed it was... but he wanted to see the rider passed. He knew it *would* pass. “Imagine a world with Ford logos in the place of stars on the flag.”

“I *see*,” Ralph Connors said. He was no longer interested.

Ralph’s amendment to the Constitution passed easily. Bucky was given credit, but not to his face. He was given credit in behind-closed-doors meetings. He wasn’t given credit in *public*. Were he ever to reach the fourth level of Ameriway’s program? Yep. He *would* be told that he had been given credit all along. He would have to clear a few hurdles first. He would have to chase a carrot on a stick for a while. They didn’t know how else to control him. They didn’t know how else to keep the ideas *flowing*.

“I’ll *do* this for you, Mr. President,” Bucky Holdwater said before the parted ways after a scrumptious meal. “I’ll do it. I’ll even draft the language that’ll be voted on.”

Bucky drafted the language. He added another rider that would be stricken. It would outlaw the flags of the former Soviet Union, Iraq, Mexico, China, the Stars and Bars of General Lee, and others around the world. He secretly wanted the General Lee flag not to be outlawed. It was part of his idea that *something* would be stricken down from the group and he’d say in a meeting, *Okay. We’ll keep the Confederate flag because it was American... but the rest? No. They have to go.* In the end, all of them were stricken down, although Daniel Quartz later joked that the flag of Mexico should be outlawed. It was a personal beef with him. He hated his housekeeper. She was from south of the border.

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Bill Swift was on Zoton. He went there for a visit. He wanted to talk to Alfred and he wanted to do it in more than telepathy. “Something’s going *on*,” he said to Alfred as Alfred looked at the ground at his marbles. He was playing by himself. He learned to manipulate the surrounding environment through his mind enough to the point that he had *some* semblance of the planet of Earth. “Something’s going *on*, I tell you,” Bill said again.

Alfred was distraught and didn’t want to speak. He finally did. “I don’t know who you *are*, Bill,” he said to him.

“I’m all you want in life and *more*. That’s what I need to know.” Bill had started to cry a bit and

tried to hold it back. Tears of salted water didn't form. They were something else, but they were still there to see.

"I don't want this joke of a loser life. Can you get me off of Zoton?"

"Nope. No *way*. You make your own mess. You'll clean it up."

"What *mess*?" Alfred demanded. Bill stood silent but looked around. Zoton was not as nice as Xeon. Alfred had no problem with it. Alfred figured that once you were at the bottom, at least you never had to worry about sinking *further*. That was one stress that was off of you. "What about you and world peace, huh?" Alfred asked. He was only half interested. Alfred didn't have the same aspirations as Bill. He just wanted to *be*. He didn't want any stress. It didn't matter to him at all. "I *care* about the world, you know?" Alfred said in earnest right after he saw Bill put a gun to his head. The gun had popped up in his hand, just like a cartoon.

Alfred waited for a reaction and got none. He waited some more. When no reaction came, he went back to his marbles on the ground.

"They'll always *be* the same. Don't you *know*?" Alfred asked him.

"I know... son. I know."

Alfred didn't feel as good about Bill Swift calling him son. He did the first time it had ever happened. This time, he felt lost and he saw in the eyes of his mentor, that he was lost as well. It was the first time he saw the look. It wouldn't be the last.

****Part Two ****

* one *

Britney Brown was a lady that was on the move. Her heartthrob was Bucky Holdwater. He had an eye for money and Ameriway let Britney know that he was climbing up the ladder fast. She had known his friends. They really weren't his *friends* though. They could be called acquaintances. The only person that he'd call a friend was Randal Meyer. The rest? They could go to Hell: Waldo Fleshman and his dead buddies in the sky; Dave Barley and his skank ass, nutty wife; Eddie Macral and his wild attempts to get his band notices; *Zotar*--he was a trip--and his nutty girlfriend, Liz Shulton; and Anna Harcdomm (it would always be *Harcdomm* to him) and her fucked up husband, Ned, Bill *Swift's* brother of all people. They could all go to Hell, Zoton, or whatever they were calling it... except for Randal Meyer. He had a secret *crush* on good, old Randal.

Britney had been part of their group for a while. She was nice. She was funny. She was money-driving, and in the end, it drove her out. They wanted to have fun. They wanted to be released of their memories from the past couple of years. She wouldn't have any of it. She wanted success. Success, to her, was being able to buy *shoes* whenever you wanted. Three hundred pairs? That was good enough. In Bucky Holdwater, she saw a *vehicle* to achieve her goals.

Britney Brown was very *attractive*. Anna was very attractive, she had *heart*, and in the end, it's what kept her as part of the Miller group. She complained privately that she wanted out, but they *all* wanted out... *sometimes*. Britney wanted out bad. Bucky Holdwater knew it. After proposing the anti-flag burning amendment to Ralph Connors, he proposed something to Britney. He said that she could be a CIA operative. She would front as a new investigative reporter manager for Miller's new paper, *The Inquisitor*. People had stopped buying the *Miller Tribune* because Marlin had been blown up there with a handful of other people. It was like reading letters from a ghost, once it got started up again (insurance had paid for everything). Britney was anxious for a change. She didn't *like* Alfred. She didn't like Bill. She got occasional voice perceptions from them, as people around the town did. They knew her heart. In her heart was desperation. She didn't like that they *knew* that. Bucky Holdwater didn't know *shit* or, at least, he'd *pretend* not to know anything.

"What's your *offer*?" she asked Bucky, in the presence of Phil McOaland. Phil was going through a divorce with his wife, Nancy.

"I'm going to make you *famous*," Bucky said. He was instructed not to talk about Whitewater. He was instructed not to talk about Watergate. The CIA--a *branch* of it--hated the liberals in the country and were out to undermine anything the Democrats did that year. For that matter, they were out to undermine the Greens, the Peace and Freedom people, and the Libertarians.

"I'm *already* famous," she said. She was proud and she blushed. She had sent out nude photos of

herself onto the internet. Response was strong. It was something she was proud of. "I'm already famous, but if you say I can be *more* famous..." She was phony at this point and didn't really care.

Bucky Holdwater shook his head in disbelief. *I can't believe I'm helping this man*, he thought of the president of the United States.

Phil McOaland dealt them cards. They were outdoors in a pretty nice setting. There was linen on the tables and a pool nearby, in case anyone got hot.

"I'm going *to...*" Bucky began. He was at a loss for words. If the aliens were spying on them--and they *were* at points--they'd think they were the biggest losers they'd seen in a while.

SOMEONE needs to do something about this! Alfred yelled into Phil's head.

"What do you *want?!?*" Phil demanded. No one else had heard what Alfred had yelled into Phil's head, except that Britney caught a *glimpse* of it.

She's a loser. I used to like her. I hate her now. Get her the fuck out of your life if you want it to be interesting. You had a winner in Nancy. You'll never get a woman like that, you know? Unless you start shaping up. Alfred wasn't mad by the time he had his piece with Phil. Phil didn't respond. It was a useless situation.

It occurred to Bucky that the CIA front was not going to work with Britney. She was stupid. She was *too* stupid. She wasn't genuine. She didn't belong.

"I'm going to go, you guys," Bucky said in embarrassment. He put a couple of quarters on the table--there were no *waiters* there--and then waited to see what Phil was going to do.

Phil did nothing. He slept on the couch that night--Nancy had kicked him out of the room they shared at a time--and he stroked off hoping she wouldn't catch him. She didn't. He was very quiet. Even Alfred didn't say a thing to him in his mind when he buzzed him that night. He went back to his business on Zoton. Phil went to his business on the couch.

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Jimmy Contrell joined a cult in the beach of Hermosa, California. The leader was Lawrence Smythers. He had told Jimmy that he had been an engineer for the state, many years back. He got laid off, lost hope in the world, then started walking the streets. He had a lot to teach. *A lot*. When Jimmy realized that Lawrence knew more about life than *him*, he decided to follow him. Lawrence had no objections. His only objection was that Jimmy had little money left--he had spent the last of it on a motor-scooter--and there was little left for them to do.

"I'm *bored*," Jimmy told Smythers.

"I have no answers, my son," he said back. He took a drink of his whiskey then continued, "We *all* can have a little boredom in our lives, can't we?"

"What is our *purpose* though?"

"I have no idea." Smythers pointed to the heavens above and said, "*They* have the answers, and I think you know what I mean."

They had been dreaming of aliens. Both had been believers in Jesus Christ. They were getting confused on the issues. It didn't matter to either. They *knew* they had a purpose, but they really couldn't articulate it. They didn't *feel* the purpose all the time. It was the fleeting moments.

"I need a drink of your whiskey," Jimmy said to Lawrence. Lawrence pulled the bottle back and Jimmy was surprised. "I *need* something! I need a *drink*. I'll *go*, if I don't have a drink."

Lawrence passed the bottle and Jimmy drank. It would be the last bottle of booze Lawrence would have for five days. They had started a following and they knew that it would mess things up if they were always on sip. They *knew* it. Jimmy didn't drink ever again in his life.

"I have this to propose, Jimmy," Lawrence said.

"Go on."

"You have a *lot* in your brain."

"No I don't."

"You have *enough*. And I'm going to tell you that it's going to *work*."

Jimmy was satisfied at that. He *thought* about going back to Miller and listening to Jerry Shuster again. Those thoughts were fleeting. He was becoming comfortable in his new environment.

He surfed later that evening and later drowned. He had too much to drink. Lawrence Smythers never saw his surf board again. It was lost in the ocean.

"Damn *shame*," he said when Jimmy didn't return from his venture. "I kind of *like* you," he said to Jimmy, wherever he may have been.

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Stephanie's class was coming near the end. In the summertime, she'd be free. Part of her was glad. Another part had grown secretly fond of the people she'd met. There were some vegetables in class, but that was expected. Ben was looney--there was no *denying* that--but he wasn't boring. He'd be missed. She wouldn't *tell* him he'd be missed--that was a secret of hers--but he'd be missed.

He came to class one day wearing sunglasses. "I *want* to be like the men in black," he said. He got a chuckle from Francine, whom was surprisingly early that day.

"Let's *begin*, class. We have some things to talk about." She covered a couple of things that she was supposed to cover long ago. She covered the fact that they were to stay on their medications. Secretly, once again, she didn't *care* if they were on their meds so long as they behaved in society. She had to say what the state *wanted* her to say. She wasn't going to be like Jeff Splifer. When it came down to it, if her subjects were questioned, they were to know that the voices they heard--the ones that *heard* voices--were from inside the brain and not outside the brain. They were to know that medication *helps* them. They were to know that there's an increase in the chance of jail and/ or mental institutions if you don't follow what's recommended. It was all part of the rhetoric for her. Some people ate it up and agreed. Ben sat quietly. He knew better not to talk up. She had spilled her guts in other regards and he was grateful. He no longer felt like beating her up.

Francine spoke after all the rhetoric was done. She had questions. She had an abusive father and she admitted to being hooked on a controlled substance, though she didn't admit that it was cocaine. She said that her *father* told her that the voices were from inside her head. She'd have to get over it. Stephanie recommended art as an outlet. Francine went on to say that *Alfred* still talked to her in her head (it was a *lie*) and that she'd be happy if he'd stop.

"I don't know what to tell you, hun. I still talk to dead people too..." (People laughed at this.) "...but I *don't* talk to Alfred Newman and I don't talk to Bill Swift." It was a lie. She *did* talk to these people. "I talk to my angels. I *think* the state might be flexible in that regard. I'm not sure. I haven't *worked* here long enough."

The conversation ended at that. Francine was not at peace. She wanted people to *believe* her. She wanted people to say, *Oh? What does Bill Swift tell you?* She wanted that. She wanted people to ask about Alfred and they didn't. She was a clueless broad and she'd die that way.

Chicken little, Stephanie thought with some insecurity. Bill and Alfred and said to her in her mind that they didn't contact Francine, though they contacted other people still. Alfred *wanted* to contact her... but it was like trying to fix something that *couldn't* be fixed. It'd be wasting his energy. He didn't want that. *Chicken little. Is your sky falling, Francine?* Stephanie thought, before closing up class for the night. *I'll miss this place, though.* She turned off the lights right after seeing Ben make his way down the steps. She locked the door and didn't come back again. They'd have to find a substitute replacement for the next couple of weeks. It was too much for her to handle.

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Dave Barley began to go to "drum ins" with his wife, Stephanie. He thought it'd be a good way to pound out the frustration he felt at times. He thought it'd be a good way to connect with her. She thought it was something to do. It was great for her in the end. She loved it.

Freight Train had started off for a couple of weeks as a five-piece band. There was Waldo Fleshman, Dave Barley, Eddie Macral, Randal Meyer... and Potsy Wilhelm. Potsy was to be the drummer, but things didn't work out. Potsy was evangelical Christian and he knew that Stephanie, Dave's wife, had problems with a mental disability in the past. It was sad to Dave because he *liked* Potsy. He was a good guy... but he wasn't very understanding.

Freight Train topped the charts the following summer with a song about Greg Lauler (the *visionary*, as he was called in the song). They used a drum machine in that song, and that song only. They did it for radio. They knew the radio stations wouldn't play something that didn't have a drum beat. They were right... for the *most* part.

On a day in the summer of 2005--the year *before* the song about Greg Lauler was released--Dave had a revelation. They didn't *need* to replace Potsy. They had *planned* to replace him, but when he went to that drum in, he saw in his *mind* what could be. The drum in was featured with people playing the maracas, the bongos, the tambourines, and any other percussion instrument you could think of. There were even

people playing the *flutes*--they would be the exception to the rule and wouldn't be kicked out because it wasn't the *vibe* of the place--but they weren't encouraged to play their instruments in *place* of the percussion.

Dave had a revelation that he passed on to Eddie. He said, "*We* can do this! We can give people in the audience *bongos*! We can give them tambourines. A couple of them could have *cow bells*! We can go on and on!"

Eddie thought he was high. He didn't take to it at first... and then he saw the light.

In the summer of 2005, the four remaining members of Freight Train went to an Ozzy concert. They had a blast. During the trip, Eddie had an impulse to do a solo record because all of his stuff on Freight Train was rather obscure. His claim to fame, up until that point, was that he wrote a song about tying his shoes. It got laughs. It didn't go very far.

Eddie used the Dave Barley idea before Freight Train got to use it. He released a record without any drum tracks. It sounded good to him. He'd know that it could work in the public.

When Freight Train started getting their wheels in late summer of 2005, they were able to *test* Dave's ideas. Songs were written without drummers in mind. They went to coffee houses at first. Later, they'd play outdoors in parks. There were a couple of backyard parties. In all of them, they'd supply drums, and the like. It *worked*. It worked like a *charm*. Freight Train was on their way. Their audience was connected. When Ralph Connors started to gain steam in the political arena about his anti-flag burning bill, they had a common enemy. They had something to rally behind. Randal Meyer never disliked Ralph Connors and ever voted for him. The *rest* of the band saw a man that was a threat to freedom and personal expression.

"This effects us *all*, Randal," Eddie had told him one day.

"It *doesn't*. He's just a *man*."

"No, he's *evil*," Eddie calmly said. He sipped some of his beer and was grateful that he was even playing an instrument. They would have *died* for this in Soviet Russia, and he knew it.

"I'm going to *go*, guy," Randal said to him that day.

"Think about what I said," Eddie said to him.

"I'll think. You *do*, and I'll think. That's the way it'll work," Randal responded.

"And I'll make all the money in the world because I have a guy in the band like you. Come here," Randal came over to Eddie, he hugged him, then they left. They parted ways.

"Don't forget what I *said*!" Randal shouted to Eddie right before going out of sight.

"I won't, Randal," Eddie said. Randal couldn't hear him though. Eddie was at unease because he thought he was selling part of himself to the system. "It's gotta *work* this way," he said. Once again, no one heard, except for Bill Swift in the sky.

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Jerry Shuster was getting ready to prepare a sermon for that night in Miller, California. It was late

summer of 2005, and being existentialist that he really was, he was going to talk about football. The NFL season was around the corner. He was going to talk about the *history* of the league. He was going to talk about how there's *always* been violence in society and how war heroes were always celebrated. He was going to say that *today's* war heroes are the ones we see on the football field. He was going to talk about how the *sexy* women in society gravitated toward these men and he *didn't* care if he was politically correct about it. He was going to talk about Joe Montana's jersey, and how it was more coveted than the actually shroud of Turin. He was going to talk about how the pro football Hall of Fame was more of a mecca than Rome, at least to a *good* sector of society. He was going to talk about how it was spreading and he was going to talk about the *prophets* of the league. He was going to talk about Superbowl Sunday and how it elicited a *stronger* response, worldwide, than *Easter* Sunday. He was going to do all of this. Once again, he was going to preach about semantics. He was going to say, "Same shit, different name." That's what he was going to say.

Miles away to the east--*thousands* of miles--it was much later because of time differential as far as physical time. Jerry's brother, Clyde, was going to give a sermon of his own. The two brothers hadn't kept in contact with one another but they would have been *proud* of each other if they did. They were riding waves. They weren't going to make money, but it felt good and they had *hope*.

Clyde's church was in Liverpool, England. It was a place that had the capacity to hold two hundred and fifty people. On average, it held *fifty* people. Clyde was *somewhat* distraught by this because he was getting the same crowds outside of Duckton before leaving. He wasn't *entirely* distraught. He looked around his church. It was a proud place to him.

In place of Christ in the center and far end of the church was a large statue of Elvis Presley. Flanking Elvis to his right were George and Ringo--they were *wax* figures, and very expensive ones. Flanking Elvis to his left were John and Paul. He thought it was great. Elvis, near the end of his life, would try to turn the Beatles in to the FBI as being subversive to the country's youth. It didn't matter to Clyde Shuster. He *knew* that Elvis had been an early influence on the Beatles and to the rest of the world. *That's* what mattered to him.

There were stained glass windows. They featured Muddy Watters, Bo Didley, Carl Perkins, Buddy Holly, and many other early rockers. On the opposite end of Elvis Presley, near the church's entrance, was Kurt Cobain. He was done in clay (Shuster couldn't afford another wax figure at this point) and he pointed in the direction of everyone else. It was a religious scene, in his mind. It was a *great* scene.

Clyde Shuster's sermons centered around rock 'n' roll. George Harrison had converted to Hinduism. He *took* that into account. He remember Alfred, his friend whom had come from Miller, California, and he *didn't* want to be a fake any longer. He wanted to know history.

"Do you *know*, folks, something that George Harrison said in an autobiography?"

"What, mister?" a girl asked from the second row. She was accompanied by her parents and Clyde could tell that she was like many of the *other* people that come. They were tourists. It was a hot attraction, at this time. The locals stayed away. They had *enough* of the Beatles. The ones that *did* like the

Beatles wanted to remember them in their *own* ways. “What, mister? I’m listening to you.”

“I know doll.” She was about seven-years-old. She *looked* seven, in Clyde’s mind. He didn’t know she was a nine-year-old from Miller, California. He had *no* idea that she had a crush on Randal Meyer in the past. She had no idea that Randal was someone that Alfred had known. It would have pleased him to know all these things.

Clyde reached into a pocket, pulled out a lollipop, gave it to the girl, then continued on. “I *think* George was getting fed up with fame.” A lady next to the little girl shifted. She didn’t want to hear this. Clyde was going to have it *his* way though. He wasn’t going to cater to the crowd. It wasn’t his job, any longer. “He *wrote* that nobody bothers Buddhist monks about hiding in the hills and meditating for long periods of time.” The lady said something but Clyde wasn’t going to be slowed down on her account. He thought of the little girl and *knew* it’d impact her years later if she *remembered*. “He wrote about the Buddhist monks. I think he *felt* like one after his retirement from the Beatles. He kept having people say that he had an obligation to *play* for them. Did he?” The lady next to the little girl nodded her head yes. The little girl was becoming uncomfortable because the older lady next to her kept poking her in the side. The old lady was *jealous* of the little girl. “So what do *you* think, hun? Do you want to see your stars tied to you for the rest of your life?”

The little girl said yes, that she would. Clyde felt he didn’t make a connection. “I want to show you guys some people.” Clyde pointed around to the glass, stained windows. “*These* people were who the Beatles were influenced by. *They* were before them.” Clyde paused, as if about to say something sacrilege. “You know? *Someone* is going to come after the Beatles.” It was a revelation to the little girl and Clyde could see it. Her *father* was a big Beatles’ fan and brought her to the place. He was gone, at the time, on business in the city. He was trying to get rites to some of their music, but he’d later find that he was in the wrong place to do so. “So, do you like the Backstreet Boys, hun?” Clyde asked the little girl. He *hoped* she would say yes, that she did. She shook her head no. It was a disappointment to Clyde, but it was a revelation, at the same time. “You’ll like *someone*.”

“Freight Train. That’s who I like. It’s a band called *Freight Train*.”

“Who’s that, doll?”

“You’ll never understand. You’ll never get it. That’s all.”

“Okay. Very well,” Clyde said. He went on to sermon without interruption. The girl stayed and the older lady next to her shifted in her seat on occasion.

Clyde spoke about vinyl. “If the early prophets had vinyl, *they* would have used it. It’s the new religious text, you know?” The little girl knew. She liked her records--her *CDs*, they were--more than she liked the children’s Bible that her aunt had given her--the same aunt that was shifting in her seat continuously.

“He’s crazy,” a girl said from the back.

Clyde wouldn’t slow down. “Strawberry Fields was a mental institution. How many of you knew *that*?” No one did. “So I *have* you. I know something you don’t.”

Clyde felt good. He felt *authentic*. He would continue in Liverpool. He'd give it a year. After that? He'd judge it and go from there.

"I'm going, people. Remember... All you need is love." Clyde didn't mean it, but it felt good to say. The little girl who was becoming so impressed said, "How corny," but Clyde didn't hear her. He didn't care. Deep inside, he knew he had enlightened them. They wanted him to stay. If said *anything* else, he would have gotten the same response, and he was sure of it.

Clyde played "Across the Universe" on the speakers, then left through a back door. Some people stayed and looked at the art in the Church of the Fab. Others left. None of them were bored though most were distraught because they felt incomplete.

"I need to come here *every* week," the little girl said to herself. She'd never go there again. It was just a visit she was on.

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Lawrence Smythers was sad when he saw Jimmy Contrell washed up on the beach. This was many months ago, but it still ate at him. It was *like* a cancer.

Lawrence Smythers had refused to continue working in 2004. He didn't like his job any longer. He *wasn't* a civil engineer, like he had told Jimmy. He was Secretary of State, and his name at the time had been Butch Jackson. He thought that leaving work and going with his family full time would heal wounds from the inside. He was wrong.

Butch Jackson had covered civil affairs quite closely, while he was Secretary of State. He became enthralled by people forming cults in Texas. Those crazy Waco people would never stop. He became fascinated by a church that had formed in Oregon. The Church of Kurt Cobain, it had been called. He was fascinated by Mesa, Arizona, and their experiences with UFOs. He was captivated by the people of Miller, but most of all, he knew that Bill Swift had influence still. It was a strange thing to him. Bill Swift was dead. He had been dead for a long time.

Butch Jackson never stepped outside of his box. He had been in the military his whole life. He didn't know what it was like to see the world in a different way. He hated liberals, to a degree, but he knew that that was why he joined the military to begin with. He wanted to protect *all* Americans.

Butch Jackson thought that family life would be perfect, upon retiring from the military. It wasn't. His kids liked Korn, the raunchiest band of the century in his mind, more than they liked him. It was a hopeless situation. His wife? She liked her soaps more than she liked talking to him about *his* life.

Butch Jackson wanted to make a change. He told his wife and kids that the military had one, last assignment for him. He was to go to Thailand. He told them that the details of his mission were to remain a secret and his family respected him. He contacted Bob Gomer, from the Periphery Intelligence Agency, the CIA's big and unknown brother, and he set up the cover. The CIA itself was to believe that Butch Jackson was in Seattle, Washington, on assignment to cover and watch the Canadians to the north. Bob

Gomer, and *only* Bob Gomer, knew what Butch Jackson wanted--what Butch Jackson *needed*--and it'd be to step outside of his *box*. He needed to see life through a different lens. He needed a *lot* of things. Bob Gomer suggested that Butch step in different shoes by going to Russia and posing as an American that was setting up a new business. Butch was *black* though. He didn't need a whole other nation looking at him strangely everytime he walked by them. Butch knew exactly what he wanted. *I want to be a bum. I want to be a homeless bum. It'll teach me a lot. Maybe I won't think they're such bums afterward.*

I doubt it, but I know just the place, Bob Gomer told him. *Hermosa Beach*. Butch grew a large and puffy beard, put on some over-sized eyebrows, learned some homeless lingo, and he *tried* out five different kinds of whiskey and brandy, just to find his flavor. He found that Thunderbird would be his ultimate choice. It was a cheap wine.

Butch Jackson enjoyed his assignment a lot. He didn't have to report back to anyone. He learned a lot from the people on the streets. People didn't recognize him. He was able to step outside of himself. It was great.

Jimmy Contrell passed away, and it was a shame. Butch Jackson, under the name of Lawrence Smythers, didn't expect to start a cult. He *did*, though. It was Jimmy's idea. It was that natural thing for him to do.

Lawrence--*Butch*--had read a collection of novellas long ago written by Stephen King (under the guise of Richard Bachman) and it was called *The Bachman Books*. Stephen King explained, in an introduction, that the reason he wrote with a pseudonym at a time was because he wanted to know if he'd be successful at it. Lawrence was a lead. So was Butch, when he *was* Butch. Stephen King found that he sold books. They weren't as many as when he was writing with his own, popular name, but they were enough. He cited the Beatles and the fact that they *wanted* to play in a small club with disguises on to see if they'd still get the same response. Butch Jackson, now in the guise of the fictitious person of Lawrence Smythers, got to test it out for himself. He didn't believe the Beatles ever did. That was in his memory.

Butch Jackson was a leader. He didn't *want* to be a leader when he took on the requested assignment of being a homeless bum. He found that leadership found *him*. It must have been in his blood, or so he reckoned.

The anti-flag burning amendment was catching steam, as summer winded down. Lawrence's new friends, absent Bob Gomer and Jimmy Contrell, were following him in ways he'd never imagine. He thought about *The Princess Bride*. It was a movie he watched long ago. There was a pirate in the movie that took on a first mate. Eventually, the first mate became the pirate. He took over his identity. The cycle would continue. When the new pirate was tired of reeking havoc across the land, he'd find a new first mate who would take over for him, and so on.

Lawrence Smythers, formerly Butch Jackson, knew that Jimmy Contrell wanted to start a cult. In ways, he was the first cult leader of the small beach. He passed away, Lawrence took over with great steam, and he was now seeing that it might continue forever. He knew that it was a *good* thing. Objectively, it was a horrible thing for the government. From a personal standpoint, nothing felt better.

There was a guy in the group by the name of Anthony Rupp. He had been a 'Dead fan and claimed to have followed them everywhere. He burned flags, whenever he could find them, and cited Ralph Connors as the reason. "He's not going to take away *my* freedom," he said to Lawrence Smythers around a trash can fire.

"I know. I *hear* you," Smythers said. He still wanted to fit in. He didn't want to have it revealed that he *fought* for the flag for most of his life. It didn't even occur to him that it was freedom of speech and expression and Anthony was going through. It was treason, in his mind. He wouldn't say a thing. He was going to ride the homeless thing out for as long as he could. He'd quit in the autumn when it got colder. He might be ready for his family by then.

Andy Partek wanted them to keep talking. He knew the Neekay flags would be coming soon. They signed a contract with the federal government as the first licensees of the new concept. "I can't *wait* for that Neekay flag to come out. I'm going to wipe my ass with it."

Anthony laughed. He didn't know what to do next.

Lawrence Smythers wasn't sniffed out. He had a good enough aura around him. It mattered to everyone involved.

"I'm going to say something else," Andy said. "I'm going to *kill* you..." he ended there. He was planning on saying that he was going to be assassinating Ralph Connors, after wiping his ass with the new Neekay flag. He was tackled by Anthony Rupp. It wasn't friendly though. Those things happened on the beach. It was chaos... but they *loved* it.

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Zotar Cassidy married Lizzy Shulton at the end of the summer of 2005. It was a blast. He didn't have a job yet, but that was fine. He worked delivering pizzas, actually, but that didn't count to him... or her. He was on his way. He knew it. She knew it. Freight Train knew it.

Freight Train played at Lizzy's and Zotar's wedding. She was in the middle of medical school and she supported them through a trust fund she had inherited. It wouldn't last long. That was fine with both of them. They had time. That's what mattered.

Zotar promoted Freight Train but he didn't *need* to promote them. Word of mouth got strong and Freight Train was signed not long after performing at the wedding. Zotar *liked* promoting. He liked the idea that music changed people's life. He believed it was his calling to promote more bands... like Freight Train.

Zote kept touch with a mental patient by the name of Ben Murphy. It *had* been only internet experience for a while. He learned that Ben had a lot of ideas. He had a lot of aggression, too. That was key. He jokingly told Ben one day, on the internet, that he should channel his frustrations into music. He knew Freight Train. He thought he could hook Ben up with other musicians. He did. They flew... for a while.

Ben talked to Zotar about other things besides music. They concluded that biologists had it right. Modern biologists, in the country of the United States of America, were right about evolution. Life started off as single-celled. It evolved from there. Single-celled organisms became multi-celled organisms. The most primitive ones were in the ocean and were two cells thick. The *reason* they were two cells thick was because they all needed food. If there was a cell that was smashed between layers of other cells, it would starve. This was before a digestive system was evolved.

Zotar and Ben believed something deeper though, and it stemmed from Zotar's relationship with Bill Swift in the sky. *You don't have schizophrenia, Ben*, Zotar had told him one day. *I get voices too. I just don't tell the government about it. They don't need to know. It doesn't effect my life in a tragic way. Learn that, and you'll be better off.*

They believed, because of Bill Swift in the sky, that atoms were alive. They extrapolated the belief that single-celled organisms evolved into something much higher, eventually becoming multi-celled beasts that were all around the Earth, and they took it to a new level, creating a hypothesis of their own.

"They say that DNA and/ or RNA was around in the primordial ooze, right Ben?"

"Yep," Ben said. He was sipping a wine cooler. Bartels and James Berry. It was his favorite.

"They say that crystals magically form. I mean..."

"...Yeah. Like *snow* flakes."

"Yep. Bingo."

Ben went on to say what was on Zotar's mind. "You're saying that *IF* the atoms are alive, like Bill *says* they are... You're saying there was a *choice*, and maybe that's why no two snow flakes are exactly alike."

"It's *more* than that, and you know it."

"I know. I don't know what you're saying, but I know. There's more to it."

The *schlaclak*--the smallest *known* particle in the universe but not yet known on the Earth--has a life. It joined with other schlaclak beings, or so Zotar's hypothesis went, and formed *colonies*. These colonies would eventually become photons. They would later become protons, neutrons, and electrons. But electrons are *not* the smallest thing in the universe, and that was known other places in the universe.

"A *colony* of schlaclak might eventually become a proton. A few protons might join together with other schlaclak colonies known as neutrons. The possibilities are *endless*," Zotar said. He wouldn't tell his aspiring bands his beliefs. He didn't need to. He had Ben Murphy, and so long as there was *one* crazy person out there that would listen to him, it would be enough.

He thought about Lizzy. Lizzy *listened*. She was in medical school and he didn't want to bother her with these other possibilities. Eventually, he would, she would laugh him off, and they'd make love afterwards. *Good* love.

"A colony of schlaclak, right? Just like the dirt that forms the Earth, right?"

"Very *much* so."

They drank coolers. It wasn't something that Zotar liked to do too often. They gave him

headaches. When he was with Ben, he didn't care. It would do.

"I *wonder*... How are miracles made, Ben?"

"I don't know."

"You think the schlaclak can disband whenever it wants? I can't disband *my* cells by consciously thinking of it..." He paused and Ben knew what he was going to say. "Unless I blew myself up like that poor sap that went into the Miller Tribune."

"Yep. You *got* it. Miracles happen. They just don't happen too often."

"By definition, what *is* a miracle?"

"I don't know," Ben told Zotar. "But I think Bill Swift had a *glimpse* of it. I think his schlaclak was in cooperation with all the schlaclak all around him."

"I get you."

They finished their wine coolers, went to their respective houses, then didn't think about it again for a while.

"I *have* you now, Lizzy," Zotar told Lizzy that night. "I'm going to make it."

"I know," Lizzy said. She was happy with him. Her faith in him was strong.

In the fall of 2005, Stephanie Venezia-Barley began working as a school teacher. She taught third grade and was two classes down from Nancy soon-to-be-again Kidman. She was afraid at the change but she knew it would be good for her. There were times that she was turning her back on the people that were like her from the summer seminars. There would be times, like she had on the first day of school, that she *knew* she was in the right place.

She bumped into Nancy. "Hello. My name is Stephanie."

"I *know* your name," Nancy said to her. She didn't really want to talk all that much. "I *know*."

"Do you know I slept with Jesus?"

"You're going to do fine here," Nancy said to her. She had an attitude change.

Stephanie looked around. She looked near the principal's office and saw flags waving. It was the first Neekay flag that she ever saw live. They had been on TV. They were appearing in commercials. It looked surreal to her. There was an American flag--a *traditional* one--that flew high. Below it in descending order were the flags of California and the flag of Neekay. "What a *trip*!" Stephanie said to herself. She looked at the kids filing in. They had the bug too. They were wearing Neekays--a good *deal* of them were. Some of them wore Neekay headbands and others wore the Neekay swisher on their wrists. It was unreal to her. "I have work to *do*," Stephanie said, before opening the door to her homeroom. "I have some work to *do*."

"What are you *talking* about?" Nancy asked Stephanie right before going into the door. Stephanie looked shell shocked. She didn't know what to say. "I'm going to tell you something about this school," Nancy began to say.

"I know already. It's *happening*," Stephanie told her.

"What are you *talking* about, hun?" Nancy pulled a Neekay swisher from under her shirt. It was held there by a string--a small *rope*, actually--that was black and looked like a large shoe lace.

"I don't know what you're *talking* about???" Stephanie growled. She was angry. She didn't know what to make of Nancy.

Nancy took the Neekay swisher from her neck and put it in Stephanie's hand. "You're better off. Keep it. It'll keep you from getting fired. If you don't wear the shoes? Keep *this*. Show them once in a while." Then she whispered, "They just want to know you're not a *communist*."

"What if I *am*?"

"You don't *belong* here then," Nancy said to her.

"Do *you* think so?"

"No. I fuckin' *don't*. I know the rules. That's all."

"I'll keep it to myself, then," Stephanie said. She was scared. There was a beast out there. Neekay was the tip of it. The beast was in corporate America. It'd be a wave. She could feel it. She didn't have freedom like she *thought* she had the day before.

“Keep it,” Nancy said then went to her room.

“I’m *going* to,” Stephanie said. She didn’t know what to do.

Stephanie went home that night and wanted to cry. She laughed instead. It was *ludicrous* what was going on in the world. She was making *no* money directly from Neekay but she felt she had to be one of their facilitators, nonetheless. “This is going to go *far*,” she told Randal that night on the phone. She was in joy. “Greg Lauler the Visionary” was being recording and remixing would come soon enough. “It’s going to go *far*. I can feel it!”

“Go home,” Randal said. “I mean, hang up. I have work to do.”

She was at home and didn’t know what to do. Dave was in bed. He was pretending to sleep. He didn’t want to deal with her. She woke him from a pretend slumber, kissed him on the cheek, then crawled into bed herself. “Fuck you, Nancy McOaland, or *Kidman*... or whatever you are,” she said under her voice. “Fuck *you* then, Alfred, too.” She wasn’t getting any responses in her mind. She was surprised.

Nancy Kidman--the soon-to-*be* Nancy Kidman--slept at Doug Michael’s that night. She didn’t want to see Phil. Phil wasn’t ready for her. He was changing. He was becoming his old self.

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For the first fifteen hundred years after the birth of Christ, the *Christian* church was relatively together. It was one. In the mid-fifteen hundreds, the printing press accelerated an eventual change that was going to take place. It wasn’t the *only* reason that people started to rebel against the Catholic Church.

Mother Mary was overloaded. It was as simple as that. People *had* heard that they could pray to her, she’d listen, and she’d pass on the messages to the divine gods that lay above her. It wasn’t completely like that in the end. She couldn’t handle the load. She was a being that was living on another planet, but she couldn’t partake in everything going on in her former world even if she *wanted* to.

Alfred was a mess on Zoton. After the summer seminars with Stephanie Venezia-Barley, Francine Cross started to try to *reach* him again. Alfred wasn’t concerned with her. She was washed up. She was lonely. She was useless. She didn’t have much power.

But she had a lot of resiliency.

Alfred started to question things on Zoton. He couldn’t get through to Phil McOaland all the time. Instead, he’d get through to Cruz Franks, his former neighbor on Earth. He’d get through to him and he didn’t want to get *through* to him.

He wanted to get through to Daisy. She was turning Republican. Republicans can be good people--they were the party of Lincoln, at a time--but they started believing in their own bullshit so *much* that it was out of control. A *good* Republican, in Alfred’s mind, was one that believed that if you worked hard, you deserved more than the guy next to you if he wasn’t working as hard. If you built three houses and he built one? You deserve roughly three times as much in life.

The CEO of Target--it was a popular merchandise store on Earth when Alfred was alive--made

more in a day than the average worker at one of his warehouses made in a year. Bottom line, this was disproportionate in Alfred's mind. He had been told something by Zaktak, the alien, about something written in *The Nation*, a liberal paper on Earth: "People need to pay attention to the *Doug Jones*. Not the Dow Jones." In other words, CEOs were getting paid *huge* money for killing people's dreams. The Dow would jump when they'd lay off a thousand (or *ten* thousand, in some cases) people. It'd jump... but profits would soar. Why? Because of slave labor around the globe. The American jobs would be replaced.

Alfred cared about all of this but he was becoming apathetic. He told *Bill* that he was becoming apathetic. He couldn't shake it no matter how hard he'd try.

Francine started to try to contact Alfred after she ended her summer seminars. She was looking for meaning in life. She was looking for a rooster... and Alfred was just the guy. She was looking for a stud. He was the stud, in her mind. He was the stud but she failed to see that she wasn't virile any longer. She wasn't virile. She was an old maid. She wanted to dedicate her life to Alfred. He wanted to dedicate his life to the rest of the world. *Women and children first*, he had told her when she finally got a hold of him through a tacky seance. *Women and children first. You're an old hag, lady. Turn around. Don't look back.*

Alfred believed that it was best that way. He *felt* that way. Cut ties early. Nip things in the bud.

Paradoxes happen in the world. People are attracted to truth. No one else, most of all Randal Meyer, would tell Francine that she was a used up hag. *No one*. Alfred did. He was wrong about his expected results. He thought that by *saying* that she was a used up hag, she'd look elsewhere. He was wrong. She looked to him over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over again. She didn't care what he had to say. She tried to convince herself that he was wrong. He wasn't. He knew nature. She was in denial.

Francine would die in denial.

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Dave Barley and Eddie Macral were driving back from the Institute of Creation Research, just outside of San Diego. They had a curiosity. It was long since believed, in Miller, that aliens were out there. It was long since believed--not just by the *Scientologists*--that human life and history was a *little* different than most people were raised to believe it was. A friend of Freight Train, by the name of Zotar, was teaching some weird and new stuff to people around him. He didn't want to live in a bubble any longer. He was confident in his belief that aliens had an intimate relationship with humans since the dawn of time on Earth. He was confident. He didn't know what else to do outside of saying that people had to take a lot of it on faith.

