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This collection is also available in html (readable on handheld devices). You can find it at MikeSheedy.com.

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Afterword

FOREWORD

In case you didn't notice, civilization was brutally attacked in 2021. The stories in this collection were written in that year. I wanted to leave behind a snapshot of what America was like at the time, and speculate on what it might become.

M. Sheedy

The Coincidence Theorist

"Fascinating," Agent Jones said. He looked up from his computer. Sherwin Fahquar sat facing him across the table. "So you believe Kennedy's Secret Service detail was called off of his car in Dallas just...because."

"Sure," Fahquar shrugged. "It was just a coincidence that he got shot a few minutes later."

"And what about the September eleventh attacks? In two thousand and one?"

"What about them?"

"Well, the government was running a series of drills on the East Coast that day. Operation Vigilant Guardian. One of the drills simulated hijacked airplanes being flown into buildings."

"I didn't know that."

Jones leaned back in his chair, sighed and adjusted his facemask.

"Okay then, what about this Covid business, the reason we're wearing masks? They did a drill for that too."

"Really?"

"Yes. The World Health Organization, Bill Gates and some others conducted a drill called Event 201. It simulated a deadly coronavirus escaping from a lab in Wuhan, China. They mapped the projected spread of infection and discussed ways to deal with it. And then, the week the drill ended, the Wuhan virus appeared for real. What do you think about that?"

"Well, I guess it's a good thing they had the drill, so they'd know what to do. It was a lucky coincidence."

"There. That's what I find so curious about you, Fahquar, that you would think a drill like that is just a coincidence. Don't you see some kind of...intent? Think about it. A coronavirus drill mirrored exactly what we're going through now."

"Why's that so strange? Bill Gates and those folks are pretty smart, so of course they'd be able to predict problems."

Jones shook his head and looked around at the tiny interrogation room. The table and two chairs were the only furniture in it. A camera high in a corner was recording everything.

Jones had already established that Fahquar didn't know why he'd been

pulled in for questioning. He said he'd been working at the marina, replacing sparkplugs in his fishing boats, when the police showed up and told him to come with them. Jones knew from Fahquar's file that he used to own eight boats but was now down to two. His rental business died during the lockdowns. Then to make matters worse his wife was declared a nonessential employee and lost her job. The boats they sold didn't bring much, so the couple was forced to tap into their savings to get by. But their account balance was too thin to break their fall. The Fahquar's were about to hit bottom.

"Is that all?" Fahquar asked. "Can I go now?"

"No." Jones gestured to his computer. "According to reports you're a radical."

Fahquar chuckled behind his mask.

"I'm not a radical. You arrested the wrong guy."

"The warrant is for Sherwin J. Fahquar."

"But there must be lots of men with... Or, at least one man with the same name. He's the one you want. I'm no radical."

"But you voted for Donald Trump, didn't you?"

Fahquar's eyes showed confusion at the question, and Jones waited for the truth of the situation to dawn on him.

While he waited he thought back to the election, to before the election, when Trump was denied his mega-rallies by the conveniently-timed pandemic. The political establishment was desperate. Trump couldn't be allowed another four years; despite his self-crippling ego he was restoring America to its preeminent position in the world, and that was antithetical to the plan for a one-world government. So the establishment had its media paint Trump as a bigot and call his supporters racists and Nazis. Democrats attacked Republicans on the streets. Videos of leftist groups beating up people who wore Trump caps were kept off the evening news, but they went viral on the internet. Support for Trump grew. The establishment was losing the battle for the soul of the nation and had no choice but to make a bold move on election night. Trump owned a commanding lead as America went to bed, but then while the country slept the vote tallies in several key states spiked in Biden's favor. It was obvious that a theft had taken place, but people put their trust in the court system to straighten things out. Unfortunately the courts were part of the problem. A stunning number of district attorneys and judges turned out to be bought and paid for by leftist money, and recounts were thwarted. And if you protested the situation you were arrested. The left had rioted and burned with impunity for months before the election, but if you were at the Trump rally at the US capitol on

January sixth you were hunted down and locked up. From there the list of Trump-supporting offenses grew. Having donated to the campaign became a matter for the FBI to investigate. Trump supporters were banned from social media and put on no-fly lists. Anybody with more than one active neuron could see where things were headed—Biden had promised to "heal" a wounded America, and if necessary he would keep that promise by scabbing the wound with the blood of political opponents.

Agent Jones suppressed a yawn. He had no problem with the political situation, as long as he got his paycheck on time. The job was boring though, so he looked forward to the little breaks that people like Fahquar provided. How could anyone be so clueless?

"So what about Trump?" he prompted. "Did you vote for him?"

Fahquar squirmed. "I don't see how that's any of your business. Besides, maybe the other Sherwin Fahquar voted for him."

"Right," Jones sighed. "Your 'wrong man' theory. You think this is all just, what'd you say...a coincidence?"

"It must be."

"And you don't see anything sinister in being arrested? You don't see a conspiracy?"

Fahquar started to answer but pulled back. "Nice try," he said. His mask wrinkled above what Jones knew was meant to be a knowing smile. "No, I don't see a conspiracy. Only crackpots believe in conspiracy theories."

Jones stared at him for a moment, marveling at the power of denial, then he returned to his computer. "Fascinating," he said under his breath.

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Covid - The Movie

Farley and Max are brainstorming an idea for a screenplay. It's about tyranny coming to America. Let's listen in:

"We'll call the virus Covid. The movie too. The poster could have a big V in the middle, like the tip of a knife, and a little 'co' on one side and an 'id' on the other."

"Changing the name won't help. No audience will believe the story. It's too crazy."

"Maybe, but let's keep going. I think we can make it work."

"Fine. Where'd we leave off?"

"With the new guy. The mad scientist. Let's call him...Fauci."

"Good name. Sounds kind of dodgy, kind of mafia. But we won't make him a thug. He'll be a fussy little turd that people want to see crushed at the end. And he works for the two climate frauds, right? What'd we decide to call them?"

"Gore and Gates. But Fauci works for others too. He's been in D.C. for decades, scheming and scamming. And after the big boys release the virus that he helped create, he goes on TV and tells America that everyone needs to self-isolate. To flatten the curve."

"Flatten the curve? What does that mean?"

"Nobody knows, but he wears a lab coat, so people do like he says."

"Then what?"

"Well, at first the lockdown is just for fifteen days, but folks are really scared, so they don't argue when he extends it to a month. Then he says it has to be six months. No concerts, no sporting events, no family gatherings."

"Hell, why not stretch it out to a year?"

"He does. And then he says that things will get back to normal after people take the vaccines."

"What vaccines?"

"Some new frankenshots that he and his buddies cook up. The clinical trials are put on hold when the first test kills half the animals, but the FDA declares the overall theory to be okay. The drug companies begin production."

"Wait a minute. Nobody would take untested shots."

"Not in real life, but this is a movie. Audiences love it when people do dumb stuff in movies. A character knows there's an ax murderer hiding in the house, but he goes to the basement anyway."

"You've got a point, but I still don't think people would take the shots."

"Then we just write in some more bad guys. We add three or four jerkwads who control the internet. They promote the shots and shut down any debate about them. People would take them if they never heard about the negative side effects."

"You can't shut down debate. The Constitution, freedom of speech. And let's stop trying to fix things by adding bad guys. Let's add some good guys."

"You got any in mind?"

"Well, one. A kid. I think he'd make a good hero. See, at the beginning of the epidemic, when Fauci's pushing the panic really hard, he puts out a lot of contradictory information. First he says the germ can only live for a few minutes outside the body, then he says it'll last eleven days. So nobody's sure what to believe."

"Let's put that in the script, or at least make notes for the actor who'll play Fauci. His motivation for lying is to confuse people, so they can't make informed decisions."

"And it works. People stop trying to figure things out for themselves and end up just staying home, like they're told. But after a while the self-isolation starts to get to them."

"Yeah, being cooped up sucks. You miss the little things, like putt-putt and street pretzels."

"Exactly. And not being able to eat out would become a major problem. People would riot if they didn't get their pizza. So, even though the government forces restaurants to close their doors, it lets home delivery continue."

"Home delivery of what? Food?"

"Yeah. Like pizza."

"But that doesn't make sense. If the virus can last eleven days in the open air, then how can pizza delivery be safe? A warm pizza is the perfect place to breed germs. And those kitchens are dirty. My cousin works in one. He never bathes and his beard has big chunks of dandruff. Looks like Parmesan cheese."

"But people wouldn't think about that when they're stuck in their homes. They'd just want their pizza delivered. And that's where my hero comes in. The movie opens ten years after the Covid epidemic, and we're at a memorial ceremony. It's to honor people who were on the front lines back in the day. So a bigwig talks about how the food responders helped preserve the country's mental health, and then he unveils a statue. It's a kid crouched on a skateboard, balancing a pizza carton. He's racing to make a delivery."

"Awesome. I can see it. Cap turned backwards, cargo shorts, butt crack."

"That's the opening, then we go back to all the other stuff, and at the end the pizza boy has some kind of showdown with Fauci."

"A battle royale, with his teammates watching his back."

"Teammates?"

"Yeah. He's part of an emergency food response team. His code name is Pizza Boy, and he works with Kung Pao Girl and the Tamale Kid."

"This is making me hungry."

"Split a large pepperoni?"

"Sure. Just don't call the place where your cousin works."

The Secretary of Woke

Naila gasped with delight when ze stepped into zir new office and saw the walls and ceiling painted with rainbows. Ze felt a stirring between zir legs and knew ze would have had a semi-erection if zir penis were still there. But it was gone, removed along with zir testicles during the smoothie operation. Still, the phantom limb twitched at the sight of the paint job that so boldly showed zir support for the LGBTQIA+ community.

Zir desk was boomerang-shaped and had a computer built into its broad glass top. Ze'd told zir new office assistant, a demiboy named Clavian, that ze wanted a screensaver of fanning peacock feathers. As ze approached the desk ze saw feathers stirring, but they weren't peacock. They looked like chicken feathers. Ze felt a flush of anger. Was that to be Clavian's game, to plague with snubs and snickers? Ze'd met him for the first time just the day before and he seemed...slippery. He was small and pink and shifty-eyed. He began filling zir in on the latest interdepartmental gossip as soon as they were alone, but after a couple of minutes ze cut him off and he pursed his lips in pique. So he might have struck back at zir with the feathers.

A wingback chair like a big burgundy flower waited in the crook of the desk. Naila sat, laid zir tie-dyed surgical mask aside, and tapped a calendar icon on the glass. Four folder icons appeared. Ze'd check them later; first ze wanted to watch zir arrival at work. Ze tapped a television icon and surfed until ze saw zirself on CNN.

The video was from ten minutes before and showed zir standing halfway up the marble steps outside. Zir new office complex was still under construction, so ze and zir department were using one of the Senate annex buildings. Fifty or so reporters with cameras and microphones were crowded around zir on the steps.

The reporters looked drab in their gray clothes and black masks, but ze was resplendent in zir rainbow dashiki. The gold hoops of zir earrings matched the ring in the brow above zir left eye. Zir skin too seemed golden in the morning sun. Zir partner had shaved zir head the night before and then oiled it lightly before the limo came. The attention to dress and grooming had paid off. Ze was a hueful shout to the powerbrokers who'd denied zir kind a voice in America's government for so long.

Some of the reporters asked questions but ze said ze was busy and they would have to be satisfied with a prepared statement. An aide passed zir a handheld device and ze read from its screen.

"The formation of the Department of Woke, a cabinet level position, was

a long time coming. Centuries of white male rule in this country have led to the sorry-ass mess we have today. Politics isn't just about power, it's about power in the right hands. Now I need to go to work. Thank you."

Ze'd wanted to make a grand ascending exit after issuing zir sound bites, but the reporters blocked zir way. One of them, a white man, said that job numbers were improving and the outlook for the economy was hopeful. Ze put him in his place.

"I don't care about job numbers. All the jobs in the world aren't worth anything if we misgender even one child. Now let me pass."

The crowd parted and ze ascended.

Naila closed the video stream and considered what to say to zir employees. They would be expecting zir to address them. Something simple would be best, simple but memorable.

When zir statement was set in zir mind ze tapped a bullhorn icon on the desk. A recorded voice, butch female, said, "Stand by for a message from the Secretary in ten seconds, nine, eight..." The countdown was being broadcast throughout the building. It would give the employees time to tune in on the nearest computer.

The count reached five and Naila tapped a camera icon. They'd told zir to look directly at it when speaking. Because of the angle ze would seem to be looking down from a great height.

"Greetings," ze said when the recorded voice went silent. "I am Naila, the Secretary of Woke, and you are my peoples. I am a genderfluid caramel smoothie, and my preferred pronouns are ze and zir. You will respect my pronouns and those of your co-workers." Ze paused to let people absorb, and then ze said, "The most important takeaway here is, if you're caramel colored or darker, I welcome you to the organization with open arms. But if you're lighter, you're on probation. MLK said he looked forward to a day when people would be judged by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin, and I embrace that sentiment. I look forward to the day when white people won't have to be judged by the color of their skin."

Ze killed the stream and sat unmoving while zir message coursed through the building. Assessments were shifting, careers were rising and falling accordingly. It would be interesting to see who fought through the political currents to reach the top. In a year ze'd be surrounded by the best of the best, the most fierce of the fierce.

Meanwhile there were chores to attend to, so ze tapped the calendar icon again and returned to the four folders. They were devoted to the areas that required the Department of Woke's immediate attention.

Ze opened the folder marked "Manmade Climate Change" first and saw

an internal daily briefing from the Environmental Protection Agency. Zir phantom scrotal sac crawled. The EPA was headed by a man. A black man, true, but still a man. And cisgender. He still used the pronouns assigned at birth.

Naila read the briefing and was surprised by its candor. It said that CO2 levels were up and the earth was greening. Plants loved the carbon dioxide. But the government's position would continue to be that the gas was killing the planet. "And since humans are the main producers of CO2," the report said, "we must expand our depopulation programs." Those included sterilization, the withholding of lifesaving medical treatments, and the reduction of global food supplies.

A subfolder marked "Memes" looked interesting, so Naila tapped it and scrolled through captioned pictures that the proles had made and scattered across the internet. One showed two photos of Ellis Island. The black and white shot at the top was captioned "100 Years Ago," and the color picture below said, "Today." The water levels in both photos struck the exact same place on the side of the island. Rising sea levels were a foundational tenet of the climate change movement, and the meme cast doubt on that tenet,

Naila needed to make zir presence known on the climate issue, so ze decided to dictate a memo. "For internal use only," ze said to zir desk. Clavian would type up and distribute the statement later. "I've just seen the meme about Ellis Island and the sea levels. It needs to be dealt with. I recommend removing it from the internet, shutting down the website where it first appeared, and re-educating its creator at a Hillary Fun Camp. We must be relentless in our fight against..." Ze started to say "climate change deniers" but felt the phrase had grown stale from overuse. Ze needed something new, something fresh but familiar. "We must be relentless in our fight against...climatic terrorists."

Ze knew that most of the meme-makers were just young people with too much time on their hands, and ze might get some pushback for calling them terrorists, but aggressive use of language was vital for effective governance. Control language and you can control thought. That's why the Alinskyites chose the term "woke" in the beginning; they knew their social engineering would be unpopular and they needed a way to advance it. How better to do that than by implying their opponents blocked progress because they were asleep? Most people weren't aware of the semantical deception, but some were and spoke their minds anyway. The divisive ones had to be silenced. Despite the cabinet heads' many differences they were agreed on that, so Naila knew they would support zir recommendations on the Ellis Island meme.

Naila's meme statement was in-house and classified. Ze still needed to make a public pronouncement on climate change, so ze dictated a note about the Department of Woke being one hundred percent green. Then ze wondered how green they actually were. "Sidenote to Clavian," ze said. "Find out the real percentage. If we're not at one hundred, say we soon will be. Say we're getting rid of paper and switching from fossil fuels, but we need time, and funding, yada yada. And remind me to mention the Brits at the next cabinet meeting. They burn cadavers to heat hospitals, so I want the Department of Woke to implement a similar program. Maybe the Department of Justice can give us a line of credit for fuel. They may not realize yet how commodity-rich they're about to become with the Fun Camps, and I want to be first in line."

Naila closed the climate folder and opened the one devoted to Covid. Ze skimmed through some charts and graphs but took zir time with the daily update from the Department of Health and Human Services. HHS would be zir interface on the pandemic. The department was run by another cisgender man, a Hispanic, and according to Clavian's scuttlebutt he couldn't be trusted. He had advanced his career by appropriating the ideas of others.

The Covid update talked about a new strain of the virus in the western states. Somebody had named it "the Spokane variant with bubonic spikes." Recent polls showed that support for the government's pandemic policies was waning, so Naila didn't expect the new scare campaign to accomplish much. But that was fine. Covid had already served its main purpose by getting billions of people around the world to accept curfews and lockdowns. It even spooked the Land of the Free into self-isolating. Americans stayed home from work and binged on takeout food and TV while the country's economy imploded. So the crisis had shown those in charge how to handle future immobilizations. And they'd be needed, the immobilizations. Too many people were still too independent, and independence was a threat to the collective.

"Covid righteous," Naila thought. The phrase just popped into zir head, and ze liked the sound of it. "Amend the green statement," ze dictated. "Have it say we are green and Covid righteous. And monitor social media for use of the righteous phrase. Let's see how people like it." Ze thought of the Secretary of Health and Human Services and his penchant for stealing ideas. "Additional note," ze said. "Asterisk and footnote the 'Covid righteous' phrase where possible, to make sure everyone knows it came from this office."

Next up was the folder on race relations. Naila scrolled through it but already knew what ze would find. Zir interface on race was the Department of Justice and the Attorney General, an old white man. Ze wondered why

they didn't just bar white people from government. The AG acted like he was onboard with the reparations bill making its way through congress, but he wasn't. The bill would seize all property belonging to whites and redistribute it to people of color. Committees were trying to work out the definition of color—three-fifths African, three-quarters Latino and so on—but the AG said the assignment of such numbers would make the bill unconstitutional. He said the Civil War had been fought to do away with the Constitution's "fractionality of personhood," and it wouldn't be legal to go back.

The thought of the U.S. Constitution made Naila's phantom sac crawl again. The document's emphasis on individual rights was an impediment to global freedom. Humanity couldn't advance if individuals were allowed to stand in the way of progress. But all ze could do until the Constitution was gone was soldier on, and one of the ways ze could make a difference was by emphasizing skin color in zir department.

Ze pulled up a folder of color swatches on zir computer and compared some to the skin on the back of zir hand. Ze wanted a matching shade to use as background for the Department of Woke's web pages. People would be able to hold their hands next to their screens to do a comparison. Anything darker would be okay, but lighter would mean consequences. Ze might reach out to Treasury and float the idea of higher tax rates for the light-skinned.

Ze marked a honey gold swatch that looked promising, and then ze opened the last of the briefing folders, the one on genderism. It was from the Department of Education. A woman headed the department. She was Hispanic and would pass Naila's swatch test, but she was also cisgender and straight. That didn't seem right. Someone of nontraditional sexuality should oversee the important issue of gender at the federal level.

Naila worked zir way through the folder but didn't see any mention of the new legislation that had been proposed in the Senate. A law that criminalized the spreading of Covid misinformation had just gone into effect, and a brave transgender senator wanted to deal with gender misinformation in the same way. He/she/it wanted to put legal teeth into what were currently just federal guidelines. Naila would get Clavian to contact the Secretary of Education's office to find out where she stood on the legislation.

The genderism folder was packed with information about classroom quotas and test scores. Naila was glad that the subject had been assigned to Education. Schools had been quite successful in teaching the rejection of capitalism, and now they were helping children reject the blindered view of

gender. Teachers who believed that gender was determined by genetics were being rooted out of the public school system. Dealing with private schools, however, wasn't so easy. Not all of them could be controlled by threatening their tax-free status. Christian schools were the worst. Many accepted the tax hit so that they could continue to condemn sodomy, and now they were refusing to remove gender-biased words like "brother" and "sister" from their curricula.

The folder contained a video with the note, "Made by a teaching assistant. Clear violations of guidelines." Naila was curious so ze ran the video.

It began by showing a dozen or so children sitting on a carpeted floor. They were smiling and looking up at something offscreen. After a moment the shot widened to show an intense-looking young white man standing over them. He held a Bible in one hand and a re-gendered government textbook in the other. It was a history book. He raised it above his head and said, "According to the government's teachings, Jesus Christ was a cult leader, and you should report your parents if they pray to him." He lowered the textbook and raised the Bible. "But according to the Bible, Jesus was the Son of God, and he said, 'Honor thy father and thy mother, and thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.' Now which book do you believe?"

"The Bible!" the kids shouted in unison.

"And the government says we're supposed to have a 'drag queen story hour' this morning, but instead I think we should study the Sermon on the Mount. Which one do you want?"

"The Sermon on the Mount!" the kids yelled.

Naila couldn't believe what ze'd just seen. Ze backed the video up and watched again, to the point where the man violated guidelines by using the words "father" and "mother" instead of gender-neutral alternatives. A tap on the desktop froze the video on the minister. Naila assumed he was a minister, because normal people didn't express his kind of extremism.

Ze pitied the children he was abusing. The poor things shouldn't be exposed to such retrograde genderism, but how could you fight a school that didn't care whether it lost its tax-free status?

Naila felt a rage begin to burn inside. All zir life ze'd watched helplessly as Christians blocked social progress with their preaching about love and charity. They fed the poor and nursed the sick, areas that were rightfully the government's concern, and the government couldn't do anything to stop them.