Dave Barley and Eddie Macral were raised in fundamentalist churches. They were taught not to believe in science. They were taught that modern science was the instrument of the devil. Nonetheless, they were young enough in their adulthood to rebel and question. They *experienced* Bill Swift and Alfred Newman a time or two in Ouija. It was good enough for them. They had secrets that were revealed. They

had candles that flickered on and off. They had a door that slammed shut for no reason. There was no reason to believe that *something* wasn't out there.

In the end, it was something that Zotar brought Eddie and Dave that spurred them to do something about deciding the nature of the universe, once and for all. If Zotar was right, there was nothing to worry about. They could keep talking to Bill Swift and Alfred Newman so long as they *wanted* to be contacted. If Zotar was wrong? They were going to quit the band.

Zotar brought them a book by the name of *Structure of Scientific Revolution*. It was written by Thomas Kuhn. It explained how scientific revolution takes place. It's *like* watching the grass grow. In other words, if somebody discovers that the Earth revolves around the Sun--as somebody *did*--it takes generations for it to be taught to the masses. The reason? Pride. Zotar told Eddie and Dave that he didn't believe the word *pride* was written in there explicitly, though he could be wrong. It's just the way he took it. It's the way he remembered it.

Old people don't like to be wrong... and old people control the world. If someone is teaching the world that the Earth is flat and he has been teaching ("he" being the operant word since we're talking about *history* here) that the world is flat for his whole life? Well, it's a *lot* easier to debunk would-be myths. The Earth being *round*? What a novel concept! But Columbus wasn't the first person to *know* that the world was round, contrary to popular myth. The ancient Greeks through trigonometry, *many* years before Columbus would sail to a place that would be known as the New World, would discover that the world had an arc to it. They *knew* the world was round but they didn't have methods to prove it outside of their mathematical skills.

The Structure of Scientific Revolution showed how people fought against new thoughts. It took generations for new paradigms--the way people view the *world*--to form and take foot in the collective consciousness of the masses in general.

Eddie Macral and Dave Barley had both been taught that the Earth was flat. Actually, they weren't taught that the Earth was flat. They were taught that it was only six thousand years old and that science--*Christian* science--proved the same thing. Ninety-nine percent of all accredited biologists taught that evolution was fact. They knew that. They believed it was part of a conspiracy to turn the world atheistic.

"Don't worry about what you *find* there," Zotar said to the two. "I want to see it myself. I've seen their stuff on the web page. It's *goofy*. They have coloring books where rams are butting heads with dinosaurs. It's *comical* in that way... If you *can*, bring back one of those books. I think my sister'd like to color in it. It ought to be a hoot."

"Don't fuck with me, Zotar," Bernard said. His real name was Barney, but he was going by Bernard since Jeff Splifer had *dubbed* him as so.

"I want that book," Eddie said. At that, *he* decided to go to the Institute, with or without Dave.

"I'm going. Simple as that," Dave said. At that, they were on a quest.

They discovered things while at the institute. They had discovered that scientists--the ICR's scientists--were teaching that *one* way the "old Earth" model could be debunked was by comparing *other*

scientists ages of Moon rocks. If dated with carbon-14, a *radically* different age was given than if the same rocks were dated with uranium or something else. When Zotar was told of this--he was *ready* for many of the assertions that would be made--he told Dave and Eddie that it was like measuring a trip to the mountains by holding out a ruler and having the passenger quickly count the many feet that went by as the car sped along its path. "You don't *do* that!" Zotar said to them. "Of *course* carbon-14 is going to have a different date for the Moon rocks than uranium. Carbon-14's half life is five thousand *years*! Uranium has a half life that is in the *hundreds* of thousands of years--I don't know it off *hand*--but it's way *different*."

Eddie and Dave looked at him a little strangely, mostly for not knowing the *exact* facts. Eddie knew what was up though and started to speak before being interrupted by Dave. "You're *saying*..."

"Go to Hell, Dave. You're an idiot," Eddie said. Dave was a piece of shit loser sometimes. This was one of the instances. "It's *like*, Zotar..."

"Bingo!" Zotar said.

Eddie's language wasn't condescending. Dave had been talking like he was insulted.

It was like measuring the length of a quarter with a trip odometer. The Creation Scientists were too stupid, prideful, or naive to know any different.

"There's a lot of stuff though," Zotar said. He had known a girl by the name of Donna Gaelic that knew someone that had a degree in science and in theology. *This man wouldn't lie*, she had told Zotar. Zote recalled it and relayed the message to Eddie (Dave was starting to leave). "There's *liars* in that church, you know?"

"I know... Zote." Eddie was mad. He was mad. No one was taking it seriously. This was a life event and no one was taking it seriously.

Eddie went home and told his mom what he had learned. He said to her, "You know?"

"What, *son*?" his mom reluctantly wanted to know.

"They'd be better off just saying that it too *faith* to believe in God. They'd be better off saying that *God* could have planted the fossils and everything else. 'Thou shall not lie.' What ever happened to *that*, mother?"

"I don't know." His mom truly did not know.

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Britney Brown was a major disappointment to Bucky Holdwater and his Republican constituents. She couldn't get done for them what they *wanted* her to get done. In the end, it was okay with Bucky. He'd be fine. He liked Britney, and so did the rest of his colleagues. She just wasn't up to the task.

Francine Cross had a father that lived in nearby San Quixote, California. It was the states fourth largest city. Actually, it was only the fourth largest city in *southern* California, but Francine and her father never took that into account. They didn't like their neighbors to the north. They were full of bureaucrats, in Sacramento mainly, and a bunch of fags in San Francisco. Francine's father, Lloyd Cross, didn't care for these people. He was a staunch Republican, and when his daughter began to abuse cocaine and hang out

with liberals (she dated a black guy, for a while, when she was in college), he disowned her. He wrote her out of his will and stopped giving her money.

Lloyd Cross was involved in the CIA and knew that his daughter was in trouble. Further, he knew an opportunity when he saw one. No one liked Francine too much, and he *knew* it. He'd turn it to his advantage. He was waiting for a period when she would hate her detractors just as equally bad as they hated her. She wanted to be a hippy, at the beginning. In the end, it was the feeling of limbo that fucked her world. Lloyd knew a saying--it was a Biblical quote, actually--and it went:

And unto the angel of the church of Laodiceans write; These things saith Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God; I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot... So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth.

It came from Revelation in the third chapter. Lloyd remembered it well and saw himself as the Lord when administering pain to the people around him. He was quite rich. His daughter would never be the same.

Bucky Holdwater dismissed Britney Brown as a candidate to front as a CIA spy in the guise of an investigative reporter. He would soon come across Lloyd Cross. Lloyd had a lot to say. He knew his daughter could do the job. And if she couldn't? She was expendable. He was ready and willing to get rid of her. She was his seed. He wasn't proud of her. If she didn't connect with her conservative roots now, she never would.

It would be a test. If Francine was successful, Daniel Quartz was going to secede from Ralph Connors' administration in a keen and even flow. No one would notice what was really going on. The Democrats, according to Lloyd's logic, were going to be co-opted to the fullest extent. Maybe in 2012, Daniel Quartz would allow himself to *lose* to the Democrats so that none of the American public would know what was going on.

"It's going to be a PRI, you see?" Lloyd told Bucky during their first meeting.

"The *Mexican* party. I know."

"We're going to have *control*."

"And your billions are going to make sure that things *stay* this way?"

"They don't even have to know who I *am*."

Bucky thought about it but looked uncomfortable. The PRI had ruled Mexico for many decades. At the end of the twentieth century, they eventually lost an election. It *had* been that one president of Mexico would choose his successor. It went on like that for a long time.

Bucky and Lloyd were having lunch in the hills of San Quixote at a fine restaurant. Bucky sipped his soup and waited for his entree. Lloyd had his salad plate pushed to the side and then started eating from it again. Lloyd's daughter, Francine, came into the room wearing a summer dress. It looked like she expected to be married anytime soon. It looked that much like a wedding dress except for the flowery patterns. She approached Lloyd, her father, and tried to give him a kiss on the cheek. He brushed her aside

then said, “Not now, hun. We’re going to make a plan for you.”

Lloyd set up the front for Francine Cross. It wasn’t to happen in the small town of Miller, after all. It was going to happen in San Quixote. No one would know what hit them. If all went right, no one would know except for Bucky, Francine, Lloyd, and a few trusted people in the Connors’ administration, most notably, Daniel Quartz. No one would know what hit them... and if they ever found out, Lloyd would lose a daughter. “What a *waste*,” Lloyd said as he ate.

“What?” Bucky asked.

“Nothing,” Lloyd said with a distant look. “I was just thinking of politics.”

“Oh. Pass the beer,” Bucky responded with. It was Heineken. Good stuff for the rich... or *not* so rich. Good stuff, but tasted like skunk.

Nancy McOaland became Nancy Kidman again in December of 2005. If she had her way, she would become Nancy Michaels a year later. She took a liking to Doug. She took a liking to his brother, Don. She didn't care *which* one she'd marry, but she preferred Doug. He had the young, fertile wife. There had to be *some* reason she was with him.

Nancy threw a Christmas party with Daisy Michaels at their home. Phil McOaland took off for the east coast. Nancy wasn't sure if he'd be seen around town as often. He was stung by the divorce and she was thinking that he'd like a fresh start elsewhere.

Ned and Anna Swift showed up to Nancy and Daisy's party at Christmas. It was rather uneventful though it was quite nice to have the spirit around again. There was mistletoe hung up around every doorway and everyone got a chance to relive youth for at least a little while. The eggnog was spiked with rum but it wasn't flattened to the point that no one wanted to drink it. The Christmas presents lay around the tree and everyone thought about the first time that Santa came into being. Christmas carols played in the background and no one knew they were on. They *felt* them though. It was a good time.

Ned and Anna went home at two in the morning that night. There were children that were staying at the Michaels' house. They were the grandkids that Doug had from a prior marriage. Ned and Anna wanted to go home and they were inspired to start a family of their own.

Ned had a lot on his mind as he approached the walkway to their house. Lloyd Cross had bought the county newspaper, the local television station, and two radio stations. He was worried, but it was Christmas. He didn't want to *think* of these things.

"What *is* it, Lloyd?" Anna asked Ned, right before reaching the screen door.

"You feel him too, huh?" Ned asked her. He was disappointed that they had to go through these things. He was even starting to get a little mad.

Anna pushed Ned away. Ned didn't take any offense to it. He opened the screen door, unlocked the wooden door behind it, let himself in, went to the fridge and retrieved a cold beer, then sat on the couch and began to mope.

"I'm not *taking* this," Anna said aloud. Ned didn't think he was being directly talked to. She was probably talking to one of the spirits in the room.

It's funny, Ned thought. *It's Christmas... and we're still getting this shit!*

Ned drank his beer. He'd talk about his hopes and fears on a later date. For that matter, he may not *have* to talk of his hopes and fears. If Anna had been talking to Bill Swift in her mind, there would be no need for conversation.

The CIA was taking over and Ned Swift knew it. Bill knew it better. It was in the guise of multimedia. They were going to get Ralph Connors' vice-president elected president for the following term.

Ned took a gulp of beer. In his mind, he could see his brother, Bill, holding up a beer as well.

This one's for you, bud, Bill said. Ned laughed. It sounded like a commercial, but he knew it was not.

“So be it!” Ned said, then downed the rest of his stuff.

Anna didn't talk to him for the rest of the night. Ned was going to have to fight... or he was going to have to accept the inevitable.

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In January of 2006, Robert Wisdom was approached by Lloyd Cross. Robert had been a successful businessman. He was a *small* businessman. He was in a class that communists called the petty bourgeois. He was neither here nor there, in other words. He wasn't a corporate raider, but he didn't work wages either. He was a “mom and pops” owner. He *feared* corporate America. He owned a small chain of burger restaurants and resented the fact that McDonald's and Burger King could snuff him out at any given time. They had backing. If they wanted to sell burgers for ninety-nine cents for a month, they could do it and survive. If *Robert* were to do it, he'd go under. He didn't have *multi* millions backing him--let alone *billions*--but he did turn his first million the year that Ralph Connors got elected in the year 2000.

He didn't *like* Ralph Connors. Ralph was of the old school of thought. He believed that if you gave tax breaks to the very rich, the money would trickle down to everyone in America, Robert Wisdom included. Things didn't work that way in the modern world. When the super rich made money, they took their profits overseas. It was a global market. The common American no longer saw their money back. Instead, it was given to third world countries--and it turned out that not that *much* was given to them by comparison of what they might be worth--and it was put into Swiss bank accounts. *Forbes* ran articles every year about the richest people in the world. They were *billionaires*. Robert Wisdom knew it wasn't true though. America was the lone superpower in the world. There were *trillionaires* in the world, but the Swiss had no obligation to report them. When you have the keys to the bank, you can make your *own* rules. It's *like* printing your own money, or Robert Wisdom was led to believe.

He was approached by Lloyd Cross. Robert had run for mayor of San Quixote as a Democrat in 2004 and he won. He had future aspirations of running for governor, but he wouldn't be disappointed if he never reached that high. It was his dream. It's all he wanted. Just a dream.

In 2006, when Lloyd approached him, Robert was thinking about leaving politics. It was getting too heavy for him. He *had* thought just to serve one term anyway. He wanted to do his service, move on, then feel proud of himself later on. He *even* thought it might be good for business. It was.

Lloyd asked Robert for a moment of his time in early 2006. It was two days before Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s holiday but Lloyd wouldn't bring him up. “You *know*, Robert. I have a *plan* for you,” he said to him.

“I know who you are. You just bought every media outlet in this town. Let's hear it.”

“I'm buying all of *America*, Robert. You just don't see it.”

“You're a pidley billionaire. What are *you* going to do with America?”

“Can you keep a *secret*?”

“I’m mayor of the city. I *have* to keep secrets.”

“I want you to run for office...”

“...I already *have* an office.”

“No. Not an office of this *state*. Well. That’s not exactly right. I want you to be *president* one day.”

“I *will* be. With or without you, God-willing, I *will* be president... if I *choose*.”

“No. You don’t *get* it. You *don’t* understand modern politics.”

Robert Wisdom took a sip from his chocolate shake. “I don’t know what you’re *saying*.”

“Money. Bottom line. I *own* things. I’ll never have *my* face in the paper though.”

“Not in a bad way. I understand.”

“You don’t *get* it. You don’t get *elected* unless it’s for me. You see? I’m in the CIA, too. You have to keep that a secret though, okay?”

“And if I *don’t*?” Robert asked. He started to smell a fish.

“I *down* you. Simple as that. I eat you *up*. I send my daughter here with investigative reporters...”

Robert looked around. The place was spic and span.

“...and I send *government* agents. They find mice. They spread rumors that you...”

“*Wait*. I see. Coercion. That’s what you’re talking about.”

Lloyd changed his tone. He got serious and said, “Let’s not be *fools*, Ralphy.”

“It’s *Robert*, you jackass.”

Lloyd changed his tone again. He put up defenses. “I say I’m in the CIA. The government knows me as a media baron now. Before that, they knew me as an investor. You start *yelling* that I’m in the CIA...” Lloyd let Robert figure out the rest.

“I *like* you, Lloyd,” Robert said. It was earnest that he spoke with. “Why are you doing this to *America*?”

“I don’t *want* to. I have constituents, you see?” Robert began to ask about the constituents and had in mind to ask if the constituents were more important to the common American. He didn’t say a thing. Robert blurted, “My daughter almost married a *nigger*! For Christ’s sake! Don’t you *see*?? We have to *protect* against this stuff. We need to *control* them. I’m the man to do it.”

“I don’t *care* if my daughter married an n-word, you faggot. Get out of here.”

Robert Wisdom drank the rest of his shake as Lloyd made his way out of the door. “You’ll *regret* it,” Lloyd said to Robert just before leaving. He had turned his head to say it and conked his head on the way out when he failed to see that the hydraulic-powered door was closing on him.

“*I’m* crazy,” Robert said to himself as he sat alone. He was thinking that this man that had come to talk to him was treating him like he was crazy. “You’re the crazy *spoof*!” Robert yelled at the door. “They’re being sold out, the Democrats are,” he said... and he began to think.

Robert changed his political affiliation the next day. He registered as Libertarian and never looked back. His picture was on the front page of the *San Quixote Telegram* living section the next day. Robert laughed when he saw it. The title of the article was called “The Genius of the Century.” *He’s obviously trying to coax me still. I see.*

Robert wasn’t coaxed. Even when his Democratic constituents tried to persuade him to come back into the fold, he wouldn’t do it. He was on a mission. And he was independent now. Nothing felt better in his life.

In 2008, this independent feel rubbed off on voters. He won in a landslide: The office of President of the United States of America! He was happy with himself.

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The month after Lloyd Cross approached Robert Wisdom in one of his eateries, Freight Train released their first single. It was called “Chain Reaction”. It was a cover of a Journey tune. Freight Train *liked* Journey and hoped they would be like them, with a little more of an edge. They figured they were paying their tributes. The rock ‘n’ roll gods, if they existed, would look down on Freight Train and bless them with riches, if not sex, love, happiness, and everything *else* that was expected. They were wrong though. There were no rock ‘n’ roll gods looking after them. Not even Alfred on Zoton, or his buddy Lucifer, could or would help them. Not even Bill Swift on Xeon, and his buddy Kurt Cobain, could or would help. In the end it was Robert Wisdom.

Robert Wisdom had security cameras in all of his establishments. He had microphones too. These were to protect him against potential robbers. He never knew it’d be an asset in bribing former CIA members to come forward about conspiracies against the left and “little people” in general. He *had* this asset though. He used it.

H. Ross Perot had run for president in 1992 and in 1996. He lost both times pretty handily. What he was *able* to do was to set an agenda. He was able to thrust into the minds of every voter that we, as a country, needed campaign finance reform of some kind or another. In 2000, Ross decided not to run, but his party kept on. It was called the *Reform* party. It was led, at the time, by Pat Buchanan and by another man that later defected back to his *Natural Law* party roots. Pat lost the election in 2000--it was Ralph Connors’ *year*--but he vowed to return America to its heart and its roots. Pat learned, as did Ross, that the *real* player in government is the media. For all practical purposes, it was the fourth branch of government, though not written into the Constitution. If Congress wanted something done and they *didn’t* have the support of the media, in general, they would be *blocked*. Public pressure and everything else would stop them. *Freaks* would be tagged, and no one wanted to be labeled as a freak.

Robert Wisdom was a millionaire. He didn’t own *two* million dollars. He was a millionaire by the classical term: he had roughly one million dollars at his disposal. It wasn’t enough.

In 2006 on Groundhog Day--Freight Train intentionally released their record on this day in lieu of one of their favorite movies of all time--Robert Wisdom got a hold of Ross Perot. “I’ll be *happy* to help

you,” Ross told him. Robert had explained that he, in a rush, registered as a Libertarian. “Anything to shake the system,” Ross came back with.

Ross Perot was still a millionaire. He still had aspirations to make a mark on the world. He *knew* it wouldn’t come through politics... not in the traditional way, at the very *least*. He’d need help from the fourth branch of government, though unofficial: *Media*.

Robert Wisdom’s plan was to make a movie. It’d be a *b-rated* movie, by industry standards. They wouldn’t hire Steven Spielberg, or any of the rest. The *story* would carry them.

Jeff Splifer was halfway through his book at this time. He had *heard* of Robert Wisdom in the articles that the San Quixote Telegram was writing about him. They *praised* him... in the beginning. Once word got out that he left one of the two PRI institutions of America--the Democratic party, in this instance, and it wasn’t *phrased* that way in the paper--they started to *slam* him. They wouldn’t attack him with health inspectors. Robert Wisdom was a smart man and made sure the right people in the government, most notably the CIA, knew that he had a copy of a tape in which Lloyd Cross, *formerly* of the CIA now, tried to bribe him and coerce him into action against his will.

Jeff hooked up with Robert Wisdom before Robert contacted Ross Perot. He told Robert that he could have a complete movie manuscript done by May. If he were lucky and working hard, it could be as early as mid-April. Jeff was on the ball. It turned out that *early* April, Robert had a manuscript in his hands.

On Groundhog day, Ross talked Robert. Freight Train’s CD was being released that day. It was called *A Shot In the Wind*. As things would turn out, Freight Train would lay most of the tracks for a late-summer release. Jeff Splifer wrote the book for it. The movie starred Susan Serandon and Tom Cruise. It wasn’t a b-movie after all. Ross was able to pay them the nominal fees that they requested. He would make his money back and *then* some. Tom and Susan agreed to the movie on principal. It was about flag-burning. It was about changing the world. It was set in the future. As things turned out that summer, it may just as well have been set in the present.

On Groundhog Day, Robert said to Ross Perot, “I have people lined up. I want a *part* in the movie.” Ross nodded yes. “I want to be *president*. I can *change* people.”

Robert Wisdom looked *so* presidential that he rode it to the office. When “Greg Lauler the Visionary” came out in July, it took America by storm. Doctors were getting arrested at universities for teaching their youth to burn Neekay flags. Teachers were getting arrested at elementary schools--Nancy Kidman was one of them--for demarking the Neekay flag. She would spend a week in jail and come back to her summer class to find that she no longer had a job. Ross knew what was going on. He financed anything Robert Wisdom wanted to do. He, in turn, financed Tom Cruise, Susan Serandon, and the host of *other* people that thought that what was going on in the world was *wrong*. He was right. America would side with him. He was right. Robert Wisdom won his election. He was never more wrong about Robert Wisdom in *another* regard.

On Groundhog Day of 2006, Robert said to Ross, before they parted from one another, “I need to

tell you something.”

“You need money right now, right?”

“No. I *have* money.” He quickly added, “It’s not a lot. It’ll get the *ball* rolling.”

“What *is* it? I’m intrigued.”

“I need to pass a pro-hemp amendment as soon as I strike the anti-flag burning one down.”

“*WHY?*” Ross wanted to know.

“We need to return...”

“...Say no more” Ross said. “I don’t need to know a thing.

Ross didn’t think that Robert would go through with his crazy idea of trying to legalize hemp.

Robert knew that the founding fathers had been hemp farmers. He wanted it to be like 1776 in the world all over again. He wanted that bad.

Ross wanted a third party to win an election. That would be his legacy.

In March of 2006, plans were still being made for the upcoming summer. “Chain Reaction” wasn’t taking off well. Neither was the album that it was on. It didn’t matter to Freight Train. They were getting local air play. They were getting local air play *and* they were developing a local following that was exceeding their expectations. Randal Meyer had been reaching for something a little higher ever since he had the sleep in with Francine Cross on the day that Alfred Newman died a couple of years ago. He had a strong intuition. He believed that *before* the band hit it big--they were all sure that they were going to make it and it was a matter of time--they ought to devote some time to God... or whatever it was. Randal was still agnostic. He *wanted* to believe.

Jerry Shuster invited Freight Train to attend a service through Ned Swift. Ned was a regular adherent to his congregation. He brought Anna when he could, but he was happy going by himself most the time. Ned invited other people from the community on the night that Freight Train would come. He invited Zotar and he invited Zotar’s new friend, Ben Murphy. He invited to wife of Dave Barley, Stephanie, and he invited Eddie’s new girlfriend, Christy Priddy. All of them came and more. Daisy and Doug Michaels made it. Nancy Kidman came with Tim Clarke, Alfred’s former step-dad and Nicole Newman’s ex-husband.

The service began with a few kind words from Jerry, “We have to bow our heads, at this moment” He looked around to see that *most* the people bowed their heads. Tim Clarke looked straight up at him and mouthed a couple of words that Jerry couldn’t understand. “Our friend, Jimmy Contrell, has departed us, O Lord. He steps into Heaven tonight. We knew him months ago. We have received word from his relatives that he is no longer with us. *HE DIED ON THE WAVES, ASSHOLES!*” Jerry yelled. The crowd busted up. They came to *know* Jerry in that way. Tim was in shock. It was the first time he was at one of his services. Nancy Kidman (a year later, she would become Nancy Clarke) gasped when she heard that Jimmy Contrell had passed away. She was sitting next to time. Jerry invited her up to speak.

“You have to *say*,” she began. “We don’t need this *horseshit*,” Nancy said. She was talking about their preacher. It was *her* first time in *Christ’s Brothers and Sisters* as well.

A man from the back--he was actually a late teen--yelled, “Sit *down*, you fat whore!”

“That’s the way *I* like it,” Jerry politely said to Nancy, not loud enough for anyone to hear. He wasn’t mocking her. He liked free speech. It was as simple as that.

Nancy gave the microphone to the teen who yelled at her. ““We don’t *need* this,” she said.” The teen was calm. ““We don’t *need* this,”” the teen repeated. “What *do* we need, you fuckin’ *cunt!*?”” the boy yelled to her.

She *had* contemplated tears. Now, she was simply awestruck. “Is this what you mean by *God*, Eddie?” Nancy asked Eddie Macral, in the third seat. Eddie went up to speak.

“My *God*, folks. Take that as a *pun*, you atheist losers. We need to *band*. We don’t need to run and fight. We need to *band!*” Eddie made a motion with hands of his fingers interlocking. “We need *this*.”

He gestured to his fingers in front of him. “We need *THIS!*” He flipped off Tim Clarke, at this time. Tim had nothing to say but he was becoming infuriated.

“Let’s go,” he said to Nancy. He took her out of the back entrance to the church. “We need to slow *down!*” he yelled at her. He was no longer the friendly “Homer Lard Ass” that he claimed to be with people. He was an angry man. Nancy was crying beyond belief. Eddie came outside and tried to comfort the two of them. “Let’s hear what he has to say,” Tim said to Nancy.

“I don’t have a *thing* to say. You’re welcome inside though. They *like* you. Passion is what they want around here.”

“Just like in the garden. I know,” Tim said. He was talking about the Garden of Gethsemane but the people that were spying from the doorway--there was about eight of them--thought he was talking about the Garden of Eden. “In *Gethsemane*, people,” he began.

“You’re welcome in our church,” Jerry Shuster interrupted. He had never been so solemn in front of a group *ever*.

Tim wanted to cry. He didn’t. Freight Train performed for the crowd that night. They didn’t do well. They didn’t have a good sound check and they had feedback all over the place. It got rave reviews from Nancy Kidman, though she would later say to Tim Clarke, her future *husband*, that it sucked. She lied. It was okay with her. It really *was* like that passion in the Garden to her, and it didn’t matter *what* garden. It was strange. Freight Train was on their way.

Jerry Shuster’s congregation steadily declined after that. He wasn’t as strongly convicted that *freedom* is what people needed. He started preaching gospels that were more typical of the surrounding churches. In the end, he was drowned out. Freight Train wouldn’t forget him though. Neither would Ned Swift. Neither would Nancy Kidman.

Tim Clarke went home that night, popped open a can of beer, drank strongly from it, and didn’t think twice of evening he experienced as he watched late night television.

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May was hot in Hermosa, California in the year 2006. Lawrence Smythers was glad that he was at the beach. He was glad that things were mostly over. He planned to stay until July. He hadn’t checked with Bob Gomer in a while. He was enjoying things too much. It felt nice to be looked out for. He *knew* that if he wanted to end it on any given day, he’d call up Bob, they’d debrief, then a plan would be set in motion that would allow him to see his family again.

Neekay started selling miniature flags for twenty-five cents a piece. They were made of fabric. They were made of cheap plastic. They were no more than three inches high, including the cheap little pole. The Neekay emblem--a swisher that looked like a spiral--was put in the blue area where stars would go. Neekay didn’t want to be too anal about things. The flags were small enough as it was. They didn’t need fifty *little* swishers all over it. One would do. It was remind people--the *older* people--of the original flags that flew way-back-when--the ones with the seventy-six surrounded by thirteen stars in a circle. It

was going to create nostalgia.

Lawrence Smythers had a good following leading into the summer of 2006. He passed on the news of the passing of Jimmy Contrell to everyone that was new. He made up stories too. After all, as Butch Jackson, he hadn't been homeless for a single day in his life... unless you counted field assignments. He made up stories of working at local engineering plants and being laid off. He made up stories that Jimmy Contrell was a CIA agent and that's why he knew so many peculiar stories about the government.

At the beginning, Lawrence tried to steer his tribe *away* from burning the flags. He'd talk often about it. He could see it in his head. He could see his wife. She'd be so *proud* that he converted a bunch of homeless bums onto the ideas of Americanism. She'd be proud. He wouldn't tell her right away that he was homeless. He'd feel it out and when the time was *right*...

Lawrence looked around one evening and saw his buddy, Andy Partek burning one of the small Neekay flags. "I *don't* know what you're *doing*!... *Andy*!" he told him. There was no one else around this time except for Andy's close buddy, Anthony Rupp.

Anthony put his arm around Andy and Andy shoed it away. "I don't *need* you," he told Anthony. Anthony wasn't queer and neither was Andy. They both *needed* each other though. There were few women on the beach--not that *they* could touch--and sometimes humans just *needed* that slight, little touch. Andy continued to burn the flag 'til it was a nub. "I don't *NEED* this *EITHER*!" he yelled. No one responded and Andy started laughing the best he knew how to laugh. It was *fake* laughter, but fake laughter was better than *no* laughter, in his book.

Lawrence stood speechless. Andy planned to go to the boardwalk, buy a *bigger* Neekay flag, and burn it in public where *everyone* could see it. It'd take him an hour or two of bumming or searching for fallen coins. It'd be enough for him. He wanted to go to prison. He was scared, but he was sick of living on the beach. The people there were horrible, and he hated to say it. He wanted *out*. *Hot three meals every day*, he thought to himself. In front of Lawrence, he just wanted to look tough. He wanted to be rebellious. He was tempting fate. He had no idea what *prison* would be like, but where *he* was at, could things be any worse? He wondered this then took off toward the boardwalk without saying a word.

He got to the boardwalk and felt out of place. He collected two dollars immediately from an old, *haggardly* lady wearing a blue bonnet and peculiar spectacles. She *looked* like someone. It was the hen from the cartoons he watched when he was younger. For three seconds, Andy had genuine laughter and he *thanked* her. "I have money to spend. Can you get me something?" he asked the lady.

"My name is Francine," the lady said. "What do you want?" The lady appeared a little desperate to Andy, but he didn't really care.

Andy pointed to a small shop across the walk. "*That* flag." It was a large Neekay flag of three feet by five. "*That* one. That would do."

"You don't wear *sneakers*. Why do you..." she began. Andy didn't want anything to do with her. He was wearing flip flops.

"I'll get the shit *myself*," he said. He dropped the lady's money on the floor, made his way across

the walk, and casually yanked down the flag.

“Sold!” the keeper said.

“Sold, *what?*” Andy yelled.

“It’s *yours*. Keep it.” The store keeper wanted to say something else but was distracted by Lawrence. He had come to *save* Andy and he was going to use his “powers” if it really came down to it. He knew *codes*. He knew legal lingo. He would tell cops that he was a fifty-one/ fifty, and if *that* didn’t work, he’d go into detail about codes that would practically give away his identity. He didn’t want to *do* that. “The man has the flag,” the store keeper told Lawrence. “It’s his to keep. Do you have a problem, sir?”

“Yes, I *do*,” he said. He wasn’t talking to the keeper though. He was talking to Andy.

“*Thank you!*” Andy yelled to the keeper as Lawrence pulled him toward their encampment.

“I don’t know what to *say*. You’re going to get *fired!*” the bitch in the bonnet said to Andy in a rude and interrupting fashion.

“Fire me, *whore!*” Andy said to the hag in the bonnet. He knew what was going. He was in the CIA now. He had been abducted.

Lawrence sent Andy away that night, fifty-one/ fifty. He called Bob Gomer and told him the situation. He was a powder keg about to explode. More than that, it was that *Lawrence* was a powder keg. He didn’t relay that message to Bob, though. “He’s a *powder keg*, Bob!” That’s what the actual conversation was like.

Bob sent special units to get Andy. He’d live in peace for three days. Mental health *heaven*. He knew too much.

Bob cooked up a special identity for Andy--Andy was told that his fingerprints matched someone else’s--and Andy was sent to the Pacific Northwest. He had a bank account with five thousand dollars. The CIA didn’t work this way but the PIA did. If he used it, he used it. If he acted up and told people that a CIA informant (this was the way that Andy *saw* Lawrence) was working on the Hermosa Beach as a body double for the former Secretary of State, he’d be shot. It was as simple as that.

Andy burned his last flag on Hermosa Beach. He used the five thousand dollars to clean up, get a place to live, buy a small vehicle for transportation, and he worked for Neekay for the rest of his life.

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At the time that Andy Partek was settling into the Pacific Northwest--he went to Evergreen College in Washington for a while to try to enroll but was rejected and was sent south by his spirit to conquer a beast in Duckton, Oregon--former Secretary of State, Butch Jackson, was sent to Vancouver, B.C. by Bob Gomer and his staff to debrief, get caught up on issues pertinent to him, and prepare for a life or *real* retirement.

At this time, Jeff Splifer’s book was hitting the shelves and on its way to becoming the number nine selling book in the country. Jeff *had* intended to write a more serious book. When he spoke to Robert Wisdom and he knew that his book would be made into a movie, he *changed* a lot of things. The *spirit* of

things were still strong... but he made the president of the United States into an axe murderer that worked with an accomplice. He *knew* that Hollywood would have it no other way. Boring things fade. The *ONLY* crime in Hollywood was to be boring... and Jeff knew it. He *knew* that it didn't matter *what* they said of you in the press. It mattered that they said anything at all. "There's no such thing as bad publicity," he told Robert Wisdom and Ross Perot during a meeting. "If they *don't* talk of me, it's a bad thing. You can *trust* me on that."

People that read were a little more sophisticated. They *knew* that they didn't need a president with such sinister motives. Jeff Splifer's president became one that went from getting things done through legislation... to one that chopped up his buddies, if they stood in his way. He had an accomplice.

Jeff's book hit the market in June of 2006. At that time, production was in a mad heat at the studios. Hilary Duff signed on as the president's daughter. Her name was Missy Sylvania, daughter to the most powerful man in the universe, *Robert* Sylvania. He didn't try to hide that he was promoting Robert Wisdom as his presidential model. It would be cathartic. Eddie Macral of Freight Train had a song as a solo artist that talked about the need for tragic drama on audiences in a song. It was from the Aristotle model. Three parts tragedy, one part comedy. That was the model he worked with.

The book didn't differ *much* from the final product, except for giving additional insights as to emotions, and so forth, of the leading characters. If you read the book, you'd know what was taking place *between* the scenes. It was an action movie though. It wouldn't *rely* on such an elaborate backdrop and character development throughout the story. It was *great*... and it felt great to write.

Jeff included caricatures of people that he wanted to take a dive, in the book. There was a model of Daniel Quartz, Robert's future running mate. He was killed in the first scene, except that he was congressman and *not* the vice-president. Ross Perot assured Jeff Splifer that his producer and subsequent casting agent would get a *great* look-alike. In the story, Donald Quilter, the character that resembled Daniel Quartz, was masturbating the pornography that he was trying to outlaw. Tom Cruise played a character that was Robert Sylvania's right-hand man. He was in the government as a spy. When president Sylvania would take a trip, an *alibi* would be established. Tom Cruise played Rocco Munchetti, former boss of the mob in Brooklyn. He was given amnesty for crimes he didn't commit but was being tried for. His exchange--the reason he *agreed* to the amnesty--was that he got to kill that people that kept him down for so many years.

The book, and the movie that was being produced, was called *Buzz Saw*. Rocco Munchetti got to kill who he wanted. President Robert Sylvania got to smile with glee.

It was a caricature movie and there was no doubt about it. The violence and the theme were *so* ridiculous that no one could take it seriously. People *got* it though. They understood. They saw in their leaders exaggerated versions of who they really were. They understood the rage of Rocco. They empathized with Robert Sylvania and his wife Betsy whom was played by Susan Serandon. The teens that snuck into the R-rated movie understood the dialogue between Hilary Duff and Susan Serandon. They understood the teen angst. At the same time, they saw a *queen* in Hilary and wanted to be her. He was kept

in the dark about the responsibilities of the murders. In the end of the story, she found out and killed her father. It was a great tale. Everyone laughed at the end when the movie finally came out. Hilary was wiping the knife that she just plunged into her father's chest with her fingers. "You *next*?" she asked Rocco when he came into the room.

"I don't want any *piece* of you," Rocco said to her.

Hilary started to cry and they were genuine tears. That's what *sold* the movie. It was *genuine*. It was method acting in its highest form.

The movie wasn't supposed to end with Hilary crying. It was supposed to end with her stabbing Rocco, and credits rolling up. It was the *only* major change in the movie from the book.

Hilary cried, Rocco--played by Tom Cruise, of course--went to comfort her. "I know a way *out*," he said. He was near tears himself but he was improving the scene.

Hilary regained herself and stabbed Rocco lightly in the hand. Tom Cruise had to have five stitches because of it. "*OUW!*" Rocco yelled.

"You should have died *earlier*," Missy Sylvania said (she regained her character). "You should have *died*!" She threw the knife at him, and though it missed by a couple of feet, editing skills made it so it plunged in his chest. "I *beat* YOU!" she said. She looked into the camera and winked. Editing allowed it and everyone was furious that the movie ended. There were still unresolved plot lines about her mother played by Susan. There were unresolved issues about *that*... and people just didn't want to watch it *end*.

Robert Wisdom played the president in that movie and though he was killed off, people *loved* him at times. He killed corporate raiders. He killed homeless people. He killed old ladies and young babies. He killed dogs and made it look *cool*. He killed a lot of people. In the end, people got it. The president was getting shit out of his system. It was as simple as that.

People didn't see Ralph Connors in Robert Sylvania when they read the book *or* when they watched the movie. Ralph Connors had led two successful military conflicts in his time as president... *but* they didn't think he'd have the gall to do things himself.

It was strange. It was really, really strange.

In June, before the picture was released and while Andy Partek was settling into his new home, Robert Wisdom said to his wife of twenty years, "I get to kiss Susan Serandon, you know?"

"I know," Eileen Wisdom said. "You get to kiss a *lot* of people now."

"It's not going to stop, you know?"

"I *know*," she said, but she was disappointed. "Do you want another Monica Lewinski trial for this country?!"

"No. No, no, *no*. But this country wants a *human* running it, for God's sake. I *am* human! They'll relate to me."

"Thank you," Eileen said. She was serious. She had gotten up from bed, but she was glad that her husband was on his way. She'd be on her way too. The movie and the office of the presidency would pay for a lot of shoes. It would take her a lot of places. In the end, it didn't matter. She wanted her husband.

He was honest with her when he *could* be. She thought he was a gentle man. She didn't understand a thing about human nature though. She thought he could turn off his hormones at will.

Robert Wisdom became a descent president. It turned out that he was *better* at turning off and on his hormones than he'd ever imagine. Pussy was around him all the time and he told his wife about it. *I think about you, though*, he'd tell her. She was satisfied.