Or could it?

Naila saw an opportunity. With the right court case, the government

could use some its new laws to set legal precedents in the fight against Christian backwardness. The incident in the video would be the perfect case. Not only had the minister committed gender infractions on camera, but he'd talked about loving people without regard to skin color. The Department of Woke could file charges against him.

Of course the children would have to be rescued first. SWAT teams, social workers and foster homes for that, with positive media spin selling the rescue to the public. But what should be done with the minister? The man's white face seemed to mock Naila from zir desk, and zir rage burned hotter. How could ze make an example of him? Enhanced psychiatrics would persuade him to recant, but he needed to do more. He needed to show remorse in some way that would embed itself in the public psyche.

He would castrate himself. The thought of blood hit Naila's rage and ze felt zirself swell, as if infused with perfumed smoke. The minister would be put on trial for crimes against humanity. It would be a sensational trial, presided over by a handpicked judge who would convict and then pass a sentence of self-emasculatation. Naila would personally record the act and present the video on prime time TV. The proles would be traumatized into abject fear, and even zir fellow cabinet members would be shaken. And while the world trembled ze would demand that zir place in the presidential line of succession be advanced. Ze'd change zir title, too, from Secretary of Woke. Secretary sounded too menial. So did Administrator and even General. Ze needed something...larger.

Ze was suddenly thankful for the minister's defiance. Ze would shut down his little Christian school and then move on to others. The power ze bled from them would fuel zir rage. Soon the smoke within would pour forth and swaddle zir in incensed glory. All would witness and all would be amazed.

Chicken feathers or whatever they were swept across Naila's desk and disrupted zir thinking.

"Clavian!"

"Yes, Secretary?" he answered over the intercom.

"I want my screensaver changed. I want peacock feathers, like I told you before."

"Yes, Secretary."

He didn't sound contrite. In fact, Naila was sure ze heard contempt in his voice.

"You can fix it on your lunch hour," ze said. The thought of petulant little Clavian working through lunch amused zir, but ze supposed he would strike back by turning the incident into grist for his gossip mill. Gossip. An

idea occurred to zir.

"And there's another thing, Clavian. Don't get too used to calling me Secretary." Ze cleared the feathers from zir desk and looked at the minister still frozen in the paused video. "From what I've heard, my title's going to be changed to 'Minister.' But keep that to yourself."

"Yes, Secretary," Clavian said, and then in a lower, conspiratorial voice, "I mean, Minister."

Naila leaned back in zir chair and smiled. Zir more ambitious sycophants should be calling zir Minister by the end of the week. Before long the media would pick up on the change and begin referring to zir as the Minister of Woke. No telling what ze would become after that. Ze'd talk to the architects about making some changes to zir new office complex. Columns rising to vaulted ceilings? Zir desk atop an altar? Crush a people's gods and they will raise new ones.

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The Autonomous Zone

Hollis sat cross-legged in the middle of the field and watched Murch dig at the edge. A kerosene lantern and a half moon in the cloudless sky lit the weedy little clearing. Mesquite trees and cactus were beyond.

Murch was big and hulking but shorter than when he first arrived. Standing a foot deep in the hole cut him down to average height. A mound of dirt was beside the hole.

"Damn this stinks," he grumbled. He tossed a shovelful of dirt and scowled at Hollis. "Too bad you can't help."

Hollis shrugged an apology with his right shoulder. His left arm was in a sling. He'd separated the shoulder in the oil fields when he was young, and cool weather could make it hurt. It ached a little that afternoon so he rigged the sling. He was glad he had. Murch assumed the arm was broken and Hollis didn't correct him.

Murch reached down for the bottle of vodka that was near the hole. He took a swig, savored it, then returned to work.

Hollis looked around at the field. A couple dozen fist-sized rocks were scattered among the weeds. A hunk of turquoise was to one side of him and some red jasper to the other. He'd graduated from college with a degree in geology and then traveled the world working for the petroleum industry. Later, when he married Hope and they had Carrie, he began bringing rocks

home from his trips. Carrie loved having colorful little bits of the faraway places her dad visited.

Carrie. Hollis sneaked a look at the house. The lights were visible through the brush. Carrie was in the storm cellar and Hollis was glad she was. She was thirteen and pretty. No telling what Murch would do if he knew she was there.

Murch had shown up about an hour after dark. Hollis and Carrie heard him yelp when the trip-wired cactus swept across the path that led from the front gate to the house. The cactus was Hollis' intruder alert system. There was time to hide Carrie in the cellar, but just barely. Hollis finished pulling the living room rug back into place two seconds before Murch appeared at a window. He stood in the square of light for a moment, then he broke the glass with the barrel of a pistol. He stuck the gun through and ordered Hollis to lie face down on the floor.

When Murch was inside he asked who else was there.

"No one," Hollis said. "I'm alone."

"Guns."

Hollis pointed to the closet where he kept his rifle and shotgun. Murch broke them down and threw the parts out the window. Then he moved around the living room looking through doors. He poked his head into the bathroom, then Hollis' room, then Carrie's.

"This is a kid's room. You ain't alone."

"My daughter's not here. She's staying with friends."

Murch nosed around some more, and when he was finally satisfied that nobody else was in the house he sat in Hollis' easy chair. He laid his pistol on the little table beside it and began picking cactus thorns out of his shins. While he worked he said, "I had a hell of a time findin' this place, but I know it'll be worth it. I'm here for your treasure, Hollis."

"Treasure? I don't... How'd you know my name?"

"My cellmate told me all about you. You can call me Murch."

Hollis was still on the floor. His shoulder began to throb and he said he needed to stand. Murch told him he could, but warned against making any sudden moves. Hollis got to his feet. As he massaged his shoulder Murch said, "Now, what were you gonna tell me about the treasure?"

"Nothing. I don't have any."

"You got gold coins buried in the ground."

"No I don't. I used to have some old silver coins, junk silver, but I traded those off. Look at this house. Do you really think I have money?"

Murch looked around and said, "Maybe the place ain't much, but the rich get rich by pinchin' pennies. You got money all right."

Hollis did have gold there. He thought of his wedding band, and Hope's, hers with a small diamond in it. And there were the diamond earrings she inherited from an aunt. He'd hid those things away and nobody knew about them, not even Carrie. He planned to surprise her with them someday.

Murch finished with the thorns and picked up the pistol. He wagged it at Hollis.

"You got treasure, mister, and you're gonna show me where you buried it."

The pistol was a semiauto, a nine-millimeter Hollis thought. Murch stuffed it in the front waistband of his pants when they went out to dig. Hollis led him to the field, then he acted unsure. He said he couldn't remember which rock marked the treasure. "I buried it a long time ago and put the rocks here to confuse people. I never thought I'd confuse myself." He pointed to a cluster of crystals and said, "There. Under that quartz. A couple of feet down."

Murch told him to back off and sit where he could keep an eye on him. Hollis sat and Murch went to work with the shovel they'd brought along. He made some noise while he dug, but otherwise the soft-lit night was silent.

Hollis studied the brush encircling them. A few of the mesquites had grown fairly tall, but most were stunted and gnarled. They looked like goblins bent to some dark task. So did Murch as he worked.

He was more than knee-deep in the hole when he straightened up and yelled. "Damn it! There's nothin' here!" He glared at Hollis. "You lied to me!"

"I didn't lie. It's been years since I've been in this field. I thought it was under the quartz."

Murch considered, then he climbed out of the hole, dropped the shovel and picked up the bottle of vodka. He sat on the pile of fresh-dug dirt. He drank, adjusted the pistol that was still in his waistband and said, "Man this place smells."

Hollis almost said, "That's because you're sitting on a pile of crap," but he held his tongue. The field had served as a bathroom before he built a working commode into the house. He and Carrie used toilet rings over postholes for months. He would cap each hole with dirt when it was full and mark its place with one of the rocks.

That seemed so long ago, the toilet rings. It had been four years since he and Carrie left Houston. His wife died from a Covid shot, then he lost his job when Joe Biden shut down the oil pipelines, and suddenly he was an

unemployed widower with a nine-year-old daughter to take care of. On top of everything else America's cities were reeling from Marxist riots, so he decided to relocate with Carrie to his property in the remote hill country of central Texas.

He and his brother-in-law had bought the land years before. The parcel was a little over thirty acres and they used it for deer hunting a couple times a year. Hollis liked the area because it was an igneous upthrust in the sedimentary sameness of the state. Three years after they bought the place his brother-in-law needed money, so he sold his half to Hollis.

Living there full-time was rough at first. The only building on the property was an old hunter's cabin. It was just a small shell of rusted tin, but the north wall blocked the winter wind and there was a wood stove for heat and cooking. Hollis did what he could to make camping out fun for Carrie. They studied a survivalist manual and pieced together a rainwater collection system embellished with whirligigs and teeter-totters. They also got really good at making traps and snares. The rabbits they caught helped save a few dollars on food.

Hollis didn't have much money after they moved, so he worked up a budget that cut away all but the essentials—food and toiletries, clothes for Carrie as she grew, and books for her home schooling. Beyond that everything went into the house.

He spent the bulk of his savings putting in a power pole and replacing the rain barrels with a well and pump. Then he began bartering for building materials. Before they left Houston he rented a storage unit for their belongings. On a trip back he traded a jet ski and some other things to a former neighbor for an old trailer and a load of salvaged lumber. After he unloaded the lumber where he planned to build the house, he made another trip to pick up the rest of their things. They had no use for most of the stuff, so he traded it to their new neighbors. It was a slow process because the county was so sparsely populated, but over time he was able to swap for some old windows, doors and used appliances. He bought nails and bags of cement at a feed store that was about ten miles away.

The house came together slowly. He situated it in the middle of the acreage so they'd have plenty of buffer from whatever was going on in the outside world. Carrie was his tool fetcher and ladder holder, and she helped design the place. Her main architectural contribution was an overly large bathroom. She'd been a good sport about going without one for so long, so Hollis built the bath exactly the way she wanted. The first time they flushed the commode she clapped her hands and said, "Goodbye Potty Field!"

Hollis shifted position on the ground and smiled, remembering. He and Carrie had been on the property for nearly a year when one evening she asked what a potty field was. She was reading a novel by Victor Hugo and said it mentioned one. She showed Hollis in the book, and he saw that she'd misread. He said, "No, sweetie, that's 'potter's field.' It's a cemetery for poor people." Carrie was embarrassed at her mistake, but then the next day she grabbed a roll of toilet paper and said she was off to Potty Field.

Hollis chuckled.

"You laughin' at me?" Murch growled.

Hollis snapped out of his thoughts and saw Murch still sitting on the pile of dirt. A glint of reflected lantern light showed that the bottle he held was half empty.

He'd found the liquor before they left the house. Hollis didn't drink but kept a fifth of vodka for emergencies—as an anaesthetic if they should ever need it for tooth extraction, for minor surgeries and so on.

"I'm not laughing at you," he told Murch. "It's...it's just pain." He adjusted his sling.

Murch grunted and took a drink.

Hollis wondered how dangerous Murch really was.

"What'd you used to do? Before this, I mean."

"Before I started stealin'?"

"No, I..." Murch didn't seem offended, so Hollis said, "Yes. Before you started stealing."

"I worked lousy jobs, that's what. Never even made enough to buy a car."

"Where are you from?"

"From all over. I spent some time on the West Coast before I came here. When I was in jail in Dayton I... Forget it."

Hollis sensed that Murch wanted to talk. He'd been pretty quiet and businesslike so far, but the liquor seemed to be loosening him up.

"Go on," Hollis said. "Why'd you go to the West Coast?"

"Because California made it legal to shoplift. I heard about it in Dayton, so after they let me out I hitched to Frisco. And it was true about the shopliftin'. You could take nine hundred and fifty bucks worth of stuff out of the stores. I took watches and jewelry mostly, sold some to tourists and hocked the rest." Murch chuckled and took a drink. "Those were good times, man. Just walk right out of the stores without payin'. Like money from heaven."

Hollis remembered reading about California passing a proposition that legalized shoplifting. And then the mayors and city councils in the

state's leftist-run cities ordered police to stop responding to property crimes. Then came the calls to defund the police.

As if reading his mind Murch said, "We should defund all the cops. They're never there when you need them anyway, bunch'a donut eaters." He'd turned serious. He stood up, adjusted his pistol and kept his hand on it. "Enough yappin'. You got one more chance to tell me where the treasure is. Tell me, or I do somethin' that hurts."

"Well, like I said, it's been a long time." Hollis looked around. "I...I think it's over there, under that piece of cinnabar."

"No thinkin' about it. You better be right this time."

"It's under the cinnabar."

Murch retrieved the shovel from where he'd dropped it and went to the rock. He kicked it aside, set the bottle on the ground and began digging. A couple inches down he said, "Damn. This one's gonna stink too."

Hollis wondered again how dangerous Murch was. He didn't believe that anyone was all bad, and the man deserved a chance.

"So, is stealing the worst thing you've ever done?"

Murch surprised Hollis by throwing his head back and laughing. He seemed to howl at the moon. He laughed until he choked, then he picked up the bottle and threw his head back again to drink.

"Yeah, m-m-man," he said, sputtering back to normal after the liquor went down. "Stealin's the worst thing I ever done. Unless you count lightin' up cops with Molotov cocktails." He set the bottle down and returned to work. He talked while he dug. "I only chucked a few of them, the cocktails. Too much jail time if you get caught. So I switched to canned goods. I must've chucked a whole store full of soup at riot police. See, if they bust you at a protest, they can't say you got a weapon if all you're holdin' is a can of food. But chicken noodles ain't just for lunch anymore."

"It sounds like you've been to quite a few protests."

"Sure. I spent a lot of time in Seattle in 2020. I hitched back and forth between there and Portland. The summer of 2020 was like one long party. I was in Portland for that first autonomous zone, the one they called CHAZ. We drove the police out of the East Precinct, then we had almost a month of doin' whatever the hell we wanted. No cops, we took whatever we wanted from the stores, slept wherever we wanted. That autonomous zone, that was nice. A place where nobody could tell you what to do. You ran your own damn life there, until they shut it down."

"What'd you do then?"

"Got the hell out of Portland. The pigs had it in for us for makin' them look bad, so I went back to Seattle for a while. Then I drifted south. Boosted

cars, done some cash registers. The Covid masks made it easy. I thought fer sure there'd be some good times here in Texas, but I don't know... There ain't much energy here. I checked out Dallas, Austin, Houston, then I ran into some trouble."

Murch paused in his digging. He was sunk to the middle of his calves in the hole. He leaned on the shovel and said, "I was stuck in a town called Sugarland and needed money, so I went in to hit the register in a convenience store. But I got sidetracked by a sweet young thing wearin' tight shorts. You should've seen her ass. It was like she was beggin' for it. So I backed her up against the frozen foods and was just goin' to work on her, when the clerk stuck a gun in my ear. And two of the customers drew down on me. One of them was an old man with a walker. I mean, who the hell carries a .357 in the tote bag on his walker?"

He picked up the bottle, drained it and tossed it into the goblin trees. "Anyway," he said, returning to his digging, "when the police got there the woman said she had to get back to her kid with her milk, then she kicked me in the balls. I wanted to press charges but ever'body just laughed."

Hollis thought of Carrie and was glad she was hidden away from Murch. At least he hoped she was still hidden away. She'd never been in the cellar so long before. He was pretty sure she understood the seriousness of the situation and would stay put, but maybe she wouldn't.

Murch continued to talk while he dug, and his speech began to slur. The liquor was catching up with him. "So I spent nine months in Sugarland's lockup. That was a backwards place. The yokels in jail there weren't into social justice. You people are screwed up down here, the way you think."

"What do you mean?" Hollis asked, though his mind was still on Carrie. He had to decide what to do before Murch found out about her. But he wanted to be fair. "What's so screwed up about the way we think?"

"Well, almost all the guys in jail there, in Sugarland, said they deserved their sentences. That's screwed up. I tried to tell them they were the real victims, not the people they robbed and beat up, but they were too stupid to see it. So I quit tryin' to educate them and just did my time. But some good came out of it because I found out about you and your treas... Aargh!!!"

Murch turned toward Hollis holding the shovel one-handed, like an axe. "It ain't here! You done it to me again!" He jumped out of the hole and laid his free hand on the butt of his pistol. He didn't draw but he was considering.

Hollis thought of Carrie again. He needed to survive the encounter

with Murch, for her sake, but he still owed the man the benefit of a doubt. Surely he had some redeeming qualities.

"Did you know it was wrong?" he asked in the face of Murch's anger. He was counting on the liquor having a sedative effect. "What you did to the woman in the store. Do you know it was wrong?"

Murch went from threatening to amused. He snorted, deflating, and said, "Right and wrong have changed, baby! Ain't you heard about the Great Reset? They're resetting the government, the law, all that stuff. Hell no I wasn't wrong. And I bet you'd've done the same thing if you was me. She said she had a kid but you couldn't tell it from that ass."

Hollis finally made up his mind about Murch.

"Okay. I'll tell you where the treasure is."

Murch seemed skeptical. He lifted an eyebrow and drummed his fingers on the pistol's handle.

"Seriously," Hollis said. "I'll show you where the treasure is now." He shrugged his good shoulder. "I know when I'm beat."

Murch smiled. "That's more like it." He patted the gun. "This hog leg kicks more when she's quiet, don't she? Where's the treasure?"

Hollis pointed to the far side of the clearing. "It's over there, by those trees. Under a piece of obsidian."

"A piece of what?"

"Black rock. Like glass."

Murch said he couldn't see it. He picked up the lantern and started off, staggering slightly, then he stopped and said, "You come with me, so you don't run off." Hollis got to his feet and followed.

Murch walked with the shovel in one hand and the lantern extended in the other. "I see it," he said after a few steps. The rock was between a couple of twisted mesquites. Murch set the lantern down and told Hollis to sit. Hollis lowered himself to the ground.

"I hope this one won't stink like the others," Murch said as he prepared to dig.

"It won't. Can I say something before you start?"

Murch eyed him with suspicion. "You tryin' to stall? Because the treasure better be here. I ain't kiddin'."

"I'm not trying to stall. I just want to say you shouldn't have done that to the woman in the store. And I think you're too hard on the police. Without them, we're on our own."

"Yeah, but that's the way it's s'posed to be. Ever' man for himself, like in the autonomous zone. You know what I mean?"

"I know what you mean. Unfortunately."

Murch drove the blade of the shovel into the ground, and the mesquites to his sides untwisted with a whooshing sound. Hollis covered his eyes against the flying dirt and debris. When he looked again he saw that the two halves of his bedframe trap had snapped shut. The insides of the jaws bristled with wooden spikes, and three or four had gone completely through Murch's chest. He stood pinned. His mouth opened once, twice, and then he died.

Hollis decided to bury him out in the brush. He'd tell Carrie that the bad man went away, then after she was in bed he'd dig the grave. It would take all night with the sore shoulder. He'd mark the spot with a piece of pyrite. Murch would finally get the gold he came for, but it would be fool's gold.

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A Cure for Stupid

We tried to warn people about the dangers of the Covid shots, but we were no match for the propagandists. The World Health Organization and Big Pharma silenced us online and conducted an incredibly effective fear campaign. America went from facemasks and social distancing, to lockdowns and business closures, then finally to needles.

The first people in line for the shots didn't fare so well. Hundreds had miscarriages, thousands developed palsies. But that didn't slow the program. The lines grew longer by the day. There were millions though who refused to take part. We knew that the government's "vaccines" were actually experiments in genetic manipulation, so we stood back and watched as the injected twitched and drooled. Some even changed color. It was spooky the way they turned green and developed a kind of brain fog. I felt like I was in a zombie movie, a bad one because in the good ones the plague comes out of nowhere. In real life our zombies had volunteered to become victims.

I already took vitamins C and D3 daily, and when Covid came along I added zinc and capers. Capers are high in quercetin, which opens up cell membranes so vitamins can get inside and stop viruses from replicating. I tried to explain this to my friends and family, but the most common response I got was, "I'll just wait for the vaccine."

My state dispensed the shots according to age groups, older people first. I declined when it was my group's turn. Then the shots were available to

everyone and the government-controlled media began reporting on how many had received them. They treated the situation like a race where we needed to reach ten percent, then fifteen percent and so on. When we passed twenty-five percent they began asking why the non-vaccinated were allowed to endanger the vaccinated. Which didn't make sense. Why would someone who'd been given the Covid shot need to worry about catching Covid?

Once we passed fifty percent we saw people being denied certain services if they hadn't taken the shot. I just did without those services. But then they introduced "vaccine passports" and made us show them when buying food. I snatched a passport from the pocket of a man lying dead in a gutter. A sticker on his shirt said "I got my shot." The smiley face on the sticker looked a lot like the man's grinning rictus.

Stolen passports worked until the swelling ranks of state enforcement officers began scrutinizing them more closely. I dodged detection by going to work at a city vaccination clinic. I'd been a medic in the Army and knew how to administer shots quickly and painlessly. And since I worked at a clinic, people assumed I'd had my shot. My employee I.D. got me through checkout lines, checkpoints and roadblocks.

I felt bad about injecting people, but they were begging for it. Fortunately nobody died on me. One man went into a seizure after I stuck him, and a couple passed out from anaphylactic shock. The orderlies would load the fallen into wheelchairs and say "Low blood sugar" to the other people waiting in line.

I never used the long swabs to collect lab samples from people's noses. I'd read once that the ancient Egyptians often punished slaves by piercing the membranes behind their sinuses with needles. Violate the membranes and pathogens can gain access to the brain. Some people get headaches after the swab tests, then later they die from encephalitis or meningitis. I didn't want to contribute to that so I avoided doing the tests.