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"Chain Reaction" peaked at one hundred and forty-three on the charts. It was from Freight Train's debut release. The band didn't care. In July of 2006, a re-release was given of Freight Train's debut, self-titled album. It wasn't a re-release in the classical sense. The reviews on the original release were bad. Some people called it "electronic noise". It was something that the *Beatles'* early music was called and Dave Barley was glad for the association. It was called a "shit sandwich" by another reviewer. Randal Meyer caught that one. He said that *Spinal Tap*, a band that originated as fiction, was given that review for their release of *Shark Sandwich*. Reviewers weren't too original but they were plenty. Led Zeppelin had gotten their name from a review of an early show that they had done. "This band is going to sink like a lead *zeppelin*," someone had said, hence, the band changed their name and became the greatest heavy metal act--arguably next to Aerosmith, Kiss, and Black Sabbath--of the nineteen seventies. Either way, a reviewer had said that listening to Freight Train was like holding a bag of wet mice. No one remembered where *that* one came from, but they thought to re-title their album *Wet Mice* as a tribute. In the end, it wasn't good enough. Freight Train was going to live--this is what the whole band *agreed* to--and they wouldn't be swayed.

What eventually happened was that class acts of the rock 'n' roll field eventually piled up and wanted to *be* on the soundtrack that was being released when the movie came out. The book was already hot. Dionne Corona--her father and grandfather were members of Mexico's Corona Extra beer--took her Moonchild Experience and wrote a song for the band: *Planet 39*. No one got it. She knew that there had been alien sightings--a *lot* of them--in Freight Train's home town. She wrote a song for *them*. Though no one in *Buzz Saw* saw a planet besides Earth, it made sense to put in the movie. It happened at a strip club when Rocco Munchetti was hunting down the congressman, Donald Quilter. He wore black glasses and drank peach schnapps. He downed his drink when Dionne sang about drinking magic berry wine, in her song. It went good with the movie. It probably went *too* good. Rocco Munchetti thought he was *magic*, after that scene.

Freight Train teamed the Dionne Corona and Moonchild. They teamed with the Romantics--a heavily covered eighties band--and they teamed with obscured artists from here and there. Eddie Macral's nieces sang on the soundtrack, as did Twink, a popular musician in England, for a period, but whom never caught a complete ride in the United States as he dwindled in obscurity. The only person that seemed to know of him was Henry Rollins. *He* covered one of Twink's songs. Rod Stewart and *other* people knew of him as well. After the release of *Buzz Saw*, the whole nation would know who he was. They'd know

Freight Train, too.

Freight Train's original album *did* catch. They were the predominant contributing band on the soundtrack. It would be enough. Once they were heard of, no one figured they should *buy* the original album. After all, all their music was on the *Buzz Saw Soundstage*, the name that the soundtrack took on.

As Jeff Splifer's book took hold of the top ten in August of 2006, movie posters and trailers could be scene for the upcoming accompanying movie. It was at this time that Freight Train decided to release their second single, "Greg Lauler the Visionary". Once again, it didn't catch with good reviews. People were on the side of Neekay and the song seemed to take *shots* at Neekay. Randal Meyer knew what to do. He promoted the band as being in *team* with Neekay. "If you can't beat them, *join* them," he said. The band took pictures with Neekay sweatshirts on. Their instruments were in the background. Instead of holding them, they held weapons. Eddie Macral held a machete and his face was painted black and white, as if Halloween was around the corner. Randal Meyer stood him and simulated a cutting motion with an electrical chain saw to Eddie's neck. Waldo Fleshman held batteries with wires attached. He pretended to be about to touch them to water. It was the *comic* element of the shoot. Finally, Dave Barley held his wife. He was choking her. Red paint dripped from his eyes as if he was crying blood.

They wore Neekay shirts in the shoot and it couldn't be emphasized enough. Time Magazine had run articles of Greg Lauler in the nineteen eighties when he sank his ship with fifty other adherents. They ran a picture of him on the front cover with a gleeful smile and an Neekay sweatshirt. They ran a front cover *similar* picture of the band, Freight Train. There was blood--what *appeared* to be blood--beneath the photo and a caption that read, "Is America Ready for Another Bout With *Blood?!?*" It was a great article. They were portrayed as corporate-friendly, though no sentence singled them *out* as so. They were *safe*. They were the new Jason, Freddy, or Michael Meyers. They were *safe*. That's the way they were portrayed.

Eddie yelled the first time he saw the photo. They didn't take the one in which he believed Randal was behind him, ready to cut his neck off. They took a photo--the one that was eventually chosen--of Randal with his *arm* around Eddie. His hand was dangling to the side with the chain saw. "NOT SCARY ENOUGH!! THIS IS NOT GOING TO *WORK!*"

"It'll work plenty," Randal said. He smoked a cigarette then the band got drunk together.

Stephanie Venezia-Barley stayed sober. She was afraid she'd start hitting on Randal or Eddie if she got drunk enough.

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Bill Swift talked to Alfred Newman on Xeon. Alfred managed to get off of Zoton. He *tried* to convince Lucifer, or *whomever* it was that he thought he was talking to the whole time while there, to come along. Lucifer couldn't... or he didn't *want* to. He was a loner when Alfred found him and Alfred reckoned he'd be a loner long afterward.

"We have *work* to do, you know?" Bill asked Alfred on Xeon.

“No, we *don't*. You have work...” Alfred began to say. Bill wouldn't have any of it.

“You *need* to pay attention to me, Alf. You really do.”

“You called me *Alf*. Is that supposed to mean that I'm an *alien* now?” Alfred joked.

Bill didn't want to continue. He summoned the image of Chelsea Clinton on Earth. “She's a beauty, huh?”

“Yep. You bet your *ass*! She almost married Waldo, you know?”

“I know,” Bill reluctantly said. In the papers on Earth, it reported that she was hot and heavy with a Brit from the school she had attended in Oxford. “She's a *beaut*,” Bill agreed.

Alfred started playing marbles in front of Bill. It was his release. It was his way of getting back to his inner self. It was his *cushion*.

“I *don't* like those marbles,” Bill said.

Alfred shoved them at Bill. “Here! *You* have them.”

Bill took them. Later he played marbles with Alfred. It wasn't fun at first. Bill would get the hang of it. When they were done, they thought about world peace on Earth. They *both* thought of world peace and the things it would take to achieve it.

****Part Three ****

* *final* *

“On September eleventh, two thousand two... No. It was two thousand *one*--that’s it--there was a *bombing*. Two planes crashed into the World Trade Center,” Ralph Connors spoke to a crowd of fifteen hundred in Nebraska during a campaign stop. It was March of 2008 and primary season was coming into full swing. He had no one running against him and it was supposed to be a cakewalk. He was there to promote his choice of successor.

Ralph paused to look around. Barely audible, someone said, “Tell us something we don’t *know*!” He was disgusted. He was in pain. He never fully recovered from the monologues that took place in the year after *Buzz Saw* hit the screens... and Freight Train hit the air waves in conjunction with *another* progressively laden band by the name of *Destruction*.

“I’m going to *tell* you something that you don’t know.”

“Go ahead!” someone yelled. It was a bearded man of about forty.

“I... didn’t... *do* it!”

“Fuck you *all*,” the bearded man said. He was in the minority now. The crowd hushed. They didn’t suspect anything *foul* with Ralph Connors. The media started to have a field day with him. He couldn’t shake the scenes of seeing his vice-president die on screen. Well, it *wasn’t* his vice-president, he reckoned, but her sure *looked* like him.

“I didn’t *do* it, you motherfuckers!”

“That’s the way to go, George!” someone yelled.

“It’s *Ralph*. Treat me with respect and I’ll do the same to you.” Ralph Connors got a hold of himself. He started *believing* in himself again. “I’ll tell you *what*,” he said.

“*What*?” Tim Clarke said from beside him. Francine did her work at home. Tim Clarke was a *staunch* Republican. He wasn’t going to be shaken. Ralph needed people around him he could *trust*.

There was silence in the crowd while they waited for Ralph to spill what he was going to say. Ralph appeared nervous. In a few short months, it would all be over. He’d be out of office. He was campaigning for his vice-president right now.

“I started the Chicago fire. *There!*” he said. He got some laughter. He hoped it would be more. There was tension in the air. “I have this to say *too*. I have *herpes*.”

“Get out of *town*,” somebody said.

“No. I do,” he assured them. They started to calm. Ralph was outside of himself. He didn’t care. He was taking a chance. The papers wouldn’t *print* that he had herpes. He’d deny it the next day and say it was a joke. He was in *Republican* country. “I *have* herpes. If you don’t respect me...”

Someone threw a beer--it was the bearded man--and it nearly hit Ralph in the face. Security

started to swoon around the bearded man. They took him in. He did five years in jail. Ralph wouldn't see him again.

"Like I *said*," he told the people. They were starting to leave.

"*We* support you," a lady in a flowery dress said. "We're *strong*, Ralphy."

"Don't *call* me that!" Ralph said outside of the distance of his microphone. "Here's George H. W. Bush!" Ralph Connors finally said. He passed the microphone to a man wearing a tie--a *red* one stripped with white--and a blue suit.

George Herbert Walker Bush didn't have a thing to say. Daniel Quartz, off to the side, was getting ready to speak and was feeling quite comfortable. It was because Ralph Connors was going down. He wouldn't have to live in a shadow. Win or lose the election, he *wouldn't* be known as "Ralphy's Boy" any longer.

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In June of 2008, Richard Gelding had his party's nomination wrapped up. Everything left was a formality. He had been approached by Francine Cross. She was doing a story on Richard and his campaign in California. Richard told her things, off the record, that she later relayed to her father. Lloyd Cross had been relieved of his normal CIA duties but the blood still ran *thick* with them and him. He was approached by Bucky Holdwater about "advisory" commitments. Lloyd agreed that he'd keep his ears peeled. His daughter would do work, and if she was *successful*, there would be no sour taste left in his mouth about his departure.

Richard Gelding had no idea who he was talking to when Francine interviewed him. He thought he was talking to a scrubby, old lady that was just trying to hold onto her job in journalism. He had no idea that her father set the job up for her. He had no idea that she still spoke with CIA operatives, and that *wasn't* counting her father. He had no idea that the paper was a front. Suspicions wouldn't even be raised by Richard or by anyone on his staff when the San Quixote Telegram published articles about him. She left out the things he didn't want the paper to print. He thought she was a good lady.

Francine found out that Richard Gelding was homosexual. Actually, he was *bisexual* since he traveled around with his wife. She found it out by *joking* with him. She told him a joke about a man--she called him "Ralphy" and Richard laughed even before the punch line was thrown because he understood him to be the president, himself--and how *Ralphy* was caught in quicksand.

Go on, Richard had said.

He was caught in quicksand and kept sinking deeper and deeper and deeper. She had a gleam in her eye when she told it. She gained his trust, she could *feel* it... and there'd be no turning back. *He sunk--you see?--and...*

He got caught up in a wave of...? Richard tried to guess. He thought she was sending him a secret message.

Just listen to the joke, she had said. She said that this *queer*, Ralphy, was sinking and kept asking

people for help as they passed. “*Blow me,*” one man had said. “*Fuck you, faggot! I ain’t no queer!*” *Ralph* had said. Another man came, Francine explained, and the same result happened. “*Blow me,*” the other guy said. “*Fuck you, faggot!*” *Ralph* responded... ‘Til there was just one more and *Ralph* was nearly suffocated by the sand that was creeping in his nose.

You don’t know a thing! Richard cried.

You’re gay. I know. Francine was on LSD. She was reading him. She wore rose-colored eye glasses and Richard couldn’t tell that her pupils were unnaturally dilated. *You’re gay... but I won’t tell your wife.*

Don’t print it, either! Richard had said.

She didn’t print it. She *knew* him though. She knew the buttons to press.

Richard celebrated in the June summer and he was going to give it a break for a while. He won enough delegates to win his party’s nomination. It was a relief. He spoke to his wife that night about the weird experience he had had in the weeks prior to wrapping up his nomination. “She had these glowing eyes, you see?”

“Don’t you know a thing about *tripping?*” his wife wanted to know.

“It’s not that. She was *stupid*. She approached me like I was homo.”

“You’re *not*. I can’t tell,” she said. She was uncomfortable though because she *knew* he was homo. She never caught him. She knew his tendencies... and he ran on an “open gay marriage” plank. It wouldn’t stop there. His wife could feel strange things brewing. She had the party’s nomination wrapped up, though. Behind every great man... was a beautiful woman. She believed that. She was going to support her husband no matter *what* he did.

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Bill Swift had wanted to be a journalist when he walked the Earth. His brother, Ned, wanted to work out his relationship with Anna. He had dreams to buy her a house on the hill. In 2007, his workers’ compensation ran out and he was left looking for a job. He didn’t want to be a school teacher any longer. He didn’t want to work in a warehouse again. He wanted to do something that would bring better pay and be less of a hassle on his body and mind. He talked Anna into moving to Los Angeles on a whim. He was going to apply at the LA Times. He was going to apply at KCBS FM. He was going to apply to *anything* that would get him a job that would *remotely* cover what Bill had wanted to do when *he* was alive.

Ned got a job at a tabloid paper. Though it was national, it didn’t fulfill Ned on the inside. He was happy, but he knew things could get better. His wife, Anna, started walking the streets at night--she was very beautiful--and she made money as a call girl/ hooker. She was proud of herself. Ned thought she worked as a waitress. She didn’t want to *betray* Ned--and he *wasn’t* the jealous type that would check up on her--but she thought she was just getting from here to there. She saved her money in an account, and she figured that *one* day, she would spring it on him: she had a rich uncle that gave her a part of his fortune. It was a lie. It would do.

Ned worked for the *National Global Star*. It was a break that he was willing to work with. In time, he'd be a *serious* journalist--these were his aspirations--but the National Global Star would give him a break and they would start him off.

Ned and Anna lived in a poor section of Los Angeles--it was rebuilding, actually--and they still talked to Bill and Alfred Newman on occasion in their minds. Ned wouldn't ever write *directly* about what he experienced with Bill--that would be too *personal*--but he *did* write roundabout messages that they would send. Bill said that the Earth was going to have a cataclysmic end in the year 2024. Ned didn't write about that. He said that the Earth would end in 2074. It suited his viewers--he called them this--and it suited his conscious. He wrote about Zaktak on occasion. *A little fiction mixed with fact can't be that bad, can it?* he asked Anna one night. She didn't know what to say. She let him figure it out for himself.

He wrote about *everything*. He wrote about a spiritual relationship between former First Lady, Hilary Clinton, and former First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt. It was old news to some, but Ned claimed it still had validity in the world. He wrote about a *lot* of things. In the end, he wrote too much.

Bill Swift let Ned know that Francine was reeking havoc on his former town of Miller. He said that *she* was using her journalism to front for the CIA. Of course, Bill and Ned were CIA informants by default. Through their uncle, Francine's father Lloyd, they were blood-related to the CIA. This didn't stop either of them from *rebellling* against it. They didn't want to be experiments. They didn't want to be guinea pigs. They didn't want to be looked *after*.

Ned wrote a story in July of 2008 that *aliens* had taken over a printing press in San Quixote. It was a lie but Ned's editor *loved* the story. He said that mutants were ready to take over the human race. He said that *any* news coming out of San Quixote couldn't be trusted. He *knew* it couldn't be trusted and he let the aliens do the talking.

Ned wrote a story about *aliens*. Few people remembered what really went on in the San Quixote area, more specifically in Miller, and it was chalked up to myth. It got under people's *skins* though. It got the attention of Butch Jackson, now retired, and it got him riled up to the point that he called Jim Blackstone and Bob Gomer to talk about it.

"There's nothing *there*," Bob Gomer assured Butch Jackson. "It's *art*. He's a master of it."

"No. He's *not*! He's *not*! He's a dropout loser..."

"...He *graduated*. We already checked him out. It was his *brother* that never went to college because his death."

Butch Jackson didn't have anything else to add on the subject.

"Let's be *American*," Bob said. "I'm tired of chasing ghosts. Oh. That guy that you sent to the Pacific Northwest? He's doing *fine*. Things work *out*."

"I know," Butch Jackson said. He was wearing his decorated military uniform. It was something he liked to do when he felt insecure. Butch hung up the phone on Bob Gomer. "Retirement, my *ass*!" he said. No one was around to listen.

His wife came in the room with a plate of cookies. "You *want* one?" she asked him.

“No. They give me heartburn,” he said. He shoed them away but he was grateful.

She could tell he was grateful and then tried to comfort him. “They’re going to *win*, you know?” she told him.

“It’s like a dam. I keep trying to...” He wanted to say that he kept trying to stop the leaks but he knew it wasn’t true. He was a battler. He was a military man. He had no one to fight. “After a half century of fighting the Soviets, we have *them*!” he said to her.

“No, it’s not *true*.” He blushed. He knew he was wrong or he knew she loved him in *spite* of himself.

“I love her, you know?” Butch Jackson said into the air.

Bill knew. Bill Swift knew he loved her. He was listening from above. He’d tell Ned. Ned wouldn’t take it lightly. He’d say that it’d cycle again in the future. *Then what?* he wanted to know from his brother. *Then what?*

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Amongst the many secrets of the CIA is a substance known as Supplement 342--“S342” for those who know it well. It is based on *viho*, a tribal herb that is used by the Desana of the Amazon Rainforest. It allows out-of-body experiences. In the movie *The Emerald Forest*, the Desana tribe is not directly mentioned but inferences were made to this capability that one can see through the eyes of others, most notably animals, if given the right medium by which to produce the results. The CIA admitted to having a remote viewing program at a time but they dismissed it as ineffective. They never admitted to having S342 as an aid. Most people *within* the CIA didn’t know about it. It was too sensitive of a subject.

Phil McOaland, now living permanently on the east coast, learned remote viewing techniques the *hard* way: Practice, practice, *practice*. Viho is the steroid of the *mind*. It pumps you up in ways that nothing else could. Few Americans know that seventy-five percent of all pharmaceutical drugs come from the Rainforest. They *don’t* know that we send anthropologists in the guise of wanting to *help* in order to extract information and substances. In most cases, it’s a *physical* cure that’s warranted. People can *accept* that. If people were told that this seemingly fictitious drug of *viho* existed, it would be laughed off. Besides that, it wouldn’t be allowed into the public in general.

Nancy McOaland when she *was* Nancy McOaland tried viho once. Francine Cross had it at her home. Francine was desperate for new friends. She *had* been trying to sleep with Nancy’s then-husband, Phil. Phil had encouraged Nancy to have an open mind. She *did*. She tried the viho and was set on a trip around the world. She became a believer.

Francine Cross didn’t use the viho that often. She wasn’t *wanted* around town. She was rude. She was abrasive. She was upfront. She was in-your-face. She was not *wanted*, period.

When she *did* do the viho--she had it in natural form and not in the S342 *refined* form--she went around trying to make friends. She was like Casper the Friendly ghost... except that she wasn’t *friendly*. She had approached Alfred Newman, when he was still alive, and he was writing lyrics about a hosebeast

in his life (a *hosebeast* is a relenting ex-girlfriend and he got the term from watching a classical movie, *Wayne's World*). The hosebeast, of course, was Francine. Viho not only allowed you to see outside of your *body*. It also enabled you to *nominally* act in the world you chose to go into. While Alfred was writing his lyrics, she would push his pen. He didn't know what was going on. He believed in ghosts, since Bill had passed, but he didn't know what to make of it. He continued on... and his pen would be shaken again. This got Alfred madder. He didn't want anything to *do* with the hosebeast. There was a lyric in a song that he loved that went, "Yeah, I let you shape me though I feel as though you raped me cuz you climbed inside my world and in my songs." It was by Guns 'n' Roses. It was from a song called "Locomotive". Alfred didn't want to be shaped... but he had no way of getting Francine away from him.

Francine stopped using the drug, for the most part. When she started covering Richard Gelding on his run to the United States' highest office, she felt she *had* to use it again.

Where are you going? she asked him. It was foreign to him. It was the middle of August and his party had its nominating convention coming up in a week. *Where are you going?* she asked again.

Am I going mad? he wondered.

No. It's me. From the paper. I can help you.

There was no response from Richard Gelding.

There was no way to concretely prove the things that she was seeing to her superiors. In the CIA, there are *instruments* that allow for *fairly* accurate accounts of what people think and feel. The brain emits waves. This much is known in public. There are ways that a paraplegic person can communicate with the outside world with the aid of computers if he or she is unable to speak. The person looks at a screen--a *computer* screen--and looks at certain letters for a given time. That letter registers at the bottom of the screen. Simple words are there as well: The, it, he, she, they, are, is, and so on. It *works* because electrodes are put strategically around the head. Each letter and word has a background that is *pulsating* at a slightly different rate from everything else on the screen. The electrodes pick up the brainwaves, they relay them to their processor, then words and sentences are formed. It's as simple as that.

Modern psychiatrists in the United States--*most* of them--will tell you that *brain* chemistry is the dominant force in what goes on in people's minds. They are wrong. It's *physics*, but they don't know it, or even *believe* it, because they are eons behind much of the rest of the universe in their technological equipment. Also, if they weren't so stuck on their headstrong contemporary paradigm, they would see that the same waves that escape the same aforementioned electrodes in the prior anecdote actually fly into the air. The substances are smaller than photons, which are essentially light particles with *matter*, but they are still much larger than *schlaclak*, a substance that only certain members of the PIA knew about but were sworn not to share information with *anyone* outside of the agency. If *one* of the scientists working for the CIA--but obviously sworn to secrecy, as well--was able to publish *his* findings about the smaller-than-photon particles that *he* knew of, he would easily win the Nobel Prize for a modern physicist. If he were to talk about *schlaclak*, being that he was leaked the information, he'd be laughed into oblivion.

Francine reflected on what she was taught from her father, many years back, and combined it with

what she learned from Alfred through Bill Swift. She thought to check in on Richard Gelding again but thought against it. She wanted to know why she wasn't *liked*. That was the bottom line. With all her knowledge and *experience*, she should be liked by *someone*.

She wasn't liked by a *soul*.

There are a million waves going through you, right now, Richard Gelding. You don't know what I'm thinking, but I do. I want to meet you. I want to marry you.

Richard heard her, thought he was crazy for a moment, then ignored her the best he could. He was on the campaign and nothing was going to stop him. *Crazy bitch*, he finally allowed himself to think.

Brain waves take off from the head and spread in many directions. Some people have a *keen* sense of observance upon picking these waves up from other people. The prophets, in ancient times, used them *well*.

A million waves are going through you, Richard Gelding. And I'm the only one...

...You get it? Richard screamed inside. He was summoning a friend that he talked to on occasion whom was lost in *Vietnam*. *You get this? Tell me.*

His friend didn't *respond*.

A million waves, Richard. There are car phones... There are television stations. There are radio stations. The only one you're in tune with is mine! Relent. Give it UP!

Richard didn't relent. He made speech that night about a crazy lady he had met in a mental institution. He thought about Francine the whole time. His point was that we, as a society, needed to give them a chance. She was a decent person, in his story. In real life, he wasn't sure if she was.

Relent, Richard, she said to him that night before he went to bed.

Crazy person, Richard thought. He got up, got some water, then went to bed without thinking of it for the next few nights.

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Richard Gelding had a successful Democratic National Convention. People thought he could *win*. He was a man of the people. His strong suit was in the environment but he had constituents across the political spectrum. The only people suffered his wrath were the ultra rich whom only wanted to get *richer*. That was the problem he had with the world.

Richard Gelding was the victim of circumstance. He didn't *care* that Robert Wisdom was on his tail--he announced his candidacy in late March, earlier that year, at the same time that it appeared Richard would be the man to beat in his *own* party. Richard even had the endorsement of Hilary Clinton early on whom chose to stay a United States senator for the time being.

Robert Wisdom knew that he would take a good chunk of the liberal base that Richard Gelding would rely on to win presidency. But Robert Wisdom was a fiscal conservative. He wasn't for the "voodoo economics" that the Republicans had used since the Reagan era. Reagan was popular for many things. Maintaining a balanced budget wasn't one of them

After the Democratic National Convention, Robert Wisdom ran a thirty percent in the polls. He was that popular from the film he made two years prior. He was that popular for promoting Freight Train. He was that popular for being on talk shows. He was that popular for workshops that he would do. He was that popular for a *lot* of reasons.

The Democrats and the Republicans had a choice that year: They could debate Robert Wisdom in a three-way debate--or a *series* of them--or they could ignore him and chalk it up to sleaze. They chose the latter.

"We don't *need* this smut in our *house*!" Ralph Connors said while campaigning for Daniel Quartz. "We don't *need* it!"

Francine worked for the CIA but was known as an investigative reporter. Her job, for that year, was to make sure the Republicans won. They would win by electing Daniel *Quartz*... or they would win by convincing Richard Gelding to come over to the darker side of politics and betray all the rhetoric that he spewed out.

The Republicans had a choice. There were those in government--not *many* of them--that *knew* that the CIA was trying to court Richard Gelding. He could *keep* some of his issues. They didn't care much about the fag issue. "Throw 'em a bone," Ralph Connors told Richard in a meeting that was supposed to be centered around the debate issue. "Throw 'em a bone. Let them have their fag California and even give them Hawaii or someplace else. We can *live* with that. You can't repeal NAFTA though. You can't *do* that. And go into debt. Blame it on *our* administration if you want. Say it was out of your *control*. We have banker buddies to keep happy. They make the *world* go 'round. You think we couldn't have stayed out of debt if we *wanted* to? No. It doesn't work like that." Ralph got closer to Richard Gelding as he leaned over to him and said in a near whisper, "I have three billion dollars in the *bank* right now! It's all protected by our military."

"Say no more, Mr. President," Richard Gelding said. He didn't want to *hear* more. He didn't want to know about the accounts where the money was stored.

"A *laundering* machine, man. I *tell* you Richard. You don't have a tape player on you, do you? We'll say it was doctored. I have people that *do* that, you know?"

Richard didn't want to hear that much more.

Richard slept with Ralph Connors that night. He had gained his trust. Ralph Connors no longer cared. He burned an American flag the next day--an *American* one, and not just one of the cheap *Neekay* ones--and he called up Francine Cross. "I think you know what to do." He handed over the tape that was used to record he and Richard sleeping with one another. They had exchanged anal sex with one another. It was a heated thing. The Lord of Sodom and Gomorrah wouldn't be proud. Ralph Connors would be. He was on his last leg. He didn't care what became of him.

"I know *exactly* what to do with this, Mr. President." She saluted him. Ralph cried in joy.

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The Republicans and Democrats chose collectively not to include in televised debates the presence of Robert Wisdom, and his running mate whom formerly assailed from Roswell, Ben Murphy. They called it a joke. They called it a mockery of the system. Some people were outraged. Most of them weren't.

On the day after the first televised debates between Daniel Quartz and Richard Gelding, Francine had a surprise of her own. She released the tapes to the public. Robert Wisdom went from a dark horse to the leading horse. The country didn't want hypocrites. They could be held in denial, like believing some wars were fought for idealism rather than logistics, but some things were *undeniable*. They couldn't vote for Daniel Quartz, though he had nothing to do with the released sex tapes. They couldn't vote for Richard Gelding.

Robert Wisdom would win *nearly* by default. He was the product of Generation X. Though most voters were older, he *rang* with them. They had children. They had teenagers. They had young adults that they *related* to. It was a generation in turmoil. They saw Robert Wisdom as a *leader* of that generation, though he was really older than most the people he *truly* jived with. They saw Ben Murphy as a candidate--a vice-presidential one--that looked like *them*. He wore his dreadlocks still. He spoke straight from the heart. He didn't pretend to have *all* the answers... but the ones he *did* have answers for made a lot of sense. "We have nowhere to go, people... but up," he said. He got cheers from the crowd.

The media tried to collectively *save* Daniel Quartz and Richard Gelding, for a while. Francine's little paper, relatively speaking, was a driving force in getting things changed. The CIA couldn't deny anything. By this time, even Butch Jackson was glad a change was being made. "We *don't* need another PRI in this country, Larry," he told Larry King in a late night interview. "A change in blood will be *good* for us."

"And if you're wrong?" Larry asked.

"Is our country not strong enough to *take* it?" Butch retorted.

Larry cut to a break then. CNN eased into a clip that showed massive crowds supporting Freight Train at concerts... and they all wore Neekay shirts (the band did, not the people in the crowd). They didn't stop cheering, though, and no flags were burnt during their shows. Larry thought it was very ironic.

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Voter turnout was lopsided in November of 2008. People who hadn't voted in *many* elections came to the polls. People that would vote Republican and *only* Republican were too scared to leave their homes. For that matter, they were too embarrassed to send absentee ballots in the days before.

Robert Wisdom won easily. He got seventy-five percent of the vote. Daniel Quartz, though relatively unscathed in the video scandal, received fifteen percent of the vote. Richard Gelding still received a whopping ten percent in *spite* of himself. The *true* homosexual population still supported him and showed up in groves. The *rest* of the country that considered themselves to be *remotely* liberal voted for the man that would eventually win.

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Lizzy Shulton, the girl who Alfred Newman loved with all his heart when he was still on Earth,

married Zotar Cassidy way before the shit hit the fans. It was *years* before, actually. She had kids with him. They attended Jerry Shuster's church for a while. After the election, Jerry left town and his brother his brother Clyde took over for him. Clyde hadn't known that Alfred had been killed. He was saddened by it but he didn't let it bother him too much. He took over his brother's church, but he made some changes.

"We'll call this one '*The Temple of Bill Swift!*'" he said upon opening it. The Beatles' church was nice. He didn't feel at home. There were mostly tourists there. It never grew to the size of his liking. He wanted a small-town feel again. He got one in Miller. "We'll call it '*The Temple That Saves Lives!*'" he yelled and got cheers from everyone around him, Lizzy Shulton included.

The country was entering a new phase. The Cold War was long over. The "War Against America" was coming to an end as well. People didn't *know* it as this until years later. It was *historians* that started to put that tag on the era.

"The war against America is coming to a close," Francine Cross commentated on her TV program. "It is near the *end*, folks. My father--can I *call* him that?--was on speed for much my life..." There was shuffling in the background when she said it. "He was on speed," she continued. "He was part of the War on Drugs as well. Ain't it *quaint!*?" she yelled, then slammed down her microphone.

She was arrested that day. Treason was what she was arrested for. She was tried, protected by the ACLU, and forgiven of her *sin* a year later. She did no serious time.

"The war on America is coming *back*, you know?" Lizzy said to Zotar. They were attending The Temple of Bill Swift on a regular basis. "It's coming back. A year? What do *you* think?"

"I don't know. I like *hotdogs!*" he said.

"They're not *American!* They're from Frankfurt, Germany! Neither are hamburgers for that matter. They reside in..."

"...I *know*. Hamburg, right?"

"Yep." She wiped some ketchup off his face. "We don't have to *do* anything any longer. What is American to *them!*--" She pointed to the television. There were debaters on an early morning talk show. "--is not American to *us!* Burger King and McDonald's. Is that *choice?* Is it?"

"I don't know."

"Burger King and *Pepsi!* I mean, *Coke* and *Peps!*..."

"Shhh." Zotar put his fingers over his lips then tried to kiss her. She wasn't done.

"I have nothing to *do* now! I have *nothing*. I've been fighting this *fight*, don't you see? I've been *fighting*. WE *WON!* I'm supposed to be happy though, right?"

"Yep." Zotar was a little taken back. "I don't have a thing to add."

A year later, Clyde Shuster began preaching against things that were against Lizzy's liking. She didn't like to go there any longer. Her husband still went.

In 2010, Clyde had enough. He wasn't making much money. He was going to give another place another try. Maybe it'd be Graceland. Maybe it'd be Duckton again. Maybe he'd go to Liverpool and try to buy back the place he had just sold. He didn't know.

He visited Zotar--he was one of his better friends in town--and told him about his quandary. Zotar agreed with him that he *should* go. They thanked God, Bill Swift in Heaven... or wherever he was, Robert Wisdom for the returned freedom, and they thanked Lizzy. She had come up the steps and she was gorgeous, even after three children. She still had the glow. She didn't hassle Zotar about his continued trek to see what was beyond the beyond. He didn't care at this moment that she was taking off to her mothers. It would be a vacation.

Lizzy came home and kissed Zotar on the cheek before she left. It's be something he'd remember for a long time. She knew Clyde Shuster was leaving town. She was glad. She was more happy that she had her husband. It'd last for a long time. In a world that was wrought with divorce, they were ones that made it... until their deaths in the year that the world exploded.

Jerry Shuster was long gone from Miller at the time his brother was leaving that town. He set up tent in a town called *Millions* (there were hundreds of people that lived there). It was outside of Mesa, Arizona. A lady by the name of Stephanie Knickerbocker ran a gas station all by herself. Her father had passed on and it was her legacy. No one knew she had been a rock star. She changed her appearance that much. The people that *did* know... didn't care. They weren't from Hollywood. If you wanted to go to the desert to escape things or just to return home, it was okay.

Mesa was a place that was looking for answers, but the surrounding towns were more in turmoil. The "big city" of Mesa learned to cope with the aliens. The small towns didn't.

In Millions, Jerry Shuster saw a chance to *connect* again. He set up a tent and let things fly. If the Mesa area wasn't good enough, he would move to someplace different.

"I'm going to tell you about Revelation, folks," he said. There was a crowd of a hundred people. Jerry was *willing* to cater to what he believed the crowd would believe. He would do this until they were hooked. And *then* he would slam them with the hard facts. "I'm going to talk right now about chapter sixteen. It's the sixth bowl. Was it a *literal* bowl that the Apostle John was talking about?" Jerry saw that people in the crowd were nodding their heads in yes. They *agreed* that it was probably a literal bowl. Jerry knew he had his work cut out for him. "Last week, we were talking about the *cows* outside..."

"...*What* cows?" a man from the front asked. He was scrubby, looked like he was full of pride, and he wore overalls.

"The *colored* cows, you know? The orange ones, the pink ones, the spotted ones with green here and there."

"That's not in the book," the man said.

"Of course it's not. We were *talking* about it though."

"Go on. I missed your service."

"Saint John wrote his book from prison. It says so in the Book itself. Let me read, 'I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus *Christ*!...' Applauds were heard at the emphasis of Jesus Christ's name calling. "...was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God..." He paused, looked around, spat to the side, then said, "...and for the

testimony of Jesus *Christ*.” There was a silence the second time that Jerry Shuster said Jesus’ name. Maybe the people didn’t interpret his spitting action the right way. He wasn’t really sure. He came to conclude as he *read* that Jesus didn’t have to do *any* of it. He looked into the crowd and he saw *confusion*. He saw pain.

“I want to *tell* you about those colored cows, pastor,” a man said that was near the other guy with overalls.

“They were *horses*, in the Book, but I made a mistake,” Jerry said. It was his style to sermon, interact, sermon some more, interact, et cetera, until it was all done.

“They were *cows*. I’m pretty sure. You showed me the light.”

Jerry didn’t finish his sermon the way he *planned* to finish it. He was going to ask the crowd if anyone had gone to prison. He was going to ask if they *wrote* differently in prison because of the guards, deputies, whathaveyou, that read the letters in between. He was going to ask, *If you were in a Soviet prison and you thought Americans were going to save you, might it be cleaver to write stories about eagles and bears? Might it be? The eagles would symbolize the United States... The bears would obviously pertain to the ones in control of the Soviet homeland.*

Jerry wound up talking about Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young. He said that in the nineteen seventies, four students were shot at Kent State University in Ohio. They were protesting peacefully (if you were to ask the *majority* of the people that were there to witness) and state troopers opened fire on them. The students were defenseless. Four of them were mowed down. “Crime. Crime, crime, *CRIME!*” Jerry said, and had to contain himself to go further.

“They were there for a *reason*,” a bushy-haired man said from the second seat over from the man whom previously spoke. It was like the people in the front were taking turns. The man held back, though, the reasons he thought they were there, so Jerry continued.

“Rock ‘n’ roll is a *religion*, folks!”

“Amen to *that!*” Stephanie Knickerbocker said. She was formerly Stevie Nicks. She put on dark glasses after yelling out her comment for fear that she’d be found out. She knew *most* people wouldn’t care too much.

Jerry went on to say that modern man’s texts were made of vinyl rather than papyrus. They were *now* made of something else--whatever *CDs* were made of, and Jerry didn’t have the exact answer for that--and the crowd laughed joyfully at his ignorance and his *acceptance* of it. He went on to say that Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young changed the world when they made a song of the Kent State incident and released it less than a month after it happened. They changed it incrementally. “You can do the same, folks. Don’t do what *these* people are doing.” Jerry pointed to the cops that were seen at the side entrances/ exits. “They don’t know what’s going on. They were told I’m a freak. I am. But...” The crowd began to swell again. “By golly!” Jerry collected himself. “I’m an *American* freak!”

The crowd roared with thunder. Jerry didn’t ask for donations on this night. He would live the rest of his life this way. If he had money in the bank, he would skip town sometimes without even asking

for a dime. If he was going broke? He'd hammer down. He was even keel, in the end. It worked out alright.

Stephanie went home that night and prayed through an ice crystal. It wasn't good enough to stop the world's doom in the year 2024.

* *Epilogue* *

In a world of bliss, no one knows death like people that experience it. Bill Swift tasted death, as did Lucifer and Alfred Newman. No one knows death worse than a person in denial and without any friends.

Francine Cross hung herself in the year 2011. Her father never forgave her for selling out his Republican party. No one in town--*Miller*, that is--forgave her for her unrelenting hitting on young boys. No one forgave her for anything. In the end, it was that she never forgave herself.

"You've got to *believe* in yourself, or no one will believe in you," Bill told Alfred on Xeon... while they played *marbles*--upon hearing that Francine would be joining them soon. He *knew* she'd be joining them. It was in the stars.

"You're talking about Ozzy, aren't you?" Alfred asked him.

"No. I know it by experience, son," Bill said. He knew it by experience pretty bad.

He watched the follies of people on Earth for the past few years. He was born a Catholic. He was taught that you get one marriage, and when that was done, you embrace widowship if that was the case. "'Til death do you part," he was taught. He held on to it tight.

Bill couldn't forgive himself, while on Earth. He had an affair with Anna Harcdomm, his brother's future bride, and he slept with Daisy Michaels. In the end, he wanted *neither* of them, but at the same time, he wanted *both* of them... *and* whoever else would come and fill his cup. He wanted them all, but he didn't *want* to want them all. He was conflicted.

When he saw that Francine finally died her lonely death, he saw himself, but from the outside. It was an extrapolation. He *knew* that you had to believe in yourself--you had to *respect* yourself--or no one else would. He didn't need a song to *tell* him.

"So I have this to *say*," Alfred said. "That little girl still rides around Randal's house at night--she's fourteen or fifteen now--what's going to become of *her*?"

"I don't know. She's lost."

"He doesn't even *live* there any longer," Alfred said.

"Freight Train. They're the key. She'll live inside of him. He'll *know* her. He'll remember her, and she'll know it."

"And then die, right?"

"Yep. They're coming. In 2024, they won't even know what *hit* them!"

"And the hemp that..." Alfred began.

"...I know. It's a problem."

"The founding *fathers* didn't think so. It can be *used*," Alfred said. "It can be used for sheets, rope, energy, clothing, you *name* it!"

"They won't accept it." Bill conjured an image of a front-running candidate for the Republican party. "Neither will they..." He conjured an image of a struggling Democrat. "They'll never *think* like

you.”

“Is it their *downfall*?”

“No. It’s *mine*. I’m *done* with that planet.”

Alfred slapped Bill’s hands in joy. “We *won*! We’re *over*!”

Jesus Christ spoke to Zaktak on another planet. It was no better than Xeon but it was nowhere near the quality of Zoton. “It’s your destiny, Zaktak. Zoton is your *destiny*.”

“No it’s not, sir. I go there, get ideas, then I’m done with it.”

Alfred never *knew* how these things were done. He didn’t know how aliens communicate with people on Earth. Bill learned. It was because aliens--*most* of them that *they* came in contact with--lived much longer lives, sometimes as long as twenty thousand times longer. They had *time* to learn other languages from different places. Kevin Costner’s character in *Dances With Wolves* learned a tribal language in months. Aliens--*most* of them--were more intelligent than Earthlings. They could pick up a language in an hour.

Zaktak spoke to Jesus Christ. “Do we really have to end the world?”

“No. We don’t. It’s in Revelation, but that’s not the end of it.” Jesus looked a little surprised that he had nother more to add. “I *don’t* have control, regardless what they think. I’d *like* to end it--I mean, end the *end* of it. I can’t. Will they get their New Jerusalem? I don’t know. Weirder things have happened.”

“Weirder things have happened, huh Jesus?”

“Call me *Hesoos*.”

“Okay. Weirder things have *happened*.... Like what?”

“There were eras of miracles on Earth. The Red Sea parted. These things *happened*. The living schlaclak that makes *up* everything... It gets *suicidal*. It busts up. Simple as that. Miracles can *happen*!”

“Like the Reds winning the World Series over the Sox...” Zaktak began.

“No. I *don’t* know what you’re talking about,” Jesus said. He was going to joke that it was more like the Miracle On Ice. He didn’t though. Zaktak was getting mad. He’d leave. Jesus would go to his mother in a place he believed to be Heaven--that’s where she lived now--and he’d forget about things for a couple of decades. He’d let the Koagulates take care of things. If *they* cared enough, the world would be saved. Otherwise? What could he really do? He wasn’t on good terms with his father any longer. Jesus was a loser, in his eyes. He was supposed to set up a church on a hill. It was supposed to be seen by people around the world. In the end, the *Catholic* Church came close. They had nonbelievers though. They had that, and they had their human nature. Nothing was every going to be perfect. Nothing was ever going to be good enough for *Yahweh*. Never.

Allah stepped aside and observed things. Jesus and Zaktak looked like two little ants trying to solve a problem. He contemplated squashing them and sending them into another dimension, but he refrained. He was a *peaceful* being, for the most part.

Manifest Zoton

Manifest Zoton prologue

On a breezy, winter afternoon, Lizzy Shulton was getting ready to take off to her mother's house. A girl of fourteen years of age was passing by on her motor scooter--it was a Honda Elite--and she didn't know who Lizzy was and probably wouldn't care too much if she did. She knew of her husband though, Zotar, but she didn't know where he lived. He promoted *Freight Train*, at a time. She was on her way to see a rock 'n' roll concert but it wasn't *Freight Train* that she'd be seeing. They were far out of town, at the time. She was going to see *Destruction*. They were buddies with Freight Train. Randal Meyer would have to wait another day to see her. She had a crush on him again. He'd know who she was if he seen her. She was sure of it.

Destruction didn't play that night and a young girl's wish didn't come true. There were electrical shortages across the state and it would wind up causing the cancellation of the night's concert. Randal Meyer's wish would come true that night. He was on tour in New York City and he was going to have sex with Stephanie Venezia-Barley. Dave, her husband, didn't care. They weren't able to have children and she was a good lay, anyway. He knew it from experience.

Part One

* one *

“Imagine a camera fixated on a white balloon as it breezes through the evening sky,” Jeff Splifer said. In the year 2012, he regained his job at San Quixote Community College. Don Michaels, the philosophy professor who had him fired, was dismissed the prior year for sexual assault on a teenage girl.

A man raised his hand in the front row. He was about thirty-three years old, looked like he needed a shave, and *probably* could have been mistaken for a janitor if he weren’t sitting there in class. “Which way is the wind blowing?”

“Don’t matter,” Jeff said. “That’s *right*. I said, ‘*Don’t!*’ You can have them fire me for it!” Jeff was still mad at the path he took. *Buzz Saw* was a hit movie for him, as well as being a hit *book*. His follow up, *Where Are We Going?*, didn’t do so well. It cracked the top hundred, but it didn’t leave him with the feel that he could *rely* on journalism, from the outside, for the rest of his life. He was left appealing the decision that got him fired. In the end, he won. He didn’t win a *lot*. He merely got his *job* back with no back pay, but it would do.

A man shifted in the third row and looked like he wanted to hack.

“The *balloon*--you see?--is placed in such a *way*...” Jeff looked at the original man whom asked what direction the air was blowing. He looked like he wanted to say something else, but he didn’t dare. “...that it is *drifting*. Light does that.” Jeff paused and waited for answers. He didn’t wait for questions. He waited for *answers*. He wanted someone to speak up and say, *Light doesn’t drift!*, an answer. He wanted someone to say, *Light moves, but can we call it a drift?*, a rhetorical question to him, and just as good as an *answer*.

Jeff got nothing from the crowd of people so he continued on. In the past, his classes would be near full. Now, they were practically empty because word of mouth had yet to form. People didn’t know he was back. *He* didn’t find out he’d be teaching again until two weeks prior to his initial speech in front of the shifting man and the one that looked like he might be a custodian on his off time.

“Light *drifts*, people. Just like the balloon.”

“What if I *shot* it?” the custodian-looking man said.

“You got the *point* there, sirry. You got the *point!*”

Jeff went on to explain that *schlaclak* was like that. If you fixated the camera on the white, drifting balloon, you would *not* notice a speeding bullet as it passed by. That’s what Jeff was going to explain to the class. Whether or not the custodian-looking man was *joking* or not, he got it on the head. Light *can* be disrupted. For the matter, it can be passed like a preschooler riding a trike as it’s being passed

by a NASCAR driver at full speed. That's the analogy he *used*. The custodian-looking man had nothing to say at that. As a matter of fact, he *yawned*.

"You see? We have *freedom* back in this country!" Jeff explained. "In the past, I might get *fired* for teaching what I am. Today? I feel *free*. I'm not going to *worry* what they have to say. Now your *assignment* is to learn about Newton, okay? You know what I *mean*? I'm not going to ask about *schlaclak*. I'm not going to *do* that. And if one of you has a *problem* with it, you write the governor and *tell* him. It's out of my jurisdiction now. If *they* have a problem, tell them to fuck off, okay? I'll write another book. That's what I'll *do*."

The custodian-looking man didn't know whom Jeff was. "Who *are* you? You act like you're some kind of *big* shot."

"I'm not, okay? I changed the world. I acted like *Vishnu* would have, okay? If I didn't do it, someone else *would* have."

"What did you write that was so important?" he asked him.

"The syllabus." Jeff passed it around and the remaining nine people in class got a laugh.

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There were more or less seven eras of miracles on the Earth that Jesus was aware of. He passed on the information to Zaktak. When Alfred Newman visited Zaktak on Zoton, he learned of it then passed it on to Bill Swift when he got back to Xeon. The Koagulates knew that the Earth was coming to an end. *They* weren't going to be responsible for the change. It was going to be cataclysmic and it was going to be out of their *hands*. It was like looking down from a tall hill, seeing two cars speeding toward one another from opposite *ends*, knowing full well that they were on a collision course, and not being able to do a thing *about* it. Unless...

The leader--a leader, it should be said (the Koagulates were a rather laissez-faire kind of group)--came up to Bill Swift and told him about possibilities. "They Earth can be *saved*--I know you're a leader of free *peace* on your--and you can be *part* of it."

"*What*?" Bill wanted to know.

"It's simple. You go *down* there--you go back to *Earth*--and you *save* the son of a bitch. It's that *simple*."

"How?"

"You see..." The Koagulate leader--the chosen one for the time *being*--said that there were eras of miracles on that planet. In *other* words, what really happens is that the world is *not* at peace. In other words, the *schlaclak* that make up all the molecules--the protons, and so forth--get *mad*. They get discontent. It's like a nation reforming itself. The United States, up until 2012, had enjoyed *relative* peace. There was never a *serious* threat to its national security. Germany? *They* had plans, during World War II to take over the *world*. They were going to take half of the United States and Japan was going to be allowed to take the *other* half. What happened instead was that Germany lost, they were split in *half*, and then they

reformed. It's as simple as that. "During war, it's chaos," the Koagulate leader said to Bill. For all practical reasons, there *are* no nations--not for the ones being *bombed*, and so forth. It's every person for himself. It's as simple as *that*."

Bill wanted to speak up but opted for listening instead.

"During the era of *miracles*," the Koagulate leader went on to say, "The *schlaclak* is at war. It's at war with *itself*. It doesn't pay attention to convention. It doesn't matter what *alliances* it had. If it were part of hydrogen proton, it would break up if the *other* *schlaclak* involved wasn't on full board. It's as simple as *that*."

"You're saying you want me to involve myself with *miracles*."

"No. You do what you're *told*. Simple as that. You do your job, your Earth will be *saved*."

"What about *miracles*?" Bill wanted to know.

"I'm more intelligent than you. I'm sorry for glossing that over." The Koagulate leader took time to consider how he'd *say* it. "What *you* consider to be a miracle on *Earth* is done like clockwork in other parts of the universe. You know what a *miracle* is, Bill?"

"No. I don't," he said. "But I *do* know that I've *seen* them on occasion."

"You're not getting the *point*. A miracle, to me, is the universe *creating* itself. Besides that, I don't really *know* of one." The Koagulate leader looked down on Bill as if he wanted to cry. "You're not going to *succeed*, you know?"

"*WHAT*?" Bill demanded. "What?" He calmed down. "*Why* are you sending me there?"

"Because you want to go. To give them *hope*. They need hope, you know?"

"And I'm going to die..."

"...anyway," the Koagulate leader said, then sped off.

Bill learned what was to happen the following day. He was to take Alfred Newman, Edward Hand, and Saul Folstiklar--the one whom blew up Alfred to *begin* with--and they were to go back to Earth on a speeding craft. Before they did, the Koagulates would enact their power. They would convince the *schlaclak* within the bodies of the four would-be heroes to *change*. They couldn't do it *permanently*. It was like setting up an interim government. For that matter, it was like starting a new corporation. In *other* words, you had to *choose*. What would it be? Were you a corporation that made milk? Were you one that was going to make *cars*? Were you going to print *magazines*? Obviously, the smart people would like to do it all. Realistically, they *can't*. They have to choose.

Bill had a day and a half to choose his specialty on Earth. What would *his* miracles be? (He still *called* them miracles in spite of the fact that the Koagulate official he had talked to called them commonplace events in other parts of the universe.) What would *Alfred* do? The Koagulate leader said that they should choose something that wouldn't leave a mark. In *other* words, their world would be saved--it *could* be saved by mathematical probabilities--if they maintained a balance. They couldn't create a worldwide scare. This would cause governments to become paranoid and *potentially* use nuclear weapons against one another if they didn't understand that the miracles were coming from *beyond*. One

nation would think that another had a new, secret weapon. Paranoia would or *could* cause disaster.

The miracles had to be strong enough, on the other hand, to have impact when *needed*. And... Bill couldn't reveal his identity to anyone on Earth, outside of a few selected and trusted people. His appearance would be *slightly* changed. It wouldn't be changed to the point that his mother in Heaven couldn't recognize him (Ned Swift, Bill's brother, still believed that they *all* were in Heaven--the ones who passed away--no matter *what* planet they claimed to be on). His appearance would be changed to the point that, once again, a worldwide panic wouldn't ensue. People *knew* of Bill though it was suppressed in many memories.

As for the rest? Alfred would do the same, as would Saul and Edward. *Saul* happened by chance. He was an evil man on the planet Earth. *Sometimes* these people are the best heroes. The Koagulate leader in *control* of the project took that into account. *Guilt* rode Saul. That guilt could potentially save the planet.

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"Do you know who I just got to *talk* to?" Ned Swift asked Anna. They were having a cup of coffee. It was afternoon, but it was their habit.

"No. Tell me. An *alien*?"

"*Better!* Patricia Richardson!"

"Patricia *who!*?" Anna asked. She nearly tipped her cup.

"Patricia fuckin' *Richardson*. I'm a *journalist*. I *get* these special privileges," Ned reminded her.

"Patricia *who?*" she asked again. It didn't ring a bell. She got up to leave when she saw that he wouldn't answer her. He *had* been excited. The exciting feel turned to one of dismay when he saw that Anna didn't want anything to do with the conversation. She took off to the bathroom, Ned followed her, and she took off her clothes, ready to take a shower. "Patricia *who?*?" she asked again when Ned didn't say anything. Water was running, Ned could barely hear her, and Anna felt *stabbed*. No blood came out. It was like *voodoo*. "I think I know who she *is*, Ned. She's your new *girlfriend*, huh? I just met her in the *shower!*" She felt another stab to her midsection and *knew* it was a form of voodoo.

Anna believed she'd live.

"I used to jerk off to her. That's all," Ned said. He returned to the cup of coffee he had been drinking. When Anna returned five minutes later wearing a powder blue bath towel, and not much more, he said, "I used to jerk *off* to that lady. She says she talks to Bill Swift. Actually, she called him *Ted* Swift at first. I think she was confused. I'm not really sure."

"What does that prove that she *knows*?"

"Watch!" Ned went to the TV and turned it on to a live broadcast of the evening news. "*There she is!*"

"That's a *hippo*, Neddy. That's all it *is*."

"No. They'll start *talking* about her. It's innuendo. That's all it *is!* I *tell* you! They have codes

for her that you won't *believe*." Ned paused. He said, "She's a key *player*, dear. She *knows* what's going on. She *told* me!"

Anna got a little serious. "Do you *believe* her?"

"I don't *know*... yet. I don't *know*. I like her. I got a good *feel* for her. I *didn't* have sex with her..."

"...But you *would* have. I know." She was disappointed.

"I used to jerk *off* to her!" Ned said.

"She's the one from *Home Improvement*. I know the show now. I *thought* it was the lady from... Ah... I can't make it *up*. It just popped in my head. That's all."

"I used to jerk off to her every day! Everyone used to jerk off to this lady--*Pamela Anderson* was on the show for a while--and I used to..."

"...I know." She came to Ned and pinched his cheeks in an affectionate way. She *loved* him. He could feel it. It made his job a lot easier. "What if she says to go to bed?" she asked him. "What do you *do*?"

Ned took off upstairs. He didn't want to *answer* that question. Deep inside, he knew what it'd be. If there was privacy, he'd take her in a chance. He'd *do* that. He'd risk the few years he had with Anna--Anna the *Beautiful*--and he'd *do* that.

"You only live once!" he yelled from upstairs. "That's all I'm telling you, *Anna*!"

"Good. I'm a *whore*!" Anna meant it. Ned didn't want to hear it. He had suspected it for a long time.

"What's for dinner?" he yelled from upstairs.

"*Uuhhh*!" she yelled to herself. She was frustrated.

Dinner was good that night. Anna looked at him with googly eyes. Secretly, she was *proud* of her husband. She knew she got a stud.

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Ned Swift printed a story that Patricia Richardson had told him. It was about Daisy Michaels--he *knew* Daisy Michaels and his brother had actually *slept* with her while he was on Earth--and it was about how she was summoning powers from the Earth strong enough to *move* things. She *had* started off in the Republican party after Bill Swift died. She wanted power. She came across something *more*. She wouldn't need politics. She would only need *herself*.

The story that Ned Swift printed was about Catherine Zeta-Jones. Catherine Zeta-Jones was a movie star--a *good* one--and had no idea what was going on in Miller, San Quixote, or certain *sections* of Los Angeles. Things were changing again. Catherine would feel it but it wouldn't be significant in her life.

Ned chose Catherine Zeta-Jones to write about because she *reminded* him of Daisy Michaels. It was as simple as *that*. Catherine had a talk with *God* --that's what he wrote in the article--and an "unidentified source" gave all the information about it. The *message* that was supposed to be conveyed to

Ned's brothers and sisters in San Quixote, and the surrounding area, was that Daisy Michaels was someone to be looked out after. He knew that she wasn't sure if she was going good or bad. She just knew that she was *channeling* something.

Above the article was an artist's rendition of Catherine Zeta-Jones talking to God through a seance in her house. It was hokey and candles were *everywhere*, even on the window seals. The picture of her face, being that it was an artist's sketch, wasn't of Catherine's face. It was clearly of Daisy *Michael's* face. The country would think that a new artist was in line. Ned Swift would think that he did a *superb* artistic job in his choice of sketchers.

While Daisy was channeling her powers, Bill Swift, on Xeon, and Edward Hand, Alfred Newman, and Saul Folstiklar had one last journey. They had to go to Zoton. From there, they would go to Earth. Lucifer was hooking them up with a space craft. They had all received special powers. Bill Swift was going to be able to change the schlaclak around him into shit balls. He'd hurl them at will. When they struck their organic targets, they would disintegrate nearly *completely* and stun the *shit* out of them. Alfred had the power of *spooge*. He could wizz a jizzum-cum line at people and send them into ecstasy. These *powers* were based off of what the schlaclak would *agree* on. Like starting a corporation, they couldn't be changed. Once you *decided*, on Earth, that you were going to make cars, you couldn't change your "power" over night into building air planes. It was as simple as that.

Saul Folstiklar chose *rubber bands*. He could hurl rubber bands of any size from his forehead. The *trick* to it all was concentration. If he thought about his *karma*--it was *bad* on Earth, for the most part--he would turn into rubber, temporarily, instead of hurling the bands.

Edward Hand chose *nothing*, as his super power. In the end, he was *given* something. "All I want to do is *fly*," Edward said. He got that and *more*. Edward was able to *fly*... and he was able to knock off his *hands* at any time... and they'd rapidly regenerate. It was cool. His hands would all be flying across town (or some shit) and they'd grab whatever they wanted to. They lasted a half hour and then they'd turn into dog shit--*untraceable* to the normal human, except when stepped on.

The four went to Zoton where they were to hook up with Lucifer (it turned out that his *brother* was the Prince of Darkness and all; he just liked to *call* himself "Lucifer") and they met up with Francine Cross. She had *hung* herself fairly recently--within the past *year*--and was sent to Zoton for a while. The *gods*, as they were called, changed their minds about Saul Folstiklar. He wouldn't be the lone champion of the rubber bands, after all. The Koagulates, still having power from far away, chose to *morph* Saul and Francine together. It'd be a hideous sight. The *rest* of the heroes could blend into society. Saul needed redemption. So did Francine. Here was a chance that they could get redemption *together*.

Together, when morphed, Saul/ Francine took on the name of *Blipwhip*, the rubber band, flying machine. Alfred and Bill were assured that *they* would be able to fly *too*. It'd take energy though. They would still need the space craft to get to Earth. It traveled *ludicrous speed* ("ludicrous speed" is the *only* description on Earth that could fully explain the *capacity* of the craft as it traveled many, *many* times faster than the speed of light; it was coined in the movie *Space Balls*).

In the following weeks after the article hit the stands about Ned Swift's encounter with Catherine Zeta-Jones' liaison, Bill and his buddies were on their way to Earth. It was as simple as that. They'd get there in six months. If they were traveling merely *light* speed, they would have gotten there in twenty-three years. "Thank God--or *whatever* it is--for speed travel," Bill said from the middle of nowhere.

"No. Thank *you*, Bill Swift," Blipwhip said sarcastically.

"Fuck you, cunt," Bill said to the side of Blipwhip--a two-headed *monster*--that said it. It was *Francine's* side.

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By the year 2012, Robert Wisdom ran a successful administration. He was able to get across his amendment that outlawed the *prior* amendment that made flag-burning illegal--flag-burning of the American flag and *sanctioned* flags, such as the Neekay ones. He was able to pass an *additional* amendment that made hemp legal. He was riding *such* a wave that medical marijuana was legalized with it as well.

In 2012, during his election run, a relatively unknown star by the name of Dianne Frostrail was riding along Hollywood Boulevard in her new convertible. She was high as a *kite*. She wrecked into a pole, it plunged down, it hit a bystander, and Al Gore had all the fodder he would need to run *against* Robert Wisdom. Dianne claimed to be glaucomic--she never had a *doctor's* prescription that said she was--and cited medical marijuana as a *reason* that she should have been under the influence. The new law stated--the Constitutional *amendment* that was passed, in other words--that drivers should not operate heavy machinery when smoking medical marijuana. It was public knowledge.

In 1988, Democratic contender Michael Dukakis was leading in the polls by as much as seventeen percentage points before taking a plunge and eventually losing the election that he ran in. George H.W. Bush successfully campaigned that Michael was a radical *liberal* (he even emphasized the "l" word many times, meaning "liberal") and that he couldn't be trusted. A man by the name of *Horton* had been released from prison in Michael's home state of Massachusetts and killed a family or *something* during his furlough. Robert Wisdom really couldn't remember *who* he had killed. He knew that he killed *somebody*, something, or... It didn't matter. He knew it was happening again.

Al Gore of the Green Party--the Democrats weren't trusted any longer and it was *known* that non-traditional politics was the wave of the future--started running adds about the girl who crashed into the pole on a late, southern California night. It stuck. There was nothing Robert Wisdom could do about it. He had all the intentions in the world to be the *best* person he could be. "The path to Hell is *paved* with good intentions," he said to himself as he turned off the TV after watching one of Gore's adds.

Gore was running on an environmental plank. That might have helped him out as it *was*. He was running on a pro-labor plank. That was *boring*. People got used to their treadmills. No, people did *not* run literal treadmills, for the most part. They got used to running the rat race though. They accepted their lots

in life. They liked the carrot. They didn't care that it was on a string tied to a stick and they'd never *reach* it. Labor was *boring*... but this thing about Dianne Frostrail? That would catch people's attentions. He knew it. He was right.

Ned Swift ran an article about Dianne in the *National Global Star*. It reported that she was a new breed of mutant. She needed the marijuana to stay alive. It wasn't just for her eyes.

No one paid attention. Ned cashed his check that week and thought what it waste it *was*. He began to wonder if *any* of his stories had any impact. They did. He just didn't know it. Some of them, like the one about Dianne, were in vane. That was just the nature of the beast. He didn't know it and was wrought with guilt for the first time since his childhood. He started to *care* about the world. It started to matter to him when things didn't *change*.

Anna rubbed his neck that night. He didn't care about the story afterward. There would be *more* battles. There would be more victories. There would be more frustrations. It was part of the game.

As Al Gore overtook Robert Wisdom in the polls in the summer of 2012, Bill Swift and his gang neared Earth. It would be a glorious journey for Bill, in retrospect. He learned a lot of the people that he was to conquer Earth with. Life would be better for him in the future. He'd finally have his shot at world peace. He didn't know that it was going to be tough. After the trip from Zoton, he thought it was going to be cake.

He was wrong.

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Woblenoft was a company that started its fortune in radio sales. It was in the nineteen thirties, at the height of the Great Depression, that they ironically got their big boom. In the nineteen fifties, they pioneered into the sales of televisions. They weren't *extremely* successful, but they held their own to the point that they stayed above water. In the nineteen seventies, as the Vietnam Conflict neared its end, Woblenoft branched into the sales of *color* televisions. That wasn't all. They partnered secretly with the Central Intelligence Agency and put rudimentary controlling devices into the sets that they sold. These *devices* were much like the Nielson boxes, but secret. They wanted to know *viewing* habits, and if there was a *person* in society they were interested, they wanted to know what would make this person *tick*. That's all they wanted.

In the nineteen nineties, Woblenoft explored that personal computer business at the *urging* of their constituents in the CIA. They would make computers that had microprocessors much like early pagers. They would report what people were writing, whether or not the person being studied was hooked up to the internet.

Ben Murphy had a vision that he was supposed to be president of the United States. He was wrong about what he'd eventually become. As fate would have it, he'd merely make it to the *second* highest office in the land. The CIA didn't like his ideas prior to this. They kept track of his writings. He didn't *advocate* the overthrowing of the government, but he made sure that people knew that it was part of

the country's *history*.

It's in our Constitution, he wrote one day, that we have the revolutionary right to overthrow our government if it is not fit for the people. It is not fit for the people, he wrote. What do I advocate? The overthrow of the Constitution itself! Why are we putting on the charade? It doesn't do us any good any longer!

Ben wrote this and didn't know that an agent from Woblenoft was looking in on his writing during a random check. Woblenoft *also* had certain precautions. They couldn't check on everyone. Ben's writings had a lot of words that were red flags. "Revolution"... "Insurrection"... "Overthrow"... et cetera, down the line.

Ben was no threat to Woblenoft. He was a curiosity though. It was *new* what was going on in the government. They had practices of opening mail from people that they deemed to be loose cannons. Through Woblenoft, they were able to get much more. They were able to see when a teacher would be receiving certain material. They were able to see how students thought, and not just how they *pretended* to think when they were to submit what might be suitable for good, ol' teacher. Regardless, the CIA had contacts that were strong in multimedia as well. They had *moles*. They had people that wanted to get ahead. They had people that were willing to jump through the fiery hoops and everything else it would take.

The CIA combined its contact with people from Woblenoft to people from Lloyd Cross' hit network television show based in Los Angeles, California called *The Nightly Buzz*. Ben was a fan of The Nightly Buzz--it rivaled Jay Leno for a period of time for the same timeslot--and watched it religiously during the nineteen nineties. When he began writing about insurrections and the like, he noticed *changes* in the show. He would turn on his Woblenoft television--he was loyal to the brand--after writing something on his Woblenoft home computer. He noticed strange things. The monologue would be centered around what he wrote. It was a joke. Most people didn't know what was going on and probably wouldn't care. Ben wrote about alien space crafts on purpose one night to test his theory. Sure enough, comedian Roni Blanchard was buzzing about alien sightings. This was *far* before Bill Swift would fly and other people in surrounding towns would experience alien phenomena on a large scale basis. Ben wrote about something *different*. Aliens could have been a coincidence. It didn't proven things concretely in his head. He invited over a friend to watch *The Nightly Buzz* with him to show her how it worked. He wrote about fish that talked with one another--fish that were supposed to take over the planet. *The Nightly Buzz* ignored his stuff that night and Ben was embarrassed. His friend, a girl named Violet, also had a Woblenoft television in her home. She wasn't watching the *Buzz* the following night and they knew it. Ben watched. A skit was done about sharks with lasers on their foreheads. It would be later used *coincidentally* in an *Austin Powers* flick. The sharks, according to the skit, were to take over the world, one country at a time.

It was enough for Ben. He was irate. Not only were they using his head as some kind of forum--he had yet to convince himself that it was *only* the computer that they were using to get their information--

but they were playing with his life. He felt like a guinea pig but when all was said and done, he felt like he was given a forum that he should not have been allowed to have. He was no one. He didn't believe he was a person of worth. He had revolutionary ideas but he figured that a million *other* people must simultaneously have the same thoughts, or at least *similar* ones. In the end, it wasn't Ben Murphy that the CIA controlled. He had no money. He had no star power. He had nothing. The CIA was trying to perfect a system. When Ben Murphy's behaviors were observed and it could be predicted what people might do under a microscope, Woblenoft televisions and personal computers would be *given* to people that were true targets. They would be given under the guise of sweepstakes, promotions, and many other things. They would be given to bookwriters. They would be given to high-powered celebrities. They would be given to voices on AM radio. They would be given to a *lot* of people. In the end, they would be teased if they went out of line for what the CIA wanted them to do. They would be affirmed when they promoted a CIA plank, even if it was unintentional.

The Woblenoft connection to the CIA had severe implications. Most people--the Ben Murphy experiment went worse than hoped for--didn't know they were being tuned like a guitar. They were oblivious. Nonetheless, a *ripple* effect is what ensued and it was the end goal of the project.

The CIA got exactly what they wanted.

Ben Murphy, in 2012, was a successful candidate for the United States' vice presidency. He kept the same Woblenoft computer that seemed to chastise him in years past. He didn't know if he was still being paid attention to. He didn't care. In his *mind*, every time he would fire up his computer, he was fighting fire with fire. Propaganda with propaganda.

Ben was preparing to write a speech that would blatantly call for a rise to arms. Al Gore, of the Green Party, had overtaken the lead in most polls across the country. Ben's running mate, Robert Wisdom, didn't know what to do of things. Ben wanted to go out with a fight.

A fight he got.

Ben wrote a speech about power brokers that ran the country. He named them by name. He identified their positions. In a routine campaign stop in Los Angeles, on *The Nightly Buzz* of all places, Ben was going to lay it on the line. Ben was laid on the line before it could all happen though. He took a sip of a cocktail in the lounge to the studio where he'd make his speech. It had "rat poison" in it. The term was generically used by the CIA operatives whom put it in there. It did the job. Ben went crazy that night, worse than being on five tabs of LSD at the same time with no prior drug experience. He didn't talk about overthrowing the government. Roni Blanchard brought out showgirls--they were the other guests on the show that night--and they stripped Ben down to the bone. The press loved it--the *rest* of the press did--and Ben felt had again the next day.

"At least he lived," Roni told his CIA informant the following day. "We could have *killed* him, you know?"

The informant didn't say a word. He secretly agreed that he could have been killed. More so, he believed he *should* have been killed. "We don't want *martyrs* though, right?"

“Yep. *Bingo*,” Roni said, then got ready to write his next monologue.

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Deborah Matenopoulis started off as a host on something that wasn’t entirely TV. Actually, it was *completely* TV, but taken to the extreme. She started off on what was known as *The TV Guide Channel*. She introduced new acts. She previewed shows that would be on. She did funny little things with her face that made people laugh once in while. For other people, it was just a place to get the scoop on what to watch.

Deborah, better known as Debbie, spent years with the upstart station and later branched into entertainment of her own. By the year 2012, she had a replacement--Jamie Lynn Spears, younger sister of then pop star, Britney Spears--and the channel evolved into something much more than it had begun. It was interactive. You could call--Jamie Lynn would answer phones--and request a specific episode of *M.A.S.H.*, for example. You could make plans to go out for the evening and not worry about missing Monday Night Football in any form because you could call the station and opt for a one-hour review of the night’s events, or even the full, three-hour game with different perspectives, as *options*. You could watch from the fan perspective, the *sideline* perspective (which include *foul language*, if you wanted the *uncensored* version), or even the traditional perspective, which was a mix of it all. You could get it in 3-D, if you wanted. The options seemed *limitless*. There was even an option, if you caught the game live, to interactively call plays through the “fan zone” on internet. This happened five times a game for each team. The coach had to comply or be fined a game’s paycheck. Most the time, the coach complied.

Deborah Matenopoulis worked for the CIA and was Jamie Lynn’s superior (though Jamie Lynn didn’t know exactly what she had become involved in) by the time that Robert Wisdom began his second bid at winning elective office of president of the United States of America. She had close ties with comedian, Roni Blanchard, though no one knew about it publicly. She told him that there was wave, after wave, after wave, after *wave* of people requesting, over and over, the night that Ben Murphy was stripped down to his shorts. On the east coast, where the show could be seen live, his pecker showed through his under shorts for about three seconds. It made people laugh. He wasn’t circumcised. That one in *particular*, before the censors got a hold of it in later time zones, got the most fanfare.

Deborah relayed the message to Roni, Roni made some calls, and a house band was called in to perform. This happened on the Monday after the Friday that Ben made his appearance on the television station. The house band’s name was *Long Chalk*. They were progressive, along the lines of *Destruction*, but they could be had. They didn’t want to change the world. That was not their M.O. They wanted women. They wanted *lots* of women. On the day after Ben was stripped down to his shorts, he and Robert Wisdom experienced a phenomena of modern politics: Their stock rose and their polls went through the roof. It wasn’t supposed to happen that way, but a lot of the things the CIA did to or for Ben Murphy didn’t turn out as planned. *Long Chalk* was supposed to come on--they were perverts in their own right--and they were supposed to strip down butt naked by the end of their show. At the end of the set they were to

perform, they would remove their pants, flash a bee-ay into the camera, and turn around holding their dongs, only they expected the cameras to “accidentally” catch full frontal nudity. It would throw things off. Ben Murphy, if he ever got crazy enough again to call for arms, would be ignored because he would be dwarfed by what followed him.

Long Chalk performed on *The Nightly Buzz*, per Debbie Matenopoulos’ request. They did well. They chickened out. At the end of their set, they grabbed their balls in unison. They thought it would be enough to catch attention. They thought it would be right for what Roni was expecting. They were wrong. They weren’t ever invited back on the show again. Ben and Robert Wisdom experienced another bounce in the polls in the following days.

“There’s no greater form of flattery than imitation,” Ben told Robert as they prepared for a campaign stop.

Robert didn’t want to pay attention. He knew his days were numbered. Even if he *did* keep up retaken lead in the polls, he didn’t want to be part of the government any longer. “I’m giving up, Ben,” he told him.

“I’m *NOT!*” Ben yelled.

He *wanted* Robert to say that at the very least, he would finish the election to its full extent. He wanted a chance to be prez himself. He wanted *something* from Robert and he was getting nothing.

Ben flicked off the channel that was showing comparisons from him to *Long Chalk*. “I’ve had enough *too*,” he said Robert. It was a revelation to him. He was surprised he was saying the words.

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Waldo Fleshman was waiting on the fortieth floor with Eddie Macral in the Turner building in Atlanta. TNT--Turner Network Television--made its way out of cable and onto mainstream television in 2010, two years prior to Wally and Eddie’s visit there. It didn’t matter much. Cable television was everywhere and even the internet had stations that would rival the big three original powers: ABC, CBS, and NBC. Fox Television basically turned into a cooking network--that’s what Waldo and Eddie called it--and ceased to bring the same fans that they had when *Married With Children* and *The Simpsons* were mainstays. Waldo and Eddie were getting ready to perform on the rival station of NBC, still the leader in late night television. *The Nightly Buzz*, *The Tonight Show*, *Late Night With David Letterman*, and TNT’s new *America Happens* vied for viewers every night. The advantage *The Nightly Buzz* had was that it aired a half hour before the other three.

Waldo and Eddie called for room service. They were waiting from Heidi--no last name given--and her friend, *Bloom*. When they got there, they were going to have a *good* time. They didn’t like to be bored on the road. Sex? If it came into play, it would happen. If it didn’t, it didn’t matter much. They would play Scrabble together--*Strip* Scrabble--and then Eddie would jerk off in the shower a half hour after they left, just to release himself. It’s the way he did things. He didn’t need any *rape* cases against him. If the girls were unhappy, that’s the way things went. There were always other towns.

Eddie's batting average with Waldo was roughly forty percent. They liked their odds.

Eddie spoke up to Waldo after he hung up the phone for room service. "Do you think they're going to *come*?"

"I don't *know*," Waldo said to him. "You *called* for them."

"Yeah." Eddie went into deep thought. "You know about *condors*, right?"

"Yep. You won't quit saying how they're the most important bird there's ever been."

"For *me*, Waldo. For *me*," Eddie said. Eddie went into deep thought again. He had a beer on his stomach, resting there like a barrel of oil rests on the ground below it. "I *have* a condor," Eddie finally said after having a sip.

"I know. *Heidi*. I know already."

"What do you *think* of her?"

Waldo cringed a little. Heidi wasn't bad looking. "I *don't* think of her."

Waldo wasn't *wired* the same way as everyone. He could get laid... or *not* get laid... and it was just the same to him. Eddie, on the other hand, had a thing about *nature*. It was *natural* to want orgasm with a woman. It was *natural*. He finally spoke up, "Heidi is my *condor*," he finally said. Condors in the wild began to become extinct in California. This was *many* years before Freight Train had a hit record. It was before Eddie's first *spooge*. It was before a *lot* of things. "She's my *condor*, you know?" Eddie said, knowing perfectly well that he beat it over the head *many* times in the past. "She's my *condor*."

"Clowns don't feed baby condors, I *know*," Wally said.

"Yep. They *tried* to save baby condors by feeding them worms. They wouldn't *take*! They wouldn't take at *all*, and you *know* it!" Eddie changed his tone a bit. "You've watched the documentaries, right?"

"A *millions* times with you, bud," Wally said.

"They don't *take* to human hands feeding them worms! Who *teaches* them this shit?! No one. Fuckin' *no* one!" Eddie paused and wanted to say more. He sipped his beer instead. It was Budweiser in a can. Wally didn't have anything to add so Eddie continued on. "If they put a *clown* puppet on the hand that fed the worms? Nah. They wouldn't take to that *either*. For some *reason* though..."

"...I know," Wally said. "They take to the puppet that has their *parents* on it. Simple as that."

Wally heard knocks at the door. It was Heidi and Bloom. He was sure of it. "I think they're *here*."

"Heidi's my condor mother. Don't tell her that. I could have had Christy Priddy *long* ago. Something instinctive wouldn't *keep* me with her. I still love her though."

Eddie got up to open the door. He let them in. Heidi looked a bit disturbed. She acted as if she'd speak up then just sped past Eddie.

"This is why I *like* her, Wally!" Eddie said. She was a bitch. Everyone else on the road treated the members of *Freight Train* as if they were *gods*. Not Heidi. Not Bloom. They took *work*. Eddie liked it. "You want some Bud..." Eddie held up a can of beer, "...Or you want some *bud*?!" Eddie asked. He got laughter with the second response. The *second* "bud" he was talking about was rolled up greenly in a little,

plastic, see-through baggy. “It’s you... or it’s *me!*” Eddie screamed.

Eddie jumped on the bed to join Heidi and Bloom. He bounced a couple of times. They looked disgusted. Eddie couldn’t be happier in life.

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Bill Swift’s space craft was getting ready to touch down in the Arizona desert on the night the *Freight Train* was getting ready to perform on *America Happens*. Eddie and Waldo had had sex with Heidi and Bloom, respectively, in the night before the performance. It was good. And they got to play Scrabble afterwards as well.

Bill’s appearance was changed nominally from the time that he was last on Earth. He was now a forties-ish man with graying hair. He had *some* wrinkles around his neck, but not much. He was supposed to look *like* the Bill Swift whom had roamed the planet years before. He wasn’t to *be* him. The Earth would go crazy.

Alfred was perfecting his talents during his whole trip to Earth. He got aim, and he got insight. Saul/ Francine, known as Blipwhip, got along to the point that they were going to make a *run* for things. They were going to have their chances at redemption. Edward Hand? He didn’t care much. He longed to give speeches again. He longed to be with young women. When he left Earth, he was in his mid-thirties. His mind still thought the same. He wondered if it’d be a distraction. He wondered if world peace would be *jeopardized* because he couldn’t control his urgings for young, beautiful women, in *bloom*.

Freight Train did their set. It went well. The band stripped down--they had picked up that it was the *intention* of *Long Chalk* to do the same thing--but they *didn’t* want to undermine Ben Murphy, as it had been the intention of *Long Chalk* to do so. They thought it would just be fun.

Bill Swift was picked up in the desert by Stevie Nicks and a waiting group of about a hundred. They were waiting a long *time* for it. They knew, early on, that *they* would be special in the redemption plans for the universe, more specifically with the planet *Earth*. They knew they had a role and they were willing to give it their *best*.

Bill, Alfred, Edward, and Blipwhip were shackled up in a mansion outside of Mesa. They were to be told what was going on. They were to be told where they could go safely, without having the press realize who they were. They were to be told *hot spots* of trouble around the country, and around the globe when it came down to it. They were to be told a *lot* of things. Most of all, they were to be provided *rest*. It was a long journey from Zoton. It was a *long* journey, but then again, the journey that *really* mattered was really only about to begin.