My psycho boss noticed this and began watching me. His name was Brent. He watched me so closely that when I got the chance I transferred to a clinic in a small town. I thought I'd be safe there, but out-of-the-way places were magnets for anti-shotters. The government raided the clinic not long after I arrived. Lucky for me I was off duty at the time and sleeping by the back door of my apartment. They didn't catch me in the roundup.

I had no place to go, so I left my car pointed one way on the side of a highway, then I hitched a ride going the other. I always carried a bug-out bag back then, and I asked the driver to drop me in a wooded area. When he pulled away I hiked into the trees.

Over the next few weeks I listened to a portable radio and lost weight eating jerky, vitamins and whatever I could scrounge up in the woods. The radio stations all got behind the vaccination push. Each day they reported on the percentage of unvaccinated people, then when the percentage hit single digits they switched to a headcount. There were thousands at first, then hundreds, and then just dozens. Finally they got down to the last ten that hadn't received the shot. My name was on the list. I listened to the radio as they removed a name or two each day. At last mine was the only one left. The state announced a reward for information leading to my capture. It was a huge sum, enough to set a person up for life.

I was starving by then and had no choice but to come out of hiding. I hiked back to the highway to catch a ride. With my weight loss, a growth of beard and a facemask I figured I wouldn't be recognized. I wasn't. The first guy to pick me up didn't know me even though my picture was staring at him from the newspaper on his dashboard. My face was all over the internet too, but no one recognized me as I made my way back toward the city where I'd done my clinic work.

The drivers I rode with liked to talk about how they would spend their reward money if they caught me. One said he'd use a chunk of his on drugs to treat the side effects of the four different Covid shots he'd taken. After he got current on everything he would throw caution to the wind and peel away one of the three masks he wore. Another man said he wanted to buy an island so he could be completely alone. Drones would deliver his food and the latest shots.

I got to the city and pulled together a cardboard flop in an alley full of homeless people. I shaved my beard so I'd look like my pictures, then I covered my face again and headed for the clinic where I used to work.

Brent was on duty, my psycho ex-boss. I asked to speak to him, and when he came to the front desk I removed my mask. His eyes lit up and he called the law. Five minutes later the place was swarming with cops and news crews.

The police cuffed me and asked a couple of questions, but the reporters were more interested in Brent. They wanted to know how he planned to spend his reward money. While he talked about big houses and fast cars, I told one of the cops that Brent wasn't the one who caught me; it was the people from the homeless encampment. A half-dozen were waiting outside. I'd told them to follow me if they wanted to earn some easy money.

The cop broke the news to Brent, who naturally got upset. He gave me a murderous look and I asked the police to get me out of the clinic before somebody tried to vaccinate me. I said, "This place has bad vaccines. I used

to work here so I know. Whatever you do, don't let them give me a shot from the Modernastrafizer batch they have in the storeroom."

I saw my words take root in the briar patch of Brent's sadistic mind. He struck a righteous pose and said he couldn't allow me to leave the building without being vaccinated. The police weren't sure what to do, but with cameras pointed at them they didn't want to make a mistake. They called a quick huddle and came out of it agreeing that I should be dosed. I got in a cop's face and yelled, "But they'll use the Modernastrafizer that's behind the water heater!" My outburst earned me a faceplant on the linoleum and a boot on the neck. I heard Brent say he'd be right back.

A couple of minutes later they put me in a chair and rolled up a sleeve. Brent knelt down beside me and grinned maliciously as he drew a syringe full of fluid from a vial marked Modernastrafizer. He chuckled when he stuck the needle in my arm.

Back when I worked at the clinic, the competing drug companies flooded us with their products. The box of Modernastrafizer got buried and was quickly forgotten. During a lunch break one day I dug it out and replaced the vials with bottles of saline solution. With my fake labels on them they looked like the real thing.

So Brent injected me with water, but nobody knew that, and I had to pretend I'd gotten the actual poison. I slumped a little in my chair and squeezed out a fart. It sounded like a gunshot in the silent clinic. All of the cameras were on me, all eyes, every ear. I let some drool roll down my chin. It hung, swung and dropped. A nurse said, "There's a shot for that side effect."

I was afraid I'd overacted, so I sat up straight and gave the nurse a smile. "Don't need it, ma'am. I feel great." Brent scowled when his supervisor pronounced me A-OK and gave me a lollipop.

They kept me in jail overnight, then the next morning a judge declared me fit to reenter society. Before I could go though I had to attend a ceremony on the front steps of the courthouse. The governor was there to proclaim the state fully vaccinated, and our masked president gave a pep talk from a big video screen. She told us we needed to remain as vigilant as the communist Chinese in our fight against antisocial behavior.

I got a passport and people leave me alone now. Some of those who recognize me say they admire the way I held out for so long. I can usually count on a free drink when I stop into a bar.

Mortuary science has become the most popular field of study in college. Makeshift funeral parlors have sprung up where small businesses lost their leases during the lockdowns. The Covid shots are by far the most successful

soft-kill weapons ever deployed. Like cancer, they change your genetics so that your cells replicate in wild and deadly ways. Cases of liver failure and spongiform encephalopathy have gone through the roof. People who used to worry about sniffles are hysterical now that they have mad cow's disease. Our leaders say the spike in the death rate is due to a new strain of Covid, and they're working on a vaccine for it.

I knew a sergeant in the Army who liked to say, "There ain't no cure for stupid." He may have been right at the time, but things change. The Covid shots are a cure for stupid. Maybe the Final Solution for stupid.

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Bug Lord

Guy sat sprung back in his office chair, feet up, staring at the computer monitor on his desk. His hands hovered over the keyboard in his lap, but he couldn't think of anything to type.

The rattle of a grasshopper distracted him. He looked out the shipping container's bay doors and thought of how much his life had changed over the past month. From a suburb of Austin he'd jumped to his remote acreage on the southern fringe of the Texas plains. He would have built on the property when he retired two years before, but he couldn't afford to. Most of his money was tied up in the Austin house. He thought about selling but real estate values were down, so he stayed put and continued cobbling together his short stories. The writing that used to help pass the time gradually came to fill it.

Then Covid appeared and things changed. Local dictatorships began springing up all over the country, and suddenly his house was worth more. Forty-four percent more to the couple that bought it. They were fleeing the leftist lunacy of California.

He moved the stuff he wanted to keep into storage, then took up residence in the modified shipping container that he'd put on his property a few years before. He was glad the container was there and glad it was wired with electricity. It gave him all he needed for the moment—a place to sleep and write.

A cricket started a singsong chirrup and Guy saw that the shadows outside had lengthened. Dusk was approaching. He couldn't remember when he'd been more comfortable. September was a temperate month, a cool hammock stretched between the sweaty sheets of summer and the

blanketed bed of winter. But soon the northerners would glaze his container with ice. Fittingly symbolic, he thought, given the way that global shipping was cooling off. He knew he would have to hustle if he hoped to get a house built on the property. He needed to see to it before goods stopped moving completely and the dollar collapsed.

Over the years he'd read dozens of articles about the deliberate devaluation of the U.S. dollar. America was to be reduced to third world status through excessive borrowing and spending. The Powers That Be planned to extinguish the American beacon and plunge the world into a new Dark Age. Or not quite dark, but dim. People would have access to lifesaving goods and services, but just enough access to feed a desperate hope. That was what the essential/nonessential employee business had been about at the start of the Covid crisis—the world's overlords were preparing the peasants for a future where only the deserving survived.

Guy sighed and turned his attention back to his computer. He'd taken a break from writing during the hectic time of the move, and now he was finding it hard to get back in harness. The story he put on hold weeks before seemed anemic. He thought about starting a new one but couldn't come up with an idea that interested him. He wondered if he would ever have another idea worth pursuing.

The lone cricket had been joined by others, and dusk was darkening to night. The container needed to be closed up before insects began flooding in to the light. Guy set his keyboard aside, stood up and stretched. He stepped outside and latched the bay doors, then he went in through the side door and latched it.

The windows were screened and a couple of moths were already fluttering at the one nearest the desk, trying to get in to the little bit of light the monitor put out. Guy switched on a lamp and returned to his springy chair. He put his feet up again and yawned, and while his mouth was open his stomach rumbled. He was hungry but too tired to fuss with supper. A can of something later would do, but tomorrow he would fix a proper meal. He might grill one of the T-bones from the freezer.

He pictured the prices on the steaks' wrappers and felt a twinge of sticker shock. Beef cost so much now. The Powers That Be said meat consumption was bad for the planet, and apparently they planned to deal with the matter in the same way they'd dealt with tobacco, by raising prices until people could no longer afford it.

Something flitted across the computer monitor. It was a lacewing that had made it into the container before lockup. Guy's thoughts shifted from T-bones to remembering an article he'd read online. It was called "Protein

Going to Waste" and promoted a U.N. program to replace traditional meats with insects. The photos in the piece triggered Guy's gag reflex. One showed a grub casserole and the other a caterpillar parfait.

The lacewing came to rest on the monitor and Guy leaned forward to study it. It was so frail, just a twitch of diaphanous green. When he was a kid he was obsessed with insects. He studied them with a magnifying glass and a half-dozen field guides. And sometimes he would imagine them blown up to ten times their size, or a hundred. At a hundred times its size the lacewing would be as big as a dragon.

Guy yawned again, leaned back in his chair and felt his eyelids droop...

...and he saw Dolph and his wife retreat into their steel hut for the night. Dolph barred the door while Shelly worked the chain that hung from the center of the domed ceiling. She left the vent open just enough to take in air and let out smoke. Dolph added some wood to the fire and then tried to join Shelly as she crawled into her bed. But of course she rebuffed him. For nearly twenty years she'd been rebuffing him, ever since she realized they couldn't have children. Still, a man had to try, so Dolph got his customary kick in the shin and then limped over to his own bed.

He roused from sleep occasionally during the night, as the howls and rustlings came and went. His dreams echoed with screeches, clicks and trumpetings. And then he was looking up at light coming in around the damper. He picked up a boot from the floor and tossed it at Shelly's bed, to get her stirring.

Together they stood at the front door and Shelly opened the viewing slit. Dolph dangled a red bandanna through it. Sometimes the movement caught the attention of a compound eye, but nothing attacked that morning. Shelly thanked The Powers Of Bees. Dolph snorted at her superstition and opened the door.

Two fleas were caught in the canopy that covered the front yard. Both were alive and kicking, so Dolph used his crossbow to put bolts in them. He cursed under his breath when he saw that one of them had broken a strand of rope. He and Shelly had woven the canopy out of nylon parachute shroud about five years before, and it was still strong but patched in a hundred places.

The net acted as a deterrent against diving insects, and sometimes it caught food. Like the fleas. Dolph thought of Shelly's grilled flea steaks and his mouth watered. He could have eaten a stack of them right then, but she was busy putting a fire together, so it would be awhile before she got to the cooking. He'd pull the fleas down after he inspected the grounds.

The front yard looked fine, with its canopy above and the pair of large

crossbows mounted on stands near the hut's door. The stands swiveled to provide coverage for the area in front of the hut and to the sides. Dolph made sure the quivers were full of rebar bolts. They were heavy and would kill or slow down anything coming at them along the ground.

Dolph preferred bows to guns because the sound of gunfire could draw predators. Sometimes though guns were necessary, so he kept a barrel of shotguns near the crossbows. He took the lid off the barrel and examined a couple of the guns. They were fully loaded and working smoothly. He left the barrel open and set off for his walk around the hut.

He tested trip alarms and checked for damage to the building. It looked like a big, rusted igloo. He'd decided to build the hut after he found a semi overturned on a nearby highway. Its load of half-inch sheet metal had broken free of the trailer and fanned out like a deck of cards along the road. The truck was still there, with a grasshopper leg through the windshield and the skeleton of the driver still pinned to his seat.

Dolph knew how to weld, so he cut the metal into manageable pieces and hauled them to the site where he planned to put the hut. After he found some metal for the framework he poured a ring of concrete four feet deep and built on that. The concrete was to prevent insects from burrowing in from underneath, and the steel was to bounce them off from above.

Dolph paused from time to time to study tracks. The cleared zone between the hut and the brush that began a few yards away was pitted with them, but he didn't see anything to worry about. And there wasn't any activity in the trees. The crumbling beetle's shell in the distance had lost an antenna, but otherwise things looked the same as the day before.

Then something moved. Dolph crouched and listened. He heard footsteps, lots of them, and he pictured a swarm of ants moving through the brush. There was no way he could defend against them if they attacked, but he raised the bow to his shoulder anyway. He waited, the footsteps grew louder, and then he saw something big moving left to right in the trees. It was a centipede. Fortunately it seemed unaware of Dolph and trundled by like one of the trains he'd seen at railroad crossings when he was a kid.

The rest of the perimeter check was uneventful, and when Dolph returned to the front yard he found Shelly standing at the butcher table. She drummed her fingers on her exoskeleton chisel. "All right, all right," he grumbled, and he got the stepladder and bolt cutters. He went to one of the fleas and cut its legs off. Shelly dragged it away when it hit the ground.

The second flea was harder to remove. It was the one that had caused the damage. Dolph got it untangled and repaired the gap in the nylon.

By the time he was finished and ready for a cup of coffee, Shelly had the

trash cart loaded with offal from the butchering. Dolph went to the coffeepot but she cleared her throat.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," he said, and he went to unplug the all-terrain vehicle from its solar charger. He backed the vehicle up to the cart, connected it and took off for the ravine that was a half mile away.

The ATV and the cart were both covered with camo canopies, and the ATV bristled with rebar spikes. A shotgun was mounted on the dashboard and a big fire extinguisher was in back. Bugs hated getting a face full of foam.

Dolph drove slowly, looking and listening for insect activity, but there wasn't any. He reached the ravine and dumped his load. The ravine was a creek bed that coursed with water sometimes, but at the moment it was covered with weeds and the husks of dead insects.

Dolph returned to the front yard and parked the cart beside the butcher table. Shelly was just starting to work on the second flea, so he finally had time for his coffee. He relaxed in a lawn chair and sipped.

He thought of trains again and remembered how the world used to be, before the experiments to make insects larger. The U.N. promoted the experiments as the answer to world hunger. Everywhere you looked there were posters that said "Bigger is Better" and "New and Improved." The posters showed children chasing butterflies with wings the size of kites. Dolph's Uncle Ned said the cutesy ads drew attention away from the catastrophe that was going on all around them, and it turned out he was right. Either by accident or design the insect enlargement program spread beyond the labs. Eggs the size of footballs began appearing here and there, and some of the bugs that hatched out grew to the size of elephants. Before long it was humanity that was insect-sized on the scale of things. The big bugs ate humans, pets and farm animals. People weren't prepared, and few survived for more than a year.

Shelly called out and pointed to a tree that was fifty or so yards into the brush. It swayed in a way that Dolph knew meant an antlion. He grabbed his crossbow and went to investigate. It was important to keep lions away from the hut; their digging might undermine the foundation.

He reached the tree and found one of the bugs hard at work beside it. It was digging a conical ant trap. He shot a bolt into its soft abdomen and it disappeared beneath the dirt. He stood watching until the dirt stopped moving and showed a dark, spreading stain.

Back at the hut Dolph told Shelly the lion was waiting for her. She ignored him. Antlions were tasty but hard to remove from their holes. Shelly ignored Dolph again when he said he expected lion brain gravy on his

flea.

She laid a couple of steaks on the grill as Dolph returned to his chair. The sound of the sizzle and the seared smell made his mouth water again. Shelly said flea reminded her of chicken, but for the life of him he couldn't remember what chicken tasted like. The last time he'd had any was out of a rusted can. Before that he ate the fresh thing at his Uncle Ned's farm, but then some damselflies got the birds. He and Ned watched through a boarded up window at the back of the house as the bugs stripped the chicken yard. Ned yelled, "Damn you, Bill Gates!" each time one of the hens got snatched up. He told Dolph that Gates had financed the big bug research. "Him and his methane crowd." He ripped a fart and barked, "That's for you too, Gates!" He told Dolph that Gates and his bankers had concocted the climate crisis in order to take over the world, and they demonized methane because everybody passes gas. "The plan is to tax us for the air we breathe in and the farts we let out." Dolph couldn't picture how they would tax farts, and he was going to ask, but his uncle had already moved on. He said that another reason Gates pushed bug eating was because insect meat was so lean. "Children's brains need animal fat to develop properly, and they won't get enough from bugs. English monarchs used to starve the serfs to keep their brains from developing. That way they'd never know enough to question authority." Poor Uncle Ned, Dolph thought. He was knowledgeable about history and current events, but that didn't save him from an earwig in the barn.

Shelly was cooking the steaks slowly, and the sun was on her, so Dolph set up the sun screen. He'd made it years before out of a big aluminum tripod and a half-dozen moth wings. He used wings from a sphinx moth, a gypsy and a luna moth. The thing was once quite pretty, but over time the colored scales fell away, and now the wings were a dull gray. Still though, the screen broke the worst of the sun and Shelly thanked Dolph for setting it up.

He got his slingshot and returned to his chair. The weapon was for the insects that grilling tended to attract. That day the bugs were mostly gnats, the kind they used to call "no see 'ems" because they were so small. They'd crowd around your head and get up your nose. Now they were as big as clay pigeons and Dolph nailed one about every third shot. They'd hover in a mass, then one would fall and the mass would shift to the side and re-form, then shift and re-form again.

Dolph shot gnats until the survivors moved away, and then he felt himself getting sleepy. Shelly was tending the meat and putting together a salad of wild greens. Life was good. Dolph's head grew heavy and his chin

dropped to his chest.

Then Shelly said something and there was a note of alarm in her voice. Dolph snapped to his feet and saw that she was holding a hand cupped to an ear. She pointed to the sky and said, "Bzzz." Dolph listened until he heard it too. It was a deep drone, but far away.

"Horseflies," he said.

"Wasps," Shelly said, and she went into one of her rocking religious chants about The Powers.

Dolph stood scanning the canopied sky. The droning grew louder but he didn't see anything. And then something large and dark came from the rear of the hut. It passed overhead and landed with a thump in the front yard, between the canopy and the brush line. The buzzing stopped.

The insect was nearly twenty feet long, black, and had long wings and a long neck. Dolph had never seen anything like it. He started to ask Shelly if she knew what it was, but she was running to one of the mounted crossbows. He ran to the other. Within seconds the bows were loaded and aimed.

Dolph still wondered what the insect was, and as if reading his mind Shelly said, "Snakefly. Long prothorax. Predatory."

The creature cocked its head and seemed to look at them. Dolph put his finger on his bow's trigger and aimed for the point where he judged the heart would be, but he held fire. So did Shelly. She was as good a shot as he was, so he knew the snakefly wouldn't get far if it came at them.

A long moment later the creature lowered its head to the ground and Dolph saw something on its back. There was a lump above its front pair of legs.

"What's on its shoulders?" he asked Shelly.

"I think it's... Is it a man?"

It was. A man in a saddle. He was dressed all in black—black pants, shoes and hoodie. The hood covered his head.

"Hello!" he called out. "Do you mind if I get down and stretch my legs?"

"Depends," Dolph answered. "Is your animal safe?"

"Oh, yes." The man fiddled with a keyboard on the front of his saddle, and the snakefly's legs folded. It dropped and lay stretched out on the ground.

"Incapacitated," the man said as he unbuckled his seatbelt and slid down from the saddle.

When he was on the ground Dolph was surprised by how short he was. He was also surprised when he pulled back his hood to reveal a pale, puffy face. He'd looked like a warrior in the saddle, but on the ground he looked

more like a worm with thick glasses and a goofy grin.

"My team and I have been flying for hours," he said. He pointed up to a couple of black specks high overhead. Dolph could just barely make out their buzz.

"May I get a drink of water?" the man asked.

Shelly went while Dolph kept watch. The man drank his water, then as Shelly walked away with the glass he began doing some stretching exercises. He lifted his legs this way and that and touched his toes. Then he went up on his toes and spun like a ballerina. He counted out loud as he spun, and when he reached ten he stopped and unzipped the front of his hoodie. A pink sweater was underneath. Dolph felt something stir in his memory. The sweater, the soft face, the glasses...it dawned on him who the man was.

"You're Bill Gates."

"Yes, I am, though I prefer to be called 'Bug Lord' now."

Gates continued with his ballet exercises, prancing and kicking, and Dolph wondered what his uncle Ned would have thought of the situation. Gates had wiped out most of humanity, yet here he was dancing around like he was at a garden party. Ned would have killed him. Dolph wouldn't go that far, but out of respect for his uncle's memory he wanted Gates gone.

"Well I'm sure you need to get going," he said brusquely.

Shelly gave him a scowl that he knew would be followed later with talk about hive hospitality. It would be nice to avoid the sermon, so he sighed and resigned himself to some chitchat.

"So what brings you to our neck of the woods?" he asked Gates.

"Oh, we're just hunting and tracking." Gates lifted his hoodie in back to show a pistol stuck in the waistband of his pants. "We tag special insects and then track them down later with GPS."

"That's interesting," Dolph said, "but why are you here, on our property?"

"Well, we saw your house, and I wanted to ask if you've seen any unusual insects in the area. Any exotics."

"Not lately," Dolph said. "Your snakefly is the most exotic thing we've seen in a couple of years. Why do you track insects?"