Bill wiped his head with a napkin. He was surprised that his *schlaclak* had coalesced so quickly. He was told that it would *happen*. He didn’t know he’d actually start sweating *tears* so soon. It was as simple as that.

Alfred looked around in his mansion. The first call he had to make was to the national government. He was going to report that a space ship was in the middle of the desert. Further, he was to

tell them that if they wanted no problems, they would neither trace the call nor try to figure out where the craft had come from.

Edward looked around and saw a jug of juice. He knew his schlaclak had coalesced as well. He wanted the juice. He asked Stevie for it, she nodded her head in agreement that he *needed* some, and he drank and drank, and drank, and drank. He finished it all without a thought for anyone else that had ridden with him.

“What the *fuck*?” Bill wanted to know.

“There’s more, Bill,” Stevie told him.

“I know... *but*,” Bill began. “He just doesn’t *know*!” he yelled about Edward Hand.

“I *know*. I use this juice, my hand comes on *quicker*! It’s as simple as that. ‘*They*’ told me so.” Edward said this then pointed upwards. “‘*They*’ told me, and quite frankly, I’m going to *listen*.”

“What about my *spooge*” Alfred wanted to know. “What if I needed it for a cum shot in your *mouth*!?”

Stevie knew the group was in order. She knew they had problems as well. “These personalities aren’t going to *do* it for you, are they?” she asked Bill.

“It’s all I’ve *got*,” he said. He was reluctant to continue on.

Lindsay Buckingham came from the other room with grapefruit juice. “This is what you *need*, sir,” he told Bill.

“I know.” Bill held it in his hands for a while, poured some of it from the pitcher onto the floor, then drank straight *from* the pitcher. “If *you*’re going to be an idiot,” he said to Alfred, “I’m going to be an idiot as well.”

Bill wanted laughter. None came. Alfred offered a *slight* laugh but it was sarcastic and slightly forced. “I think *you* need to leave!” he told Blipwhip. They had a mission. They weren’t to be seen with the other three *most* the time. They were to prowl the corners of the Earth. They were to report telepathically to the Koagulates on Xeon. Everything would be fine, or so it was the plan.

“I *want*...” the Saul side of Blipwhip said. He didn’t continue. Instead, he made motions to his mouth. He wanted *chips*, except that he was mocking the rest. Being that he was locked with Francine in his being, he didn’t *need* the juice, like everyone else. He was *programmed* different. And he was an asshole.

The summer of 2012 was heated in politics. Robert Wisdom and Ben Murphy regained the lead in the polls but it was short-lived. The year before, Al Gore had considered running for president as a Democrat. He was approached by constituents of Lloyd Cross from the CIA and told that they had an agenda for him. If he were to *go* by that agenda, he'd be given a billion dollars in various forms for his campaign. He'd be able to compete with the *Republicans*, in other words, for campaign-matching contributions. Corporate America was afraid of what had happened when Robert Wisdom's Libertarian party got elected. They thought it was a fluke--most of them did--but they wanted to make sure it wouldn't happen any longer. They had a plan

"You see?" a man had said from Ameriway in approaching Al Gore at his home in Tennessee. "What we're going to *do* is run you in *Coke* adds. You'll take pop shots at the prez--pardon the pun here--and you'll drink a *Coke* by the end. The *controversy*--you see?--is that your candidate--the one you're running against in the *Republican* party--is going to be sponsored by *Pepsi*! It'll all work out! He'll take shots at *you*!... and then..."

"I'll take shots at *him*. I see," Al said. He thought about it for a while. "It *sounds* good. It does. I don't *know*. What about the environment?"

"*What* environment? Between you and me, *nothing* is going to change."

"*Why*?"

"We don't *know*, Al. It's like that meteor that crashes into the Earth. There's no turning *back*! The Earth is *doomed*... but we still have time to have a little *fun*, you know?"

"Yep. Bye." Al shut the door on the man. He knew he couldn't operate as a Democrat any longer. If he *didn't* take the pot shot adds for Coke, another Democrat *would*. He knew it. And then he'd be driving a Ford, on TV, while his rival drove a Buick or a Cadillac. It'd be as simple as that. The *nature* of politics was changing. There was no going back to the stone wheel. Things were changing too *much*.

Al registered as a Green and didn't look back. The following year in 2012, he was in a dead heat in the polls. The Democrats were able to persuade Donald Trump to run for them. He did the Coke adds. Daniel Quartz--unscathed from the prior election but still trying to gain ground--did adds for Pepsi. They *hoped* to create a controversy: *Which one is better*? They hoped that Americans would see that there were only two choices. They *hoped* that there would be a subliminal message that voting for Robert Wisdom or Al Gore would be like electing to drink Royal Crown cola instead of the major two. They thought they had it wrapped.

As October rolled around the Fab Four, as they were being called (this consisted *not* of the four major presidential candidates, nor did it consist of *Freight Train* or even the Beatles), were stopping bank robberies, saving women from being thrown off of high buildings, and generally "saving the day" for many *other* people. They knew they had work to do on Earth. Bill, Alfred, Edward Hand, and Blipwhip were learning their *chops*, in other words, much like *band* learns its chops by playing in small venues at the

beginning of their careers--their *prospective* careers.

The Fab Four took on the world. The media *dubbed* them as so because there hadn't been four *things* put together like this since the Beatles. They saved the day over and over and over and *over* again. It was small potatoes to them. They were learning to *use* their special powers. They were learning how to get along with one another. They were learning what world events needed their tending. They were learning a lot.

The *other* four--the major candidates of the election of 2012--felt *threatened* by them. They thought they were undermining authority. In a way, they *were* undermining authority, but they were doing it with good *reason*. Robert Wisdom ran ads on TV in which Emilio Estevez and Demi Moore blew up banks. It was taken from the 1980's in a *movie* that was coincidentally called *Wisdom*. Robert Wisdom tried to imply that *he* would be doing the same thing. In reality, he had no *control* over the banks. They were a beast of their own. The *Fab Four*? They had control. They stopped bank robbers at first, and in Robert Wisdom's mind, maybe they should have been letting the bank robbers *go*, but they could have been doing so much *more*.

"Why do you think they're stopping bank robbers, Ben?" Robert asked his vice president one day.

"I don't *know*. They're not anti-authority. That's all I know."

"Maybe they're learning their *craft*. That's what I hope. Maybe they're going to do good in the *future*."

"Good for *who*?" Ben wanted to know. "You *always* have to pick sides on this Earth. You can *try* to be like a Buddha, but that's *impossible* nowadays."

"I like my *roots*. That's all I have to say. This *Blipwhip* character... He gives me the *willies*!"

"I know." Ben was serious at that. "I know."

The election of 2012 rolled around in early November and no one knew who would win. All four parties--the Greens, Libertarians, Democrats, and Republicans--had all had leads in various polls. For all practical purposes, it was a four-way dead heat.

Ben Murphy committed suicide on the day before the election. He had enough with government. He had enough with life. In the end, it was that he found out that Bill Swift had come back as a superhero. He didn't want to say anything to anyone--it wasn't like him to blow a cover unless he felt he *had* to in self-defense--but he wanted to be done with it all. He knew Bill had hung himself many years back. *The-Powers-That-Be* in the universe allowed him to come back as a hero. Ben thought there was something wrong with that. And then he hung himself and hoped the same thing would happen to him.

Ben was sent to Zoton. Robert Wisdom lost the election to Al Gore by four percentage points. Blipwhip stopped being showed on the media outlet stations (the secret wasn't kept for very long that "it" was on Earth) because of the hideous nature of its being. Bill Swift was in high demand. He was in *higher* demand than new president, Al Gore. It made Al mad. It set the stage for a showdown. In the end, no one would be happy. The Earth would be torn to pieces twelve years later and it'd be the result of their *feud*.

"I have to *tell* you something, people!" Bill Swift proclaimed from the steps of a building in

Hawaii in January of 2013. Al Gore was to be sworn in as the president of the United States of America in three and a half hours. There were cameras all over the place. Alfred Newman was to Bill's right and Blipwhip, in a surprise appearance, was to Bill's left. Edward Hand was in the audience and checking the crowd for potential troublemakers. He would subdue any of them with his flying hands if trouble was made.

The crowd rustled a little.

A pause ensued as Bill thought the best way to proclaim the thing he had to say. "In the Old Testament..."

A heckler shouted something out about not bringing up religion. Edward Hand projected one of his hands off him. A new one would be reformed within five minutes. The hand that took off flew to the heckler, bitch-slapped him, then disintegrated into dog dookie in front of the person. People looked on in stunned amazement. A lady yelled out, "You're no better than *they* are!!!"

"I *know*. I have something to *say*, dear lady," Bill said. "I... HAVE... the *POWER*! It's as simple as that. If you want to be *bitch slapped* by Edward's other hand, *doubt* me on the subject. As a matter of *fact*..." Bill paused, pointed to the women, then a diarrhea projectile was sent toward her. She fell in amazement before it could hit her. "The *issue* of evil, people... Let's see?" He thought of a way to say it. "There *is* no evil anymore. It's about who has power... and who *doesn't*!"

The crowd laughed. It was manufactured laughter. They kept on for about five minutes and Bill reveled in the glory of it all.

"These *cameras*," he finally said when they started to die down. "Are here for a reason." He made a waving motion with his left arm to display the hundred-plus cameras from around the world that came to film him and his buddies. "They *know*. And I'm not going to *HIDE*! I am not *evil*, folks. I *will* kick your ass if you *cross* me! Goddammit!..." Bill had to compose himself. He felt a stink from his ears. Whenever he got angry, fart-like smells would exude from him. It was a byproduct of the gift he had been given.

Bill composed himself but he felt embarrassed. The lady heckler who had challenged him minutes ago was gaining her consciousness. She was being let out the side of the crowd near the edge of the building.

"I will *kill* Al, if he makes you guys *pay*!"

There were thunderous applause and roars from this last sincere statement from Bill Swift.

A little more than three and a half hours later, Al Gore dismissed Bill Swift as a freak. "If he *threatens* you again," Al said during his acceptance speech. "I *will* shoot a nuke up his ass!" He expected laughter from the crowd but got nothing. He continued on as if it didn't phase him. "He *has* to live by the rules. We *all* do... me most of *all*! I'm a *servant* to you, people!" He said.

Al got his laughter. It was at his most recent statement.

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Years before Al Gore was elected president, Ralph Connors reigned in the Whitehouse. When he got his anti-flag burning amendment passed and Neekay signed on as the country's first endorser of the new flag licensing concept, he erected two ceremonial flags next to his Old Glory. One of them, obviously, was the new Neekay flag. It was to send a message to the rest of the world that they were going to take the new licensing concept seriously. They *did* take it seriously.

The other flag that flew next to Old Glory was England's Union Jack. "America--you see?--is in *partnership* with our mother! You got that right! We need not deny any longer that we are truly kindred," Ralph said in a speech. In all actuality, he *supported* the Union Jack flying next to Old Glory. He didn't want it there when push come to *shove* though. It threatened his nation's sovereignty. Nonetheless, England and the United States were more like brothers, as of late in his administration, than that of a mother- sibling. He thought it would go over well with the public. It did. It also diffused any possible backlash people would have when they saw the new Neekay flag flying high on the Whitehouse's front garden.

Robert Wisdom had the Neekay flag removed during his administration. He *also* replaced the Union Jack of England with something a little more personal to him--a little more sentimental as well. It was *true* Old Glory, to him. It was the flag that had the large 76 in the middle of the blue field, and thirteen stars circling it. He *cried* on the night that it was first put up. He had let the other flags fly for a *short* period, but there were protesters on television that were burning his *new* flag concept for the Whitehouse. He cried, and he cried, and he cried. They were tears of joy though. "We have *America* back, *son*," he told Ben that night. Ben cried as well. They were tears of sorrow though, unlike Robert's. He didn't want to be in the Whitehouse any longer. He felt his mission was over. He'd trudge on for a few years, *nevertheless*.

Al Gore's first action as president was to take down Robert Wisdom's flag. It was *great* to Al. In spite of this, it *reminded* him too much of Robert Wisdom personally. He didn't want his ghost around, and he had his own agenda that he wanted to work on.

Al Gore's flag that he put up in place of Robert's was one of the Earth. It had a blue backdrop. The Earth. There were some clouds around the globe. The United States could faintly be made out underneath them. Overall, Al thought it was a better symbol for the *world*. It was a symbol of openness. It was a symbol of diversity. In his dreams, *every* nation would have this flag flying high.

Al was wrong about something. People *resented* the flag. Daniel Quartz took on the job as political host on a show known as *Everything America*. He said that Al was part of a communist plot to control the world. The *World Flag*, as it was known to Daniel Quartz and others (Al Gore called it *Gaia* and hoped it would catch on), was a symbol of the New World Order. Jerry Shuster, now retired from his ministry, thought about things that Daniel Quartz said one night and likened them to things happening in Revelation. Daniel didn't have *that* agenda, at least not publicly. He thought of the Greens as a large monster, a *subtly* one at that. "'Egalitarian' is a word that our friend, Mr. Gore, uses on occasion. I'm going to *tell* you something, folks," Daniel said during his newscast. "We've *had* this before. It's called *Communism*. Look it up in the dictionary, if you don't believe me."

Eddie's impression. Eddie spoke to Christy when she opened the door.

"Come on *in*," she told him. She had no interest in him and it made him mad. Eddie let himself in, sat on the couch--it was red with yellow flower designs--and then *thought* of things. He knew Christy didn't want to stay. Further, he sensed that this off-duty police officer wanted to take her out. She wasn't expecting Eddie. Eddie knew it, but he thought she wouldn't mind.

"I have something to *say*, Christy," Eddie told her.

Just then, she let herself out of the house. Before she reached the walkway, she dangled a set of keys in front of him. She felt sorry for him, and he could feel it. He thought that she wanted him to *take* the keys. Maybe it was a sign that he would be welcome later, after the *cop* left and all.

Eddie composed himself as Christy continued towards the police officer's Malibu. "I have something to *say*!" he yelled at her as she let herself in the passenger seat. She rolled down the window and Eddie could tell that she had *interest* in her face. "I don't know what to *do*! I had you in my life for four *YEARS*, Goddamn it!" He waited for a response, but Christy didn't say a thing. She looked like a model to Eddie at that moment. She was wearing a flowery dress--something you'd never see on the cover of *Cosmopolitan*--but she looked gorgeous.

Christy didn't say a thing. It was her police officer buddy that finally spoke. He didn't speak with *words*. He started to cry. He said, *Something's wrong*, but the words never escaped his mouth. His tears did all the talking for him.

"I have nothing to *do* with that man, Christy. If you're *seeing* him... Let me *know*. Please. Please, please, *please*."

A lady came up the walkway and prepared to let herself in the apartment next to Christy's. She didn't say a word but looked like she wanted to talk. She looked interested by what was going on.

"Do you *know* this lady?" Eddie asked the stranger that apparently lived next to Christy.

"I don't have a *thing* to say to you, mister," the lady said. She was about thirty-five years of age and had brunette hair of shoulder length. "I don't have a *thing* to say to you *either*," she told the police officer.

"Why are you *here*? You don't... Ah, forget it," Eddie said to the new mystery woman. For a while, he thought that she must have *known* Christy. He thought that she wanted to say something because of knowing her. He was going to challenge her on it. He knew the result though. If the stranger was loyal to Christy, she'd deny that she had any interest in the conversation. If she was an enemy or indifferent to Christy, she wouldn't say a thing because of not caring. It was as simple as that to Eddie. "I'm going to *go*," he said to the mystery lady. "If you know me, it's because I'm in one of the bigger rock bands on the *planet*! She--" Eddie pointed to Christy, then continued, "--used to be *mine*! Her heart never was!" Eddie paused, wanted to go on, started to cry a little himself, then took off down the walkway faster than Christy had.

He got in his car--it was a ninety-seven cherry red Mustang with a nice paint job still--and was surprised to see that Christy had come up next to him. Her cop buddy was right behind her, and Christy

seemed not to mind the additional company.

“What do you *want?!?*” she asked in consternation.

“I’m a *rock* star, Christy. I don’t expect that that’ll do anything to *keep* you. If I had you’re *heart*, it’d be great... but I *don’t*. I never did. I *know* now.” Eddie thought about Heidi and that way he felt around *her*. “You screwed my friends and I didn’t think anything of it. I *wondered*, *Why does Dave enjoy your company more than me? After all... I’m your boyfriend!* I *thought* things like that, but I never did anything *about* it! Don’t you see that I feel fuckin’ *taken!*” Eddie waited. He stopped crying but tears were still on his face. They were drying. He waited for Christy to react. He wanted to *hear* something from her. He wanted *closure*, but he was *afraid* of closure. In his mind, she was his first love. She was the person that he was willing to give it all up for. She was *perfect* for him, in his mind, but she wasn’t a perfect person *to* him. It didn’t matter. It was part of life.

“I don’t have a thing to say,” Christy said. She contemplated leaving as she got up out of his rolled-down window.

Eddie wanted more. He was now happy. He hadn’t seen her *real*. Maybe he never wanted to *see* her real. She went through the motions with him. When he needed a lady on his arm, she was there. When he needed a person to talk to, she was there. When he needed a person to speak *back* to him, she was *never* there. That was his problem with her. He thought she was a ditz. He was coming to learn that she wasn’t. She just had other people in the world that she liked *better*. There were people that listened to her and understood her, or so he thought. The cop was a one-eighty from Eddie, in Eddie’s mind. *Your first love is your opposite. I learned that somewhere*, Eddie thought. *Your second love is your equal. They are similar to you. This cop must be just like her. I’m nowhere like this cop, am I? We can’t be the same! Can we?* “I’m going to let you go with your cop boyfriend here, Christy,” Eddie finally said. He was happy with things in the sense that he felt he had a better grasp on what *reality* was. Reality was that she wasn’t waiting around for him. That helped him. He wouldn’t be on the road, in the coming months, turning down perfectly good *poontang*. He wouldn’t do that. He wouldn’t feel *guilt* when he was with another lady. Eddie had something he wanted to know before leaving and he asked Christy, “Did you ever love me?”

Christy had something before Eddie asked. It was “bye” and it was after Eddie said that he was going to let her go with her cop boyfriend. Eddie was in deep thought after that and asked Christy if she ever loved him. She wasn’t paying attention. Eddie sped off and let them do their work together.

As Eddie was leaving the parking lot, the neighbor of Christy Priddy came out from her apartment and flagged him down. “You have to *be* with me!” she said. Eddie looked at her face, saw the sarcasm on it, then thought what a *jerk* he must have been for believing that rock stars must have it all.

“What a fuckin’ *joke!*” Eddie said to himself. He put on the radio. Barry Manalow was playing *Mandy*. Eddie loved it. He stopped his crying, lit up a cigarette, then contemplated shooting himself when the song was done.

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“Two years ago, I started talking to Bill Swift. You *know* that, right?”

“Yep,” Stephanie Venezia-Barley said to Jeff Splifer. They were at a tavern that wasn’t far from San Quixote Community College. “I *think* you told me that...”

“...I don’t know *what* I told you, to tell you the truth,” Jeff interrupted. He held up a glass of draft beer. “*This* is what’s keeping me from remembering everything.” Jeff took a swig then continued, “The *anecdote* that I used in class the other day from what Bill was telling me--the *anecdote* that I’ve been waiting for--” Jeff paused, wanted to cry in joy, then resumed, “--is *somehow* flawed.”

“How do you know?”

“I *don’t* know, Steph. These *schlaclak*! They started *talking* to me in their dreams. Was it *their* dreams? Was it *mine*?! I don’t really know. I could go crazy just thinking about *that*!” Jeff started to foam at the mouth a bit from undrunken beer. He was “three sheets to the wind”. That’s a term he would use to describe himself the following day.

“Wipe your mouth,” Stephanie said with care. She looked around after handing him a napkin. Half-eaten crust sat between them. Steph worried that they’d be thrown out for lewd behavior. She didn’t know it, but at *that* tavern, with new *ownership*, you could pick a bar fight and be back the following day.

Jeff wiped his mouth, then continued on, “The *schlaclak* has a message for me and for *YOU*, Stephanie.” Jeff looked at her like he just gave her the insight that he was about to let her in on the original, *mysterical* (a word not known to the public but known to Jeff’s semi-drunken state) Riddle of the Sphinx. Stephanie was unphased and was actually becoming a little scared and uncomfortable with every passing second that Jeff didn’t explain himself. “They said to send a *message*!... righteo!” Jeff yelled, and Stephanie laughed. Jeff got serious after channeling his *mysterical* English brethren from beyond, leaned toward Stephanie, and said, “I... need... *you*, Stephanie... to--”

“Yes?” she asked.

“--pay... for the *tab*!” Jeff laughed, but Stephanie didn’t get it. Jeff was in hysterics, started slobbering again, then had Stephanie get off her seat to take care of him before he fell off his chair.

She wiped him clean around his mouth again.

Jeff waited for her reaction. He contemplated “sending his message”. He didn’t know if she was ready or if it even *mattered*.

Stephanie paid for the tab against Jeff Splifer’s wish. He said that he was just joking, but she wouldn’t take any of it. The next day in class, Jeff began his lecture by talking about the prior day’s events. The class laughed that he could be a blubbery slob at times. He continued on in *spite* of the laughter and continued, “Stephanie is my *friend*.” He noticed her coming into the room and said, “A *la*! There she is right now!” Steph took a seat and Jeff Splifer continued.

He talked about the *schlaclak*, as he did before. He said he was *wrong*, to a degree, that it was much like shooting a bullet by a small, drifting, white balloon, in comparison to the “light rays” known as *photons*. He said he was wrong. He said that in a *dream*, the *schlaclak* started talking to him. He said that each *schlaclak* is like the *Blob*, a movie character monster that *many* of Jeff’s students were still aware of,

for whatever *reason*. The *blobs*, known as schlaclak *COULD* break into smaller particles. It was rare, but it happened. And *when* it happened, it was like a chain reaction. Jeff brought up an anecdote--he was a master of it--about a movie he had watched when he was younger (he *actually* read the short story as well but that skipped his mind at the time of the story). The movie was called *Stand By Me*. There was a barf-o-rama that was going on (the classed laughed at the suggestion of it). The barf-o-rama started when one person puked, intentionally at *that*, and it started a chain reaction of people getting nauseous and puking themselves. Jeff paused then said, "The schlaclak is ready to *do* that, my friends. They're *leading* me to believe that the end is *near*!"

"I don't believe *shit*!" a girl yelled from the back. She pulled out a gold cross that had been tucked under her blouse. "This is my *Saviour*! He's going to *come* before it all happens."

"Doll," Jeff said. "This is a creative writing course. You don't have to believe a thing I *say*. Take it as fiction, okay?"

The girl hushed up, looked a little embarrassed, then said, "*Oh*!"

Jeff continued on. "The anecdote I gave you was *correct*. Schlaclak in it's most *common* form is like a speeding bullet passing by a drifting, small, white balloon. We don't have the technology--maybe the PIA has it and that's a different *story*--to *prove* that these passing bullets exist."

Jeff thought for a while, decided to let the class out for a break, then continued where he left off ten minutes later. Much of the class didn't return. They were scared by his "end talk" and Jeff could sense it. He decided to let the scared ones leave. He wanted to talk to the people that wanted to be talked to. He wanted an *honest* discussion when it was all said and done.

The girl that shouted out about her Lord and Saviour returned to the class. Jeff was happy.

"It's like a parachute, the schlaclak is. Fast as it *may* be compared to photons of light, it's still like a *parachute*. A bowling ball is *much* smaller in mass..." Jeff said.

The girl raised her hand and corrected Jeff after being called on, "It's in *length* that it's smaller in. It *probably* has a mass that's not *much* different."

"Okay. You're *right*," Jeff said. "It's the *surface* area. I think me and you are *both* saying that."

"Yep," the girl said. A guy two seats up from her thought she was a kiss-ass, wanted to say something about it, then refrained.

Jeff continued, "Schlaclak is able to travel *much* faster than light. If it *hit* a photon, it would bust it up or bounce *off* of it. Most likely--I don't know this from experience because I haven't learned *everything*--it bounces off in most cases." Jeff paused for the last time of the night. He said, "The *smaller* schlaclak--the one's that have been busted up like the *blob*--I want to tell you that it's like shooting a bullet through a hot air balloon. The *balloon* will stay in tact for the most part, I *think*. Either way, it's like dropping a bowling ball past a large parachute. I *think* that's what I want to tell you. Telepathy across the universe? That's what it's all about, people. People *used* to think on other planets, that it was all *schlaclak*. They were right. They just didn't know that the schlaclak breaks up into smaller particles and can *travel* thousands of times *faster* than a hot air balloon."

“You mean a larger schlaclak, don’t you *mister*?” Stephanie asked sarcastically, yet with joy, from her front row seat.

“No. I mean a balloon, I guess. I’m going to go now.” He put down his pen and left.

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Eddie Macral had a burning sensation inside of him and he couldn’t get over anything. He decided not to stay in his hometown of San Quixote. Los Angeles was not far--it could be driven there in less than two hours even with traffic--and there was a lot more action. He knew a lot of people in his industry. He could call up Heidi and have her flown in from Georgia. He didn’t want to do that. He could call up Beam Goodson and have a good guitar jam session. That might help relieve things. He opted out of it.

There was the idea of the shotgun. After a few beers, it was the *furthest* thing that Eddie wanted to do. Eddie crushed a can of Miller Genuine Draft in his hands, thought about how *different* it tasted than the bottled taste of the same beer, and said, “*Fuck* killing myself!” aloud to an empty hotel room.

Alexander Hamilton was killed while in the office of the presidency. Aaron Burr (Eddie didn’t know who the fuck Aaron *Burr* was, but his name was plugged in his head, nonetheless) had challenged him to a duel. Alexander Hamilton *accepted* the duel! “Wouldn’t it be *strange* if Al Gore would accept a duel from *anyone*!” Eddie said aloud into the room. “Wouldn’t happen. No. Not in *today’s* society. They probably want Alexander the *great*!... off of the ten dollar bill now. We can’t be reminded of *chivalry*, can we? No. We *can’t*! It’s unacceptable in today’s mode. That’s right! Today’s world can’t *handle* it!”

Eddie heard a thumping on his floor. Someone was knocking on the ceiling below him with a broom or something. “*SORRY!*” Eddie yelled. He passed out on the bed with a new beer cracked between his legs. He didn’t even sleep under the covers.

Eddie woke the next morning with a slight hangover. He knew what he wanted to do. He called his manager--the one that managed *Freight Train*--and arranged to be in a tough man contest. He didn’t want to do it with *anyone*. He wanted to challenge Christy Priddy’s new boyfriend to a duel. It wasn’t a duel of the *classical* sense, but it would do, regardless. If the man were to retreat, he would challenge his buddy from a rival band, Beam Goodson, to a duel. *That* would be a joke though. He would have fun with it.

Christy Priddy’s boyfriend accepted. Eddie had gotten his number from Christy, directly. The new tough man competitions in Los Angeles encompassed kick boxing as an option. That was the route that Eddie wanted to go. Since it was not promoted by a major machine and since Eddie Macral was not featured, by his own *request*, as a major card, the boxing event was to take place in a week. Eddie trained hard, Dean McJames trained *harder*, and he already had his police training *besides* that. The Fab Four caught wind of the event through the internet. Blipwhip had its eyes on springing events. This seemed to be a *hot* one. Alfred Newman was sent to watch. He was making sure that nothing happened out of the ordinary. Bill Swift would later show up but more out of curiosity than anything else. He could *give* a shit

if the place broke into a riot. He wanted to see some action and it seemed like the place to be.

The internet was a strange thing in 2013. All the hot celebrities were linked to a specific site by choice. They paid big money to make sure that they had the lowdown--the *same* lowdown as the new Fab Four was getting. George Foreman showed up to the event as did Heather Lockier. She brought her husband, Richie Sambora, and he brought Jon Bongeovi and the rest of the band that they were playing with. It was an event from hell.

Eddie Macral was going to fight in the third slot of events. That was the *original* plan. He wanted to be like everyone else. The *cards* were randomly drawn. When Howard Stern found out what was going on, he brought a team of freak reporters--Stuttering Jack had long since replaced Stuttering John--and he requested that Eddie fight in the night's *final* event, twelfth over all. Eddie had no say in it. All he knew was that he was *pushed* to the final card for some reason or another. The event's handler came and told him directly.

It was a freak circus, at the beginning: Tall man versus short man; big man versus skinny man; fat lady versus skinny dude; and so on. There was a frightening moment during the middle of the twelve matches in which an irate woman challenged her *husband* to come into the ring, unexpectedly. The man came in, she knocked him cold, then tossed him over the top turn buckle. Everything would have been fine except that *insurance* wouldn't have covered the man if he broke his neck. The night's events would *likely* have been called off... and that was *scary* to a lot of people.

The man got up off of the floor--it was solid concrete--after five minutes. The crowd cheered him. His wife approached him, gave him a hug, then kissed him on the cheek. The crowd would have roared at their making up, but they wanted to see more action. A man yelled from nearby, "Hey cupid! Get the fuck *out* of here!" People laughed at that.

Eddie got ready to fight the fight of his life. He kept a small plastic knife in his glove as a joke. If he was *really* getting his ass kicked, he was going to *pull* it on Dean McJames and hope the crowd got a laugh out of it. He didn't care. He *was* having second thoughts. He didn't even know why he was doing it.

Eddie was called to center ring. The crowd roared. They played "Death to Jesus" on the loudspeaker. It was a song by *Destruction*, close friends of *Freight Train*. Dean McJames was called into the ring next. The music changed. He chose *Mozart* to come in with. He looked calm. He looked collected. He looked *nervous* for fleeting moments. There was a *chill* in the crowd. His cape was red, white, and blue. His trunks could have come off of Apollo Creed of the Rocky movies, but they were somehow different. The *stripes* were slanted as if the flag was being blown in the air. "He destroyed our *flag*!" Dean said to a man near him as he passed.

"I *know*," the man said about Eddie Macral.

The fight began with a roar. It was scheduled for five rounds. The crowd thundered. Dean didn't want any part of initiating contact at the beginning then something hit him. *I've got to get in there*, he thought to himself. He went to center ring, where Eddie was waiting, and started jabbing him in the ribs on

Eddie's right side. Eddie didn't feel a thing and barely made an effort to defend himself. The jabs weren't meant to *hurt* Eddie. They were meant to give the crowd a *semblance* that Dean was at least *trying*. They were to make him look like he wasn't a *chicken*. If Dean felt enraged, he could have *broken* one of Eddie's ribs with one or two punches. He held back. He wanted Eddie to fight back with his initial punches. He wanted to *feel* the rage. He wanted to *operate* with the rage.

The rage didn't come. Eddie said to the crowd, after turning his back on Dean, "These are the people that *defend* you, people! They want to kill people like you and *me*! We are *rock* stars!"

Eddie was prepared to say more but he was rabbit punched from behind. Dean hit him with a serious blow. Butch Jackson had made it to the event as well and was prepared to enter the ring to *help* Dean.

"I've *won*!" Dean said and started to raise his hands, jump in joy, and blow kisses to the crowd as he circled the ring.

No one had declared him winner, but Eddie walked up to him and put his arms around his shoulder. "This is a defender of *freedom*, folks. Defend him with your *life*," Eddie said.

The crowd roared--*half* of them did--and a man, after the roaring was over (it took about five minutes as the two basked in their glory), a man finally yelled from the tenth row, "Kick his *ass* still!"

The crowd laughed.

Eddie went home that night. Howard Stern pegged the event as a publicity stunt for *Freight Train*. He had no idea that Eddie was willing to die that day. He wanted to know what kind of hands Christy Priddy, his ex-girlfriend, was in. When Dean didn't hit him with vicious blows off the bat, he knew the guy at least *cared*. He wouldn't tell too many people--Eddie wouldn't--but he thought he was a *fox*, actually.

"I've gotta get these queer feelings *out* of me!" he said to himself that night in his hotel room in Los Angeles.

"Shut *up*!" someone yelled from below.

Eddie went to sleep with a boner. He was thinking of a girl named Elaine Cassidy, Zotar's younger sister. It please him that he was still thinking of women.

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Dean McJames celebrated the same night that he won his boxing match (it was *kick* boxing, in all actuality, though no kicks were "thrown" in the match). He went with Christy Priddy, Butch Jackson, and two off-duty police officers to *Blinker's Pub* in Hollywood, California. They had the times of their lives. Eddie Macral didn't celebrate until the following week. He went with his buddy, Beam Goodson, and they lit up the town. Word was around that Eddie lost his long-time girlfriend and was exploring homosexuality. Nothing was further from the truth, but when an independent reporter from the *National Global Star* (not by the name of *Ned Swift*) caught Eddie and Beam at the *Whiskey-a-Go-Go* together without any *dates* and drinking heavily, the reporter confronted Eddie and asked him, "Are you homosexual, Eddie? You can be

upfront with us.”

Eddie responded, “I don’t know. I don’t *care*. If you want to *write* that I’m homo now, go ahead. I’ll even *pose* for you. You know why? More money for *me*! More publicity, in other words, right?”

Eddie posed for a picture of him about to kiss Dean. A story was printed the following week that they had been dating all along. Christy Priddy, according to the article, was actually jealous of Beam Goodson. In all actuality, she had no idea who he was, as was the case with *many* of Eddie’s friends. Dean McJames *fought* Eddie for Christy’s honor. That’s the way the paper put it.

Ben Affleck was coming off of his fourth divorce. He *wanted* marriage to work. He couldn’t make it happen. He looked to the wrong people. He *picked* the wrong people. The chemistry was simply not there. Unknown to Ben, he *tried* too hard. He held his wives tightly. *You need to treat them like they’re wet fish*, Matt Damon had told him candidly one day. Ben didn’t listen or was *unable* to listen.

Ben gave up on convention. He saw the picture of Eddie and Beam about to kiss on the front page of the *National Global Star* one day while in a Seven-Eleven. He picked it up, looked at Beam, called him up after tracking down his number, and asked him on a date. He *actually* asked if he was still dating Eddie, before anything else. “Publicity stunt, Ben. You should know that,” Beam told him.

Ben didn’t listen to him and *demand*ed that they at least meet. Beam met Ben at a cafe. He didn’t have a lot to *say* to him and didn’t intend to *say* a whole lot. He hired a photographer--a *private* one--to take pictures of the two men together. He wanted to be in the news. He wanted it to be out “mysteriously” that he was shopping for new food. He wanted to be gay.

Two months later, Ben had a *barrage* of proposals from gay men around the world. It was exactly what he wanted. *The National Global Star* wasn’t the first paper to pick up the hype. It was a rival paper, the *Blast Stringer*. It didn’t have the fanfare that the *Global National Star* had, but it did the job.

A month and a half after dating Dizzy Johansson, a millionaire that made his fortune in gay pornography, Ben proposed marriage to him and sent an open letter to Al Gore, president of the United States of America. The letter said that the ban against gay marriages needed to be lifted *right* away. Al Gore, in a speech given the first night that he received Ben’s letter, said that he tore the letter up. It was a joke. Not many people laughed. His Secretary of State, Tom Burman, was severely homophobic on the outside, but dreamt secretly of having sex with his father since he was fourteen years of age, and bellowed with laughter. Some of it was fake, but most of it was not. He was laughing at himself, but he knew the public would not know the difference. Tom was the only one that laughed in such a fashion in front of the TV cameras.

Al gave a speech that night that addressed the “homosexual problem” as he put it. He would later recant that it was a mix-up on words but *not* a mix-up in his message. He said that America was a place of *values*. One of the values that America had, in his opinion, was that it did not *allow* for homosexual marriage. “We need not turn clock back to the time of ancient *Greeks* my friends,” he said. A reporter would ask him where, then, we got our concepts of *democracy*, if not from the Greeks themselves. He had nothing to say on the issue, but rather continued with his speech, “I’m *trying* to say that we are *beyond* the

point where homosexual masters are not having sex with their young, male pupils. *That* is what I'm trying to say." A lady reporter asked if Al Gore ever had sexual relations with another man. Al admitted that he had *one* sexual experience, it was with Bill Clinton in the Whitehouse, people laughed, took it as a joke, and Al went on without knowing whether or people *took* it as a joke. "In summation, I have to say. Ben... You've got to *move*. Simple as that." Al held up the letter that Ben Affleck had sent him, tore it in half, and Tom Burman was held in silence.

Bill Swift was infuriated by what was going on. He decided to declare war on the United States of America, most of all, Al Gore. "We need to *examine* what his happening, folks," Bill told a crowd the next day in front of the World War II Memorial. "Al Gore, last week, demanded the removal of the *last*--the *VERY* last--plaque that signified the Ten Commandments in a state courtroom. He *did* that. I don't think he read the Mayflower Compact, people. Do you *know* that--?" Bill began.

Blipwhip was in the crowd and Alfred just arrived. They flew in separately without the use of jets or anything else motorized. They were getting *good* at the flying aspect of their missions. Blipwhip--the *Francine* side--smirked at Bill. Bill contemplated sending some kind of shit bomb at her face and refrained. Someone *near* Blipwhip caught Bill's telepathy and slapped it silly.

"Do you *know* that," Bill began again, "The Mayflower Compact *EXPLICITLY* says that we were to become a Christian nation?" A moan could be heard from the crowd of about two hundred people. Ten reporters were covering the event as well. "I bet you didn't *know* that. I bet ninety-five percent of you have never *read* the Mayflower Compact, the Constitution--*all the way through*--or the Declaration of Independence from front to *back*!"

"You're not *right*, Bill," Alfred said from next to him. "*None* of them in this crowd, reporters included, have read *one* of them, front to back. Not *one*," Alfred said. "I read their minds. I have that *power* now, once a day."

"Oh," Bill said privately to Alfred. He continued on to the crowd. "We have to keep in mind what we're *founded* on. Separation of church and *state*? That *means* that we believe in *God*, folks. It's *on* our fuckin' *MONEY*, for Christ's sake!" Bill composed himself. He could feel the stink from the anger coming on. He said, "Read your dollar: 'In God We Trust', it says. That's what it *says*. Separation of church and state means you worship God in your own *way*! *That's* what it *means*!"

The Francine side of Blipwhip tried to throw in a "hallelujah" but no one listened. The crowd roared. When they settled back down, Bill said, "I am going to *reclaim* this country! I am going to put Seventy-Six Thesis Statements on the front door of the Whitehouse door!" The crowd roared again. "First, and foremost... We don't have a magistrate any longer." Bill reconsidered his words and rephrased, "Most of you are *dumb*, and don't know what that means. It *means* that, 'No more Congress, no more *Executive*, no more Supreme *Court*!' That's what it *means*!" The crowd began to cheer again but were held from a complete roar by a collective feeling of awe and dread. "All is *fine*, folks. I *know* George Washington. Those of you that are *afraid* of losing your country--your precious, little U S of *A*--be assured that you lost it a *long* time ago and didn't *realize* that."

A man yelled from the third row of people. It was standing-room only. He said, “I *HEAR YOU, BROTHER!*”

Bill continued on, “I *know*, George. He’ll be coming back to this planet just like *I* came back to this planet. We *don’t* have to listen to Al Gore any longer. Your *new* president is your *old* president. His name is George Washington.” Bill continued on as the crowd anticipated something else. *That could be all that Bill was proposing, could it?* was a collective attitude.