"So we can kill them and harvest body parts. There's quite a market for the organs and glands of the rarer species. Scientists want them for research, and others use them to make potions for virility, cell regeneration and so forth. Lately I've been injecting myself with a distillate of one of the regenerative compounds. Look at this." He leaned forward and ran a hand across his forehead. "New hair growth."

Dolph wasn't sure how to respond so he said, "That's...impressive."

"Thank you," Gates smiled, then he looked around and asked if they'd seen any orchid mantises.

"Not that I know of," Dolph said. "What do they look like?"

"They're white, with big flaps of pink, and conical eyes. A warlord in Peru wants the hypocerebral ganglion from a male. I could trade it for a diamond mine."

Again Dolph didn't know what to say, and as he was trying to think of something, Gates did a series of tiptoe lunges that took him to his snakefly. The insect was still flat on the ground.

"Thanks for letting me stretch," he said, "and for the water." He climbed the snakefly's neck and buckled himself to his saddle.

Then a loud buzz seemed to flare out of nowhere. A shadow appeared, and an insect landed beside Gates. It was nearly the size of the snakefly and had long, scimitar-like jaws. A dobsonfly, Dolph realized, and he leaned to his crossbow. Gates sat frozen at first, then he reached for his pistol. But the dobsonfly was too fast. It flicked its head sideways and closed its jaws around Gates' neck. He fired his pistol as his head was lifted from his shoulders.

The dobsonfly took off with its prize, and Gates' body thrashed around in its saddle. As it thrashed, one of the hands hit the keyboard that controlled the snakefly. The insect went spiraling up and then shot away in a straight line. The specks that were Gates' companions followed.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully for Dolph and Shelly, as did the next few weeks, except for a hatching of stinkbugs that made life a bit whiffy for a while. Dolph smiled whenever he thought of Gates losing his head. He wished his Uncle Ned could have been there to see it.

And then one day Gates returned. He was riding a different snakefly, lighter in color and smaller, but he was dressed the same. He landed and sat with his black hood covering his head.

"So have you seen an orchid mantis yet?" he asked Dolph and Shelly.

They were both stunned and couldn't answer, then Dolph said, "We...we thought you were dead."

Gates pulled his hood back to show a head that was half the size it used to be. The sight was unnerving and Shelly said, "Powers." Dolph said he didn't understand. "We saw you decapitated. Nobody could survive that."

"That was true," Gates said, "once. But the regenerative compound I told you I was taking is a lot stronger than even I thought it would be. And look at this." He tilted his little head forward and said, "I'm going to have a full head of hair."

"Well, uh, congratulations," Dolph said. "Do you know what happened to

your old head?"

"I accidentally shot it with a tracking dart when I was attacked. It's stationary, a couple hundred miles from here, so I assume the dobsonfly crapped it out. But it doesn't matter. This new head will be much better."

He ran his fingers through his hair and then shifted in his saddle, as if trying to get comfortable. "And my head's not the only thing I've been regenerating. We're on our way back to China, and by the time we get there my new testicles should be fully grown. I traded the original pair for a tin mine, and now I'm going to trade for a smelting operation. And by the time the next pair..."

One of Gates' people buzzed past on a dragonfly and he said, "Oops. Time to go." He punched at the saddle's keyboard and the snakefly's wings began to pump. "On to China," he said as he rose into the air. The drone of the Gates group faded into the distance and...

...Guy jerked awake with an intense buzzing in one of his ears. He stabbed with a finger, then examined the tip and saw mosquito parts trapped in amber earwax. One of the wings twitched with a final spasm. And something twitched at the back of his throat. He gagged and coughed the remains of the lacewing into the palm of a hand. It must have flown into his mouth while he was dozing. He smacked his lips and tasted...was it green blood?

His stomach growled and he looked at his computer monitor. He decided he'd beaten his brain against the writing enough for one day, and he wondered if he would ever have another idea that was worth pursuing. Maybe something would come to him while he ate. A can of beef stew would get the bug taste out of his mouth.

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The Attack of the Zoombies

"I can't believe you said that," Ingrid huffed. Howard leaned back in his chair and looked from her, to Dobie, to Van, and then to himself. They each occupied a corner on his computer's monitor. "Did you hear me, Howard? I can't believe you said that."

"You'll get over it," Howard shrugged. "But like I was saying, it's not a vaccine. It's an experimental mRNA treatment. You know that, Ingrid."

"I still think you should take it. It'll minimize your symptoms if you get sick."

"Minimize my symptoms? You're just parroting what the government says. Do you remember when they said the shot would keep us from getting Covid? They knew at the time that that was a lie. Fool me twice, shame on me, so I'll skip the shot. My body, my choice."

"There!" Ingrid barked. "You said it again! You shouldn't be using a pro-choice saying. It's offensive to women."

"So I don't have freedom of speech?"

"That's not the issue here. Your inappropriate use of a pro-choice saying is."

"No, my right to choose is the issue. You're trying to change the subject because you're losing the debate. And I haven't even brought up the Nuremberg Code yet. The Covid shots are experimental, and the code says you can't perform medical experiments on unwilling individuals. That's what the Nazis did."

Ingrid began to sputter, at a loss for words. Howard knew that as host of the Zoom call, and plant manager for Dinkman Shoelaces, he shouldn't be pushing her buttons. But he felt cantankerous and couldn't help himself. He needed some excitement after a year of lockdowns and masks and shuffling between Xs taped on floors. He needed to break out of the shuffle for a while, so he decided to make an aggressive dash through the weekly conference call of the Dinkman department heads. Normally he and the others chatted after finishing with company business, but this week there was no small talk. As soon as Howard announced the meeting was closed he said that people who took the Covid shots were idiots.

Ingrid still sputtered but was slowing down. Howard felt kind of sorry for her. She was head of advertising and had been as sharp as a tack a year before, but too much downtime changed that. She'd become kind of dull-witted and had lost interest in her appearance. From styled hair and the latest in fashion she'd gone to a bathrobe and what looked like a bushy red fright wig. Her unplucked eyebrows were becoming a fright too.

Dobie, the head of shipping, sat above Ingrid on the screen. He wore a surgical mask over his fat, pasty face and stroked a python that was coiled in his lap. The snake's name was Bejeezus. Dobie took Covid extra seriously. He lived alone but wore a facemask for the calls, and sometimes he even put a snout mask on Bejeezus.

Van occupied the corner of the screen below Howard. He was in charge of sales. He sat with his elbows on the arms of his chair and his fingers steeped in front of a tie that matched his silver hair. The others kidded him about wearing a suit and tie for the calls.

Ingrid sputtered to a stop and Howard expected Dobie to take up the

torch on her behalf. Dobie was a Democrat and Ingrid was a self-styled political independent who always voted Democratic. So Howard watched Dobie's mask for lip movement ahead of speech, but then Van cleared his throat.

"Howard," he said gravely. "Don't you think it's a bit extreme to bring the Nazis into this?"

"No, Van, I don't. The Biden administration is behaving like a bunch of Nazis with the Covid business. They want people who don't take the shots to lose their jobs, their freedom to move around and so on. That kind of thinking led to lots of dead Jews in World War Two."

Van unsteeped his fingers and straightened his tie.

"Well, you really should take the shot."

"Yeah," Ingrid said.

"I agree," Dobie said.

Bejeezus flicked his tongue.

"I'll add a note to the minutes about your feelings on the shot," Howard said. "You all think that I should be injected. That's rare, you know, for the three of you to agree on something."

"You're right," Ingrid nodded, making her hair bounce. "Dobie and Van hardly ever agree. I mean, what with Dobie being a Democrat and Van a Republican. They don't have much in common."

"They have more in common than you might think," Howard said. "For example, they both admire Charlton Heston."

Dobie snorted. "You mean the actor? Mister 'pry my gun from my cold, dead hand?' I don't admire him."

"Why not? He was a liberal, same as you."

Dobie adjusted his mask, gave Bejeezus a stroke and said, "Heston was a gun nut and a fascist, not a liberal."

"A fascist wouldn't have taken part in the freedom marches in the nineteen sixties," Howard said. "Heston did, because he was a liberal. And then at the end of his life, when he was president of the National Rifle Association, he was a libertarian. Liberal and libertarian come from the same root word as liberty. Heston was a firm believer in liberty all through his life."

Nobody responded. By the way they sat blinking at Howard he knew that the Heston info was new to all of them. And they didn't know what to make of it. They liked being told what to think by news sites that promoted themselves as 'trusted.' Dobie and Ingrid went to leftist websites and Van to conservative. They absorbed only one point of view and as a result had become unthinking zombies. That's how Howard viewed them at the

moment, as zombies. But not the Hollywood kind that ran around eating brains; Ingrid and Dobie and Van were chewing on Howard but hoped to avoid any new information that his brain might contain. They were a new kind of deadhead, not zombies but...

"Zoombies," Howard chuckled.

"Pardon?" Van said.

"Nothing."

"Well," Dobie said, "I don't know if I believe that about Charlton Heston. Just because you read it on the internet doesn't make it true, Howard. Do you know if the website you got the story from is fact-checked?"

"It's not a story, Dobie, it's in Heston's biography. Even your most politically-biased 'fact checkers' will acknowledge that he took part in the civil rights marches."

"So you won't tell us where you saw the story?" Ingrid said.

"It's not a story, Ingrid. Like I just told Dobie, it's..."

Howard had planned to close the call after making his statement about Heston. He'd wanted to have a bit of fun, then take a shower and watch a movie. But suddenly he felt cantankerous again. He'd give them a lot more than just Heston to think about.

"Okay," he said, "I made it all up."

Ingrid went smirky, Dobie shook his head, and Van nodded.

"Well," Van said, "you had us going. But you should be more careful how you speak about Charlton Heston. He gets enough flak from progressives as it is."

Howard squinted like he was thinking and said, "Progressives? Do you mean socialists, Van?"

"Sure. Socialists and others on the left. You've never discussed politics with us before, Howard, but you really should try to educate yourself."

Ingrid said, "He probably goes to those conspiracy sites, Van."

"Yeah," Howard said, "you got me, Ingrid. I've been visiting conspiracy sites. All except for one. It's where I read that Republicans are communists."

Astonishment swept across the screen. All three of Howard's co-workers sat with their mouths open for a moment, then Dobie giggled and said, "Oh, this should be good." He reached for his keyboard, and Howard knew he would be recording the conversation from that point on.

"Howard," Van said after he recovered from the communist statement. "Again I must caution you about making...wild claims. Republicans are conservative. It's Democrats who tend to be of a leftist mindset. If they had their way they'd turn America into a socialist nation."

"We're already a socialist nation," Howard said. "We have Social

Security, Medicare, Medicaid and a dozen other federal assistance programs."

Van squirmed. "Well, I...I guess you could make that argument."

"There's nothing to argue about. FDR gave us Social Security in the 1930s, and for nearly a hundred years now Republicans and Democrats have worked together to expand social programming."

"No they haven't," Dobie said. "Republicans hate social programs."

"Then why do we have so many?" Howard asked. "Republicans are in control in Washington about fifty percent of the time, so why haven't assistance programs been reined in?"

Ingrid said, "It's not that simple, Howard."

"Yes it is. Republicans and Democrats have worked together for decades to expand social programming, and now they're working together to take us from socialism to communism."

"That's absurd," Van said. "Republicans are anti-communist."

"Are they, Van? Like I said, I read something that says they're not."

"From one of your conspiracy sites?" Ingrid taunted. "We can't take you seriously unless you tell us where you get your news."

"You're right," Howard said, trying to look properly chastised. "But if I tell you... Forget it. You'll just laugh."

"No we won't," Dobie said, but his mask couldn't hide his chubby cheeks rising above a smile.

"Well..." Howard said hesitantly, "I don't know. It's just that... Lately I've been reading a lot from the...it's called the...well, the congressional record."

Howard had watched Ingrid and Dobie's faces swell with looks of anticipation as he dithered. They were ready to pounce the moment he named some tinfoil hat site, but they didn't know what to make of the congressional record. Their faces deflated.

"That's excellent reading," Van said. "I go to the congressional record sometimes to study proposed legislation."

Howard gave Van a thumbs-up and said, "I'm glad you approve, Van, because I found a speech there that a congressman read into the record nearly twenty years ago. His name's Ron Paul. He served as a Republican, but really he's a libertarian, like Charlton Heston. And Paul said that communists took over the Republican Party a long time ago."

"Nonsense," Van said. "Ron Paul's a conservative, and I doubt that...no, I'm sure he never said anything like that."

"Well, he did, in a speech called 'Neo-Conned.' He read it into the congressional record in July of 2003. I suggest you all look at it."

"I've heard of Ron Paul," Dobie said, shifting Bejeezus in his lap. "He's a

rightwing nutcase."

"He's not a nutcase," Howard said, "but he's been portrayed as one because he exposed the neocons. The fake conservatives in Washington. They started out as followers of Leon Trotsky, a communist who challenged Lenin in a power struggle during the Russian Revolution. Trotsky lost and fled to Mexico, then after he was assassinated in 1940 most of his people moved to the United States. One group, operating out of the University of Chicago, vowed to take over the federal government. To do that they knew they'd need to seize one of our two major political parties, and since Marxists had already laid claim to the Democrats, the Trotskyites focused on the Republicans. And today they control the party. That means that two types of communists are in charge of our two-party system. Conservatives still have power at the state and local levels, but communists run Washington."

Again Howard got the impression of zombies blinking at him, then Van said, "Preposterous. For you to say..." He was so upset that he tugged at his tie. "Preposterous."

Dobie said, "Have you been smoking pot during the lockdown, Howard?"

"No, I haven't. And it's not preposterous, Van. The 'Neo-Conned' speech names names and gives pedigrees. Leo Strauss, Bill and Irving Kristol, people like that. Ron Paul did his research. But we don't have to rely solely on what he said to prove Republican communism. Let's look at the recent record of cooperation between the two parties on Covid. First, they agree that people should be paid not to work. Stimulus checks instead of paychecks. Dependency on government. Both parties support it. Second, landlords aren't allowed to eject tenants for nonpayment of rent during the crisis. But the landlords still have to pay taxes and provide maintenance on their properties. That's an attack on private property ownership."

Howard listed other ways that Republicans and Democrats had been working together to advance communism during the Covid mess, and he even threw in some examples of Cloward-Piven, the leftist strategy to bankrupt America by overburdening the social services system. But by then no one was listening. Howard wasn't listening either. He'd muted the last of the three channels after Van called him a son of a bitch.

Van had removed his tie and was shaking a fist at his camera. Dobie had ripped off his mask and was giving an erect Bejeezus a spirited stroking. Ingrid flailed from side to side, making a blurred red arc with her fright-wiggly hair. All three chewed the air like they were eating into Howard. Like zombies he thought, and chuckled.

He knew he wouldn't be heard above the cacophony if he unmuted and

tried to speak, so he typed a message that said, "I guess I'll add to the minutes that Ingrid can't explain why she's in favor of violating the Nuremberg guidelines. And Dobie disrespected the civil rights marchers of the sixties. And Van won't acknowledge whether he is now or ever has been a member of a communist party."

He hit Send and all three paused to read. Then they resumed their chewing.

Howard typed, "Same time next week," hit Send again and disconnected.

He leaned back in his chair, sighed and relaxed. The call had been just what he needed. Cathartic. He'd try to mend fences next week, but what if he wasn't able to? Or what if he didn't want to? He might want to wind everyone up again. So how would he do that? The communist stuff got a big reaction, so maybe he could mention Joe McCarthy's infamous witch-hunts.

The shower beckoned. Howard got up from his desk, and as he stretched he dug through his memory for what he knew about McCarthy. He'd read about the man's investigations into what he claimed was a growing communist threat in Washington in the nineteen fifties. At first the investigations stuck to searching for proof, but then they veered off into personal attacks. The media focused on the personal stuff and the country never got its answers about the communists. So was McCarthy right about them? Leftists already controlled the Democratic Party in the fifties, and they were in the process of infiltrating the Republicans.

Howard made a note on a scratchpad. "Was Joe McCarthy right or wrong?" That should stimulate discussion at the next weekly call, but just to make sure, he changed the note to, "Was McCarthy right, or was he right?"

He chuckled on his way to the shower.

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A Foam-Bell More or Less

I fell asleep while reading Mark Twain's book about life on the Mississippi, and when I came to I was on a riverboat. It was a sternwheeler and I was at the back rail on the upper deck. The hurricane deck. The paddles below me churned the water.

I knew I was dreaming and wanted to draw the experience out for as long as I could. The only other time I'd dreamed what I was reading was with a Henry Miller novel, and I was a eunuch in that one. The memory

made me reach down to check my equipment. It was all there. Not that I expected to use it on the boat, where women might ward off impropriety by opening fire with a derringer. In Miller's books they open their legs.

But I didn't see any women, or any men. The deck was empty. The pilothouse was at the other end, and the back door was open, so I set off walking in that direction.

The deck was dark wood, shellacked and shiny. Brass fittings sparkled in the sun, and thick white steam poured from a smokestack that was painted red, white and blue. I assumed the boat was making its way along the Mississippi. The river was wide and smooth and the banks were a luxuriant green. Some fleecy clouds to the starboard side seemed to be grazing on the green like sheep. The air was warm, so I judged it to be late spring or early summer.

I stepped through the back door of the pilothouse and saw a man standing at the other end, at the wheel of the boat. His back was to me but I suspected who he was because of his white linen suit and shock of white hair. A stream of what smelled like cigar smoke flowed over his shoulder in the light breeze passing through the cabin.

I approached him and cleared my throat to make my presence known just before I reached his side. He turned his face to me and sure enough, it was Mark Twain.

"Uh, duh, hello," I stammered. "This is an honor, Mr. Twain. I'm a big fan. Or should I call you Mr. Clemens? I know your real name is Sam Clemens but you wrote as Mark Twain and..."

A blast of cigar smoke hit me in the face and interrupted my gibbering.

"Just call me Sam," he said while I coughed.

He turned back to the river and I studied his profile. The hair, the bushy mustache, the observant squint—I'd call him Sam, like he asked, but to me he was the immortal Mark Twain.

He noticed me staring and said, "Did I lose a crawfish in my mustache at lunch?"

"What? Oh, uh, no. It's just a great honor to meet you. And unexpected. You died over a hundred years ago."

"The reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated."

"I'd forgotten you said that," I laughed. "You know, most witticisms that people use in my time are attributed to you, Dorothy Parker or Oscar Wilde."

"Wilde? The Irish fairy?"

"We...we don't say 'fairy' anymore."

"You don't? Where are you from?"

"Well, America, like you, but from the twenty-first century."

"And you don't say 'fairy'?"

"Not to mean 'homosexual.' It could be considered offensive."

"Hmpf. So what brings you here?"

I told him I'd been reading nineteenth-century writers lately, mainly American, and especially him. "You were the best, Mr. Twain... Sam. You were the absolute greatest."

I saw a glint of pride in his eye before he shrugged dismissively and said, "Good breeding consists in concealing how much we think of ourselves and how little we think of others."

We talked about other writers for a while, his contemporaries, and he said he ran into them from time to time on the river. "As a matter of fact, there's Mr. Thoreau now." He pointed ahead, to the portside bank, where a man in a wrinkled suit and straw hat sat watching us from a stand of cattails.

I said Henry David Thoreau was remembered for advocating a quiet life in the face of industrialization. "He's been a model of poise and self-contemplation to several generations."

I thought I saw a smile below Twain's mustache. He turned the wheel and guided us toward the cattails. When the boat was close to shore he blew its whistle loud and long. Thoreau shook a fist at us, made an obscene gesture, then stood up and dropped his pants to moon us. Twain laughed and muttered "model of poise" as he swung us back to the middle of the river.

There was an unhurried feeling in the air, and I looked forward to spending time with Twain. I had lots of questions for him. Before I could ask one though he said, "There's something up ahead," and produced a spyglass. He extended its long brass tube, put his eye to it, then after a moment he snorted smoke and said, "Now that's an unusual sight."

"What?"

"A giant mulatto. Or the top of his head at least. It seems to be spanning the river from bank to bank."

"That's another word we don't use that word anymore, Sam."

"What word?" He was still peering through the glass.

"Mulatto. They're mixed-race people and we call them, well, mixed-race."

He looked at me, probably to see if I was joking, then he went back to the glass. "Well, whatever you call him, he's an ugly cuss. He has beady eyes and ears like barn doors."

"May I look?"

He handed me the glass and I saw the top of Barack Obama's head. It

spanned the river, like Twain had described, and the river ran into his mouth.

"His name's Obama," I said. "He was president. Or he will be, someday."

"Indeed? America elects a mulla...a mixed-race president?"

"Yes, to two terms. And some say he's still in control through his former vice president. I was just reading..."

"Take the wheel," he interrupted. I did, and he ran out of the pilothouse. I watched him grab a long pole and go to the starboard side of the boat. He used the pole to reach for a woman who was floating in the water. Her petticoats and green skirt billowed around her, making it look like she was riding a lily pad. She wore a bonnet that obscured her face, but when the tip of the pole hit her she looked up and I recognized her. It was Jane Austen. Twain stretched the pole out as if to aid in her rescue, but then he pushed her under the water. She bobbed up and swam away. Twain ran along the side of the boat so he could continue to poke and stab as we moved past her.

When she was receding in our wake he stowed the pole and returned to the pilothouse. "Sorry," he said as he took the wheel. "Just doing my civic duty."

He relit his cigar and stood studying the river ahead. Obama's head was looming larger, and even without the spyglass I could see nose hairs the size of tree roots. While I watched, some huge white crystals fell from the hairs and then his mouth began to move. His teeth gnashed the water.

"We'll be in for some rough going in a bit," Twain said, but he didn't seem overly concerned. He puffed his cigar and adjusted our course slightly. "So tell me about this Obama," he said. "Was his father or his mother the Negro?"

"His father. But we don't say 'Negro' anymore either. If you do, people think you're racist."

"Well, I suppose I'm as racist as the next man, preferring my own race to others, but I think I gave...what do you call Negroes in the future?"

"African-Americans."

"I think I gave African-Americans a fair deal in my writing."

"Not by modern standards. According to those you shouldn't even be writing about people of color. Whites can only write about whites."

"And African-Americans can only write about African-Americans?"

"No, they can write about whites, but with contempt if possible. Mixed-race people can write about both their parent groups, but they're expected to condemn the white side if they have one."

"What happens if you don't abide by those rules?"

"Then you're cancelled. Shunned."

"It seems that would cripple free expression."

"It does. It's killed modern writing, and now the academics are reevaluating older writing, like yours. They want to cancel you."

Twain smoked and contemplated, then he said, "Too many academics want to be agents of change rather than guardians of knowledge. I wish they were smart enough to figure out why they're so stupid."

Obama's mouth had continued to chomp at the water, but as we drew closer I learned that he wasn't just chomping, he was speaking. The words came to us across the roughening chop. "Welcome to my presidency! Hope and Change! Welcome to my presidency! The Audacity of Hope!"

The riverboat gained speed. Twain held the wheel firmly, and he said something, but his words were drowned out by what sounded like a roaring cataract just inside the mouth. The boat narrowly missed being crushed when we passed between the gnashing teeth, then the deck tipped and we shot downward.

Obama's voice died away as we slid into darkness. We picked up speed and encountered hot headwinds rushing up to meet us. The tip of Twain's cigar provided the only light. His face glowed orange as he called for lanterns. Several flared to life around the boat.

He jerked the wheel left and right, guiding us around what looked like tombstones sticking out of the pink meat of the throat. I saw "Integrity" carved on one as it zipped past, and "Decency" on another. They were words that Obama had choked on while he was president.

Farther along we passed a large stone skull with "Fast and Furious" carved on its forehead. I told Twain about Obama's gunrunning operation by that name. He and his Attorney General gave thousands of guns to Mexican drug cartels, guns that were later used to kill American police. Twain asked a couple of questions, and then some stone pillars raked our starboard side. One was engraved with the words "Disparate Impact."

"That was a phrase from a typical Obama program," I said. "He claimed that the disciplinary policies in America's public schools were unfair, and he ordered that whites be disciplined in the same numbers as blacks. It was mathematically impossible for schools to comply with the order, unless they eliminated punishment for blacks, so that's what a lot of them did. The result was an explosion of classroom violence. Blacks attacked whites because suddenly there were no consequences. Obama talked about bringing us together, but he did everything he could to divide us."

"Politicians were just as deceptive in my day," Twain said. "All they cared about was getting fools to vote for them. If they could do that they always won with a majority."

We passed through another patch of choked words—Morality, Honor, Truth—then Twain asked whether Obama was from the North or the South.

"From Hawaii," I said. "Or that's what the media tells us. No one knows the truth about his origins. He used to work for the CIA, a spy agency, and at times he went by the name of Barry Soetoro. People in Chicago nicknamed him Bathhouse Barry because he liked gay bathhouses. I remember one of them was called Man's Country."

Twain's face took on a puzzled look, and I said, "Gay means homosexual in my time."

Before Twain could respond, our angle of descent increased and we rushed toward the sound of another cataract. There was a moment of freefall, and then we splashed down in what proved to be acid. Roiling waves of it broke over the deck outside the pilothouse and ate into the planking. The tossing boat smoked like it was on fire.

"We must be in the stomach!" I shouted, but Twain didn't answer. He was busy fighting the wheel. He kept us afloat, though we bounced and listed so badly I figured we were sure to capsize.

I saw monstrous shapes in the swirling haze, then faces. Victoria Nuland's twisted visage rose out of the gloom, as did Rahm Emmanuel's and Susan Rice's. Obama's lieutenants. There were other faces, but I couldn't put names to them. Several appeared as a group, like a school of fish, but it was a school of giant spermatozoa. They had heads like basketballs. I pointed them out to Twain and said, "Obama's boy toys. College basketball players who visited the White House through the back door." One of the sperm creatures leapt and landed on the deck in front of the pilothouse. It flopped around, and as it did I recognized its face as that of a man named Reggie something-or-other, one of Obama's favorites. Before I could recall his full name he slid back into the acid. A man in a coonskin cap gave chase and both were swallowed up by the darkness.

Other faces came and went, and then a leviathan rose up on our port side. Above its acid-dripping jowls I made out the face of George Soros, the billionaire and former Nazi collaborator who was Obama's biggest backer. He rose until he towered above our boat, then he extended a half-dozen tentacles. John Brennan's head was on the end of one. His face bobbed in front of the pilothouse and scowled in at us.

"That man was chief of Obama's intelligence apparatus," I said. "He converted to Islam. Obama's a Muslim too. He was born and educated as one, but when he entered politics he began posing as a Christian."

Twain was focused on piloting the boat but said, "That doesn't surprise me. Mohammedans are crafty buggers."

Some movement just ahead caught my attention, and I saw a little boy in water wings paddling frantically. Joe Biden was chasing him. "Speaking of buggers," I said, and I pointed to Biden. I told Twain that he'd been Obama's vice president, then he was cheated into the presidency even though he had a history of being inappropriate with children.

Biden swam near the boat, and when he did I noticed that something trailed behind him. It was attached to him nose-to-ass, but as I watched, it broke free and partially rose from the waves. It was a seahorse with a British redcoat sitting astride its back. The horse whinnied and I saw that it bore the face of Kamala Harris. I told Twain that Harris was Biden's vice president. He said something about Caligula appointing horses to high places too, and then an Indian in war paint rose out of the waves and pulled the redcoat from Harris' back. The man in the coonskin cap reappeared and he, the soldier and the Indian fought while they sank beneath the waves. Harris sank with them. Her final acid-gargling whinny made me think of the time she laughed about murderers flooding into the U.S. across the Mexican border.

Twain looked spooked. He said, "We're in hell. I never really believed in it before, but now I have proof that it exists."

"Because of Kamala Harris?"

"No." He pointed to where the coonskin cap bobbed on the waves. "Because the place is infested with Fenimore Cooper characters."

I remembered his essay on Cooper and was about to comment on it, when the boat swung wildly to the port side. We got caught in a vortex and circled once, twice, and then we plunged.

We fell for several seconds before our bow hit a thick sludge. We skidded to port, smacked a wall, then ricocheted to the starboard side and smacked a wall there. The impacts knocked me around, but Twain stood fast and wrestled the wheel until he got the boat under control.

We advanced on a viscous current as the rumbling of the maelstrom we'd fallen through faded behind us. The lanterns on the boat's deck lit our way. We were moving along a cavernous channel with a dark ceiling just barely visible overhead. Recesses in the walls to our sides held big-screen TVs. Some came to life briefly as we passed in front of them. I saw CNN on one, MSNBC on another. One program was about Obama's Strong Cities Network. "It's truly a blessing," the host said. "American cities are partnering with sister cities from around the world to provide police protection for our young people." The screen showed the face of a smiling child.

I said, "The media put a positive spin on Obama's efforts to chip away at

our sovereignty. His Strong Cities initiative placed foreign police on the streets of America."

The next TV to light up showed a hooded Ku Klux Klansman before switching to Obama. He said we needed a "civilian security force" at least the size of the military.

"He got it," I said, "or a proto-version of it. A leftist group called Antifa is the head of the force, and the bulk of its members come from Black Lives Matter, Incorporated. They may not know they're part of a paramilitary group, but they are."

"And is the Klan still a strong force in American society?" Twain asked.

"No. Half of its membership is FBI. Federal police. They keep the Klan alive in order to justify their funding."

An animated cartoon flickered on the next screen. Uncle Remus was telling a story about Brer Fox and Brer Buzzard.

"That's Joel Harris's work," Twain said. "I'm surprised it lives on in your time."

"Wait for the other shoe to drop."

A cartoon woman in a stiff Victorian dress entered the picture and began lecturing Uncle Remus. She said his speech and demeanor promoted a negative stereotype of African-Americans.

"Unless I'm mistaken," Twain said, "that's Harriet Beecher Stowe."

We both watched as she told Uncle Remus that he was permitted to say this, but not that, and to do this but not that.

Twain shook his head after we left the screen behind. "President Lincoln said Harriet started the Civil War with her book about Uncle Tom, and now it seems she's being used to help start another. But there's no cause for war in the future. Not for racial reasons at least. The country freed the slaves and elected a mixed-race president." He puffed his cigar, thinking, then he looked at me and said, "Sinister forces are at work in your time. Your leaders say they're charting a new course but..." He waved a hand at our surroundings. "We've passed this way before."

We entered a narrower passage. The boat's smokestack barely cleared the low ceiling, and dark walls pushed in on either side. We moved more slowly, on a thicker sludge.

I said, "If we were in the large intestine before, we're in the small one now."

Twain had to keep his gaze fixed ahead to pilot the boat, but I was free to study the walls. And I came to see that they were covered with what looked like living carvings. People moved just beneath a layer of glistening muck. Most were in Muslim garb—turbans, burkas, hijabs and so on. I

watched them argue and fight, kneel and pray, and then a helicopter passed through them. Somebody dangled from one of its skids.

"This is Joe Biden's first term as president," I said. "Or as some people call it, Obama's third term. Biden continued Obama's policies, and one of those was to appease radical Islam. This here, with the helicopter, this is where Biden pulled us out of Afghanistan. He handed it over to Islamic fundamentalists and abandoned tens of thousands of people who'd helped us provide stability for twenty years. The headchoppers got them, and another country was added to the expanding international Caliphate."

I'd barely finished speaking when the walls seemed to tighten around the boat. A great wind rushed past us from back to front, blowing out all the lanterns, and aside from the glow of Twain's cigar we were left in darkness. The boat slowed and then lurched forward once, twice, three times. A dot of light appeared in the distance after the first lurch, and by the third it had grown quite large. It was like we were approaching the shutter of an enormous camera, a shutter that opened and closed, opened and closed.

When the boat lurched a fourth time we shot through the opening and into bright daylight. We fell some distance, hit water, nearly submerged, then bobbed up and leveled. The roar of a cataract behind us drowned out most of Twain's curses as he struggled with the wheel. He spun it back and forth until I felt the boat's paddlewheel catch water. We began to move forward and Twain pointed us downstream.

I looked back and saw Joe Biden's face up high. It was Rushmore-sized and his mouth was moving. A brown discharge poured out over his lower lip and fell from his chin. Boats and people tumbled from the mouth and dropped to a foul-smelling, foamy pool below. I saw Hawthorne's Hester Prynne just barely staying afloat by holding onto a lowercase a. Melville's whale was dead on its side. Twain directed my attention ahead and said he thought he saw Walter Scott in the water, but it was hard to tell with so many other turds floating around.

The current slowed and the stream widened. Twain lit a fresh cigar and I thought I saw a look of sadness on his face. I told him that, for what it was worth, he'd been shat out of other monsters besides Obama. I told him about the Nazis burning his books. "All dictatorial regimes try to silence you."

"All dictatorial regimes try to silence everybody but themselves," he said. "Look at Miss Dickinson over there." I looked where he pointed and saw Emily Dickinson on her hands and knees on a sand bar. She was sodden, disheveled, and vomiting. "Poor woman," Twain said as we passed. "How could her work possibly warrant gastric censure?"

Before we could discuss the matter we saw a man swimming past, headed upstream. He had a manic gleam in his eyes.

"Walt Whitman," Twain chuckled. "He was a wild one. It looks like he's going back for more."

Twain waved to Whitman. He didn't see, but a gaunt man on the bank beyond did. He was seated at a writing desk, and when he returned Twain's salute I noticed he held a black quill pen. "There's Mr. Poe," Twain said. "He seems to have made the passage just fine. The stories you've been telling me, about Obama and the others, would fit quite well into his line of nightmarish fiction. Shall I drop you on the bank so you can exchange thoughts with him?"

"No, thank you. I think I've had enough thinking for one day."

We drifted along until the river resumed much of its former appearance. It was smooth and wide, but the vegetation on the banks was struggling. Half-dead trees leaned out over the water, and the fields leading away from it were streaked with brown.

Twain smoked for a while, then he asked if things were really as bad in my time as our trip through Obama had shown. I told him they were worse. "What we saw was just the tip of the iceberg."

"The nose of the bear," he said softly. He smoked some more, then he said, "I've often wondered why people are so willing to tolerate the lies of politicians. It must make the honest ones want to give up the fight. As Arnold said, 'On the breast of that huge Mississippi of falsehood called history, a foam-bell more or less is of no consequence.'"

"Who's Arnold?"

"Matthew Arnold. I didn't see him in the flotsam back there, so perhaps he hasn't been subjected to your modern 'reevaluation.' He was an Englishman and a harsh critic of America, but he touched my heart with that line about the Mississippi. It's quite lyrical."

"But you don't believe it, do you? That truth is of no consequence?"

"No, I don't believe it." He made a slight course adjustment and said, "I used to be a newspaperman, you know. I wrote about the same scoundrels that you have in your day, though mine had different faces and different names. But as a reporter I learned to stick to the truth. That's a rule you should apply to all writing, even fiction; whatever yarn you spin, stick to the truth of the thing." He puffed his cigar a couple of times, then added, "And don't worry that somebody in your wake may criticize you. If you think life's a popularity contest, then you've already lost."

The Preternaturalists

Professor Hiram Waterman woke to muted light and the sound of a boom fading into silence. He sat up and his head broke through a blanket of ground-hugging fog. The fog stretched away to a vague horizon and then feathered up to a fuzzy dome that twinkled with tiny points of light. Another boom sounded.

"Hello!" Hiram called. He waited but no one answered. "Is anybody here?!" No answer.

He started to stand but remembered the pain in his chest. It had been so intense that it drove him to the floor before he blacked out. That was in the teacher's lounge. So where was he now?

He knew he must have had a heart attack, and he probed the ribs around his heart. There wasn't any discomfort so he got to his feet. He stood for a moment hunched like a question mark. Still no pain. He straightened up and began a slow turn to take in his surroundings.

The fuzzy world was like no place he'd ever seen, and he figured he was dreaming. Maybe he was lying drugged in a hospital bed. Or he could have been in a coma. Whatever the case he decided to take a closer look at the twinkling lights. He set off walking for one that was down close to the horizon.

His step was buoyant, like there was less gravity than he was used to. Before long he'd developed a bounding gait. The light he was approaching grew stronger, until he was close enough to see that it came from a radiant blue-white whale. The whale hung high in the air and flexed as if pushing through water ahead of its fanning tail. But it remained in place, and the huge undulation was eerily silent. Hiram paused and stood looking up, mesmerized, until another boom sounded. He took off walking toward another light.

He reached it fairly quickly. It was circling high above him but spiraled down and hovered a yard away. A hummingbird. He lifted a hand to it and for the first time noticed that, unlike the bluish/white of the bird and the whale, he glowed a honey gold color. The bird touched his thumb with its tongue before rising again to resume its circling.

He walked on, and as he approached the next light it resolved into two. Two bears standing upright leaned close to each other. They seemed to be engaged in an earnest conversation that Hiram couldn't hear. They too were blue/white, as was the drooping willow he went to next, and then the napping horse.

Then he saw a pinpoint of light that was golden, like his. He walked toward it and after a while made out a woman bent to some kind of work that was hidden beneath the fog. The woman was quite shapely—thin-waisted, well-bosomed and roundly-hipped. She wore jeans and a blouse, and her long hair fell like a golden wing over the side of her face.

Something in her form seemed familiar. Something about her movements too, and the way her hair swayed as she...

Hiram stopped.

"Judith?"

His heart raced and he thought he might be having another attack. He closed his eyes and began to count. By the time he reached ten his pulse had slowed. He opened his eyes and continued toward the woman. She looked like his wife, but how could that be? He'd seen her die.

He stopped a couple of steps away and stared. The woman straightened to a standing position and smiled at him. "It's about time you got here," she said.

It was Judith, no doubt about it.

She slapped her palms together like she was brushing away dirt. "What do you think of the new me?" she asked with her slight Oklahoma drawl. She went into a twirl and her hair flared as she spun twice before stopping to face Hiram again. "Or actually it's the old me. But I'll do, won't I?"

Hiram was dumbfounded. He stepped close and touched her cheek. They both glowed more brightly, which accentuated the age spots on the back of Hiram's hand. "Good lord," he said. He touched the wattles under his chin.

"Why am I so old, Judith? I mean, I want to be young like you."

"You'll adjust. Give it time."

He studied her face. She looked the same as when they'd first met, with her clear, piercing eyes above high cheekbones, and full lips that he'd wanted to kiss even before he heard them utter a word.

He tore his attention away from her and waved an arm.

"Where are we?"

"In the hereafter."

"I'm in a hospital, right? Hallucinating because they gave me drugs?"

"No, you're really here. And we're together again."

"But how?"

"I don't know."

"But..."

Hiram was caught by her eyes. They beamed love and he wanted to tell her how much he'd missed her. He wanted to describe the long, desperate

ache since her death, but his throat constricted before he could speak.

They'd had nearly a quarter century together, wonderful years that began with a blind date. She was just out of medical school and working as a pediatrician at a hospital in Tulsa. Without a doubt she was the brightest woman Hiram had ever met, and with that and the beauty, he couldn't believe she wasn't married. "No time," she said when he broached the subject. "School, school and more school. And then work, work and work. But what about you?"

His story was more convoluted than hers. He too had put off romance so he could go to school, but while she sailed from scholarship to scholarship, he navigated the locks of academia one pay-as-you-go semester at a time. During the Depression he worked various jobs to save for college, and then when he got there he juggled jobs with classes. And he read at every opportunity. History and biographies. He read between jobs, between classes, and he read himself to sleep at night. Fortunately he was blessed with an eidetic memory; he could recite whole chapters years after reading them.

He joined the Navy at the start of World War Two and served for the duration. He was twenty-three when he went in and twenty-seven when he got out. Following his discharge he returned to school on the G.I. Bill. Two years of furious study later he was just beginning work on his doctorate, when he met Judith. They married after he graduated and secured a job teaching history at a college in Oklahoma City. She transferred to a hospital there, and within a year she was pregnant. They had three happy children and life was as good as it gets. The children grew and went off to school, then married and started families of their own.

Hiram watched Judith grow more beautiful as she aged. Each year brought forth a face more ravishing than the one before. She seemed beyond the reach of time, but what time couldn't touch disease pummeled. The cancer came on quickly. Judith shriveled, took to her bed, and wasted down to a knot of flesh fed by a dozen tubes. She passed in 1973, when she was fifty-four.

"Why are you frowning?" she asked.

"Because I...I saw you die, Judith. But now we're together again. I don't understand. Are we ghosts?"

"I couldn't say. I've given up trying to figure it out. We might be ghosts. Death is a wall, and we don't know what's on the other side. This place could be supernatural or the most natural thing in the world. But I've come to think it's somewhere in between, someplace that's...what's the word I'm looking for? Preternatural?"

Hiram felt his eidetic memory kick in. He pictured the page of a dictionary and said, "Preternatural: surpassing the ordinary or normal. Otherworldly. Transcendental." He looked around. "I guess that would apply here. This could be limbo, you know, Catholic limbo or Zoroastrian. That one's called hamistagan. And the ancient Greeks had the Fields of Asphodel, midway between the Elysian Fields and Tartarus."

Judith smiled. "Always the historian. You taught me so much. And I was glad you stayed with teaching after I passed."

"So you've been watching me?"

"Of course, dear. Couldn't you tell?"

Hiram remembered feeling sometimes that she was watching. He'd be reading, or he'd awaken in the middle of the night, and he would sense her eyes on him. Whenever that happened he would still his mind and wait. He didn't know for what exactly, but he waited, hoping that through some miracle she would appear and complete the moment.

He felt compelled to touch her again, and he reached out and brushed a strand of hair from her face. Again she glowed more brightly. So did his hand, and as he watched, the age spots on the back of it disappeared. He felt his neck. The wattles were gone.

"Look at that," Judith said. "You're learning to control things."

"But I don't know how I did that. I just wanted to be young like you, and now I guess I am."

A boom overhead made him look up. A couple of lights blinked off, a couple blinked on.

"Each light is a life," Judith said. "Plants, animals, stars. They come and go. And every few billion years they all rush together, when the universe contracts before rebirthing itself. I've lost count of how many times I've been through that, but I always make my way back here, to wait for you."

There was another boom.

"That was a big one," she said.

"A big what?"

"Civilization. They fall all the time. But you'll see. I think you'll like it here, Hiram. You can tap into any period in earth's history and observe."

"So which civilization just fell?"

"You tell me. Close your eyes and try to see."

He did, but he couldn't picture what she was talking about. He told her so and she said, "That's okay. Soon you'll be able to see everything that's ever happened."

"Well, I'm pretty current up until I died, so tell me what happened after 1985."

"Not much good, I'm afraid. You know how bad off the world was by '85. Humanity was in an intellectual and moral meltdown. And then, in two thousand and... No. It'd be too depressing to talk about it. But you should make that your first project here, to look at the year 2020 to see how the world began its collapse into tyranny."

"Collapse into tyranny?' I don't like the sound of that. Come on, Judith, at least give me the short version of what happened."

"Okay," she sighed. "Let's see... In late 2019 a group of elites released a deadly new virus in China. It spread across the world, and democracies began to shut down."