“Al Gore removed the Ten Commandments, as I’ve said before. He said it was because of ‘separation between church and state.’ It is *horseshit* and we all *know* it. If it were true, my *Mormon* brothers would be allowed to marry ten women at a time. It *is* part of their history, you know? They’d *be* the same if the United States didn’t outlaw their practice.” Bill didn’t get much of a response from the crowd and didn’t really *want* one at the time. He was *building*. “My brothers with the last names of ‘Ali’ and ‘Mohammed’ don’t get to practice *their* religions in full. It is called *polygamy*, but the Koran, their holy text, allows for up to four wives. *We* don’t allow that in this country. Separation of church and state? I say it’s *horseshit!*” Once again, Bill scanned the audience. There was no response audible but he could sense rustling. It wasn’t an unhealthy rustling, in his mind. When he spoke, he had power. He was going to continue on with *force*. “Ben is a Scientologists now, my friends. His brethren say it’s okay for him to marry another man. The United States recognizes Scientology as a religion, and even if they *didn’t*? I won’t get into that right now. Even if they *didn’t*, man! Either way, he is now a Scientologist, we should respect his *beliefs*. I’m here, aren’t I? I’m a fuckin’ *alien*, for all practical purposes!” Bill looked up into the statues around him. He had a sensation that the CIA had planned for radical speakers and wouldn’t have been surprised if a nerve gas emitted from one of the statues. None emitted. He felt safe.

Bill stepped down from the podium. He did so without cheers. He did so without challenging Al Gore again. He did so dejected. He didn’t feel he *lost*. He felt he *couldn’t* lose. He sensed that if he kept on talking, he would have had *volunteers* that would have nailed his Seventy-Six Thesis Statements to the wall of the Whitehouse, or wherever he’d *order* them to nail them.

Bill, away from the podium, said to himself, “I need to think this over.”

Just then, an alien space craft appeared through the clouds. “You’ve done *well*, Bill,” an alien said. His face could be seen through the window. Only Bill could hear. The alien was talking in telepathy.

The story the next day was not the Seventy-Six Thesis Statements. It was the alien space craft. Bill Swift took his thesis statements to the Whitehouse lawn, wrapped them in cellophane, and tied them to a rose bush. If they were found, they were found. If they were reported, they were reported. If they weren’t, he did his job, at least *half* way.

Bill wasn’t happy with himself as he flew home that night. He was alone. Blipwhip, and the rest, did not accompany him. He didn’t want to *be* with anyone else. He wanted to be alone.

Al Gore was coming in from a jog that night at midnight and noticed the cellophane-wrapped document. He read it upon going inside. It made a lot of sense to him. He compared it to the thesis statements made by Martin Luther when Protestants broke from Catholics. They were remarkably similar,

and Al knew that Bill had done his homework. He gave them to his wife, Tipper, that night. “Censor them,” she said to him without yet reading the statements.

“They’re actually quite *good*,” Al said to her.

“Do you want to lose your *job*?” she asked him.

“No. I *don’t*,” Al said with affirmation. He tried to give her a hug but she pushed him away. “It’s the end of the day,” Al said to himself. He wanted to follow it up with a clever comment. He couldn’t think of one.

****Part Two****

* one *

Ned Swift was *furious* at what had happened at his paper concerning Eddie Macral and Beam Goodson. He was even *madder* at the fact that a chain reaction ensued that caused his brother, Bill, to be put on the line. He was mad enough to quit, but he didn't. He wrote a story instead.

The flying saucer was common news in Washington D.C. Elsewhere, it was *questionable* whether or not a flying saucer actually descended down from the clouds and nearly made a landing where Bill was giving his speech. The *photos* were there, but doctored photos were the norm rather than the exception in regards to alien space crafts. There was just too much demand to *see* them, as of late, and not enough authentic sightings. People didn't *trust* the Washington media, nor did they trust the *credible* papers which would make it national news. Ned wrote a story that the event was *fake*. It was contrary to what he was usually doing. In *most* regards, Ned had become a person that would write *fiction* about alien landings. Now, an alien landing nearly actually took place and he treated it like a fabrication. Ned wanted the *heart* of the story. It was known that Bill was talking about Seventy-Six Thesis Statements. He gave an example or two, according to the few papers scantily covered *that* aspect of the day's events. Ned made up his *own* seventy-six statements and implied that Bill brought them with him from beyond. He was half right. Bill *had* thought about doing something like this on his journey back to Earth. He never *articulated* it. Bill wasn't close enough to Ned, anymore, that he would confirm or deny it *anyway*. Bill had his mission. His brother was small potatoes, as far as he was concerned.

Ned said that Bill's forty-fifth thesis was that people needed to storm the Whitehouse, led by the Fab Four of *course*, and slit the throats of all that were in power. He said that the fifty-first thesis was that aliens would come down and set up an interim government to restore and maintain authority--a *good* authority. He said that the sixty-third thesis was that Al Gore's image, wherever it may have been via magazines, television tapes, or anything else, had to be destroyed. He said that the seventy-second thesis was that power would be given back to the *people* of the United States, when all was said and done. They would gain back their use of local utilities and the like.

Ned was *wrong* about his thesis statements--the *made* up ones. He thought it made for good fiction. He thought that maybe his brother would visit him and give him the *real* thesis statements... *OR*, he thought that Al Gore would release the actual statements that Ned believed in his heart he was eventually given. Until then, it would be Speculation City. People would *buy* his stuff until the end of time. He was sure of it. He had to have a *catch*, at the beginning. The *catch* was that one of the early statements had to come true.

Ned had been covering Daisy Michaels of the Republican party for quite some time. He stopped writing about Catherine Zeta-Jones--that's whom Daisy reminded Ned of--because the story was going dry.

Daisy stopped using the powers she was trying learn. Ned knew that if he could get someone into her life, things would change.

Eddie Macral was right about the publicity that he received from his alleged homosexual activity. It increased record sales and it was water under the bridge, as far as he was concerned. *Why does it matter what people think of me if I don't have a love in my life anyway*, Eddie thought to himself on occasion. It didn't matter if people thought he was queer. He was enjoying life. He was having fun. Slowly, but surely, he was getting over Christy Priddy, as well.

Ned sent Eddie Macral to meet with Catherine Zeta-Jones. It was *believed* now that Eddie was gay, so it didn't matter that she was married to one of the biggest men in Hollywood in terms of name recognition, Michael Douglas. There wouldn't be suspicion that he was hitting on her. His mission was to tell her--let her *in*, in other words--that there was a body double, a near *look alike*, that was traveling around in her guise and setting forth havoc via supernatural means throughout California. Soon, it would spread to the rest of the nation. After that, there were world targets.

"What do you want with *me*?" she asked Eddie.

"I'm a *rock star*," Eddie said, and Catherine began to close the door on him. Eddie shouted before the door closed, "I'm *in* the CIA *too*, don't you know?" It was a lie, but he thought it would hook her.

She opened the door and said, "Tell me more."

Eddie told her, after coming into her large living room, that there was a running debate between Bill Swift and Al Gore. He said it would end in catastrophe, if no one did anything about it.

"And you want me to...?" Catherine wanted to know.

"Bill--*Ned*, I mean; that's his *brother*--started writing *stories* about you."

"I'm aware," Catherine said. Michael Douglas came into the room at that time. He had been in the backyard and *looked* like he had been playing tennis. He didn't say a thing but Catherine went over to him anyway, kissed him on the neck gently, then prepared to make some lemonade. "I have some. Do you want?" Catherine asked Eddie.

"Oh. I *want*," Eddie said. He was beside himself and made Catherine blush. He *had* thought that *maybe*, being a rock star and all, she was subtly coming on to him. He was wrong. That's what made her blush.

"Tell me about the story," Catherine said as she returned with a pitcher of lemonade. She was drinking from a glass in one hand while she held the pitcher in the other. "There are glasses next to you at the bar, Eddie," she said. Eddie wore a tag that said his name. It was something he was given from Ned to give the impression that he was one with the paper. Eddie wondered if she *knew* his name from the band he was in or if she was reading from the label. "I have *more*," she said to him after he downed his first glass.

Eddie felt embarrassed and wanted to leave. He forgot his manners. He'd stay, unless kicked out. He knew it. It was because the *mission* was important. Not just to him--to the rest of the *world*, if Ned was correct about things. "This *lady* is using your identity, Catherine. Can I *call* you that?"

Catherine looked disturbed but nodded her head yes.

“I have to say, too, that I *feel* like I’m a hoax.”

“Go home,” she told him. She didn’t look him in the face and she was serious.

“I have a *crush* on you. You have to know that. That’s why I’m here,” Eddie said.

Michael Douglas didn’t say a thing. One of their children ran into the room and Catherine shifted her attention. “Go *home*,” she told Ned. She was more polite. She was holding a three-year-old baby and Eddie couldn’t make out the gender. He didn’t *read* the National Global Star much and didn’t keep *track* of these details. “Go *home*,” she told Eddie. She kissed him on the lips in front of her husband and her husband threw a fit. He gathered some magazines that were sitting on the table after a fire rushed to his face. He threw them off, but knocked nothing over. He tried to contain himself.

“I’m *sorry*,” Eddie said. He let himself out. He was happy. He knew in his heart that the *threat* wasn’t with Daisy Michaels, after all. It was with Catherine Zeta-Jones, herself. She had a *magic* in her kiss. Eddie never felt that way before. He’d never feel that way again.

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Francine, before becoming half of Blipwhip after her death on Earth--her *initial* death--had a crush on Alfred Newman that wouldn’t die. This was before and *after* Alfred passed from his original Earthly body as well. The irony was that the *gods*--if they could be *called* that--chose to hook up with Francine, in the form of *Blipwhip*, the person that *caused* Alfred’s death, Saul Folstiklar. Francine was transformed in many ways. In the obvious form, she was now a two-headed monster/ hero. She shot rubber bands through her fingers--her right or left side, depending on which side Blipwhip as a unit chose to *let* her do so--and she was able to fly on occasion. She was saving the day with Bill Swift and others. She was *redeeming* herself. Her karma, if she kept it up, would *release* her from Saul eventually, and she’d be her own self someday, somewhere *else*.

Francine couldn’t control her passion, even as a member of Blipwhip--even as a member of a quartet that were saviors to so many around the world. She still liked Alfred. He knew it. He thought she’d be able to control it. She did for a while, and then it reached a head.

A bank robbery was going on in New York City. It was a masterminded plan, and even city politicians had a stake in it. Blipwhip was called into action. So was Alfred Newman. Bill Swift was in Africa. Edward Hand was in Russia.

The robbery happened like clockwork. There were twelve men with overpowered rifles. There was a getaway car in the front that was being used a decoy. There was a UPS van down the street that would be the key to it all. There would be three transfers in vehicles within a one-mile radius. Cops would look the other way in some instances--they were on the take--and they would blame the decoys as the reason that they weren’t on the ball. There was to be fifty thousand dollars that would be stolen--not a lot for a twelve-man robbery--but *jewels* from safes would be taken as well. They were put there by the bank manager, himself, and in a series of what would *seem* to the public to be erroneous and near-random mistakes, the manager would blame a newly-hired employee as the ultimate responsibility for the

carelessness. As things were planned, the employee would feel the guilt and *freely* admit responsibility with the understanding that he wouldn't be charged. He would be wrong. Upon confession, he'd be slapped with a charge that would give him two to five years in prison. That was the plan.

Alfred Newman was getting good at *honing* negative thoughts. He *knew*, like a spider, when something was about to happen. He called Blipwhip via "mental telecommunications" and let it know what was going on. Blipwhip was on the case. Simple as that.

The robbery happened like clockwork, all until Blipwhip was able trace the final leg of the day's events. From the UPS truck, the robbers went into a beer truck. They each chugged a couple of brewskies, wished each other luck, waited for their *next* stop, then prayed a little. Their final stop was to be in a garbage truck. This was their demise, but it was not a *complete* demise, as things turned out. Blipwhip, being in control of everything rubber for given periods of time, was able to *track* the men (there was one woman with them, actually) by honing its capacity to *see* through the "eyes" of biodegradable trash bags around the robbers, as they sat around stench, hoping they wouldn't be accidentally crushed. Blipwhip let Alfred Newman know what was going on. Alfred arrived on the scene--the truck was speeding toward a barge--and he let out a huge spooge puddle underneath the truck's wheels. He knew it'd be the last of him for at least fifteen minutes. The schlaclak around him would need time to regenerate. Blipwhip, on the other hand, *could* have easily caught the robbers by descending upon them and wrapping them with projected, large rubber bands. Saul wanted to do this. In most cases, he had *most* control of the Blipwhip unit. Alfred was in trouble. He overshot his load. Francine was confused and thought that he was going to fall from the sky--he had been *hovering* over the garbage truck when he shot his huge wad--and fall to *another* death. She decided to chase after him. Her *will* was so strong that Saul had no control. She sped to Alfred, Alfred wavered a little, and she used her powers to sling a rubber mat onto the area beneath him, and it extended from power line to another. She had no idea--she didn't *think* of it at the time--that if you *touched* two power lines together that you generate *energy* between the connecting sources.

The rubber melted on impact. Sparks flew for a few seconds. Saul was furious. Alfred floated gracefully to the floor, without any help from the rubber whatsoever. The robbers got away into a Dunkin' Doughnuts truck. They weren't seen on the barge because they didn't *continue* to go to the barge. The jewels were recovered, as was most of the money. The politicians remained safe, as did their cohorts in law enforcement. No one *knew* who these guys were. Blipwhip blew it.

Alfred said to the Francine head of Blipwhip that night, "You *don't* need to save me."

"I know," Francine said. She looked at him like a teen girl would look at a movie star of her dreams. "I *know*," she said again, then dropped her eyes.

Alfred was disgusted. Consciously, he *hated* Blipwhip at that moment. The Saul side--the one that sent him to his initial death, years *back*--was disgusting to him. He was *redeeming* himself. He *tried* to stop the robbery. "Listen, Blipwhip," Alfred said after taking a swig of beer--the same kind of beer that the *robbers* were drinking earlier that day. "I don't *like* you. I don't like *either* of you. But *you*..." He addressed Francine. "You are *unprofessional*. You are going to get us *both* killed. You'll get us *three*

killed if you count *that* piece of shit that's next to you."

Alfred felt guilty after saying that. He finished his beer and then shot a nominal amount of spoooge into Blipwhip's midsection. It was enough to make the Blipwhip creature feel happy in the regard of the *physical* realm. It wasn't enough to relieve Blipwhip's confusion and anger at "the gods" that put them together.

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Christy Priddy was not ready to settle down in life. Dean McJames was a good guy--he was a *real* good guy. He was *too* good. He was like Forrest Gump, to her. Every time that she would flirt with a person at a club, Dean would be ready to *arrest* the person.

On the night that Dean celebrated his abbreviated victory over Eddie Macral in the ring, Christy went out with Butch Jackson, Dean McJames, and two of Dean's buddies that were off-duty police officers. *One* of the officers was Aaron Gribley. He was short, at five foot three, but he was a man on a *mission*. He liked to play rough. He didn't take a *thing* from alleged criminals that he arrested. In bed, he liked to use the handcuffs. He was small, stocky, but he had the *confidence* of a ten foot giant. He thought he was Tom Cruise, when it came to the ladies. He joked on the first night that they celebrated together that he would sleep with Christy. Dean laughed him off. In the end, Dean didn't know what hit him.

Christy gave Aaron her number one night on a later double date. Aaron was seeing an ex-hooker whom he recently arrested and Christy was surprised by it. He knew it wouldn't last but he didn't really care. He wanted the bottom line. *One* time--and one time only--he'd cuff her to his bed and whip her madly with a belt. She'd like it, and if she *didn't*, she wouldn't say a thing. It was as simple as that unless she wanted to spend more time in jail. Aaron had it *rigged* in that regard.

Dean got up to use restroom at the time that Christy slipped Aaron her number on a napkin. It said, "Call if you're not chicken... Christy 555-3091." Aaron put it in his pocket, didn't tell Dean a thing about it, then slept with Christy two days later.

The sex was good, surprisingly to Christy. She thought she'd be tied up--Aaron was bragging what he was going to do with his hooker girlfriend--and *regret* it. She didn't regret a thing. Aaron swiped enough drug rape drugs from crime scenes to be prepared. He slipped Christy one in a drink, she partook, and she was in for a ride. She had nothing to lose, or so she thought. Things were over between her and Eddie--she didn't like him much anyway--and things between her and Dean were stale. She thought that taking a chance on this madman might be worth it.

The drug kicked in and when she *realized* that she'd been slipped a substance, she didn't complain. She knew that complaining would make things worse. Further, she thought to herself that she might actually *enjoy* things. Aaron was five foot three. He wasn't much to look at, if you were to compare him to Hollywood models. It didn't matter. He *wanted* her. He could feel it and so could she.

Aaron was going to rape her and toss her aside if she complained about the drug. He was going to deny ever being with her and put her conveniently in the LA River. It would be off of his hands, and he

would mourn with Dean when Dean found out that he lost his love interest. Christy didn't complain. As a matter of fact, she opened up. She put her mouth on his pecker as soon as she could unzip his pants. Aaron had a camera and an idea. *Instead* of tying up Christy Priddy and beating her before he jammed his thing in her, he would take *pictures* of what was going on. He didn't like Eddie Macral. He had a bad *feel* of him. He wanted the pictures to go straight to the Freight Train web site. By then, he didn't even care if *Dean* found out. He didn't care.

The sex was good and thorough. Aaron set up a camera to catch everything and even took a couple of Polaroids. "*This 'll show him!*" he said aloud as he got a good snap shot of Christy's pooch. "This'll show that motherfucker not to mess with the *LAW!*" he said in enjoyment.

The sex was good to Christy. As a matter of fact, she would revere it for years. She let down Eddie, in Eddie's mind, but she didn't care. She was with a madman. She didn't care. She *didn't* want her picture taken but knew it was too late. Things were done, things were set in motion, things couldn't be *stopped*.

The sex lasted an hour. Aaron cried in joy when it was all over. He felt vindicated in life. He slept with a rock star's former love interest. He would be the talk of the precinct for a while, and he even thought that *Dean* might be proud of him for taking down someone whom seemed to be adversarial to him. He was wrong about Dean but he was *not* wrong about the way he was treated by the boys at the police station. They gave him a party. Christy would come by on occasion--Dean *tried* to take it like a man--and congratulate him. She felt like a whore, but she felt *included*. She wasn't living a boring life. Being a rock star's girlfriend wasn't all it was it was cracked up to be. There was a *lot* of waiting while her man was on the road. Beside that, Eddie didn't have a killer instinct. He didn't have the drive to tie up a lady or to rape her if things started to go wrong. He didn't think *twice* about using the date rape drug, but it was always consensual... and always with someone that *wasn't* Christy. He wanted safety there. He *got* safety, but he also got boredom. Eddie wasn't even sure that what he was using--*Extasy*--was considered a date rape drug *anyway*.

Eddie received the pictures of Christy from Randal Meyer. "I have something that's going to break your heart," he said to him.

In Randal's hands were three, large photos that were taken from a color printer. Eddie could see the first one and *knew* that it was Christy. She had a large cock near her head--an *erect* one of ten inches, from the appearance of it--and looked like she was licking the balls of a five foot two man. He didn't say a word to Randal as he took the photos into his hands. Finally, he said, "You *don't* have to do this." He didn't know exactly what he meant because the words just came to his mouth. He didn't feel like crying but felt like he had been transported into a sick, b-rate movie.

He eventually removed the first picture and put it underneath the others. The second one showed a cum wad apparently *splashing*, of all things, on Christy's forehead. Her sandy blonde hair was dripping with bits of semen. Her head held an oval that was black and large. It was her open mouth and she looked like she was having an orgasm by the expression on her face.

The third photo took the cake. Christy was lying on the bed, looking somewhat uncomfortable and *not* looking at the camera directly, next to a man, very short, in his boxers smoking a cigarette. It wasn't the cigarette that took the cake. It was what Christy was wearing. It was a *police* uniform.

Eddie ripped his shirt when he saw it. He wanted to cry but the fury that overtook him wouldn't let him. He yelled at Randal not to tell a soul but he *knew* that if Randal got it off the internet, *everyone* already knew about it... or was going to find out about very soon.

Eddie felt like crying but couldn't. It wouldn't be the last time he had that feel as a result of what was jammed into his head.

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Stephanie Venezia-Barley comforted Randal Meyer on the night that he told Eddie Macral what he had been sent to them, the band, through the internet. Dave was out of town supporting a local act from San Francisco, California. Randal felt bad that things had turned the way they did.

Miles away to the east, Bill Swift was back in the limelight. He had come back from Africa and had new insights as to how the world should be run. He thought about *history*, a lot, while in Africa. He wondered how things began. Even the aliens on Xeon were unsure about the Earth. Some claimed that it was *them* that started the human race. Some claimed that aliens merely started the quasi-bacteria cultures that life sprung from on the planet. *Some*--and they were in the majority--said that the schlaclak simply had enough. They claimed that they focused their energy on doing something exciting. It took them a while to evolve into human colonies, but that was okay. They were generally satisfied with the end product.

Africa is a place where anthropologists around the world believe that initial human life began. Where did the bacteria began? It didn't matter to Bill. It could have been in the ocean, it could have been in volcanoes, and it could have been in the clouds. It didn't *matter* to him. What mattered to him was human history. He *knew* that history repeated itself. He *knew* that there were answers in the beginning. The beginning would give clues as to how the end would be. A baby starts the world with no teeth and unable to walk. He evolves into a creature capable of getting to the Moon... and then the cycle starts over, inevitably. He learns to eat without teeth if he *lives* long enough and doesn't want dentures. A lady with Alzheimer's has no capacity to work in the real world, as does a baby. It wasn't the *perfect* analogy for Bill to be using in his mind when he thought of things, but it would do for his purposes.

Bill went to Africa with the idea that he'd save some villages from destruction. He saw human life. He saw people one with nature. He saw human beginnings, in a lot of regards. They weren't in the towns that had been formed. They were in the outback. They were in the jungle.

Many people claimed that human life started not *far* from Africa, in the Middle East. Bill didn't know *how* many people believed that, but he knew the belief was prevalent. *Maybe they don't think of black people as legitimate ancestors so they think of the Hebrews and their cousins because of Bible conveniency*, he thought one day. He wouldn't share his thought with the world. They needed to hear roundabout ways of protecting things. They needed to hear *solutions*. Solutions didn't arise from

ambiguity and/ or controversy, in Bill's mind. If they did, it took time.

Bill went to Africa, saved a village from an imminent flood, and was hero for a day. They didn't know him from the States because they didn't have TV hookups. Bill thought it was great.

Bill came *back* from Africa with some insights and he *thought* that the world ought to know what was going on. He called a press conference and held it in Boulder, Colorado.

"We are going back to the *beginning*, folks. We are." A man asked what he meant, Bill shot a shit ball at his face, the man collapsed to the floor but wasn't passed out, then Bill continued on. "I'm *saying* this mainly for the press. You guys are *stupid*. I'm talking now the general masses, of course. You've been watching TV for six or seven decades. It's made you *stupid*. If all the world's electricity came out of existence, you wouldn't know what to do." The man who had the shit ball land on his forehead said something, Bill ignored him this time, then Bill continued. Before he did, he said to himself, "That man has *balls*, at least. No one *else* here does." The man shifted in his seat as if he knew that Bill was thinking of him. Bill continued, "'Back to the Pleistocene' is what our friends in *Earth First!* used to say when they wanted trouble. They don't *exist* anymore, but that's a different story altogether. If they do, they are so underground that even *I* don't know who the fuck they are anymore."

A lady in the front chastised Bill for using cuss language. All of a sudden, Bill didn't want to be there anymore. He took off into the air (demonstrating his ability of flight quite *well* to the general public), snatched an eagle from the sky, petted it on the head for a couple of minutes, started to cry, and contemplated tearing off its head for the sake of demonstration. He wanted to know where the people stood. If they didn't react to the head being torn off of the national symbol, they didn't *need* to be in the Pleistocene. They needed to be off the planet, maybe on the Moon.

Bill petted the eagle, let it fly, contemplated talking, cried a little more, then tried *hard* to regain his composure.

Bill couldn't regain his composure. He was going to talk about early religion. He was going to talk about the first monotheistic religion of the Hebrews. Of *course*, they descended from polytheistic beliefs but most would deny it. He was going to talk about the Book of Judges and the Books of Kings. He was going to remind them how *judges* once roamed the land of ancient Palestine. He was going to say that *kings* had their lot as well. The *point* he was going to make was that if someone was writing the same history of modern USA, they would see an era of pioneers and cowboys. They would see an era of *presidents*. They would see a lot of things. For all practical reasons, the *book* that would be written of the United States, since the Declaration of Independence at the very least, that would or *could* be called *The Book of Presidents*.

All that is going to change, ya'll, he was going to say.

The eagle came back and landed on Bill's arm, while he sat and contemplated what *could* have been and what *maybe* still might be his speech.

Sports writers were around and they were ready to ask Bill what he thought of the Broncos and the Nuggets. Other reporters were around and they were going to ask him if he was serious about the Seventy-

Six Thesis Statements that made news in the National Global Star. They were going to ask him a lot of things.

The man who had the shit hurled at him had cleaned off but the rest of the crowd--about five hundred people--stood in silence as they waited for Bill to speak again.

The next era, Bill thought, *Is not going to be another Book of Presidents. It's going to be a Book of Heroes because we will rule the land.*

Bill said, "That's all I have to say, folks. Ask Alfred Newman--known as the *Spooger* to many of you guys--what he thinks about the Seventy-Six Thesis Statements. If you guys *want* them, we can have them." There was a hush in the crowd. "My brother, Ned Swift, printed false statements about me." The man who had the shit tossed his way gasped in genuine surprise and Bill could see it. "It's okay. The *crux* of it all was there... but I'm *not* going to slit Al Gore's throat." He paused. "I'll send a shit ball the size of *Canada* his way though." Bill halfway expected laughter and got none. Eventually, *he* laughed, but it wasn't at the joke he told. He laughed because no one believed him or *wanted* to believe him. "We can *have* it folks. *The Book of Heroes*. It's going to be an addition to your New Testament in the future. Trust me."

A reporter asked what he was talking about.

"I don't have anything to *say* to you, ma'am," Bill politely said. "I'll be having a web sight to explain what I'm doing. You'll get all the answers there... unless the CIA shuts me and you down."

"Then you'll have to..." a lady began. She was going to say that he'd have to send a shit ball their way. She was *afraid* of him, by now. He was like Midas. Everything he touched turned to gold, in the *beginning*. He abused his powers and was starting to sense it. He feared that he'd send a shit ball her way if she said the wrong thing. The lady sensed it and shut up.

"I'll leave you now," Bill said without looking at the crowd directly. He raised his hand in affirmation and started on his way.

The crowd went home that day and prayed. They didn't *want* to go back to the Pleistocene, or whatever the fuck it was. They wanted to live in the modern United States of America.

Bill knew something that the crowd didn't know. By the year 2021, the Earth was going to be in a financial crisis. At the root of the crisis would be misuse of the world's energy and resources. The have-nots would suffer from the haves. It was going to be that simple, but Bill couldn't tell them. He thought it'd work it's way out. He thought he might be wrong and alternative sources of energy would spring up from people *other* than petroleum companies, always dubious in their ways as of late, or from the government, whom protected special interests with all its might.

Bill flew home after he walked far enough away from the crowd. No one dared follow him in lieu of the shit ball that he had thrown at the man. Bill *thought* to go back and finish the man off. He didn't. It was in his mind, but he wouldn't manifest it into the real world.

Home, for Bill as of late, was in the Florida Everglades. He hung out with the crocks and the alligators. He wasn't sure which was which and even thought that they were *all* alligators upon further

evaluation. He liked it there. It provided peace. It provided insight. It was important to him.

No one cared about Bill Swift on the night that he arrived home in Florida. The news coverage was slanted toward Bill showing the man whom he shit balled where he could go. Upon the man looking at Bill in horror, Bill pointed far away, toward the horizon. He didn't say a word to him, but he inferred that the man ought to leave if he was going to speak up in a derogatory way.

In the end, Bill didn't realize that he was becoming like the country that he was trying to destroy. The United States lost its touch. Bill was losing his touch as well.

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Richard Gelding was upset that he lost the election of 2008. More so, he was upset at the *way* that he lost the election. He gave into his senses. That was fine with him and he could *live* with that. He got to sleep with a president of the United States of America. He was secretly proud of that, in spite of the fact that it took him down when video was released of it. He was mad at the system. His anger laid dormant for many years. He looked at Al Gore in office and wondered "what could have been?" quite often. He looked at the *new* opponent of Al Gore--a superhero from *beyond*--and wondered how *he* could change things if given the chance.

Richard Gelding wanted superhero qualities. It was rumored *strongly* that Bill Swift and his friends that went around with him--Blipwhip and the sort--were actually *dead* people that settled on another planet, transformed, and came back. Richard Gelding didn't want to die. It was furthest from his mind. He started thinking that he could *attain* the supernatural powers if he could contact an alien. Maybe he didn't *have* to go the route of dying.

Richard Gelding *prayed*... and he sought answers from books, cooks, and crooks. He sought answers anywhere he could *find* them. Eventually, he got his answer from a cat. "Pussy, is my name," the cat said. The cat was a hundred feet tall and black with a furry tail. "I am *Pussy* and you like me very much. I *know* you, Dick. I want you *in* me. I want you in me *bad!!! Meow!*"

The cat stood their in amazement because Richard Gelding started to break down into a cold sweat.

"I have all the *answers*," the cat said. He--it was a *she*, actually, when Richard thought of the name "Pussy" because it *had* to be a *she*--wasn't moving its mouth when it talked. It stood there and the thoughts came from the cat's *mind*.

The cat looked in amazement still. It wanted Richard Gelding but he would not come. The cat turned, as if to leave. Richard noticed the *stars* around the cat and realized he must be in space. He saw the stars and then he saw streaks of light. An alien--one similar-looking to the alien from *Land of the Lost*, a show he watched as a youngster--came out of nowhere and approached Richard. From behind him, there were *Sleestack*. Yes, it was a dream, and Richard was realizing it.

"I want *out*," he said. He couldn't *get* out and realized that he wasn't even heard.

“We heard you want *answers*,” the Sleestack said. It was the leader that spoke but it wasn’t *Enoch* (the one *known* as the leader from the actual show that he watched). “We *have* answers for you. You must enter that *cat!*”

Before the Sleestack could finish talking, the cat gobbled him up. Richard Gelding was sent into the cat’s tummy. He was comfortable there and started to dream. The cat nurtured him, in the dream, for what seemed like *centuries*.

Richard Gelding woke up and told his wife that he had the craziest dream. She said, “I *know*. I was there too. I was the *cat*, asshole.”

“No. The *cat* was the cat. That much I’m sure.”

“I was a Sleestack,” she said.

“I can *believe* that.”

Richard didn’t say a thing. He knew something supernatural was happening with him. Would he learn how to fly? Would he be given supernatural powers of telepathy, death rays from the eyes, or *spooge* projectiles as Alfred Newman had? He didn’t know. He waited for a sign.

Richard Gelding ate breakfast that morning--it was Tony the Tiger’s cereal and he ate it because he felt like a kid in a fantasy--and he noticed things floating around the kitchen. It happened for a few seconds and stopped. He heard a voice from above him and thought an alien space craft must be above. He went to the kitchen window, thought he *saw* nothing, and then there was a zip in the sky. “I *have* you figured out!” he yelled at what seemed to be a craft. “I don’t want to *do* this,” he said to an empty kitchen.

The aliens were testing him. They didn’t like Bill Swift as leader, any longer. They wanted someone new.

Richard Gelding disappointed them. It wouldn’t be the last time. They hoped he’d be more friendly upon the revelation that something spectacular was happening to him. They were wrong. They were okay with it.

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“The sexual response cycle is something that biologists know as a positive feedback loop. In other words, if you see a sexy lady--maybe she’s wearing a pink sweatshirt and you’re particularly *drawn* to pink,” Jeff was telling Stephanie Venezia-Barley during one of her visits to him. “I *think* of you, Stephanie, and I always *have*. I think of baseball as soon as I see your breasts in my mind. Do I want the image to *pop* there? No. I *don’t*. The body *works* that way.”

Stephanie took a drink from her mug. They were at *Pig and Gobbler*, the tavern that was located near San Quixote Community College. She didn’t say anything as she listened to Jeff.

“You know that they’ve done cruel experiments on *animals*, right?” he asked. He got no response verbally. He got a nod *yes*. “They’ve *done* these cruel experiments on *animals*, and I feel like one of Hitler’s henchmen talking about it.”

“Then *don’t*,” Stephanie finally said.

"I *have* to. It's in my mind and it'll *ease* what you're going through. You might have heard it *anyway*."

Stephanie didn't say a word but rather took another drink from her beer.

"The sexual response cycle is a positive feedback loop. I've *said* that. They do experiments on animals. What they *did* --it's not so cruel what I'm talking about compared to blinding rabbits with potential toxins that would be used in makeup--"

"Don't *talk* about it," Stephanie said.

Jeff continued like he didn't hear her, "--was to take an *ape*. I think it was a monkey, actually. Maybe it *was* a young ape. I can't remember." Jeff wasn't drunk. He wasn't the one that needed to escape at the time. "I've thought about screwing you for a *long* time, Steph."

"I know," she said nonchalantly. "I can *feel* it."

"I don't though. I don't even *try*. When you were younger, I *wonder* if I could have had you... and subsequently lost my job like Don Michaels, the guy that eventually got me fired a while back. I *wonder* though. You were vulnerable, young, looking for a father figure, and I *know* I could have done things to manipulate the situation."

"You're not here to propose. I can feel that as well."

"The sexual response cycle is a positive feedback loop," Jeff said for the third time. "The body doesn't *check* itself."

"What about the apes. What were you going to say?" Stephanie asked. She took another sip from her beer, poured more beer in Jeff's glass, and continued to listen. She wanted *him* to drink too, and share her pain.

"The *apes*? Oh yeah. They did these experiments..."

"...I *think* I know what you're going to say," Stephanie interrupted.

Jeff composed himself and carried on nonetheless. "If I assume you know what I'm talking about, I'm making an ass of both of us. Okay?"

"Yep."

"The *apes*! The ape experiment went like *this*..." Jeff continued on for a couple of minutes and explained that they did experiments in which a young ape was taken from his mother. He was put in a cage and there were two *surrogate* mothers, though they were fake. One of them was a skeletal remnant of a mother ape basically composed of wire and not much else. It *resembled* an ape, in other words, but barely. It had, near its teats, two real nipples that were made of rubber. The teats extracted milk from bottles within the faint skeletal structure when sucked.

There was *another* ape, in the experiment. It wasn't real either. It *looked* like an ape. It was furry, unlike the skeletal ape. It *didn't* have the capacity to give milk, or anything *else*. It *looked* comforting, but it wouldn't move. The baby ape would *choose* to spend the vast majority of its time with the *furry* ape. It couldn't hold, but it could give the illusion of caring, nonetheless. "We have this *instinct*, Stephanie. I see you, you're *gorgeous*, I love you as a *person*, but do I get milk from you? Do I want *comfort*? What *is* it?"

“I don’t know what you’re *saying*, Jeff.”

“I’m saying your *breasts*. They *do* something for me. And if I’m alone at night and watching television, I’m *drawn* to the same kind of people. I get *boners*. That’s what happens to me.”

“And then you jack off? Is this a *confession*, Jeff?”

Jeff blushed and tried to change the subject back to the sexual response cycle.

“I’m *trying* to say that *ANYONE* would jack off if they were in my shoes...”

“...Unless you have some kind of motive *not* to. Like watching baseball in your head.”

“Bingo.”

“There *are* negative feedback loops, right? Is that what you’re going to get at?”

“Yep. It was there, but not most important.”

“Tell me, and tell *him*,” she said. A police officer walked into the tavern. It was Dean McJames and he passed the two as if he didn’t see them. He went to the bar, ordered some nachos and a pitcher of tea, then sat in front of a large screen television set on the other side of the room. The rumor was *strong* in San Quixote, Miller and much of the area that he had dated Eddie Macral’s ex-girlfriend, had a falling out with her, then slipped into a mild depression. People felt bad for him because he seemed on top of the world after beating Eddie in a kick boxing match. “Tell me *more*, Jeff,” Stephanie said sarcastically after looking at him. She could tell that Jeff wanted to finish his story. Stephanie had a nurturing instinct that kicked in and she wasn’t even cognizant of it. “Tell me, Jeff. Do you *still* get off on me?”

“I HAVE NOT JACKED OFF TO YOU *ONCE!!*” Jeff yelled. “I think of baseball,” Jeff said, nearly apologetic that he let himself explode, “Because I *like* you. I *feel* that if I jack off to you, you’ll *know*. How? Call it women’s intuition, but I *feel* that I’ll lose you as a friend if you ever found out that I had fantasies of you.”

“Oh,” Stephanie said with amazement. She didn’t know. She finished her beer, went over to talk to Dean and let Jeff finish his own beer with his own thoughts. Before she left the table, she said to him after putting her arm around his neck, “You pay for the pizza and beer this time, *hun*. Okay?” She said it with sincerity. Jeff felt like he was married to her.

When she talked to Dean, Jeff thought about what he wanted to say to her. Part of him knew that she knew anyway. She was good at connecting dots. He said to himself, “I’ve gotta leave before I go *mad*.” No one heard. He was catching a slight buzz and wanted to leave before he felt threatened by Dean. He didn’t want a DUI. That would screw things up in his life.

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“You were throwing *shit* balls at people, though,” Alfred said to Bill Swift. They were high atop a mountain in Yellowstone National Park. They had managed to bring a keg of beer (they were immune to petty amounts of liquor and needed a full keg between the two to catch a buzz over time) and they were drinking from red plastic cups. “It feels like a *party*, you know?” Alfred said to Bill. He watched a goat leap upon a rock then continued what he was saying. “The *paper* said that you were drunk, probably, and

you were throwing shit balls *randomly* into the crowd.”

“They tried to protect me, huh?”

“Yep,” Alfred said. “They tried to protect you... and the *rest* of us, for that matter. We *are* associated, you know?”

“Yep.” Bill didn’t feel like drinking. His cup was empty and he didn’t refill it. Bill went on to say that he was going to take a crack a sobriety. He *wasn’t* drunk when he unleashed a shit ball at a man in Boulder. He was mad. He didn’t want people to oppose him. Alfred and Bill had made a habit with the other ones on occasion, of course, to unwind *somehow* or another at least once a week to gain perspective on what they were to be doing. Bill went into deep thought, contemplated continuing the conversation, then spit out, “I have a *problem* and I don’t know if you have it as well.”

“Tell me,” Alfred said.

“I have a *problem*. I am coveted. I *know* it. I can throw a shit ball at the Pope and I’d be jeered.”

“But you’d be cheered by many as *well*, and I know it.”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you. I can destroy a village. People would cheer me. Are they sick individuals? I don’t really know because I haven’t *thought* of it. If it was a village in Africa, where I *visited*, the racists in this country would say I was doing it for them. If it was a village in rural Russia, the capitalists would say it was a sign of some kind. I don’t really know.”

“You *feel* like you’re on top of the world,” Alfred said with confidence.

“No. And that’s the problem.”

Alfred thought about saying something else, went into a semi-lucid trance, then just stared at his cup. It was a third of the way full and he finished it off with a gulp. He said, “I *don’t* know what to say.”

They had time on their hands. They were in no rush to hurry the conversation. Bouts of silence would ensue for much of the day but Bill was ready to spill what he had been thinking. “I’m getting *good* at this telepathy thing. I’m getting *really* good. I can read people like a book in a matter of seconds. I can *do* that. The guy I shit balled? He was decent, but he was holding back the crowd and he didn’t know it.”

“So you showed him the *way*?”

“Yep. Immanuel Kant, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, or *one* of those guys...”

“...They were philosophers, right?”

“Yeah. *They*--one of them--thought that if you were doing the greatest amount of good for the greatest amount of people, you were committing a moral act. I *feel* like that sometimes. That guy I shit balled? I could have *killed* him... and I would have been happy if that’s what it took. He threw me off. He really did. I didn’t know what to do after that.”

Alfred didn’t say a thing. He looked rather scared. He started thinking that Bill was *amoral* in spite of his references to moral giants in Western traditional philosophy. “I *want* to say something,” he finally said. He took a drink from his beer, put it down, his *hand* started trembling, and he wouldn’t say a word.

Bill talked on and he wasn’t sure if Alfred registered half the things he was talking about. He was

talking about *intentions*. One of those philosophers--he was confused on the issue--believed that *intentions* mattered in moral judgments whereas one believed that the *act* alone determined whether or not something was right. Stealing was stealing, for example. If you did it to save a starving family? Forget about it. It was *wrong*, and Bill believed that it was Immanuel Kant that believed it in his time. "I have something to *add*," Bill finally said. "I don't want to *live*."

Once again, Alfred didn't have anything of consequence to say.

Bill continued on, nonetheless. "The *philosophy* goes both ways. Actually, it's the telepathy I'm talking about here. I CAN'T TURN IT *OFF*! FUCK, I can't do it." He paused. "And I'm *coveted*. That's the kicker."

"So you *think*..." Alfred began to say. It looked to Bill like he was going to rejoin the conversation again. "You're trying to *say* that..." Alfred didn't know what to say or he was afraid of Bill. He didn't want to finish his sentence.

"I AM *MAD*, Alfred!"

"I know. I can tell," Alfred said.

"No. You don't *get* it. I finally *do* though. I really do."

"When you say you're mad, it's because you're angry. Seems simple enough."

"But they call *crazy* people 'mad,' don't they? The public doesn't get it. They've forgotten the connotation."

"You're *mad*... because you can't get rid of these people that are reading you *back*..." Alfred said in a half-question, half-statement.

"Yeah. And there's *millions* of them now. I am *mad*. I am *crazy*, and I admit it. I am *mad*."

"Hitler was mad, you know?"

Bill took some time to think about it because he wasn't expecting that response. "I *know* what you're saying," he said to Alfred. It was a revelation. He changed his tone then said in a calm voice, "I have *no* reservation whatsoever about saving the world. I *can't* be mad when I do it or I'll be like him, huh?"

"I think *so*, Bill. I really think *so*."

They talked for an hour more. They talked about nature. They got halfway through their keg and left it up there for a later date. In the winter, it'd be cold again. They'd hide it like kids and hope to find it again. It'd be cold and it *might* be good.

Alfred said, "I *think* you lost your mind," to Bill.

Bill said, "I think I lost it too... to a million people, maybe more."

"Another euphemism for 'crazy', right?"

"You'll never know," he said to Alfred. He was surprised that Alfred wasn't going through the same, exact thing.

Eddie Macral watched a movie many years before that he had on DVD and watched quite a few times. It was *Mortal Kombat*. It was insignificant in the genre of teen movies to most people. There were subtle ways of life that the characters lived by that were metaphorical to real life existence. The movie was based off of a gruesome video game but it had a point. The protagonist of the movie was an Asian man versed the martial arts. He was instructed that he needed to do three things to succeed in his life's journey. He had to confront his fear, he had to confront himself, and he had to confront his destiny. Eddie Macral didn't care what his destiny was and he didn't care. He remembered the first time he watched the movie--it was with a friend by the name of Biff Doadley--and Biff yelled out, "Water is not an element! It's a *molecule!*" when the head master talked about the elements of the world: Earth, fire, air and water. It was funny to Eddie and he couldn't forget it. He *thought* of the movie for the reason of confronting his fear. It was something he tried to do since being inspired by the lead champion of the movie. He wanted to confront the fear that he had of Christy. He didn't think she'd kill him. He didn't even believe that one of her new cop buddies would do it of their own will or *want* to do it. He wasn't *paranoid* of the cops in *general*. There were loose cannons and he could accept it. By and large, he knew that paranoia begat more paranoia and so on. If he crushed it in his heart, it would go away on the other end. That was his intuitive belief.

Eddie wanted to do something creative with what happened with Christy. He didn't want to humiliate her. He wanted to put things in perspective. His band was still together, the public at large knew that Christy was an ex-girlfriend of his whom put porn of herself on the web with a police officer, and there was still a demand to see *Freight Train* live.

Eddie prepared the photographs. He didn't alter them. Three songs into a set of music that Freight Train played on their first tour since the incident of Eddie boxing Dean, and Christy sleeping with one of Dean's friends, Freight Train did a cover song of a Def Leppard tune. It was "Women". The song was epic in the way it felt to Eddie. Randal cared a little but it wasn't his bag. Dave played on like nothing was going on and checked out the women in the crowd while his wife, Stephanie, looked on at him from the side of the stage. Waldo was in a zone and when Eddie glanced at him, he barely knew if Waldo even knew what song he was playing keyboard for. Waldo knew. He was going through the same thing though and didn't say a thing to Eddie. Bloom was cheating on him and it ate him up. It didn't make national news, but it was happening nonetheless.

When Eddie sang the part, "I give you hair... *eyes...* skin on skin! *Legs... thighs...* what's that *spell?* *What's THAT SPELL?!*", his contemporary band mates sang along with him in the background--perfect harmony it was--and the *images* of the Videotron started to flash toward *Christy* sucking the pecker. Christy with the *spoooge* on her face... *and* Christy lying naked with her cop uniform on top of her (it was an image that Randal hadn't showed Eddie on that first day). Images were then displayed of Christy as a child of ten years of age. She was eating a rainbow sherbet ice cream, probably bought from *Thrifty's*, and

enjoying it. The screen showed her on the swing when she was seven. It showed her with teeth *missing* from the top of her mouth, but a big and wide *five-year-old* smile. It showed a lot of things and it showed Eddie holding hands with her in the end. They were on the beach and their images were nearly cloudy and silhouetted because the sun was going down behind them. That was the last image shown.

Eddie thought he was hung on her and he was probably wrong. He thought he was confronting his fear and he did. He *didn't* know that the crowd would react in a positive form. They roared. They asked for more. Eddie performed some more and then Waldo did a solo of "Yesterday" by the Beatles.

Many people thought *Freight Train* was becoming a cover band. They were wrong. For the next three hours, they performed nothing but original music. It was original beyond belief. The critics lauded it, surprisingly. Eddie didn't care. He took care of what he needed to take care of. It was done for the time being.

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Patricia Richardson--the one who talked to Ned Swift at the *National Global Star* about Daisy Michaels, a person that looked very similar to Catherine Zeta-Jones in a story that Ned eventually wrote--was wrong about what she reported. She didn't *mean* to be wrong. Daisy Michaels was a lonely, aging woman. She was looking for power in her old age and feeling very helpless. She joined the Republican party and thought that *they* would have answers for her. When they didn't, she turned to the occult and started channeling powers that were beyond her recognition.

People in the public at large don't realize that celebrities and world leaders have powers beyond their scope. They are coveted, and if Bill Swift was intimate in what his brother Ned was doing, he could offer him some of his recent insights. A celebrity basically, in general, has the option of sleeping with a million different people on any given night if *wanted*. Bill knew that he was going mad. He knew that telepathy was changing his life. He knew he was losing his *mind* to people that thought of him on a daily basis.

Celebrities go through the same thing--*many* of them do--and they always *have* gone through the same thing. Bill didn't know it. When he left Earth, he was a nobody. He was appreciated in town--the place where he grew up--but it wasn't to the point that at any given moment, he was *thought* of to the point that he couldn't handle his own thoughts. Thoughts *do* travel. The Beatles knew this before they finished their careers. They lost their manager and were told that happy thoughts would suffice in relieving any suffering he might incur on the other side of the life spectrum. Celebrities *after* the Beatles realized it as well. The public at large? No one in society is *interesting* enough to be thought of on a continual basis. If you're in love, you might have *one* person. If you have a loving mother.. and if you're an only child, you might have one person as well. You *might* have two if your dad has *any* regard for you. Most males don't work like that. They aren't nurturing enough and they *think*, quite naturally, of the next poontang that they'll be getting, even if it means being a slobbering, old dude in a rest home visualizing a chance to score with a lead nurse. Mothers are different. The public at large is different.

Patricia Richardson never got to experience what Catherine Zeta-Jones felt, but she had a glimpse. She was a celebrity by all practical means, but at the end of the day, she bled like anyone else. She had *visions*, like anyone else. She *admired* other people, like anyone else. She thought of her *coworkers* (Patricia Richardson was not the *star* of *Home Improvement*, the longest living sitcom series in syndication). “All the world’s a stage. We are merely players... performers and portrayers. Each another’s audience...” she said to Ned on the first day that she met him.

“...Inside the gilded cage. I *know* that one. *Rush*, right?”

“No. It’s *Shakespeare*, originally,” she said. She was trying to tell him that she felt like anyone else. She was trying to tell him that she was looking out for Catherine Zeta-Jones, though they didn’t *talk* much, and that a crazy lady by the name of Daisy Michaels was passing herself *as* Catherine.

Patricia was wrong, and it was an innocent mistake. She was sure that Daisy was causing havoc and she’d cause more, if given the chance. What she *didn’t* realize was that Catherine had witch powers beyond belief. She *knew* that this lady was trying to steal her identity, to varying degrees.

“Most people *know* that they are special, somehow,” Patricia said to Ned Swift. “It’s because they *are*. They have a billion people *thinking* about them at any given time--I *don’t*--and they can *chose* who they learn to listen to. I don’t know if it makes sense. I *like* Catherine, and that’s all I have to say.”

Ned didn’t know what to do and didn’t think much *of* it. He thought of an analogy. It was like being the general manager of a baseball team. If you had the power, you’d have the selection of a lot of *many* who to chose to make your team out to be. If you were *lucky* enough to be the Yankees, you’d have a tenfold power at the very *least*. They have a draw. Millions of kids dream of wearing Yankee pinstripes. It’s the tradition. It’s the mystique. It’s everything you can *think* of. The kids don’t release their thoughts, not even if they could.

Catherine Zeta-Jones was like this in society. If she wanted something--she had four Academy Awards by this time, but *that* wasn’t the determining factor--she’d have it. If she wanted to cut a three hundred hitter? She could do it and *still* succeed.

Ned thought about his analogy, pondered how much pull Patricia Richardson really had, then said, “You’re a borderline player, in my mind. Think of yourself as a baseball player. You play for your job. You love it, people love *you*, but no plaques are going to be made of your name in Yankee Stadium.”

“What? I don’t...”

“... Hear me out.” Ned thought a little further. “The *masses*... They are *desperate* people, though not one of them would say so. They *covet* people. By and large, they are not thought of as significant in this pathetic existence of ours.”

“So they like *me*?” Patricia asked. It nearly amazed Ned that she was *near* tears. She didn’t understand what was going on but she *thought* she was in the right place. She didn’t know it at the time--Ned didn’t let on the he had a secret *crush* on her--but she couldn’t be at a better place, or so Ned figured.

Ned continued, “You’re special. You really are. Ten years from now, people are going to remember Freight Train. They’re popular right now...”

“...But a *hundred* years from now?” she asked.

Ned didn’t let on that he *thought* the world might be ending soon. Instead, he said, “The history books only have room for so many people. You are a *footnote*. They’ll study the Beatles. They’ll study Elvis. They’ll study someone that came twenty years before the history book was written that appeared to be on the same path. You’re a dime a dozen--you’ve been on *TV*, grant you--but you’re not thought of. There are people on the Yankees that the common person doesn’t think of. Ruth will live forever, as will Gehrig and Mantel. They will live *forever*.”

“So you’re saying that because I’m not *thought* of as much as...”

“...I’m saying you’re in between. That’s what I’m *saying*.”

Ned thought of it further. He thought about wealth as an analogy. He thought about the billionaires in society. He thought that *they* had ultimate freedom because they had money, they didn’t *need* more money, and they were able to behave as if the world would never end. On the other end of the spectrum, *homeless* people have a sort of freedom that *no one* experiences. Ned knew from experience because *many* of his stories came from leads of ranting lunatics that didn’t even have a place to live. He thought about them. He thought that *they* have an ultimate freedom of sorts. What are people going to do if they don’t shut up? What are people going to do if they don’t conform to their wishes? Take away their *boxes*?

Ned thought about all this, he thought about Patricia, and thought she was clueless on many levels, not to her own fault. She was running a treadmill, of sorts. She *longed* to be like Catherine. She never *would* be. The universe allows for certain amounts of the same archetype. There is a *hero* in society (Bill *Swift* was the hero for a while), there was a *scapegoat*, there were enablers, there were peacekeepers, there were black sheep, and there were many things in between. When it came down to it, there was only one Marilyn Monroe. She was from a generation passed. There was only one contemporary Catherine Zeta-Jones. She didn’t command the same physical beauty that Marilyn once did, but she had something Marilyn *didn’t*. She had wits. She had strength. No one could pin what it was, but it was there. She was a mother. People didn’t even care.

“What you’re *saying* is that I’m in between--I’m neither a loser nor a winner, in other words... You’re *saying* that the masses in general are *losers*? *Aren’t* you, Ned?”

“They *are*!” Ned went on to tell her that he believed that you *care* for losers. That’s what you’re supposed to do. Corporate raiders didn’t know they were stupid. They didn’t know they were short-sided. On the other end, there were *millions* of people that believed they were the next thing to *becoming* a Patricia Richardson... or a Renee Zellweger... or anyone *else* that seemed attainable. They didn’t *know* that. “People still flock to Hollywood, you know?” he told Patricia. She listened and knew it was a rhetorical question with an *obvious* response so she nodded and let him continue on. “They *flock* here. They aren’t pretty. They are *stupid*! They don’t *know*! It’s like buying a fuckin’ *lottery* ticket, goddammit.” Ned thought that Patricia might be turned off by his tone, then continue a little more softly. “My job is to give them hope. I write about aliens that give old ladies recipes that delight their families. I write about Tom

Cruise, on occasion, secretly dating people that he wants to make it big. Does he do that? I don't know and I don't *care*. It gives them hope. They are *retarded*."

"They think of *you*, don't you know?" she asked Ned. Ned didn't know what to say, she changed her subject, then she said, "If these people are *thinking* of Catherine--not *me*--if they are *thinking* of her, what's the big deal in it all?"

"She has *choice*, don't you see? There are people that unlock doors for her. It's a slippery slope but in the other *way*. It really is. She started off as a good thing, she listened to the few people that would telepathically communicate with her, she took the *best* advice that she was given and disregarded *secretly* what she couldn't handle. She *did* all this, it made her successful, which in turn made more people think of her, which in turn made her more effective because she had more people to listen to, which in turn made her more successful, and so on." Ned thought of it for a while. Patricia had said that she got it toward the end of his spiel but he wanted to continue because was on a roll, and he was even revealing things to *himself* for the first time. He said, "She's *not* that pretty, you know? She's *not*. She looks great. I would *not* kick her out of bed... and I'm *married*, and so is she. She picks good roles. She makes people *happy*. People love her for it. That's all there is to it."

Patricia thought about what it had to do with Daisy Michaels. She didn't say a thing. She was sipping on coffee (Ned *always* had coffee around him to offer people) and she sat down and waited for something to happen that would finalize the visit.

"I'm going to write *good* about you, Patricia. I really am. I get the feeling that Daisy Michaels is *using* Catherine. I *don't* think she knows what she's up against." During this initial visit--the one that later sparked Eddie Macral to visit Catherine personally--Ned said, "Most people think they're over average. Do you *know* that, Patricia? By definition, only *half* of us can be over average. That's the law of the definition, for Christ's sake!" He composed himself, then said, "People think that they are capable of *love*. Not everyone is capable of love. I have a brother's friend in mind, and they both passed away. Alfred was his name."

"I *know* Alfred," Patricia said.

"I forgot. You *spoke* to my brother telepathically and that's why you're here. Alfred though, if you know the story, had a friend--she wasn't a friend in *my* eyes--that thought she loved him. In reality, she was a desperate lady that had nothing to live for. She made a last-ditch effort at what *she* thought was true love, of some kind."

"I can *relate*," Patricia said.

Ned wanted to kiss her because he noticed a *tinge* of desperation within her. He refrained and said, "This lady ruined his life. She really did. He *hated* her. I hated her as well, and I didn't really *know* her. She destroyed lives in concentric circles, but she thought she was *loving*. Do you understand what I'm saying? Or am I just making stuff up that can't be deciphered?"

"The *second* one," is what Patricia said. She wasn't desperate any longer. She was joking. She understood and Ned was happy.

“You remember *The Talented Mister Ripley*, right? The character in *that* movie thought that everything *he* was doing was right?”

“You see a *danger*,” Patricia said.

“Bingo. And my job is to stop it.” Ned was talking about the desperate people--the masses in *general*--that lived their lives like they were somehow meaningful, somehow believing all along that they were thought of by everyone they’ve ever met. In reality, it was a vacuum the way things worked. Ten percent of the people on Earth were coveted by the rest of the ninety percent. Beyond that, there was a top *one* percent that Patricia Richardson was not necessarily a part of in her post *Home Improvement* days. They were people that had *so* many people thinking of them at any given time that they would literally lose their minds. They would lose control of their thinking capacity. People would roam like *spirits* around them. Schlaclak would allow it. Most people--the vast *majority*--couldn’t relate to the subject. When asked who was enviable in the world, a common person would respond with confidence, “Catherine Zeta-Jones... *Maybe* that new actress, Blaine Starlight.” The common person--the vast majority of them--would honestly respond in the affirmative when asked, *Are you an enviable person?* the person might qualify it with, *If you took the time to know me*, and feel quite good about it.

Most people in 2013 didn’t know that envy was considered to be a cardinal sin by the Catholic Church for ages. Of course, they didn’t know that the Catholic Church was the cause for the Inquisitions either, since religious teaching had been phased out of public text books. Envy, though, causes pain in the real world. It causes paparazzi to stake out subjects that are admired by many. Admiration, in itself, is not a sin because it is controlled. The next step is overstepping people’s bounds. Princess Diana was killed because of jealous people that had no lives of their own. It was a strange paradox.

Ned thought about the things going through his mind, figured that Patricia Richardson never had to endure what her former co-star, Pamela Anderson, had to endure, and refrained from talking about it. He thought she was enjoying his company. He was tired. He didn’t want to *think* of the sick world any longer.

Finally, he asked in candor, “What do you think of television, Patricia? Can I *call* you that, by the way?”

Patricia had been sipping her coffee and not saying a word. She seemed shocked by the question, got up and grabbed her coat, then let herself out the door.

“What a fuckin’ *loser!*” Ned said to himself when she left. He’d use her information. Later that day, he’d confess to his wife that he used to beat off to her. It was a strange world.

Since the initial conversation with Patricia Richardson, Ned sent Eddie Macral to talk to Catherine Zeta-Jones, Eddie got in a fight with Dean McJames at a kick boxing match, Eddie had his concert in which he displayed internet photos of his former girlfriend, and *then* he got an insight that he didn’t expect.

Daisy Michaels had been harnessing powers of the universe---that much he knew. She wasn’t that successful at it but she kept on trying. Patricia Richardson, when she *thought* that she was talking about Daisy Michaels--she *had* been trying to double for her--was actually talking about Catherine Zeta-Jones.

Catherine felt *trapped* in Hollywood and in her *other* homes throughout the world. She caught

wind that someone was trying to be *her*. In return, Catherine thought it'd be a good idea to turn the *tables*. She went to Miller and San Quixote--it was something that Michael Douglas didn't approve of but went along with--and pretended to be Daisy Michaels. She would dress up like her, wear the mole or two in the right places (one was bigger than the other and she'd opt to just wear *one* sometimes), and go places where she knew that Daisy was welcome, expected, and *wanted*.

Catherine had a great time. She had powers of her own. They were on her lips. Eddie Macral thought that it was a psychological phenomenon what happened to him. He was wrong. As supernatural powers went, her kiss was as strong, if not *stronger*, than one of Bill Swift's shit balls. It'd cause an *orgasm* if she so wished. People channeled *love* into her. They channeled *hope*. She was able to transform this power to something into something different. She could knock people off their socks if she wanted. She didn't *want* that. She was ready for the world. She was living outside of the bubble that she had grown into because of envious people throughout the world. She was ready to change things. It would all start in San Quixote. If necessary, it would start in Miller, California as well.

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Ned Swift had told Anna Harcdomm--she was now Anna Swift, but in Randal Meyer's eyes, she would *always* be Anna Harcdomm--about the things that Patricia Richardson had told him. He didn't come out and spill his guts about it. He didn't mention that there was a moment that he sincerely wanted to kiss her. He told her about the things she had told him, in a roundabout way.

Anna didn't take much heed to it, but she remembered.

In the early winter of 2013, not long before the New Year, Freight Train was winding down their leg of the western states in America. They had started in Frisco, went up north to Fresno and Duckton, traveled to Portland then Seattle, took some time in Idaho, then started their way south again through Nevada and Arizona. They played a lot of small clubs along the way because it was their style. They were "unscheduled stops", as far as the public was concerned. People were given little, if any, warning. It would take away the scalpers and it would bring the *real* fan base out of hiding. They liked it that way. It would charge them for their larger shows.

Freight Train was to fly to Provo, Utah after the New Year arrived. From there, they'd go to Colorado and then they'd skitter across the western states they had missed then end up on the eastern sea board.

Before the New Year, Randal Meyer was in a funk. He knew what had happened to Eddie with Christy. Eddie had *stopped* playing "Women" after a few shows as a matter of catharsis because he got it out of his system. He knew he'd have to play it again if wind got out that it was any good. If he did, he knew he'd have to tone down the concert session on the Videotron for his *own* reasons. Waldo had admitted that Bloom was screwing him over. Randal never had anyone steady. He was an extravert that decided to play the field. He thought he'd *always* be that way. Dave was having a good time with Stephanie, his wife, by and large. Randal still slept with her on occasion and it didn't seem to bother Dave

too much. There were pretty women on the road. Whenever Steph would sleep with Randal--he didn't let her on a *long* leash in her habits--he would pick a blonde or a brunette or a redhead, of his choice basically, depending on the mood he was in. It all worked out.

Randal heard through the grapevine that Anna Hareldomm was sleeping around in Los Angeles. It went further than that. She was prostituting herself. Beam Goodson, a friend of Eddie Macral's, had heard it from one of *his* buddies and passed it along the way. Eddie didn't want to tell Randal because he knew that he had slept with her before, back before Freight Train was even born. Randal had a mixed relationship with her. One day he had yelled at her that *someday* he was going to treat her right. It didn't resonate in his mind on a conscious level for many years--it had been *suppressed*--but as soon as he heard that Anna was giving her body for money, he decided to find out *how* to get a hold of her without sounding alarms. Los Angeles was going to be the last stop that Freight Train had before they took a break and headed east. It would be Randal's opportunity.

Randal got a hold of Anna through the grapevine. He made sure that he wouldn't be busted--Beam was willing to help out in his own regard for the sake of Eddie Macral--and registered in a hotel under the name Jack Meoff. He figured it'd be funny. If she showed... and she was a *whore*, it'd be funny to her. If she didn't, he'd get a laugh at the *very* least when telling the story of the receptionist's reaction at the hotel. Her jaw literally dropped, but she went about things anyway because she recognized who he *really* was and wasn't about to blow a cover. That would have had repercussions in the industry because no one would want to stay there any longer if he were a rock star and wanted privacy.

Anna showed up and *thought* that she was going to see Beam Goodson. She had seen him a time or two and *couldn't* remember the details fully. There were a lot of men that she saw. She was getting rich. She planned to buy a house for Ned. He was doing good at the paper, but his wages were fixed. He wouldn't make it big himself unless he wrote a book of his own instead of giving all his ideas to a corporate paper, liberal as it was in relative terms.

She opened the door, Randal was masked in a silver setup that covered his face, except for his eyes. There were purple feathers coming from the mask and Randal's guitar was nearby.

"Do you want to tell me what this is all about?" he asked Anna.

"What *are* you? You're not Beam. But Beam wouldn't *do* this to me... I think," Anna said. She was confused and turned away from Randal.

Randal approached Anna after getting off the bed. He grabbed her by the arm and said, "Do you see what he's *doing* to *you*?" He was talking about Ned and Anna knew now. It was someone from her past but she wasn't sure that it was Randal. She didn't even know what Randal looked like any longer. She had stopped reading the papers about Freight Train.

"People change, huh?" she said aloud.

Randal had gone back to the bed and knew she wasn't talking to him. "It's Elvis Grbak. That's who I *am*," Randal said to her when she finally went toward the bed. He pleaded with her to accept it as a "maybe truth". He *had* heard that she had clientele of ex-athletes.

Anna didn't accept it on the inside but she wasn't afraid of him any longer either. She went toward him stooping down. She leaned over his tummy--there was a bulge there, not *too* noticeable--and said, "I *know* who you are now." She looked at a scare right below his tummy. "Why do you *do* this, Randal? *Why???*"

"Basically, it's like this. I *slept* with you one time--"

"I see. Go on."

--and I want to make sure that you're okay. I *don't* trust Ned, no matter what you say. You *think* you're in love with him," Randal said. He wasn't so sure when he asked, "Don't you?"

"I *like* you, Randal. I..." She didn't know what to say.

Randal and Anna didn't sleep together. They spent time together and they watched TV. Randal promised not to tell anyone that he knew--no one that *Ned* would know--but he wasn't too sure that it wouldn't get around the grapevine anyway.

Anna told Randal about things that Ned had told her, but she attributed it to Beam Goodson. She said that Catherine Zeta-Jones was a lady that was gaining lots of power. It was either her, or a look-alike. She explained things in a roundabout way then she said that her husband talked to trolls from underneath the Earth but refused to write about them. She *didn't* know if he was kidding or not when he told his stories. It was his *job* to be fanciful. Anna just wanted a peace of mind and thought Randal could give insight.

"There *are* no trolls. Where would they live?"

"Everything else makes *sense* to him. He's been making things up for so *long*... I don't *know*. I don't. And then weird things happen."

"*What* weird things?"

"Well his *brother*... You know Bill Swift, right?"

"Of course. I *talked* to him on the day he flew... right here on Earth before he came *back*! I know Bill."

"Well, if Bill can fly, why can't there be trolls?"

Randal thought about it as he sat upright at the edge of the bed. "I don't *know*. I don't."

"I think he's *kidding*. I really do. He has to throw *some* of us off in order to maintain sanity, right?"

"I'm sure he does. I'd like to meet him now."

Anna didn't let Randal meet her husband. She was afraid of a powder keg. She didn't get one. Randal took off to the *National Global Star* on the day after he slept with Anna--*slept* being the operant word since they didn't have sex--and didn't tell Anna anything about it. He told her not of his intentions before taking off at five in the morning, either.

"I *have* something for you, Neddy boy," Randal said to him.

"I know you. You're my brother's friend, right? Bill? You remember him? Right? Is that it?"

"I have *this*." It was a photo of Anna. "She *loves* you. Don't ask me how I know. I *know* these

things because I'm in a rock band."

Ned analyzed the picture. It could have been taken anywhere. There was no nudity and there was little hint of location. "Where was it taken?"

"Last night. I *slept* with her."

Ned blushed. He was embarrassed. "I *don't* know what to tell you and I'm busy."

He sped off to another office. Randal wanted to say something before Ned closed the door. Instead he followed him in after a five-second delay.

"I don't *need* this," Ned said. He *had* thought he was a secure dude. He wasn't. He was fragile. He had a great-looking woman and he even believed that there was something innocent between Randal and Anna at the time. He believed that but he knew that Randal was a rock star... and he wasn't. "If you *wanted* her... If you *want* her... If you *want* Anna--my *wife!*--take her now, please. Okay? Don't delay. But if I catch you with her again, I'll write you into oblivion. I'll say you're a *Barquori* in one of my articles." He knew that Randal had no idea what he was talking about. "It's an race of humanoids that transforms into trees once per year for about a week. They'll chop you down. People don't *like* trees any longer."

Ned left it at that. Randal was dumbfounded by what happened because he was genuinely trying to help Ned. Ned was in denial, and as much as Anna loved him and showed it, he thought he was going to lose her on any given day.

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Paul Foster Lawrence taught at San Quixote Community College and was good friends with Don Michaels, twin brother of *Doug* Michaels and relatively recently fired from his job for flirting with young women in his class beyond the scope of acceptance, and one time privately *acting* too far in the same scope. They were bitter at the world but Don, being in philosophy classes for most of his adult life, learned to rationalize it to the point that he wouldn't become diffused of his goals in life, which was to actually teach. He thought he'd be given a chance somewhere else.

Paul Foster Lawrence--going by *Professor L* most places--felt differently but he didn't *tell* Don about his full ideas. He thought it would be good to go elsewhere--maybe South Africa--to teach for a while. Paul was a teacher of sociology and taught such classes as *Marriage and the Family 135*, and *Self-Esteem in Modern America 196*. Ironically, he had been divorced five times and was barely above Maslow's lowest level of what was called his *Hierarchy of Needs*. This basically meant that he had food and shelter in life, but not much more. He didn't *like* himself. He didn't like life. If people knew that in his classes, he'd be reported, denied tenure, and even his *lowest* level of needs (according to Maslow) would be threatened. He didn't tell a soul and he taught his *Self-Esteem in Modern America* class like he was the best source of information on the subject. He *acted* like he taught for pleasure. *I could have been a book writer or I could have made more money like Tim Robbins used to... but I chose teaching because it fulfilled me best.* The highest level is *Self-Actualization* in Maslow's theory, he would teach to his classes

every semester. *I hope you reach the level that I'm at. I'm there. I teach for a living. What could be better?* When insulted, he would direct his anger, fear, and insecurity back at the source where it came from. He would refer to psychology--and he *hated* to do that since he believed *little* in the ability of the human individual to break form from the norm--and say, *It takes one to know one. I know you think it's amateurish, but it's obviously the only thing you'll understand. If I told you that there's a term for what you're doing--it's called projection in psychology--you're taking your fears and putting them on me. You feel inadequate. I know that only because you make me out to be inadequate without having met me for more than five minutes. You're putting your fears of self-inadequacy on me. It's a long semester. You'll get by. Please don't drop out.* Whenever Paul would say that, he would *secretly* hope that whomever it was that challenged him would drop his class the next day for public embarrassment reasons. Most the time, he got his wish. Junior College kids--as they were known to Paul--didn't have the certificates that he had. They wouldn't *challenge* him without fear on an ongoing basis. It didn't *matter* that they might have more self-esteem *or* even better knowledge of what it takes to operate a family in modern society. That didn't matter.

Don Michaels opted *not* to go along with Paul to South Africa. He thought that he had too much going on in the States, and though he had been fired and sued for sexual assault, he thought he could work *somewhere*. He didn't feel blackballed. Maybe he would work for the ACLU as a consultant. He wasn't sure, but he was going to try his options.

Paul, in the end, decided to go to Australia. It was an English-speaking country. It was a nation that was originally formed from criminals. Paul thought that Don might go along with him *eventually*, if not for anything else, but because of that reason. Paul would stop being called *Professor L*--he *knew* or *believed* that secretly, it meant *Professor Loser* to the people that would call him it--and he would make a new start. He would stop telling people--*emphasizing* the fact--that his middle name was Foster. *I'm here to foster you kids, okay?* he would say at the beginning of every semester. *Remember that. It's in my middle name to do so.* He would do all this and more.

Don, when he found out that Paul was serious about going to Australia, changed his mind and thought it was a good idea after all. He packed up his wife--she was a stay-at-home lady anyway--and invited his brother Doug and his brother's wife Daisy. They agreed. Paul took off with his dog, Engel, and Don took off with his wife, brother, and Daisy. On New Year's Day of 2014, they all arrived in Melbourne, Australia. It was a symbolic new beginning for them. They had forewent the celebration that typically came with commemorating the end of the year through New Year's Eve parties and packed instead. This, during that time that most people were having toasts and being merry.

Paul was a lonely man, but he felt energized by the new possibilities of the new land that he was in. He fought kangaroos on the weekends. He would dress up as an American in red, white stripes with blues fields here and there that had they typical white stars. He *thought* to wear the Neekay flag instead--it was outdated by then and a *Ford* flag had come in vogue--but thought the natives might not get it. He fought the kangaroos as a symbol. He knew that Australians, and much of the *rest* of the world, were

secretly anti-American. Their *governments* were typically pro-American, but they were pro-American on the outside in the same way that a person is pro-bully when he is a kid in elementary school. It's because you don't want to be picked on. You don't want to suffer wrath.

He figured that by fighting kangaroos, and losing *most* the time, he would be liked by his new neighbors to the south of the equator. He was right. He was able to land a teaching job there, and he was able to make a new beginning that was suitable.

Don Michaels had an easy time getting a teaching job and his brother Doug lived mainly off his pension that was sent from the States. He had worked in aerospace for much of his life.

Daisy Michaels was the wildcard. She had been harnessing supernatural powers in California and *thought* that leaving the States would leave behind, with her, the life that she had started to live. She was unhappy. She *always* was unhappy. She had been willing to leave her husband for Bill Swift at a time in her life. Bill died, came back to Earth, and didn't notice her. If she became powerful enough, he *might* notice her. They could become like Batman and Batgirl. They could be a duo that *ruled* things. In the end, she gave up on the idea.

The one that was most effected by the change was not Don, nor Daisy, nor Doug, nor Don's wife Hilda, nor Paul, *nor* Engel, Paul's dog. It was Catherine Zeta-Jones.

Ned Swift was right about things. The more people think of you, the stronger there is a propensity to go nuts. Bill Swift, his brother, was realizing the same thing and *maybe* there was a cosmic connection that was allowing them to think the same thing at the same time in life. They *didn't* talk a lot to one another, after all. Catherine Zeta-Jones had a lot of people thinking of her. Through Daisy, a virtual look alike, she was able to return to her roots again. What *Daisy* didn't realize was that she was able to harness powers *because* of her identity and her close looks to Catherine. She *looked* like her. People in markets would register it, but they wouldn't say a thing to her face. They would think, *Is that Catherine Zeta-Jones? Nah. Can't be. This is Miller weren't talking about.* Schizophrenics typically have lives that are off center. *Before* they are deemed to be schizophrenic, they are *typically* dubbed as eccentric, which by definition *means* "off center". Because of peculiarities--maybe they were in the paper for being at the right place at the right time, they helped a ladies that were being mugged in parking lots of Staters or other places, and they get notoriety of unexpected kinds--they live different lives than people that the grow up around. Peculiarities turn into outright *strange* things, in people's minds, because problems exacerbate. What *had* seemed like a positive--being in the paper for something *good*, of all things--turn bad because they are treated different. In an effort to fit in again, schizophrenics do strange things. These strange things are thought of, they receive more attention because of it, people begin to swarm their minds, they go crazy, and no one understands.

Rich people around the world have the same problem. At their disposal, they have law enforcement that will attack anyone that thinks too much of him or her. Poor people don't have this option. They are deemed *crazy*. No one understands.

Daisy thought about what was going on in her mind. She *thought* that her problems were based in

Miller. She was wrong. They were based in her mind. *A thought doesn't have location, does it? I mean, when you have an image in your head, where is it located?* she thought. She concluded that, since *thoughts* don't have location, neither does the mind in general. In other words, getting away from Miller was a waste. It didn't matter if she was in Australia. It didn't matter if she was in Miller, California. It didn't matter if she was on *Zoton*, a place she had heard the kids of her community talk about years back. It didn't matter at all. As a matter of fact, what was *probably* going on was that people were still thinking of her. Why? It didn't matter to her. They were *thinking* of her, and she concluded that going to Australia probably *further* compounded things in the sense that she was now a mystery of the *complete* kind by leaving people's presences.

Daisy didn't know it--there was a web page that was designed for her when she was with Bill Swift and Bill Swift started to fly--but people still *tagged* that web site at an alarming rate. They thought she *knew* something. She was right. It *was* because of the fact that people thought of her that she thought she was going crazy. It wasn't because of her likeness to Catherine Zeta-Jones, in totality. It was her association to Bill Swift that made it most intense.

Catherine Zeta-Jones, after realizing that her "soul sister" had gone to Australia, decided to make a trek down there as well. If anything, she'd make a *movie* there, if that's what it took. She was intrigued by Daisy, and she couldn't figure out why. Catherine was increasing in supernatural powers but so was her twin--her *near* twin--though they weren't identically related.

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Bill Swift was back in Yellowstone National Park with Alfred Newman. This time, he invited Blipwhip and Edward Hand. Edward Hand couldn't make it--he *said* he couldn't make it--because he was in love for the first time in his life. He was in Germany and he was dating a lady of twenty-one years of age. She was a vigilante, but not of the typical kind. Ever since Bill, Alfred, Edward, and Blipwhip started making national headlines and *global* headlines, she caught wind that things were changing. She could come out of her shell. Her family were Holocaust survivors in the past. They chose to stay in Germany, after World War II, rather than going to the UN-sanctioned, new-again, reformed nation of Israel. They had that choice but opted out of it. She was a Jew, but she was a *Catholic* Jew. She was Jewish--*Yiddish*, more specifically--by race, but she *chose* to explore that Christ may have been the Messiah that her people waited so long for, thus she was Catholic by religious journey.

She wore a suit when she went out at night that was made up of royal blue silk. Her mask was leather--she did that because she'd be in fights and she didn't want it yanked off--and she saw it as a means to an end (she was vegetarian in real life, but as a superhero, she would eat meat in public). She fought with tools that were rather archaic--there were swords, spears, knives the size of her fists, and Chinese stars; there was a ball and chain that she'd bring out on occasion that was spiked all around the ball--but she got the job done. Crime started dropping in Germany. She had buddies on the police force that would tip her in to important events. Of course, the police had to live by due process to a degree, but if *she* knew

about things--she went by the name of *Lady Protector*, when translated into English--it would be okay because she'd proactively approach anyone that needed approaching.