"Shut down? How?"

"They surrendered their core freedoms, in the name of public safety. They curtailed travel, and the right to assemble, and freedom of speech. The world became a medical prison that used the internet to..."

"The internet? That computer network?"

"Yes. It was still being standardized when you died, but you had it on your campus."

"I know. Some of the students used it."

"Well, by 2020 it was everywhere. It was vital to the world's economy, and the elites controlled it."

"That's the second time you've mentioned 'elites.' Who do you mean? Bankers? Businessmen?"

"Those and others. Members of the World Economic Forum. A man named Schwab founded it. His family worked with Hitler and the Nazis in World War Two. By the 1980s he'd signed up more than a thousand corporations, foundations and other big organizations, and they acted as an unofficial world government. The WEF was behind the fake climate crisis that stripped people of their rights in the name of saving the planet. That was its most ambitious project, but it had lots of others. Around the time of the virus scare it targeted professional sports in America, and it got the leagues to promote kneeling during the national anthem."

"Kneeling? Why?"

"To protest against the country."

"Big business protested the country that made it big?"

"Yes. If your business was a member of the WEF, you had to do whatever it ordered, no matter how crazy. And the results were bad. Fiscal mismanagement and social manipulation drove the world into chaos. The WEF should have been held criminally liable for its actions, but it wasn't, and it continued to expand. Then in 2020 it released a video that made eight predictions. One of them was, 'By 2030 you'll own nothing and you'll be

happy about it."

"That's communism."

"Well, authoritarianism. The WEF was more fascist than communist. It merged private industry with elected government, the way Mussolini did."

"But fascism was defeated in World War Two. Why would people give in to it seventy-five years later?"

"Partly because of the little catchphrases that the WEF used. 'Build Back Better,' 'The Great Reset,' 'The New Normal.' People heard those and assumed they'd benefit somehow if they gave up their rights."

Hiram stood thinking, taking in what he'd just learned, then he said, "Okay, so the world got duped into accepting despotism, but we continued to evolve, didn't we? What about space exploration? Did we make it to the stars?"

"No. The elites set up mining colonies on the moon and Mars, but that was it. They didn't want us escaping their control. Solar flares killed off the miners and everybody on earth, then a few million years later the sun went nova. End of story."

"So we never even left the solar system?"

"No. The desire to do that kind of thing died with the crushing of the individual. You were right about collectivism. You used to say, 'Many hands don't just make light work, they make slight work.'"

"Apparently I didn't say it loudly enough." Hiram felt an overwhelming sadness. He shook his head. "I thought for sure we'd make it to the stars."

"Maybe we do."

"But you just said we don't."

"Yes, but I'm not sure that history's predetermined. I've heard about people going back in time to make changes, so maybe something will happen to..."

"Wait a minute. People can go back in time? From here?"

"That's what I've heard."

"Then I want to go back. I might be able to help get the world back on track in space exploration. If the sun's going to explode, then mankind needs to relocate. That means that whatever happened to put us off of space travel needs to be fixed."

"Do you think it would matter?"

Hiram was surprised.

"Judith. Did I just hear...despair?"

"Yes. Please don't be disappointed. I've tried to maintain a positive attitude since I got here, but learning as much as I have, seeing such a big picture, it's made me realize how silly it is to think the human race can

survive. We might learn how to stay ahead of the exploding stars, but no matter what we do the universe will eventually contract and destroy everything."

"But if we could figure out how to move from star to star, then maybe we could figure out how to survive the contractions. You've managed to survive them, so maybe we can find a way to do it as a species. We need to try."

Judith didn't respond. Hiram could see that she was debating with herself. He let her think for a moment, then he said, "What about pain and suffering?"

"What about them?"

"Did people suffer under the tyranny that began in 2020?"

"Of course."

"How did they suffer?"

"Well, millions starved to death when the WEF sabotaged the world's supply chain. And then there was the social isolation. The medical industry created a pandemic out of fudged numbers, and whole nations were forced into quarantine. Workers couldn't go to their jobs and children couldn't go to school. Suicide rates skyrocketed. And those awful injections..." Judith shuddered. "The spike proteins produced by the Covid shots migrated to the testes in males and the ovaries in females. It was the biggest sterilization program in history."

"So people were starved and injected with poison, gave up freedom of movement, and were driven to suicide. That's suffering, all right, and the Judith that I remember would want to do something about it. Even if there's no future in it."

Judith squirmed and Hiram said, "I'm sorry to make you feel uncomfortable, darling, but you became a doctor because it's in your nature to alleviate pain and suffering. You have a chance to do that now."

Judith squirmed some more, then finally she said, "You're right, Hiram. I guess I put everything on hold while I was waiting for you. But now... Let me ask around. I'll find out if we can go back. But how would we change history? Do you have a plan?"

"Maybe. You told me that the man who founded the WEF had Nazi connections, right?"

"Yes. Klaus Schwab. His family's company was Escher Wyss, one of Hitler's favorites. They built flamethrowers and helped the Nazis place stolen gold in foreign banks. Allied intelligence protected the company, so it came out of World War Two stronger than ever. It was the first building block of the WEF."

"Well, what if there's no war to build on? What if we prevent it?"

"Prevent the war? Can we do that?"

"I think so, if we neutralize Adolf Hitler."

"Murder?" Judith gasped. "I know it's Hitler, but we can't just..."

"Not murder. Hear me out. The war was the result of a thousand factors, but everything hinged on Hitler. His politics were the key. The odd thing, though, is that he never planned to go into politics. He wanted to be an artist."

"I remember that. He was a painter, but he couldn't sell his work."

"And he was bitter about it. But what if he'd sold some paintings? Enough to keep his passion for art alive?"

"Then he wouldn't have gone into politics."

"Exactly. So I propose that we go back to when Hitler was just starting out as an artist and buy a bunch of his paintings. That might avert the war. And with no war, there might not be any WEF in 2020."

"But what about space travel, and the contracting universe?"

"We'll deal with all that later. Hitler first."

"Hitler," Judith muttered. Her brow furrowed. "We'd probably have to display his paintings, on the walls of our home. Could we live like that, Hiram? Surrounded by the paintings of Adolf Hitler?"

"Well, he wouldn't become the mass murderer of the war, so there's that. And we could mix some other work with his. Winston Churchill was an artist, too. With no war to make him internationally famous, we might be able to pick up some of his paintings."

Judith smiled. "I like that. We could decorate our walls with the paintings of Churchill and Hitler. But I expect they're different styles. What if people say they clash?"

"We'll tell them it could've been a lot, lot worse."

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Shedder

Lee checked his watch after they got settled in the blind. It was 6:57 and the sun was due up at 6:59. The feeder was set to scatter corn at 7:20.

He looked to the side and down, to James, his only son among three children. The boy was studying the fog with slit-eyed concentration. His mom had wanted him to wear an orange vest over his jacket, for visibility, but James talked her out of it. But he couldn't talk her out of the orange

stocking cap. His sisters called him pumpkinhead when he first tried it on.

Lee smiled and turned back to the feeder. It was a dark green tower that looked black in the pre-dawn light and fog. A rutted game trail led past it, and the brush around its base had been trampled down. Deer would soon be swarming to the spot. The clatter of scattering corn breaking the silence would bring them running out of the cactus and mesquite, and James would make his first kill. He was eight and that was when Lee shot his first deer. The tradition would continue.

James had laid his rifle on the blind's wall and left it there, aimed at the feeder. Lee held his gun across his lap. The blind was just a U-shaped pile of tree branches and chopped brush with a couple of old lawn chairs behind it. The setup was primitive but time-tested.

Lee shifted position and felt the weight of the bottle in his coat pocket. He'd brought a half pint of bourbon. Normally he would have taken a nip against the chill, but he didn't want James to associate his first hunt with drinking.

His own father never had any qualms about warming himself with liquor while hunting. He devoted himself to work for the bulk of the year, but shifted chores around during deer season so he could enjoy some downtime. And at Christmas the family would gather at the ranch for a hunt. They'd have a feast in the big old house on Christmas Day, then after a sleepover the men would rise early and tiptoe out to the back porch and their guns.

Lee and his siblings inherited the ranch. His brother and sister moved away but he stayed on to work the place for the lion's share of the profits. Because of modernization he didn't have to work as hard as his father had, but the daily grind got boring and he always looked forward to Christmas. The family still gathered at the house for the big meal, and the men still crept out the next morning to hunt.

Martha suggested once that they clear the hundred or so acres of brush so the entire ranch would finally be open grassland. But they were already running plenty of cattle and Lee wanted to keep the thicket the way it was. He felt that his children were owed a piece of the past.

"Do you think we'll see him?" James whispered. Lee gestured for silence and saw that the boy's face was red from the cold. He reached over to tug his stocking cap down over his ears, and James turned back to watch the fog.

Lee thought of the buck they'd seen earlier in the year. It was a hot day in July and he was working on the tractor near the edge of a field. James was with him. It was quiet and then there was a crashing sound as

something broke out of the thicket. They looked up to see a big white-tailed buck, not twenty feet away, glaring down its nose at them. His ten-point spread was magnificent. The antlers were covered in golden velvet that seemed to glow in the sun. After a long frozen moment the animal snorted and then leapt back into the thicket.

At least once a week since then James talked about the deer. He and Lee guessed at its weight and age, and Lee explained how the antlers grew year by year through a process of shedding velvet. He was glad that James took such an interest in the animal, because that gave him a reason to present the boy with his first real rifle.

James had already learned the fundamentals of shooting with a pellet gun, so Lee felt comfortable placing the .22 hornet in his hands. It was the same gun his father gave him at eight. The .22 was a small caliber but the bullet had lots of powder behind it and was deadly if placed right. Lee sat with James to practice shooting at twenty yards, thirty, and then forty, the distance from the blind to the feeder. James got to where he could place a group of shots into a two-inch circle. If the buck appeared that morning he'd die with a bullet through the heart.

Lee looked at his watch again. 7:06. The day was lightening and he wondered what the other hunters were doing. His brother, Alan, and Martha's cousin Aaron were in blinds set up at other spots in the thicket. He hoped they would spare James' buck if they saw it. James told them about it and they'd seen his excitement, so maybe they would hold fire if the deer passed their way.

As they left the house that morning James asked Lee if he'd seen lots of tracks when he filled the feeder earlier in the week. Lee said yes, but really there weren't many tracks because the feeder was empty. He'd filled it in the middle of the month, and there should have been some corn still in it, but there wasn't. And the feeder had footprints around it. They were smooth-soled prints, not like those from Lee's knobby mud boots. He figured one of the neighbors had made them a couple of days before. Plenty of people in the area were experiencing hard times and struggling to provide for their livestock, so one of them sneaked over to pilfer. Lee wished they'd just asked him instead. He wouldn't begrudge a little corn for livestock.

Thinking of neighbors lacking feed made him feel a twinge of guilt for the meal his family ate the day before. It was wonderful, with a fat turkey, all the trimmings, and three kinds of pie. The refrigerator could barely hold the leftovers. There used to be no more than a morsel of scrap after Christmas dinner, but each year fewer and fewer people showed up to partake. The government always rolled out a new Covid fear campaign just

before the holidays, and Lee had watched as the campaigns took progressively bigger bites out of Christmas attendance at the ranch. This year his sister didn't come. She said she couldn't risk being around anyone who wasn't vaccinated.

James fidgeted and Lee reached over to lay a calming hand on his shoulder. The boy looked at him and Lee held his hands up to the sides of his head. He spread his fingers wide, imitating antlers, then made a sign to keep watching. James settled down and squinted into the fog.

A belch of late-night pecan pie returned Lee's thoughts to the Christmas meal. Martha came from a religious family, and her uncle Jeremiah had insisted on saying grace before they ate. He started out calmly enough by praising Jesus and his infinite mercy, but then he got onto the topic of the godless communists in the government. The prayer turned into a sermon. A fiery one.

In particular Jeremiah blasted the politicians that he said hailed either in body or in spirit from San Francisco. He walked everyone through a history that told of the benign old liberalism of the East Coast giving way to the malignant progressivism of the west. "New York," he said, "used to be a place of humble immigrants who erected enormous churches in thanks to God, but San Francisco is a hedonistic cesspit that's more interested in erected..." He stopped himself before he finished the sentence. "But the city's foul inclinations," he growled, "have been made manifest in the politics that it's forced upon the Democratic Party. The tired old generals like Pelosi and Feinstein and Boxer have been replaced by new and energetic spoilers who are no less determined than their predecessors to drive America into the pit of Hell." At this point Jeremiah's son, Aaron, began to stamp his feet in an uneven cadence and let out an occasional Amen. Jeremiah upped his volume and said there could be no political solution to a spiritual problem. He said America was founded as a Christian nation and had grown strong nurtured by the tenets of love and honor. But leftists now encouraged the opposite of love and honor—hate and disrespect. "Americans once strove to be on the right side of God," he said, "but now everybody wants to be on the right side of history. And since history is written by the winners, that means that the worship of power has replaced the worship of the Almighty." He went on to condemn gays in the military and the elevation of environmentalism to religion, and then he railed against the medical tyranny that had taken over America. He said Covid was God's punishment and the country would not be free of it until she returned to the path of righteousness. Aaron continued with his stamping and Amens.

Lee sat at the head of the table and listened, to the prayer at first, and

then he listened for an opening. Finally, when Aaron let loose with an especially loud Amen, Lee thanked Jeremiah and stood up to carve the turkey. He asked who wanted a drumstick before anybody could suggest warming up the food. Someone might call for another prayer when it came back to the table.

Lee saw movement near the feeder. The day had grown brighter but was still foggy, and he saw a deer step out of the mist. A doe. She approached the feeder, sniffed a metal leg, then began nosing around the ground.

James saw the deer too. He leaned to his rifle, but Lee gestured for him to wait and he sat back.

Another doe appeared, then another. Lee checked his watch. 7:15. The feeder would trigger in five minutes. If the buck hadn't appeared by then but was in the area, he would hear the clatter and come for the corn or the mating.

A minute dragged by, two minutes, and then something spooked the deer. They all threw their heads up and looked up the game trail in the direction of the county road. They looked, then one snorted and they all scattered into the brush. James said, "Awww" in a low voice and Lee signaled him to keep quiet. The does might have been running from an approaching buck, part of the mating ritual. They'd looked at the trail before bolting, so Lee did the same.

A few seconds later a man came walking out of the fog. He carried a gray five-gallon paint bucket in each hand. Lee could tell that the buckets were empty by the way they swung around his knees as he negotiated the trail's twists.

The man was tall and thin and wore a dark fur cap. Lee lifted his rifle to look at him through the scope. He saw a sandy blonde beard that was neatly trimmed and about an inch long. The man seemed to be about thirty, and he was dressed too lightly in a dark blue sport coat, blue slacks, and black leather shoes that still showed a bit of shine beneath the muck they were picking up.

James tugged at Lee's elbow and he lowered his gun. He leaned down and James asked who the man was.

"I don't know, son. Let's watch and see what he does."

But he already knew what the man was going to do. Government policies were making it harder and harder to find food in the cities. No telling how many had starved to death in America in the six years since Washington began using Covid as an excuse to clamp down on the production and distribution of food. The cities were hit hard. From what

Lee saw on the news, store shelves were picked down to nothing. City dwellers had to look elsewhere if they wanted to eat, and many of them drove to the country to buy their food. And some came to steal. Lee hadn't been affected yet, but some of his neighbors talked about stolen pigs and chickens. He should have known from the slick shoe prints around the feeder that he'd been robbed; his neighbors wore mud boots like his. The man was probably from Waco or Dallas, and since he got away with raiding the feeder once, he was back again.

"Sit tight," Lee whispered to James. "He's after the corn."

But the corn was barely food, Lee thought. Deer could starve to death with a belly full of it. It was tasty but had next to no nutritional value. The city man wouldn't know that though. He wouldn't know much at all about food that hadn't come from a grocery store.

The man reached the feeder and set the buckets on the ground, and when his coat spread open Lee saw dots on the chest of a gray shirt. He felt his hackles rise.

He lifted his gun again, and through the scope he saw a cluster of twelve enameled stars. In the center of the cluster was the blue one that meant the man had gotten the most recent Covid shot. The other stars, different colors, showed that he'd been vaccinated regularly since 2020. The pins allowed him to move freely in whatever city he was from.

The man picked up one of the buckets and climbed the feeder's ladder. He laid the lid of the bin back, upended the bucket and scooped. He filled the bucket with corn and climbed back down. When he was on the ground again he set the bucket down and rubbed a shoulder like he'd strained it.

James tugged at Lee's sleeve. He lowered his gun, leaned down, and James whispered, "He's got pins on his shirt, dad. You have to...to do something." Lee didn't know what to say. He wished that James was still in bed, tucked away from what needed to be done. And the boy knew exactly what needed to be done.

"Don't look," Lee said, and he watched to make sure James turned his face away. He looked down and to the side and covered his ears.

Lee raised his rifle and rested it on the wall of the blind. He put the scope's crosshairs on the man's head but then thought of the mess the 30.06 would make. There would be nothing left but a bloody stump, and he didn't want James to see that, so he lowered his sights. The man was still massaging his shoulder and his right arm was crooked across his chest. Lee had a clear shot to the heart.

He placed his finger on the trigger and concentrated on slowing his breathing. In and out, in and out, and then the feeder went off.

The clatter of corn spinning out was faint from forty yards away, but up close it was loud enough to make the man jump and turn to face the feeder. Lee still had a shot to the heart. He fired.

The quick double thump of shot and contact would tell the neighbors that he'd hit his target, but they would assume it was a deer. He'd lie and say it was, and he would never, ever tell them about the stranger laid out on the ground.

Lee watched through his scope for a minute to make sure the man was dead, then he stood up and told James to wait in the blind.

He walked to the body but stopped about ten feet away. The man had fallen so that he was twisted at the waist, with one shoulder and his face against the ground. The front of his coat was laid back and the stars on his chest were partly visible, but the shirt they were pinned to was now blood red instead of gray. A kernel of corn was among the pins because the feeder's spinner was still going when the man fell. The folds of his clothing had caught other kernels, and one was even lodged in his ear. A spot on the ear's lobe looked like blood, but it seemed to sparkle. Lee leaned down for a closer look. The spot was a gold stud set with what might be a ruby, and just below the stud, nestled in the man's beard was...something. Lee grabbed a mesquite branch from the ground and used the tip to part the beard. And he saw a tab of skin, about a half inch long, bent slightly and articulated like a...was it a finger? He leaned as close as he dared and thought he saw a tiny fingernail on the end of the tab. Was it some kind of mutation caused by the Covid shots?

Lee shuddered and took a step back.

"What is it?" James asked from behind.

Lee turned and saw James standing a few feet away. He moved to shield the boy's view of the body but realized the action was pointless. There was no escaping deed and consequence. He looked over his shoulder at the man, at the way he'd fallen face down, and he was thankful that at least James wouldn't be haunted by a dead stare. But what might haunt him instead? The memory of his father killing another man?

"I had to do it, James. You saw from the pins how many Covid shots this man took. He was stealing corn today, but tomorrow he might've tried to steal something from our house. And then he could have infected us all."

"I know, dad. You had to do it."

Lee felt relieved. James wouldn't grow up thinking of his father as a murderer.

Lee stepped to the body again and used his stick to go through the man's pockets. He fished out a set of keys and a wallet. He pulled the wallet

toward him on the ground, then he took the bottle of bourbon from his coat pocket. "I, uh, I brought this for emergencies," he said as he doused the wallet with liquor. "The alcohol's a good disinfectant."

He dug through the wallet until he found the man's driver's license and vaccination card. He laid the items faceup on the ground, washed his hands with liquor and motioned James forward.

"Let's see what we can find out about this man, son." He pointed with the stick. "His driver's license says his name's Nicholas Bascomb, from Arlington. That's between Dallas and Fort Worth. If he's still at that address then he had to drive about three hours to get here. I imagine they're hurting for food in Arlington, with two big cities to feed just outside. Not many delivery trucks would make it through."

"How'd he find our feeder?"

"I don't know. Maybe word of mouth. Or satellite pictures from the internet."

Lee used the stick to pull Bascomb's vaccination card closer. He studied it for a moment and then pointed to the bottom line. "Here's his last shot, about three months ago, and up here's his first, for Covid-19. He got the brand that caused so many strokes. A bunch of countries outlawed it and the company finally stopped making it. More than a hundred million people got that one, as I recall. And here..." He skipped down a couple of lines and said, "This shot was for one of the early variants, in 2021. They discontinued it too because it caused so many heart problems. The shots produce spike proteins that collect in major organs, like your heart, and kill you. All of the shots do that, but some are worse than others."

Lee continued going down the list and telling what he knew about each shot. Over the past few years they'd been proven to cause kidney and liver failure, blood clots, and immune disorders. And senility. That was the latest side effect sweeping across the world. The controlled media reported that it was just a rise in Alzheimer's among an aging population, but really it was spike proteins collecting in the brain on top of aluminum and lead and pesticides. A lifetime of sponging up pollution, capped off with the spike proteins, had led to an explosion of dementia. The afflicted were being mandated into nursing facilities, where they were diagnosed with Covid so they could be placed on lung-rupturing respirators. Covid and its treatments had become the most successful depopulation program in the history of the world.

When Lee finished with the vaccination card, he used his stick to shove it and Bascomb's other personal effects under his body. Then he took a step back and flung the stick into the thicket. He washed his hands again with

liquor.

"What do you know about shedders?" he asked James.