Edward Hand fell in love with her and they started dating. He was able to summon powers from beyond--he was still in mental contact with people and beings from Zoton--and he was able to supernaturalize her swords, shields, and other instruments. He tried to give her supernatural powers *directly*, but it was out of his grasp. He was given the knowledge that in *time*, she would *gain* them. She had to be virtuous in the eyes of the Koagulates--they had given the Fab Four their powers--*OR* she would have to impress Lucifer, and his horde--a *mounting* one--enough that she could destroy the world, if necessary. She couldn't have much of a middle ground, but she *did* have a middle ground that she was aware of and she couldn't shake. She wasn't into the bank robberies. It wasn't her thing. It was stopping polluters. It was getting straight to the source as often as possible. In the end, she was conflicted because she believed that corporate polluters--*government* polluters, for that matter--were stupid people that had short-side visions. Was it right to *kill* short-sided people? In the end, the answer was *yes* to her. She thought that it would turn on Bill Swift, because she knew that *he* felt the same way as well. In the end, Bill was wrapped in his own personal problems. While on Earth, he had Anna Harcdomm (future wife of his brother's) and he had Daisy Michaels. That was enough for him. Edward Hand had no one. He was a lonely, aging man when he died. He *died* to have Lady Protector. She knew it.

"Our friend, *Edward*, is in Germany right now," Bill said to the group of superheroes at Yellowstone, notwithstanding Edward and Lady Protector, of course. "He is *there*. We have a keg of beer here, though. We do. It's great, isn't it?"

The Francine side of Blipwhip was eating a roasted squirrel. Alfred went to get the keg of beer at the secret hiding place he and Bill had hid it in. It was there. It was cold. The Saul side of Blipwhip was in horror. He *had* been an environmentalist to a degree. It shuddered him to see Francine eating meat--*any* kind of meat--and she was doing it now without consideration to his feelings, as they were channeled to his side of their being.

When Alfred came back with the keg--it felt nearly frozen inside--he said, "There's no cups. I don't know where they went. A bear? I don't know. *Something* came and took the cups."

"It'll have to do," Bill said.

His agenda was simple: Take on the government so long as they had the power to screw the masses, in general. "We're going to *do* this, I tell ya'!" Bill said. He expected a loud cheer. He said it with the reverence that he said it with in front of crowds--*people* crowds. All he had in front of him were former human beings in the guise of superheroes, and he had a few squirrels that squirted from here to there. He looked at Blipwhip and noticed that Francine had *more* of an interest in her squirrel than she had in Bill's speech and proclamation. Further, he noticed that she was still hung up on Alfred. Bill noticed that when she looked up from her squirrel, mostly *gone* now, she looked at Alfred like he was going to bone her. He wouldn't do a thing, even if the gods put a *pussy* on the Blipwhip creature. For that matter, he wouldn't touch Blipwhip if it had a penis that cured envy. He was *envious* toward Bill--Bill noticed that only Alfred

paid attention to his proclamation--and he couldn't hold it in. Someday, he wanted Bill to die from his life. *When* that happened, he wanted to be just like him. He imagined that before--maybe it was *Ned* that was Bill's idol--Bill had someone in *his* life that he envied... and tried to copy step for step.

Francine--the Francine side of *Blipwhip*--tossed aside her squirrel. All the meat was gone. She said, "Rubber band *city*! Saul here doesn't realize it, but a healthy Francine is a healthy Blipwhip. We'll do *better* together if you just let me eat my fuckin' *meat*, SAUL!" She started to cry. Even superheroes cried, Bill was surprised by it, and it was being witnessed by the group.

Bill finally said, when all the blubbing had stopped, "Jules Verne knew that we would go to the Moon."

"*What?*" Francine wanted to know. "What are you *talking* about?"

"Fuck you, Francine," Bill said. He continued on in spite of the *stare* that she gave him. "Jules Verne *knew* that we would go to the Moon, as I said before. He *thought* that we would take a rocket--it was a large *bullet*, actually--and *shoot* it to the Moon. This was in the nineteenth century. He was way before his time."

"You're *saying*," a conflicted Saul-side-of-Blipwhip started to say, "That *we* have knowledge that other people don't have." It was half-question, half-answer.

"Bingo. That's it. The world *will* end... or *will* it? Conventional wisdom says *yes*, it'll end. I *don't* think the Koagulates are right. I *don't* think they have all the answers. I don't. I refuse to believe it. But Al Gore... Even if we weren't *here*. He's fucking things up so *bad*! He's fucking things *UP*! I don't think he knows what he's doing."

"Give us an example," a scared Saul-side-of-Blipwhip said.

"The atheistic thing. I mean... He's a Communist. Let's put it that way. He *says* he's Baptist, but in his first book about the environment, he was pandering the Buddha as *well*. He's all *over* the place, and in the end, it's his wife Tipper that he listens to. She's *big* on mental health. I don't know if Al goes through what *I* go through. I have a million people thinking of me at any given second, I *feel* them, I know they're there."

Alfred managed to rig up a temporary drinking cup out of a magazine that he had brought. He poured some beer into it, and started drinking. He didn't like where the conversation was going. He was a superhero, in many people's eyes. These things were to happen. He wouldn't *run* from it, but he would soften the blow with a placebo to him... known as *beer*.

"Al would have you believe," he continued on, "That Catholics are wrong in believing that they see Mother Mary, on occasion. If he had *his* way, he might string 'um up in mental health somewhere. I don't really *know*. All I have to say, is I have a bad *feeling*. People don't *care* anymore. Our *only* hope on this planet is that we turn back to God and supernatural beliefs. You know?"

Blipwhip nodded *yes* together. It was mostly the Francine side that was doing it.

"We *all* know that anyone *we've* come across hasn't come across God the Absolute, whether it be Allah or someone or something else. We've seen powerful *shit* though. The Koagulates think they're

strong. I *bet* they're just like you and me. Who knows? Maybe Zeus and his gang got tired with toying with humans and they started to take refuge in the delights of Koagulates' toils. I *don't* know. I really don't. If not *Zeus* though..."

"There's always someone *else!*" Blipwhip said. It was the Saul side, he was finally confident in what he was saying... and he was surprisingly unafraid at any wrath that might come from his selected leader for the time being, Bill Swift.

"The *world* knows me in different places as *Superhero One*. Why? I don't care. I need a message though. I need to tell *them* that they are nothing unless they start thinking of themselves as heroes. It's as simple as that."

Al Gore made a stop in Australia that was widely publicized. He was trying to convince the prime minister, Peter Doaknickle, to accept nuclear submarines and air craft carriers into the harbors of his country. Most people in the world were unaware of it, but the leader of Australia, for all practical reasons, was still sitting on the throne of England. Queen Elizabeth had passed away early in 2014 and Prince Charles, as he *was* known, was asserting his authority on the country. He was now king and instructed Peter *not* to allow the United States to push them around. Al, of course, wanted to *challenge* the status quo of the country's foreign policy. He did so not knowing what kind of fight he'd be against. King Charles, as he was *quickly* known in Australia, was respected and he wanted to *stay* respected.

Richard Gelding continued with his strange experiences from the "people from beyond", as he called them. They *gave* him supernatural powers to the best of their ability. He could fly, but only for a day or two at a time, without needing a break of two weeks or longer. He couldn't shoot shit balls. He couldn't send *spoooge* into the air. He couldn't read *minds* effectively yet. He couldn't send *rubber bands* into the air. His *gift*, that they gave him, was wit. It was incredible *wit*. He could set a crowd laughing without realizing the punch line of a joke that he just told. It didn't matter to him. The aliens knew that it was a quick fix. Giving him the ability to shoot *fire* from his eyes--this is something they wanted to *do* initially--would take too much time. Wit was easy for them... and it was *effective*.

Richard thought that his duty was to check Bill Swift. The aliens didn't hide the fact that they thought they might be wrong about him. They thought he'd be *too* out of control, when push came to shove. They thought he'd be too independent, the trait that they were attracted to of his to begin with. Richard? They thought they could control him accurately. Al Gore? They didn't care about him. He thought that the aliens were a farce all along. He had been to Area 51 (he *wasn't* permitted to go to Siberia and see the *real* stuff) and seen the aliens himself. For fleeting moments, he found himself believing. "It's like watching Jurassic Park, my dears friends," he told a crowd of advisors before taking off to Australia. "It's *like* that. You find yourself believing that the dinosaurs are *real*. I mean, you actually *think* that somewhere on Earth, Michael Creighton... or *whomever* wrote that story--was it Steven Spielberg himself that wrote it?--you actually feel that they know something... That *somewhere*, there are dinosaurs right now on the *Earth*. There's not, and you know it. You leave the theatre and you know it's all *pretend*." Al knew of Bill Swift, though, and made *speeches* of Bill Swift. He wouldn't let himself believe that it was real. He wouldn't let himself believe that the media in general were giving accurate accounts of the world, the way it was evolving. He wouldn't let himself believe the CIA operatives that said the same thing--that Bill Swift was an alien, or a *former* human being. He wouldn't let himself believe it, but he'd talk about it to the public. *They* believed that Bill Swift was alive and well. *They* believed that he could fly and he could *kill* someone with his anger alone. *They* believed that there were aliens around the country that were now influencing world events in an undeniable way. In the end, Al Gore was no good to the aliens because

he wouldn't believe in them even if he were to be abducted. He wouldn't believe at *all*.

"Our mission for you, Richard Gelding, is to *beat* Al in the next election. You'll have to rejoin the political spectrum. You'll have to beat him. The best way to start is by going to Australia this week. He's going to be there. You'll be there too. You'll make him look dumb. You'll look like a hero in more ways than one when you fly past him in a speech. You'll make him look dumb when you use your supernatural power of *wit*! You'll do it."

Richard believed it all. The reason *wit* was the best and easiest gift they could give him was because it was a placebo. In other words, he *believed* in the cure that they were giving him. Some people, on Earth, were able to convince themselves to *heal* their bodies when given sugar pills. They *thought*--they were told by doctors on occasion--that they were given a breakthrough *miracle* drug. The power of the mind is strong in humans, and the aliens that dealt with Richard Gelding knew it.

The only power that he had been given that could work was flight. Of course, in human dreams, when a person fears that he or she cannot run, he *or* she will *not* run, quite often, and the mystery goes unexplained to people that experience it. Richard *could* freeze, the aliens knew it, but if he was told he had an *additional* trait--that of *wit*--he was likely to succeed in his flight.

Al Gore spoke in front of a parliamentary building in Sydney. He was going to say that there was a new era. Little did he know that one was brewing, but it wasn't the era he envisioned. "A new *era* has come!" he proclaimed. King Charles was on the podium with him and he raised King Charles' arm. "We are friends. We are *brothers*! The United States is your *friend*!" Al didn't intend to say that he wanted to influence King Charles to persuade prime minister, Peter Doaknickle, to change the policy of nuclear warships in Australia's harbors. The people knew they didn't *need* them there. They were a symbol. Al would do his persuasion behind closed doors.

Richard Gelding flew in from behind Al Gore's podium. Al barely noticed him, saw him and laughed on the *inside* because he thought he'd never be taken seriously again after the sex tapes that were released of him, then became horrified when Bill Swift arrived *behind* him. Richard Gelding didn't know he had been stalked. He didn't know that Bill was in cahoots with Al (in all actuality, he wasn't, but that's not the way Richard perceived things). He didn't know that the Koagulates would betray him. He *felt* betrayed.

Bill didn't say a word. He settled to the far end of the ramp which held up the podium, Al Gore, his entourage, and King Charles. He waited as an observer then said to Richard Gelding, "Say your peace." In Al's mind, it registered as, *Say your piece*, as in, *Say your piece of shit that you're interrupting with*. Bill meant, *Say your peace of mind*, with an emphasis on the *peace* factor.

Richard was hesitant at the beginning. He *thought* about the gift of *wit* that he was told that he had. He had *faith* in it and it revolved around the fact that he *flew* there. If they said that he could fly... and he *did*, then it followed that he would have *wit* when the time came to shove.

Richard looked around and noticed that Tom Burman, Secretary of State in the USA, was laughing at him. He said to Tom Burman, "Fuck... *you*!" He pointed at him. Tom didn't take him seriously. There

was a crowd of three hundred people that were held captivated by the action. “I have *powers* like Bill Swift...!” he started to say.

“Then *show* them!” Tom said.

“Okay. A rabbit and a monkey are crossing the street... Which one gets their *FIRST*!?”

“I don’t *KNOW*,” Tom said.

Tom was genuinely surprised and Dick--Richard felt like *Dick* when he was aroused by public action--could see it on his face. “They both get there at the same *time*, folks. They’re fingering each other in the *ass*!”

The crowd busted up. Richard made the joke up on the spot. The crowd didn’t know. They thought that Tom was the monkey, in the story, and Al was obviously the rabbit. That’s what would be written in the papers the next day.

“The next order of business...” Richard said, and continued to talk for fifteen minutes. It was politicians’ speak, and he didn’t refer to multiple people changing a lightbulb *once*. He thought to do it as an anecdote, but he knew he had his base covered.

Catherine Zeta-Jones was in the crowd that day. She was startled by the politicians. She had started filming a movie by the name *Dead People Don’t Lie* with her husband, Michael Douglas. She was there because she was intrigued by her look alike, Daisy Michaels, but she knew she had word to do as well.

When Richard Gelding stopped speaking--he announced his candidacy for office of president of the United States before it was all over--Bill Swift took the podium. He prepared to speak but Catherine Zeta-Jones unveiled her face--she was wearing a robe of pastel colors with fruit-like designs--she said, “I have something to say.”

Bill Swift looked at her, said to the crowd, “It’s Catherine Zeta-Jones, folks. We have to step aside, my friends,” and then handed the mike to her. When he said that they’d have to step aside, it was directed toward the politicians that were speaking. King Charles took it the wrong way and nearly yelled at Bill that he wasn’t going to ask *his* people to step aside, meaning the people in the audience.

Prince Charles, as he was still known to *many* of the Americans present, stepped aside eventually after giving Catherine her due credence.

She composed herself after the strange incident and said, “I only have one thing to *do* here.” She whizzed her fingers by Bill’s throat--it was a delicate touch--and his embarrassment caused him to turn brown in the face. People could see fumes exuded from his ears, and those *closest* to him thought that someone farted pretty bad.

**Part Three **

** last chapter **

The 2016 election for president in the United States was one without much fanfare. People tried to drub it up like it was something important and historic. In the end, Richard Gelding won the seat of president. He beat Al Gore, but not by much. Once again, third parties had become inconsequential and the battle at the time was between the big two: The Greens and the Democrats. Republicans--the ones that were left--were afraid of the superheroes. Al Gore was undaunted, let it be known, and ran unafraid. Richard Gelding had *started* as a Democrat in his political life, *thought* to form a new *Majestic* party, but couldn't get any of the other superheroes to run with or *against* him. People saw that Richard was like them--he had been a human born to the Earth and never traveled to Zoton, or anywhere *else* off of the planet--but they saw that he was a hero as well, in the likes of Swift, Newman, Hand, and the Blipwhip thing. He was *both*, and people related.

The election of 2016 had a record low turnout. There were only twenty-five percent of registered voters that bothered going to the polls. Many bought into Bill's theory that we ought to let *heroes* rule the land, and not much else. They carried with them, at Bill's urging, a copy of the United States' Declaration of Independence and the copy of the United States' Constitution, which would eventually save many of their lives. When a cop would approach them on laws that *spawned* from the Constitution, they would respond by pulling out their Constitutions and saying, "Bill Swift says I have free *speech* and so does this Constitution. If I want to be outside of a congressional building with a sign that says that our senator is a bigot, I'm going to *do* it! For God's *sake*!" Most cops would leave them alone. The few cops that would challenge ultimate Constitutional authority would be taken care of by Edward Hand and his new cohort in crime, Lady Protector. They would *kill* cops, if necessary. It wasn't the case in most instances. They would simply maim them, or Edward would send one of his hands into motion and it would fly, contact the perpetrating police officer, and bitch slap him a few times. Lady Protector eventually got her powers, too. She would send swords into motion. They would cut off ears. When confronted face to face with the people that ignored Constitutional authority, she would say, "You're not listening to *this*? You don't need your *ears*, motherfucker!" She would say that, go home to Edward (when he didn't accompany her because he was busy on his own at times), and they'd have long sex that lasted hours.

Bill had his own take on what was going on. He *thought* it was a good idea that people were bearing arms again--they'd *need* to if they didn't want forces harbored inside of their homes, a Constitutional no-no--and they were speaking more freely than they ever had. He said in a speech, after Richard Gelding was sworn in, "I have this to *say* to you, people." He got a loud cheer from the crowd in Washington D.C. "I have to say that you are *free*. It's going to take time for it to *work* again. I have this to say to people that still believe we have a *government* in this country. I'm *talking* about a government of

consequence. Al Gore, in one of his last actions of president, decided to *give* nuclear submarines to the Australians as a compromise. He wanted them to seem *global*. In the end, it was because he wanted more *power* over them. They accepted, of course, and they *sent* one of their subs to the California coast--most of you don't *know* this--and I had to stop a nuclear missile from hitting Los Angeles. Most of you won't believe me because I demanded that it stay off the news. I *took* a missile, grabbed it in my *hands*, and it turned to shit. It did. I was there... and I *stink* of it 'til this very day."

The crowd was subdued and many of them decided to leave. Bill had control of his anger, again in life, and decided not to shit ball anyone. He continued on for posterity and for the sake of the news cameras that were still around.

Al Gore watched from his home in Tennessee and was horrified. He threw a Pepsi at the television set, grabbed another one from a cooler that sat next to him, then popped it open without tending to the cola that was sitting on the floor and spilling onto his rug. "I don't *believe* this shit," he said in dismay. Tipper had brownies that she brought in that had macadamia nuts--he *liked* macadamia nuts--and it quelled him for a while.

Bill continued his speech, "We *don't* need heroes any longer. That is true. I'll be here for the *big* things--that's what I'm here to do *anyway*--but *you* guys! You guys are the heroes. You're throwing them *off*! You're betting that your Constitution *matters*! I *love* it. Freedom of speech for *everyone*!"

The crowd that remained roared.

Bill settled down then said, "I have this to say to Richard Gelding, now. He's a *hero*, alright, and many of you voted for him. If *I* were to fight him, he'd be wiped off the planet."

"He'd be turned into a *shit* ball!" someone yelled from the crowd.

"No. He *won't* be. Not anymore. I don't *do* that. But I *do* give you freedom... and I give you *insight*." He paused, looked at the cameras that were flashing at him (it was en vogue to use the old fashioned method of photography again), and said, "To the media... and *Richard*. I have this to ask you... What is a no confidence vote? It's when you abstain, right? That's what it means."

"We *hear* you, Bill," a husky lady said from the press corps.

Bill continued on, brushing the fact that he wanted to have *sex* with the husky lady out of his mind, then said, "In 1996, for the first time in modern American politics, less than fifty percent of the electorate voted. That *means* that there was less than fifty percent of the people that had confidence in the system. I can *live* with fifty percent, actually. I think that the number I was given by Zotar, a close associate of mine, was that it was forty-nine percent of the people that voted that year that elected to select a president. The *rest* of them said, 'We ain't *voting*,' my friends. They said, 'This place sucks and I don't like where it's *heading*.' They gave a vote of no confidence, in other words."

"Say your *piece*, Bill," the press corps lady said. She had been in Australia a while back when he gave Richard Gelding the honor of speaking before a world audience. She remembered his line that he had told him.

"Okay. This year? Unacceptable. We *could* have given people ballots in the mail when they

received their DMV registrations. We didn't *do* that. We could have given them a whole week to *vote*, for Christ's sake! We could have done a *lot* of things, but in the end, people want you to vote Republican still. *Owners* won't let their employees have *time* to vote. Fuck that it's in the *law* that's been written. And there are no more Republicans, right? They are in *hiding*. They are afraid of big, *bad* Bill Swift and his associated *heroes*!"

The crowd cheered again and the lady that was brusque smiled deeply.

Bill continued by saying, "Seventy-six percent abstention of the electorate is a *NO CONFIDENCE VOTE!!!* Take that to your *grave*. It is no confidence, and I declare to you that for at least the next four years, you do *NOT* have a nation. It is obsolete. If you want to get nostalgic and hold on to your *flags*? Go ahead. I'm not going to *do* it though!" Bill pulled out a *flag* from under the podium and wore it like a cape. It was the *American* flag of modern tradition and not the Neekay nor the Ford flag models. "This is my *cape*! This is not my *flag*! I will fly around and I will *spy*! You watch me, okay?"

The crowd left. Once again, they felt indifferent about what had happened. They remembered good moments, but they remembered scary moments, at the same time. They had bosses. They had *lawyers*. They had doctors, and they had people that worked at Woblenoft that would scan their computers for "wrong thinking" (Alfred Newman had warned them about it after talking to Ben Murphy telepathically, as Ben did his time on Zoton). People were *scared*. When Bill was around, things couldn't go wrong. There were still military officials around that thought that Ronald Reagan was a poet, a preacher, a leader, and a *prophet*. They would take their chances, when necessary, and try to *neutralize* Bill Swift and his buddies. They would return things to normal. The masses wouldn't have power, but they wouldn't *know* that they had no power. They would be happy just thinking that Tom Cruise would smile at them if they were to ever meet.

Bill Swift knew the fear that they had. When the speech was over, he approached the manly lady that he was somehow attracted to and said, "I like you. Send a message to the Republicans not to worry. If they don't declare war on me, I won't declare war on them. It'll be better for *both* of us if..." Bill Swift trailed off. He wanted to say that things would be better off that way when he wasn't around. Instead he said, "Just tell 'em I'll *treat* them better, okay?"

She said yes and loved it. She had an exclusive *and* she had the mind of a superhero. Her day was done. She'd write the best article of her life then turn out of politics. She didn't see a future there.

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Alfred Newman, the superhero that once had a crush on Lizzy Shulton when he still walked the Earth as a *regular* person, developed a *deep* fondness for Catherine Zeta-Jones. She had filmed her movie in Australia, after embarrassing Bill Swift in front of a world audience, and it was released not long after Richard Gelding took office. *Dead People Don't Lie* took home two Oscars that year, and solidified her as the best actress of her generation. Alfred, though, knew *personal* things about her. He knew from Eddie

Macral that she had a kiss that was electric. It wasn't electric in the sense that it *electrocuted* you. No. It was electric in the sense that it sent *shock waves* from you. You never felt the same again, if kissed by her.

Eddie didn't tell Alfred this, person to person. Alfred would fly around in people's dreams. He had an interest in Freight Train. In some ways, he *founded* Freight Train, along with Bill Swift. Randal Meyer and Waldo Fleshman would have never picked up instruments if it weren't for them. Eddie Macral and Dave Barley would still be relative nobodies.

Alfred found out that the kiss he had with Catherine--it was her kissing *him*, originally, but in his dreams, she'd allow him to peck her back--would change Eddie's life in unheard ways. He didn't *tell* anyone. He knew that once he kissed her, no one would be good enough for him. Bloom was good for Waldo. They were back together. Eddie had tried to work things out with Christy Priddy, but it never flew. He tried to move on with Heidi, but thought of her more as a friend as time wound on. He kissed Catherine in his dreams. Alfred found out... and was jealous.

Alfred went to Australia, where Catherine was thanking people for lending her their country for the shooting of the movie that put her over the top, in many people's eyes. He went there, and wanted nothing more than to be with her. He didn't care that she had a family. He didn't care that she was married. *One* time would be enough. He didn't think he was abusing his superhero qualities in the past. Things were reaching a head, with him, and he'd be willing to take a risk. Little did he know that he was becoming like Bill.

Alfred tracked Catherine down in the city of Dublin, Ireland. He didn't want to confront Catherine when she was still in Australia. He didn't know why. He couldn't *bring* himself to do so. Alfred perched himself like a gargoyle on the top of a building that sat across from the hotel where Catherine was staying with Renee Zellweger, and old-time friend of hers since their time shooting *Chicago*. Alfred wanted to cry because he felt like nobody. People were afraid of the superheroes and crime was down. Everything else, concerning what Bill wanted to do with the United States, was going to take time and patience. He'd have to wait. Michael Douglas didn't come with Catherine to Ireland because he was watching their kids. She chose not to take them because they had been there before and were quite bored with much of the touring. Renee left the building by herself--it's what Alfred wanted--and Eddie could *sense* that Catherine was alone in her room. He didn't approach the room through the front door, up the elevator, and then down the hall. He knew just where she was at and flew to her window. Catherine saw him there, closed the window as soon as she saw him, then waited for a response. Alfred thought that they'd have sex. He didn't think she could deny him, but she *was* denying him. He stayed on the perch right below Catherine's twenty-story ledge. He didn't want to move, and then Catherine invited him in. When he didn't respond, she made her way onto the ledge and it felt to Alfred like a bad movie. It had been done in *The Naked Gun* and it had been done in *Cat's Eye*. There were probably *other* movies that he couldn't think of.

Alfred made a strong dildo out of quickly dried cum that he managed to will into existence. "I think you want *this*," he told Catherine. She didn't take it. "It's from a *movie*, you know? The Naked Gun,

except the dildo in that movie wasn't made out of... Well." He looked down at it, realized he wasn't even going to get a laugh, then took off back to his perch.

A half hour later, Renee Zellweger returned with food. Alfred thought to himself that they *could* have had sex if they wanted to. They didn't. Alfred stayed perched like a gargoyle for another hour then took off. He wouldn't come again for another day or two. Those were his intentions.

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Alfred jacked off in a meadow that wasn't far from London, England. Actually, it was thirty miles *away* from London, but that was a hop, skip, and a jump to him. He jacked off there and didn't know what would happen. Since he had return to Earth, he *refrained* from doing such thing. He didn't know how long he would hold out, and the truth was that he didn't think too much *of* it when he felt like he had a use in the world. He felt senseless now. He felt he wasn't making a difference. He had the power of telepathy and he *knew* that whomever he would jerk off to, she would *know*. She would *feel* him. He was too powerful to know that it *wouldn't* happen. If it was Catherine? She would send things tumbling down. She didn't have a good impression of him, or so he thought because of the experience with her. Renee? That one could be a possibility. He thought about Anna Hareldomm from his youth and he thought about Lizzy Shulton. At the very least, *they* would understand since they *knew* him as a normal person at a time in life. He was a superhero, but he wasn't perfect by society's conventions.

In the meadow, Alfred noticed *deer*. There were many of them, he assumed, but he noticed only a couple coming out of the woodworks *literally*. He noticed, kept his jack on, thought of Lizzy, and wondered what would happen when it was all over.

There were hydrogen test bombs that exploded after World War II. This was lodged in his head. There were people that believed that scientists and the government were playing *God*. They didn't *know* what would happen. There were theories that a bomb would explode, and it would keep *happening*. It would shake up the whole world and even *explode* it all. People didn't *know*. That's what the tests were for. There were theories, yes, but theories went so far. By *theory*, a car could run on water around the world with a gallon in its tank and have no problem... so long as the engine was perfectly *efficient*. A gallon of gas? Alfred didn't *know*, but he was betting that by *prior* conventions--before the schlaclak started to rebel against their traditional *roles*--maybe you could send a rocket to the Moon. He didn't know. He didn't care. It *scared* him to think about the hydrogen bomb. *What if the schlaclak simply saved the day... when push came to shove? What if they ruined their existences for the sake of all those around them? It's possible the world could have been blown up, right?*

Alfred finished his jerk on--that's what he called it by then; it was *on* because it *felt* on--and didn't realize that a deer had come over to him. He was ready to drink Alfred's cum... or it was a *she*. He didn't know. Alfred didn't know what *gender* the deer was.

The deer merely *sniffed* the expelled spoooge then bent forward to let Alfred pet it. He felt good, and he could tell that it was a...? He didn't know. He *wanted* to say female deer, but he thought he was

wrong when he saw the *rest* of the deer coming to the edge of the miniature forest. He stopped thinking about gender then said, “Shoe! Shoe, you people!” When they scattered, he said to himself, “Fuckin’ *voyeurs*.”

Alfred *had* been thinking of the possibility of his spooge. If it was powerful enough, it could *end* things. After all, spooge that was sent from his hand through his finger tips did a job. *What if it was to come--pardon the pun, you voyeurs in my mind right now--through the place where it was intended to cum through? I wonder*, he thought.

He didn’t know. He felt *safe* now. It was a good experience, and it was a better release. If he were to ever make love to *anyone*, he’d feel safe. *This superhero stuff is for the birds. I know why they killed off Superman now. I wonder if he ever flew in real life? He was no doubt a real person--an inspirational person--in real life to the author that made him up. Is the penner of a comic an author? I wonder.*

Alfred wiped the spooge from around him just in case it had supernatural powers of its own. He knew that when he spooGED a villain, the villain didn’t show any long term effects any different than getting maced or stunned by a taser. The spooge from his dick? That might be different. *We might be talking three-headed deers after this, my friend*, Alfred said to his new buddy deer. He wiped up his cum with a cape that he brought along, but seldom wore. It was one of Superman’s. He liked to wear it. When he had saved someone from Hollywood, they sent it to him--the buddies of the person saved--and said that it came from Christopher Reeves’ personal *closet*. It was a gift, of course. Alfred wore it with pride when he felt worried about the world. Now? It was a piece of cloth that might save people from seeing twelve-foot high deer in a month or two.

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The night that Alfred spooGED a wad in England, he flew back to Dublin to check on Catherine Zeta-Jones. He saw that Michael Douglas showed up *after* all. He brought their children with him. He thought--*Alfred* thought--that maybe Renee Zellweger would have a room of her own now. He thought he’d check on *her* the following day.

Miles to the west of Alfred, and the rest that he was spying on, Bill Swift was ready to make another proclamation about the way things stood in the world. He didn’t know what his buddy, *Alfred*, was doing. He didn’t *care* much. Things were coming along slowly, but they were coming *along*. He was ready to challenge the president to a duel. He was ready to use *swords*, if necessary, and he was ready to say that if he lost, he’d be given exile from the country--the *world*, for that matter--and he’d *accept* it. Little did he know that Alfred was contemplating a similar thing but for different reasons.

Blipwhip was having the time of its life on this night. It was enjoying margaritas in Baja California at a place where a “red rocker” occasionally came and performed for his patrons. Blipwhip didn’t know who he was because of its ignorance in certain world affairs. It was glad to be out of the country though. It was glad to be at a place where it was accepted, or at least *felt* accepted for very fleeting

moments.

Edward Hand was having sex with Lady Protector at the time that Alfred sat perched on the building he claimed as his own. He felt like a gargoyle, Alfred did, and it made him glad that *people* were once like that. Otherwise, he reasoned, why would the myth of gargoyles ever have been made? For further thought, he *considered* that maybe, with the revelation of what schlaclak could do when it set its agenda toward it, these gargoyles were *alive* at a time.

He didn't care though. He'd wait out the night, see what was to happen, then take his last shot at curing the loneliness inside of him.

As dawn broke on the next day, Edward bid adieu to his lover as they split ways on their next targets. Blipwhip was hung over after taking in fifteen pints of tequila. It didn't have a penis nor a pussy, so it spent *much* of the night shitting like a bird. Bill got a speech ready, in the morning time, and he sensed that something was awry. He didn't do a thing about it. The feeling wasn't strong enough.

Alfred approached Michael Douglas, as he left the hotel at around nine in the morning. He said, "I want to sleep with your wife and I can't *control* it. I'm a *hero*. I am. To a lot of people, I *save* them. I don't know what to do."

"Think of *me*," Michael said.

That was enough for Alfred. He said, "You're done. I won't touch her. No worry... but you're *not* helping out the *world*!"

"You don't *know* that!" Michael Douglas said in response.

"Oh. I *do*. Watch *me*!"

Alfred took flight about twenty feet into the air. He plunged down and must have been going a hundred miles per hour when he hit the pavement. He *managed* to drive ten feet into the ground and then said from below, "Look at my *hands*! Not a fuckin' *scratch*! And I'm supposed to *live* like this? No. No *way*!"

Michael Douglas looked down at Alfred and noticed that he was foaming at the mouth. It wasn't *spit* that was coming out though. It was... "I *see* what you're saying," finally said. "Okay. *Have* my wife!"

Michael Douglas stuck around for a while. He was mad, but Alfred was even more upset. "I don't need *cum* on my lips to see what'll happen when they *shoot* me, for God's sake. It won't be *blood*! It's going to be cum all *over* the place! Don't you understand what's *happening*?"

Michael Douglas did. He realized it then said, "You're an immortal now. I *see*."

"I can't live without *love*!"

"Don't take my wife. Find one of your own."

Alfred shook his head then said, "I *can't*. I can't. I fuckin' *can't*! I'm the best that there *is* on this planet. She made my buddy, *Bill*, look stupid a couple of years ago. She can make me look like a *god*!"

There was silence between the two and then Catherine came out of the building.

Alfred looked at Catherine--she tended to her husband--and he said, "I need a *kiss*!"

Catherine blushed and said, “*Staaaahpp!*”

“I need a kiss to *prove* something!” Alfred had in mind that if *she* kissed him, the same thing would happen as happened to Eddie Macral, but a lot *worse*. He thought he would *feel* the orgasm again. He wasn’t sure, but it was worth a shot. “I *need* you, Catherine!” he said. Just then, he realized he was violating his friend, *Bill*. If things were to go as they *might*, the world might end, just the same as Alfred had been thinking with the hydrogen bomb.

Catherine kissed Alfred on the cheek. It was sincere... but Alfred didn’t feel it like he *thought* he’d feel it. It didn’t change his life like it changed Eddie Macral’s. It didn’t make him fume from the ears, like it made *Bill* fume. *Actually*, Alfred thought, *It wasn’t even a kiss that set off Bill*.

Alfred was satisfied with things and didn’t even need to spooge his pants like he felt he needed to the day before.

“I was just *checking*, Michael. Please don’t be *mad* at me!” Alfred offered his hand to shake and Michael Douglas surprisingly *shook* it. Alfred didn’t expect that. “What about Renee?” Alfred asked. “Do you think I could sleep with *her*?”

Alfred didn’t get to sleep with Renee either. In all actuality, he was half joking when he asked. He thought he overstepped his bounds. He went to a pub that night, picked a fight with a guy that didn’t need a fight in his life, then took off to the Pacific Islands.

“I need to *end* this,” he said. He dove into an active volcano. Bullets wouldn’t hurt him and he knew it. It was the only way he’d go back to Zoton and play with his marbles.

The volcano didn’t end his life immediately. He *was* rendered helpless to fly anymore. For five years, Alfred sat at the bottom molten lava. He contemplated life and communicated with Bill when he could, through telepathy. He didn’t know that it’d be such a drawn out process. There was nothing the other heroes could do to save him. For that matter, the problem was no longer that he couldn’t fly. The problem was that he didn’t want to *live*. Even if they *could* save him from a physical Hell, they couldn’t cure his soul. He was destined for Zoton, but it would take a long time.

Alfred sat at the bottom of the lava pit for years and then his body began to release him. He went straight to Zoton. He met Osama bin Laden and Uday Hussein (his farther had made it to Xeon). What *was left* of Alfred’s body became general white *liquid* through the lava. People, in the year 2023, started to notice that the lava was *white*. No one knew what was going on. By the end of that year, the volcano that Alfred flew into *gushed* with semen--scientists now knew it was semen because of tests that were done--and they *knew* why the world hadn’t seen Alfred Newman in years.

The last act that Alfred did before going into the volcano, many years back, was to put on his cape, one last time. He *thought* he was Superman at that point. He couldn’t control himself any longer in the regard of hitting on beautiful women so he thought he’d save the world from a lot of heartache. The scientists knew that semen was coming from the volcano but they *didn’t* detect the cape that Alfred put on. They never would.

In 2024, Lizzy Cassidy was having her fourth child--she was in her late thirties, but that was okay

with her--and she was having her first *grandchild*. She said to her little one--the one that called her “mama” but was really a grandchild, “The world is going to last forever and you’re going to be a *star*!” She was right about the child being a star. The universe collapsed into a large cum ball, because of Alfred Newman, and the Big Bang happened all again many years later.

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* *Epilogue* *

Bill Swift woke from an eight-day coma. It was Saturday. That much he knew because there were cartoons on TV on the television in front of him.

Eeeeeeyee... waaaaantt... BEEEEEEER... he heard in his mind. Eeeye waantt seeerviice, heerre! The thoughts were coming to and from him and he couldn't make out a thing. Bill realized he was in a hospital room. He should have picked it up when he saw that the cartoons that he was watching were mounted on a television a few feet above him. He looked across the room and saw three vases with flowers. One of them had a card that he could read the first two words of, *Get Well...* it started to say. *Get well, Bill? Is that the message?* he wondered.

He looked around. There were nurses in the distance but they didn't notice him. He didn't *remember* falling asleep, nor did he remember being rendered unconscious. *The schlaclak. They're playing tricks on my mind!* he thought.

He looked down at his hands and saw that they were the hands of a young teen. He didn't have gray hairs sprouting out from his knuckles. He was *young*. The schlaclak removed it all from him and gave him a normal *life* again. That was his reasoning.

"I don't know what to *say*," he said to a nurse when she finally came in.

Just then, a man came from beyond a door from within the room. He was zipping up his pants. He looked at Bill, shook his head in amazement, then ran out of the room. Bill could hear that he was saying, "I'M *FREE!* I'M *FREE!*" as he yelled down the hall.

Zotar was there. That's what Bill was registering. And he was zipping up his pants then running. Zotar... but why?

"That man--that young *boy*, I should say--is Dirt Cassidy. I'm nurse, Betty Davies. He knocked you *unconscious* eight days ago--you *know?*--at one of your pickup football games!" Nurse Betty Davies shook her head, checked Bill's temperature, then said, "He's been here *hours* upon end! For most of that time, you've been *asleep*," Betty whispered, as if Bill didn't realize it by then. "Welcome BACK, Bill Swift!" she yelled. "Did you have any interesting dreams while you were *under?* I really do *have* to know!"

In times of old, Joseph, a former Patriarch, foretold things in his dreams. He had been sold into slavery by his brothers. As recently as Nostradamus, people could show an uncanny ability to see into the future. The books are littered with seers in between.

Aliens really do pick up telepathic waves from humans on Earth. They feel it's their duty... and they're simply nosey, as well. Bill Swift's dream went out to a place called *Kliptor*. The people (*things*) on Xeon didn't pick it and Zoton turned out to be a fragment of his imagination. In 2023, based on Bill's dream, the beings from Kliptor sent a ship to Earth. It had the capacity to carry thousands, but it chose to pick only a handful. It didn't discriminate between artists, politicians, working, poor, rich, or anything else.

It wanted diversity, but it looked to race.

On Christmas Day 2023, the ship landed in Texas and took two, healthy young people. They were making love in a loft of a barn. Their names were Dandy and Simon. The ship traveled to the Congo in Africa and picked up a couple that was holding hands as they made their way back from a dinner feast. A *rhinoceros* had been eaten. It went to Asia and picked up a young couple in Vietnam. They were praying outside of a Catholic temple. Stops were made in Brazil, Denmark, American Samoa, Libya, South Korea, and finally in France. Further stops would have been made, but the aliens lucked out in Paris. There was an international peace convention in the works. They picked up five couples of varying ethnicities. They were all very young. Not a one of them was over twenty-five. The Kliporates, as they would soon be known by the people that were captured by them, wanted to start over again *somewhere...* just in case Bill's dream was true and legitimately prophetic. There were no superheroes on the world... but there was no Zoton in the universe. Sometimes dreams are just *partially* right in what they predict. Bill, when he was eight, predicted a presidential election. That was enough for the beings from Kliptor, and they started following him ever since.

The travel back to Kliptor was a surprisingly good one. Dandy and Simon had been fighting their parents and were glad to get away. They didn't have to do much work on the ship besides being in love. By the time they *reached* Kliptor, they were ready to have their first baby.

They named him Adam, a symbolic gesture of a new beginning.