"Well, the shots change your cells, so when you shed them, they're not natural. I mean the cells aren't natural. They're mod...mod...what's that word?"

"Modified. Changed. And this man had his cells changed more than anyone I've ever been close to. He's barely even a man anymore."

Lee looked at Bascomb and hoped that James hadn't seen the deformity buried in his whiskers.

"You shed the most right after you get a shot," James said.

"That's right. For two weeks. And the problem is that everybody gets their shots and boosters at different times, so the shedding overlaps. We're exposed to mutated cells all through the year."

"Mom says the cure is worse than the disease."

"She's right," Lee said. He started to pat James on the head but stopped himself. "Here." He held up the bottle of bourbon. "Let me wash the soles of your boots, in case you got anything on them."

James lifted his feet one at a time and Lee poured. He did his own boots too, then used the rest of the liquor on his hands. He tossed the bottle and told James they'd need to wash at the trough on their way past the barn.

"What are you going to say about the shot?" James asked.

"The shot?"

"The rifle shot. I bet Mom and everyone heard it."

"Yeah. And my gun's louder than yours, so I'll say yours jammed and I shot a deer but it got away. And we didn't go looking for it because there were other hunters in the brush."

"Okay, dad."

"But I'll tell your mother the truth, later. She and I don't have any secrets. She won't tell anyone else, and you can't either, son. Not even your sisters. You can only talk about what happened here with me or your mom. All right?"

"All right."

On the walk back to the house Lee made a mental list of things he would need to do. First let the visiting relatives depart, then find where Bascomb had left his vehicle and move it to the highway. Leave the keys in it and with luck it would get stolen in the heavy holiday traffic.

After the car he would come back to the feeder alone and search Bascomb's body for a phone, credit cards and anything else that might act as a tracking device. He should have destroyed that stuff already but hadn't thought things through. But later he'd pull batteries and burn things, then

dig a grave somewhere in the thicket. If all went well he would be finished with the burial by dark.

Lee noticed that James seemed downcast. He didn't have the spring in his step that he'd had on the earlier walk.

"I'm sorry you had to see all that, son."

"I know, dad. It's okay."

"Well, we can talk about it if you want, after the relatives leave."

Lee thought how different James must have imagined the day would be, this day when he was supposed to kill his first deer, and he said, "We'll come hunting again next week, son. We'll go to one of the other blinds and try to bag that ten-point."

Lee saw the spring return to James' step.

"Can we really, dad?"

"Sure. Maybe New Year's Eve. We'll come out in the morning, and the afternoon too if we have to. And if you don't get a shot by sundown we'll shoot off our guns like firecrackers, to celebrate the New Year."

James broke into a skipping step at the happiness of the thought. Lee smiled, but as he did he felt something on the back of his head, like something scratching. He thought of the nail at the end of the little finger in Bascomb's beard, and he imagined it trying to pick its way into his conscience. He rubbed the feeling away and watched James line up beside him to match their steps.

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Corporate Head

Franque placed Dushawn's head in the shopping cart's baby seat and leaned it back against the handle. The chop had left a lot of neck and the head stood kind of high. Its half-closed eyes seemed to peer out past the front of the cart. The dreadlocks were mussed so Franque ran his fingers through them. The hair used to rest on Dushawn's shoulders but now it was splayed out on the seat.

The Target crew stood about ten feet away, ringed around their cart. It was red with a white company logo on the side. Two judges were finishing up with their count at the cart. They were down to the last head. It was an important one because the score was tied. Franque's Walmart team had been given credit for fourteen heads, but Target would get fifteen if the last one was allowed. Really it was just the top half of a head. The guillotine's

blade had caught it across the bridge of the nose. The judges said they weren't sure if there was enough for the facial recognition system to make an I.D. They used the system on every head to help keep ringers from being sneaked into the baskets—heads of the recently deceased taken from funeral homes, morgues and so on. If they were listed as already dead the judges would know. One of them snapped a picture of the half-head and said it would take a couple of minutes to get the results.

The leader of the Target team, Javier, looked over at Franque and scowled. Franque smiled in return and thought back to earlier in the day, when he got the call to action. It was a warm summer afternoon and he and a dozen other members of his family were sitting on his grandmother's front porch after dinner. The sun was sinking, the mood was mellow, and then his phone vibrated in his pocket. All of the young people checked their devices. His screen showed the word "congregation" and an address. He and his cousins went hustling off after hugs and kisses.

That night's congregation was in the commercial district, and everybody knew what that meant. A horde of people showed up pushing shopping carts. There were chromed carts and carts of every color plastic. With so many rolling around it was easy for the headhunters to blend in.

Franque wasn't sure how the headhunting game came into being. Some thought it was Marxist social engineering, and some thought it was just a form of competition dreamed up by bored billionaires. Whatever the case the truth was hidden on the dark web. The group in charge operated from behind a wall of encryption that Franque hadn't been able to penetrate. Twice he tried to trace the communiqués he received advising him on how to set up and train his team, but both attempts ended with disconnects. So he reined in his curiosity and just did as directed.

Dushawn did too. His head was leaning sideways, so Franque righted it and secured it by tying a couple of dreads to the cart's handle. As he worked he thought how he would miss Dushawn. The boy should never have entered the competition. He was too laid back, had been ever since they met in the first grade twenty years before. He was weak and there was no room for weakness in the world today. Even the tards knew that.

Franque looked over at the Goodwill cart. It was made of the same dark blue plastic that Walmart used. The carts were identical except for the logos on their sides.

The leader of the Goodwill team was a Down's dude named Larry. When he saw Franque looking at him he grinned and gave a thumbs-up. The other members of the team stood poking at the cart's contents. One of them was still wearing his facemask. The team was made up of your

typical Goodwill types, group homers who sorted bric-a-brac at the thrift shops. They were sorting through heads now, mostly. One held up a foot with a huarache on it. Franque had seen the guy lose the foot. The Goodwill boys made a decent pin, but then they got confused and flipped the man the wrong way round when Larry rolled up with the cart. He tripped the guillotine's spring before he realized he had an ankle instead of a neck under the blade. The team tried to fix the mistake by turning the man around for a second cut, but by then his adrenaline had kicked in. He knew he was fighting for his life and made such a fuss that he turned the cart over. The tards ran off chasing spilled heads, and the forgotten victim hopped away on one huarache.

Franque chuckled at the memory and then checked his phone for news reports on the congregation. The networks weren't reporting anything yet, but several videos had been uploaded to personal accounts. He selected one and tapped Play.

The video showed the crowd about a half hour before, already gathered in the commercial district. Black people were at the front to give an appearance of social justice, and non-blacks were behind them. Everybody was waiting, just passing time until they could roll their carts forward.

Franque skipped ahead to where the Antifa provocateur threw the first Molotov cocktail. A parked car bloomed into light and then the bricks started hitting the storefront windows. The mass of shopping carts surged toward the stores.

Franque and Dushawn had both put their teams to work at that point. They were at the rear of the crowd, carts waiting side by side in the shadows. The crash of glass was the signal to mount their little guillotines on the fronts of the carts. Franque's team set theirs up in just seventeen seconds. Franque tested the trigger rope with a quick chop, and then he was following his boys into the crowd.

He looked forward to seeing the official videos later. Both teams were assigned a videographer, to keep a record for review by the judges if needed. The videos would never be uploaded, unless it was to the dark web, but the contest rules said that the teams would be allowed to review them to analyze performance.

Franque was impressed by his pin team. He'd picked well. Teams consisted of five men—one for each arm and leg, plus a cart driver. Franque's leg men were short, wide bodybuilders. They had practiced sneaking up on their targets from behind, then dropping at the same time and settling like concrete around the feet. Once the legs were immobilized the two arm men would move in. They were bodybuilders too but taller,

and they'd each grab an arm and lean the target back slightly, to keep him off balance. Franque would run the cart up from behind, the leg men would lift, and the body would be held horizontal while Franque pushed forward. As soon as the head passed between the guillotine's uprights he would trigger the blade. Spurting blood could be a problem, so he wore a long rubber apron. The rest of the team never got bloody because the moment the head fell they dropped the body and set off for their next target.

Outliers at the back of the crowd were the easiest to pick off, and most of the outliers were white boys. Franque told his team to focus on them. He had nothing against whites, it was just that a lot of them weren't very aware of their surroundings. They tended to think of riots and looting as shows for their amusement, and they stood with their phones held high shooting video. The first four heads that went into the Walmart basket were white.

Then Franque saw the Target team try to pin a guy who turned out to be a kickboxer. He put up a good fight while Dushawn held back looking pissed. Franque directed his guys to move on Dushawn. They pinned him, and Franque rolled up and took head number five.

They were doing number six when Franque looked back and saw Dushawn's people standing around their cart yelling at one another. Javier yelled the loudest and took over as driver. The reduced team of three pin men moved off into the crowd searching for the next target.

A little later the videographers told the teams to stop their chopping. Six minutes and 6.6 seconds was what had been allotted, enough time to allow for a good contest but not so long that the police could figure out what was going on. So the videographers called time and then accompanied the teams to the warehouse. They continued to record video from behind, to make sure nobody took an unauthorized head along the way.

Franque had felt some admiration for the Target team as the count of their heads progressed. He didn't think they'd be able to regroup after they lost Dushawn, but Javier did a surprisingly good job. He got things back on track by directing his guys to go after women. They were smaller and easier to handle. Some of them had brought men along as bodyguards, but that wasn't a problem. The men were tofu eaters better suited to guard against offensive gender labeling than offensive linemen. A couple of their heads ended up in the basket. You could tell which heads were pairs because of matching tats and nose rings.

Results from the facial recognition scan on the half-head came in, and it was allowed. Target got fifteen, Walmart fourteen. The Target team broke into cheers. Javier stuck his tongue out at Franque and went into a dance

that involved some vigorous pelvic pumping.

"Point of order!" Franque shouted.

Javier stopped in mid pump and the warehouse quieted down. Both judges looked at Franque. The videographers focused their cameras on him. One of the judges asked what he meant by point of order.

"Well," Franque said, "now that the first round of counting is finished, I want to present our second basket of heads."

He pointed to the Goodwill cart that nobody else seemed to have noticed until then. The tards standing around it fidgeted self-consciously when attention turned to them. Franque walked to the cart and peeled the Goodwill sticker off the side. A Walmart logo was underneath.

"Larry here is the team leader," Franque told the judges, then to Larry he said, "Take your cart to those two men so they can count." Larry smiled and started toward the judges. One of the cart's front wheels made a loud floppy sound in the silent warehouse.

Franque smiled at Javier, who stood bulging his veins. They got bigger, and bigger, and then he popped.

"No way! He can't do that!"

Larry reached the judges and one of them shook his head. "I don't know," he said to Franque. "This is unprecedented."

Franque shrugged. "Can't be helped. This is the maiden run for this contest, so how can there be any precedents? But I've studied the rules. There's nothing in them about having only one cart."

The judges conferred, then fingered their handheld devices, apparently going through the contest rules. Franque looked at Javier. He seemed ready to pop again, but before he could one of the judges said, "We can't find a rule regarding the number of carts, but there's one about the markings on them. It says the competitors' carts must be clearly identified with company logos."

"We're in compliance," Franque said. "The cart you're standing at is marked with the Walmart logo. It's true that it was covered up temporarily by a Goodwill sticker, but the Walmart logo is there."

The judge said, "But to our knowledge Goodwill did not give permission to use their logo, therefore we find that..."

"Hold on," Franque interrupted. He looked at Larry. "Did you give permission?"

Larry was picking his nose. He unplugged and said, "Did I, uh...huh?"

"Did you say it was okay for me to put that sticker on your cart?"

Larry balked. He looked as if he thought Franque was trying to trick him. Franque persisted.

"You said I could put the sticker on your cart when I showed you and

your friends how to set up the chopper. I bought y'all sodas, remember? The orange sodas?"

"Oh, yeah," Larry smiled. "The sodas was goood."

"And you told me I could put my sticker on your cart, right?"

"Right."

Franque spread his arms to the judges. "There you go, your honors. An agreement between Walmart and Goodwill. Everything's copacetic."

"But..." One of the judges leaned over the cart. "This is a mess. There's a hand in here, and a foot, and a..." He took a pen from his shirt pocket and used it to poke at something. "Is that what I think it is?"

The other judge looked. "Could be, but I think it's a finger."

"As long as there are two heads," Franque said, "the Walmart team wins."

The judges conferred, then one of them called the videographers over to record the official ruling. "Due to the vague and incomplete nature of the rules, we find that the Walmart team has a valid point. And since there are four, maybe five heads in their second cart..."

"You didn't scan them!" Javier shouted. "And there's no video of them!"

"True," the judge said, "but we have no doubt that Walmart's lawyers would claim those rules are also open to interpretation. File an appeal if you want, but for now we find that since there are more than enough heads in Walmart's second cart to put them in the lead, they win."

Franque's team broke out with shouts and high fives. The Target team sulked. But Javier, as leader of the runners-up, got a few seconds with a videographer to make a wrap-up statement. He bitched about the loss and said the rules needed to be fixed.

Each member of the winning team also got some time with the videographers. The pin men gave the usual sports bromides about team effort, a hundred and ten percent and so on, then Franque took his turn. He faced a camera and said, "Corporate cooperation is the key to the future. The temporary alliance between Walmart and Goodwill achieved a notable victory tonight, but such cooperation does not need to end here. I have a Bachelor's Degree in marketing and am working on my Master's in Woke Profiteering. I look forward to hearing from the corporate participants in tonight's contest. Together I think we can achieve great things."

He held his smile until the videographer said they were clear. The man was about to walk away but Franque stopped him and said he kept his blurb short so it could be included in the highlights reel. To show he was serious he slipped the videographer a hundred-dollar bill.

The man pocketed the money but said, "I don't know. You just went out

live, so you got your exposure, but the highlights reel?"

Franque gave him another hundred.

"And the editor."

Franque handed over another hundred and said, "That's it, man. I'm dry."

The videographer told Franque his speech would be in the reel.

A line had formed in front of the judges, who were doing the payouts. Team members were to receive five hundred dollars apiece, and each of the winners an additional two. Franque knew he would only net four hundred after the business with the videographer, but he didn't mind. His eye was on a greater reward. The game they'd initiated tonight would no doubt catch on, and he could be running it before long. From there he'd go on to...no telling what.

There was a disturbance in the pay line. Larry from Goodwill was demanding more money. Franque heard one of the judges say, "But sir, we don't pay extra for fingers. Or whatever that is."

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The Battle of Venice Beach

The Beach Boys sang "Fun Fun Fun" on the phone's ringtone. Kenny opened his eyes a little but closed them again when he saw gray. It was daytime. And raining. He heard water dripping outside the living room window.

The phone's answering machine picked up after the boys sang that daddy took the T-bird away. Jamal's voice said, "Aloha keiki. I guess I'm out catching a wave. Talk to me. A hui hou."

After the beep a woman said, "I'm with the Venice chamber of commerce and I'm calling for Mr. Jamal Abudi." She had a perky voice. "Your Funk o' the Junk Deck Wax has come to our attention, Mr. Abudi. We've noticed you sell it at several local surf shops, and we're hoping you'll join the chamber so we can help you promote it. I'll call back later so we can discuss the many benefits of chamber membership. Have a great day!"

The machine beeped off and Kenny shifted position on the couch. He would leave the message for Jamal. Big-time businessman. Funk o' the Junk at the chamber of commerce. He chuckled as he drifted off again to the sound of the rain.

He half awoke later when he heard some crackling outside. It sounded like fireworks coming from the direction of the beach. Fireworks in the rain

was strange. Was it the Fourth of July? Christmas? Maybe it was Marley's birthday. They played a lot of his music at the beach the night before. He wondered if schools and stuff would be closed. The chamber of commerce was open. The wahine on the phone sounded hot. He fell asleep again picturing her as a blonde walking the nose of his board.

A loud slam jerked him to a sitting position, eyes wide, brain burning with light. He saw two homeless men outside the window. They were pushing their shopping carts away from the dumpster that was in the alley behind the apartment complex.

He sat blinking until his eyes adjusted to the light. It wasn't so bright outside really. The day was gray from the overcast, but the new mural on the side of the dumpster still popped with neon color. The painting filled the window with an electric blue ocean and a bright orange sunset. Somebody had graffitied their initials in the leaves of the palm tree, but the letters were small and you could barely see them. At least the taggers were respecting the chi of the new painting. Except for the one who'd sprayed a penis rising out of the waves. He wrote "Moby" just above it.

Kenny reached up to scratch his forehead and found a post-it note stuck there. It was a reminder from Jamal that the repair shop would be in touch when his boogie board was ready. Kenny had promised to pick it up as soon as the call came in. And he was waiting for a call from somebody else, too. Who was it? He fought through the brain fog and pictured a face, the dealer he met at the party on the beach. Bob something. Fuzzy Bob? Furzo Bob? No, Fresno Bob, that was it. He didn't know the dude but everybody said he was cool. He tried to sell Kenny some pot.

A sudden need to pee hit Kenny. The urge was strong but he pinched it off because there was more important business to take care of first. He dug through the ashtray on the floor and found a half-burned joint. It was some of Bob's orange stuff, from the beach party. Kenny wondered where his Grease Monkey went and hoped he hadn't smoked it at the beach. Maybe he dropped it between the cushions of the couch. He'd look later.

He fired up the joint, inhaled, and smacked his lips. Bob said his pot was as good as Banana Kush, but it wasn't. It didn't have anywhere near the THC content. BK was banana plant crossed with primo Kush, and Bob said his was crossed with orange trees. Kenny could definitely taste the orange. He took another hit and felt himself relax. The pot wasn't bad. It gave him a buzz, and the orange juice taste was perfect for breakfast. If the rain let up later he'd take care of the bacon and eggs taste at the taco cart.

There were more firecracker pops, closer, and Kenny hoped the party was coming his way. Some of the hardcores from the beach might still be

going. He remembered a bunch of them shouting, "Til death do us partay!" while they played dodgeball with a dead stingray.

"Partay," he chuckled as he smoked, and then on a long exhale he noticed that two of Jamal's boards were gone from a corner of the room. Where did he say he was going? Oroville, that was it. He said he wanted to check out the dam there. People said it was going to break from all the rain. They had some stuff about it on TV the day before. Kenny and Jamal watched an emergency dude talk about it, and then the governor said the United Nations was coming to help out. "Humanitarian aid, invasion," Jamal said. "Tomayto, tomato. I'm going anyway." Kenny didn't know what the U.N. had to do with tomatoes, and he was about to ask when Jamal dropped to the floor to do some pushups. "I want to catch the first wave," he said while he pumped, then he jumped to his feet and went into his surfing crouch. He said, "The trick will be to stay ahead of the debris in the flood. Should be a wicked ride. You should come with me, K." Kenny said he'd pass because his hamstring was sore from that morning. He tried a 360 on a crest, but he only hit 180, and that was top to bottom instead of front to back. So he told Jamal to go on without him. Jamal said to watch for him when the dam broke.

The blinking light on the phone's answering machine caught Kenny's attention. He checked the I.D. and saw that two messages were waiting. One was from the babe at the chamber of commerce, and the other was from somebody named Robert L. Maybe that was the call about Jamal's board. Kenny played the message.

Robert L. was Fresno Bob. Kenny recognized his voice. He said he hoped Kenny enjoyed the taste or orange he got for gratis, and he could knock ten bucks off the half ounce. "Coupon code H-I-G-H", he giggled, "so give me a shout when you lower the landing gear." The machine beeped off and Kenny wondered when Bob had called. He didn't remember hearing the Beach Boys during the night, but he remembered telling Bob he was twenty bucks too high on his asking price. Bob said, "It is what it is," but this morning it looked like it wasn't what it was. Kenny smiled. The dude was coming around. Make him sweat for a while. Some things are worth standing up for, and the price of weed was one. Kenny told himself he would have to be amadant with Bob. He was new to Venice Beach and needed to earn his place there. So Kenny would be amadant on the price. He might even use that word the next time he talked to Bob, because when somebody says that, you know there's no use arguing.

Kenny struggled up from the couch and limped through scattered clothes to the bathroom. He peed and then stayed for a monster crap. He

closed the door afterwards so the smell wouldn't follow him, and he fought the chop back to the couch. His feet were wrapped in clothes by the time he sat down. He untangled them and massaged his hamstring. Then he reached up for the joint he'd stuck behind an ear when he crouched on the can. The joint was gone, burned down to nothing. He poked at the blister where it had been. Bummer, he thought, but he felt good after the crap, so things could be worse. Just keep on moving. Like Marley said, keep on moving, keep on grooving.

He grooved to the song in his head until it faded and there was nothing but the sound of dripping rain outside the window. He studied the mural on the dumpster but soon got bored and searched for the TV's remote. He found it under the coffee table. One end was stuck in an open can of Funk o' the Junk. He wiped it off on the couch and turned on the TV.

It was tuned to the weather channel. The weatherman said the situation at Oroville was getting worse. A view from a helicopter showed water foaming over the top of the dam. Kenny didn't see Jamal, so he clicked around and landed on a show about soldiers fighting in a bunch of rubble. It was old black and white film, with sounds of explosions in the background. A narrator said the place was called Stalingrad. Kenny couldn't understand why anyone would fight over rubble, but the people on the screen were really into it. They were shooting and running around and popping up and down like a game of whack-a-mole.

Kenny knew what it was like to fight, not over rubble but over the right to smoke. He was a political activist during the final push to legalize marijuana in California. It was a tough fight, what he could remember of it, and it wasn't fair that he did all that frontline work and now he was low on weed. He should be treated like a veteran, like those retired navy dudes who jogged up and down the beach. Or used to. They all moved away. But they got free hospitals and stuff, and he should get free weed. It didn't have to be Grade A, just good enough to stay buzzed.

He thought about his Grease Monkey again. No telling when he'd be able to do a repeat on smoke like that. Probably not until the government sent another stimulus check. He felt around under the couch cushions to his sides, hoping to find the little baggie the pot was in. No luck. He dug through the soda cans and takeout cartons on the coffee table and found a baggie, but it was just some old Mexican generic with a "Half Price" sticker on it. There was enough residue in the baggie to make it to the evening if he was careful. He thought about calling Bob for the half ounce of orange but fought the urge. He didn't want the dude to think he was desperate. Make Bob call him, and stick to his guns on the price. It was a war of wills.

He started to roll a joint but remembered the blister over his ear and decided to burn a bowl instead. The TV was still buzzing, so he muted it and focused on searching for his pipe. He found it in a shoe. He loaded it and fired it up.

Lungs full, he settled back on the couch and held his breath. He held it, held it, and the mural outside the window began to glow. Then it began to swim, and then he saw the top of a pale blue bubble floating across it.

He exhaled and watched the bubble bob slowly along the bottom of the window frame. He thought of the big glass fishing floats they used to find washed up on the beach. They were blue and rolled up and down in the lapping surf.

The bubble passed the Moby penis, then stopped and rose up. It was a blue helmet, on a short dude with dark skin. He turned toward the window and looked in at Kenny. The helmet said UN in big white letters on the front. Kenny smiled and waved with his pipe.

The dude yelled something and dropped down. Kenny wondered where he went, then the front door flew open and people came barking into the living room. Kenny bent forward and curled his arms around the back of his head. He'd learned the position during his political activist days, and it had saved him more than once from getting head injuries. Not from cops beating on him but from falling down after smoking dusted pot.

Kenny held his position but glanced up a couple of times and saw that the dudes stomping around the apartment were soldiers. They wore green ponchos over green uniforms. It didn't take them long to search the place, since it was just the living room, kitchen area, bedroom and bath. The soldier who checked the bathroom came out gagging and slammed the door.

In all there were four soldiers. When they finished with their search they gathered in front of the couch and pointed their stubby rifles at Kenny. He sat up straight and raised his hands above his head.

"Cool your jets, dudes. You don't need to get all...Gralinstad on me."

They didn't say anything, just stood dripping water and staring at him. All were dark-skinned and had shaved heads under their helmets. Their brown eyes were pinched like they'd been smoking mucho ganja. One looked kind of like the Godfather, Brando, with his jaw stuck out. Another looked like Curley from the Three Stooges.

They jabbered some but Kenny couldn't understand them. He wondered if they were Filipino. They looked a little like the Tresmanos a few doors down. Justino and his wife were from the Philippines and Kenny couldn't understand them either. She cooked pineapple into everything. It seemed that Brando was in charge, so Kenny asked him, "Habla Filipino, dude?"

He didn't habla, so maybe they were from somewhere else. Maybe China.

"You boys from China?" Kenny asked, then felt bad for calling them boys. African-Americans didn't like the word, so maybe these dudes didn't either. He needed to be more politically correct.

"Are you Chinamen?"

They didn't answer, but after a pause Curley leaned across the coffee table and took the pipe from Kenny's lap.

"Hey, be careful," Kenny said. "That cost eight bucks."

The soldier examined it, then aimed it at the floor and tried to pull the trigger.

"No," Kenny said, "it's not a real gun. It just looks like one. It's a pipe." Curley looked at him and shrugged.

Kenny made a gun shape out of his hand, put the end of his index finger to his lips and sucked on it. "You know, for smokee? Ganja?" He sucked again, held his breath, then exhaled and rolled his eyes up with a smile.

Curley sniffed the pipe and jabbered to the others. He held the end of the barrel to his lips, faked inhaling, and staggered around a little. His friends all laughed.

Another soldier took the pipe. He pretended to toke and then hunched down so his knuckles were scraping the floor like a monkey's. They all laughed again, and Kenny joined in. The next guy took it and pretended to stick it up his ass. He hopped up and down squealing, and Kenny laughed again. But the others didn't. He noticed they were all looking at Brando, who'd gone from smiling to serious. He barked something, then took the pipe and used it like it was a syringe to poke at his forearm. The others nodded. Next Brando put the pipe to his temple like he was going to shoot himself, and he jabbered at Kenny. Kenny didn't know what he was saying, but he knew the tone of a lecture when he heard it. Brando was definitely down on drugs.

"I can dig it," Kenny said. "You're not into self-medicating. But all I do is toke a little. I don't spike. I tried it once. I stuck the needle between my toes, safe-like, but I hit a nerve. My toes went numb and it spazzed my walk for a week."

To show what he meant, Kenny walked two fingers on the coffee table. He buckled one with every other step.

The soldiers stared at him, then Brando used the pipe to point around the apartment while he barked some more in his lecture tone. It was easy to see he didn't like the mess. He got really loud when he pointed to the

trash piled around the trashcan.

While he yipped, the soldier who'd checked the bathroom earlier went back to it and opened the door. He fanned it a couple of times, and the rush of smell into the living room made everybody gag and cough. Before the soldier closed the door he sent the monster crap tubing. Kenny had forgotten to flush.

Brando yelled when he got his breath back. He pointed to the sole of one of his boots and made a show of squatting like he was taking a dump. Kenny assumed he was complaining about stepping in one of the offloads from the homeless people outside. They stopped and pinched a loaf no matter where they were when nature called, and it called a lot from the sidewalks.

Brando must have asked a question because he went silent and stood looking at Kenny like he expected an answer.

"Uh, sorry dude. I don't know what you're saying. But you definitely have to watch where you step around here. It helps if you know un poco de surf."

He did a snaky little sway and cutback move, and the soldiers all stared, then they all started jabbering and shaking their fingers at him. They repeated the word "dude" over and over, and Kenny knew he was being dissed, though not about what. He tried to figure it out but needed a toke to clear his head.

It was like Brando read his mind. He tossed the pipe so it landed in Kenny's lap, then he barked at the others. They each gave Kenny a final jabber as they filed out the front door. Brando was the last to leave. He paused and checked the ground before he stepped out.

Kenny watched them walk across the dumpster sunset, one helmet after another, like fishing floats heading in the direction they'd been going when he first saw them. When they disappeared he fired up his pipe.

He blissed out for a while, and then he heard the pop of a firecracker. Just one at first, then a siren or scream, then more pops. The sound wasn't from toward the beach like before; it came from the direction the Chinamen went. And it sounded like it was a ways down, maybe from the Tresmanos place. The beach party could have passed him by while he wasn't paying attention and ended up there. Justino liked to party. He liked to get high and mess with people's heads by waving his machete around.

Kenny was thinking about going to check on the party and maybe get a free toke, when the Beach Boys sang out from the phone. He saw from the ID that it was Fresno Bob again. Make him wait. Let the boys sing and then pick up just as daddy takes the T-bird away.

Kenny smiled and looked at the muted TV. The people in Strolingad were still fighting over their rubble. He respected them because they were all so amadant. That's how he needed to be with Bob on the price of the pot. The two of them were in a war of wills, and Kenny would win because some things were worth fighting for.

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The Weight of the World

I was going through my storage unit when I came across a box of old books. The day was pleasant so I sat in a recliner and leafed through Steinbeck, Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe. Then I got absorbed in Hemingway and read until the light coming in at the door began to fail.

That night in bed I thought of the books and the writing styles of the authors, from the convoluted Faulkner to the iambic Wolfe. But still after all the years it was Hemingway who had impressed me the most. And as I drifted off to sleep I pictured his words as painterly dabs that led to strokes of sentences and landscapes of paragraphs. I hovered over those paragraphs and marveled at the sparse perfection describing war and love and loss. I hovered and admired, then I heard a man say, "Ordonez was the superior fighter," and suddenly I was falling. In a rush I dropped through the words, down through the branches of a tree, and then to a table and a chair where I stopped.

The fall had left me dizzy so I closed my eyes and grabbed hold of the edge of the table. The voice continued. It spoke matter-of-factly.

"His technique was better than anyone else's on his good days and flawless on his best. Against the larger... Oh. I didn't see you sit down."

I opened my eyes, and as my blurry vision cleared I saw that it was nighttime and I was on the terrace of a café. It was a clean, well-lighted place, with a streetlight nearby and the shadows of leaves falling across the small tables.

"Habla inglés?" the voice said, and I turned to see Ernest Hemingway. He was seated across from me at the table. It was unmistakably him, with his gray beard and hair, and the sunburned skin and a khaki shirt open at the throat. He lifted a glass to his mouth but then stopped and said, "You don't have a drink." He called out to a couple of waiters who were inside the café. "Another for me and one for this man!"

He studied the street that ran past the café while we waited for service.

When our waiter arrived he gave me a saucer with a glass on it and added a saucer to the stack in front of Hemingway. He poured brandy into our glasses, but when he turned to walk away Hemingway said something in Spanish and the man turned back and filled the glasses to overflowing.

After the waiter had walked away muttering, Hemingway raised his glass and said, "Salud." We both sipped and then he asked who I was.

I introduced myself and started to say I was a big fan of his writing, but this was Hemingway and I didn't want to gush in an unmanly way. So I just told him my name, and he raised his glass again with another "Salud."

"How'd you get here?" he asked after we drank.

"Well, it's hard to explain," I said, and then I was gushing. I talked about a box of books and a recliner and hovering, and from there I jumped into praising his work. I said his iceberg theory of writing, where you leave the important things unsaid, was brilliant. "The restraint you brought to your prose was peerless. You were the greatest stylist of the twentieth century."

He shrugged and said, "Prose is architecture and the Baroque age was over."

Somewhere in my gushing I had mentioned being from the future, so he asked what year I was from.

"2021."

"Sixty years after I died. And what news of bullfighting is there from 2021?"

"Bullfighting? I, uh, I don't know. I've never followed it. But, let's see, I remember reading that they're trying to ban it. They say it's cruel to the animals."

"Bah. Invaders have always tried to ban it, but not because of cruelty. It's a symbol of Spanish culture and they can't have that. But it's survived from antiquity and will go on surviving."

"Maybe not. It's not just bullfighting they want to get rid of now, it's any sport that's especially aggressive."

"Who is this 'they' you speak of?"

"Our leaders. They're feminizing western society. They want to remove threats to their power, so they've targeted traits like strength and bravery."

"That sounds like something a bunch of women would do."

"True. But to be fair, there are as many men involved in it. And by the way, making broad statements like that about women has earned you a reputation as a misogynist."

"Misogynist? I loved women. I married four of them."

"I know. And some people say that's because you were a repressed homosexual who couldn't commit to one woman."

"Freudians," he said like the word was a bad taste in his mouth. "Some people also say that Freud was an incestuous pedophile who invented psychiatry to legitimize his perversions. I was no homosexual. And no misogynist."

"Well, there are those who say you were, but they also listen to music that calls women 'bitches' and 'whores.'"

Hemingway tossed back the rest of his brandy and signaled our waiter. The man came with a fresh saucer and the bottle. He said, "You'll be drunk," but Hemingway told him to pour anyway, again to overflowing.

We sat sipping our drinks and I saw a girl and a soldier walking along the street. Hemingway watched them pass and then looked at me. "Who are you?" he asked, then, "Oh, yes, the time traveler." His speech was a bit slurred. The waiter had been right about him getting drunk. "So tell me," he said, "have you talked to other writers in your travels?"

"Yes. I met Mark Twain awhile back."

"Twain," Hemingway smiled. "All modern American literature comes from his book about Huck Finn. There was nothing as good before, and nothing as good since."

I said I'd documented my meeting with Twain in a short story called "A Foam-Bell More or Less." I was hoping to start a discussion of my writing, but Hemingway didn't rise to the bait. Instead he asked for news of the future, so I told him about space travel, 3D printers and surgery performed by robots. And then I said something about the new genders.

"New genders? What do you mean?"

"I think they say there are eighty-seven now."

"Eighty-seven genders? How is that possible?"

"Maybe the psychiatrists couldn't count any higher."

"The psychiatrists again. The worst mistake I ever made was to let myself fall into their hands." He seemed to get lost in a reverie for a moment, then he came back and said, "What of the children, in your world of eighty-seven genders?"

"Well, what do you think? They're confused. And that's the way the monsters that push the gender lie want it. Everywhere you look there are movies and commercials and celebrities encouraging kids to 'explore' their sexuality."

"How do parents protect against a thing like that?"

"They can't really. People who call themselves social justice warriors use the courts to advance the agenda. They argue that it's a child's right to pick his gender. And in schools now they've begun teaching that men can have babies."

"Have babies? That's insane."

"I know, but you run the risk of being arrested if you go to a school board meeting and question it. Some schools bring riot teams to the meetings now, police teams trained to assault and subdue. The perverts in charge don't want any discussion of what they're doing."

"But how have things reached such a point?"

"Because the people who run things are good strategists and attack from several directions at once. For example, they've convinced millions that meat is bad for the planet. As a substitute they encourage us to eat soy products, which raise estrogen levels in males. Estrogen is the female hormone. By the time boys reach their teens now, many of them have breasts. And school counselors encourage them to undergo sex changes. They put them on drugs that increase breast size even more and shrink their genitals. After that they're pushed to undergo castration. A surprising number of parents sign off on having their boys surgically..."

"Stop!"

My gaze had drifted to the street while I spoke, and I looked back to Hemingway. He was rubbing his temples.

"You make my head hurt," he said.

"Sorry."

"Don't apologize. At least you're honest about the problems of your time. And you talk about them, which is like draining an abscess so the healing can begin."

"That's how I see it."

He sipped his brandy and then he said, "A world like you describe, a world without machismo...what good is it? Without the bravery of the bullring to inspire, or of the rhino hunters? Sometimes they're as brave as the matadors, even though they face their moment of truth with a gun in their hands. They know that as the rhino charges they will get only one shot to bring it down, so they wait for the soft spot of the target to grow larger. And the brave ones take the shot late and get pushed aside as the horn of the fallen animal cuts past like a plow." He looked at me and said, "Be thankful that at least you have hunting to turn to."

He drained his brandy, set the glass in its saucer and stared down at the table.

I didn't have the heart to tell him that big game hunting had been demonized and practically eliminated. He died before the hippies and the Earth First movement, and before the big foundations seized millions of acres to convert to what they called nature conservancies but were in fact their private game preserves. I thought of the Green New Deal, which

pretended to be about saving the planet but was really just a bunch of wealthy elites lecturing us from their yachts and mansions about how ashamed we should be for polluting their planet with our breath. If it were up to them, each and every one of us peons would eat the end of a shotgun the way that Hemingway had.

I wondered later if I'd transferred the thought of the shotgun to Hemingway, because as soon as it entered my head he said, "Up until the final pull on the trigger I had a good life, what I remember of it." He was still staring at the table and his voice was soft, but steady. There was no trace of the slurring from earlier. "I have some memories of childhood, but I didn't truly grow up until I was injured on the battlefield in Italy. After that was the hunting in Michigan and then the newspaper work in Paris. That was the best place to be for writers. The city was cheap to live in and the people were like nowhere else. Pound, Picasso, Stein. And Joyce. God the man liked to spout off in languages. Pound did too. Half the time I didn't know what they were saying or what language they were saying it in."

He paused, sighed deeply, then continued.

"Some of my writing was good and some was bad, but even the bad could be good because the sight of the pages in the wastepaper basket gave weight to the world. It was the right kind of weight that kept you grounded and working hard to do better. I worked like crazy until I finally got the success. Then came the travels and the hunting and fishing. Key West and Wyoming, then Africa and Cuba. In '43 I put a depth charge on the back of my fishing boat, to be ready in case I came across a German sub in the Gulf of Mexico. Later I learned that's when the FBI began watching me. They opened a file on me and then added to it when the government lost Cuba. The CIA put Castro in power but he turned on them and they needed to blame his communism on somebody. They chose me and some others. They combed through my taxes and began to follow me. It affected me. I became withdrawn and Mary got worried. She talked me into going to the Mayo Clinic because she said I needed a rest. I thought it was for a rest too but while I was there they gave me electroshock treatments and questioned me about Cuba and Castro. If they were truly after that sort of information they erased it with the electricity. With each session I could feel the loss of a few more memories. The hunting, the battlefields, the lesser characters. Whole episodes were wiped away and in the end I was left with little to write about. How could I tell my story if I couldn't remember it? Finally I had nothing but the gun in my hands and the soft spot in my throat."

He was silent for a while, then he said, "I killed myself because I lost my memories. But at least I got some of them down on paper."

He stood up, counted his saucers and scattered some pesetas on the table. "Every man's life ends the same way," he said. "It is only the details of how he lived and died that distinguish one man from another."

I thought he would walk away then, but he lingered. "Did you say you're a writer?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Are you writing about the important things in your life?"

"Yes. Or, important things in the world. This year I'm writing political stories. It's a year of atrocities and I want to document the crimes so the guilty can never be completely free of what they've done."

"You mean like the crimes against the children? The carving of boys into girls?"

"Yes."

"Then I wish you well."

He walked to the street and was starting away when he stopped and turned back to me. "I just thought of something," he said. "I killed myself because I lost my memories, but writers in your time are more likely to kill themselves because their memories won't go away."

With that he walked off. I sat at the table watching him until he disappeared around the corner of a building. The shadows of the leaves trembled slightly, as if stirred by a passing breeze.

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The Spectrogyph

"Lord of the dark light, lord of the dark light, lord of the dark light..."

The words echoed in Eben Wale's head until a buzzard's croak clawed him back to the moment. He switched the coffeemaker on and looked out the cracked window above the sink. A buzzard was perched on the crossbar of the power pole behind his old farmhouse. The bird was black against the gray winter sky, and the sight reminded Eben how cold it was. He yawned and rubbed the goosebumps beneath the sleeves of his robe.

The buzzard squawked again and one of the hens answered from the chicken yard. Old Cackleburr had been dead for a month now and the girls missed him. They tried to imitate his crowing but made gaspy little sounds that were so weak they hadn't even wakened Eben that morning. But he probably would have slept through a dozen roosters. He got to bed hours later than he was used to the previous night, and it took a whiff of Blucher

to rouse him from his sleep.

As if he knew Eben was thinking about him, Blucher came limping into the kitchen. He was a big dog who'd wandered up years before, without the limp, but with a big appetite that was still healthy after no telling how many bags of dry dog food and now the softer canned stuff. Eben hated to see the arthritis eating away at his hips. His coat had seen better days too—his fur used to be thick and black but now it was thin and gray. And he smelled like crap in an old shoe. No wonder buzzards were showing an interest in the place. Skunks would be nosing around next, thinking one of their own was in the house.

Blucher's long toenails tick-ticked across the grimy linoleum. He went to his food bowl and looked down at it. Empty. He turned his rheumy eyes on Eben, who felt guilty and looked away. He studied a flyspecked wall. A gray hairball was stuck to its baseboard. He couldn't tell if the hair was his or Blucher's. They were having a race to baldness. Eben was sixty-four, which was...what, in dog years? Probably as old as Blucher.

Blucher lapped from his water bowl and eyed Eben again. He wanted his breakfast. Eben shook his head.

"Sorry, boy. I need you hungry for later. I need the kitchen warm too."

He stepped to the stove, turned on all four gas rings and set the flames high.

"This'll heat things up."

He warmed his big hands briefly and then went to the living room. He stopped himself from looking back at Blucher, but he could feel him projecting hostility.

Eben crossed to the stone fireplace and took a match from the box on the mantel. He lit the gas heater on the hearth. As he stood holding his robe open to the rising warmth, Blucher came in and plopped down on his hairy rug near the fire. He sighed and closed his eyes.

Eben cinched his robe closed and went to the desk in the corner of the room. He sat and turned on his laptop computer, then he leaned down and rummaged through the backpack beside the chair. Ski mask, pistol, portable scanner...he found his camera. He pulled its memory chip and snapped it into the computer. He started to run the new footage, then decided to check his email first. A couple of clicks, a yawn, and he was connected to the internet.

He saw the usual junk in his inbox, and a note from Candlesnuffer. He opened that one. The brief message said "obit, FYI," and there was a link. Eben knew before he clicked on it that the obituary would be for the TV executive.

The executive was featured in Candlesnuffer's latest video. It was a good piece of work that spliced short clips from well-known sitcoms and news programs into the interrogation session. During the session the executive told how the CIA had used television to tie the words "conspiracy" and "theory" together in people's thinking. Constant repetition of the simple two-word phrase had led to a point where now it was nearly impossible for the average person to hear the first word without supplying the second on his own. Basic conditioning. The executive laughed about it. He said that once the term "conspiracy theory" had been embedded in the hive mind and associated with enough kooky ideas, the government could then discount even the most obvious examples of its wrongdoing by just uttering the word "conspiracy."

Eben read the obituary and learned that the executive was fifty-six when he died, a pillar of the community, church leader, contributor to charities, a member of the Shriners... Ah, a Shriner. Membership in a secret society was always a giveaway. And the Shriners were one of the worst, with their membership of 32nd degree Masons and façade of good works. The stumpy red hats they wore commemorated the beheading of fifty thousand Christians in the city of Fez.

The obituary didn't give the details of the executive's death, so Eben did a quick search of the internet and found a newspaper article about it. The piece was from a New York paper's website and described how he died after a fall from a window. There were no photographs, but a picture from another local story showed lots of snow. Eben thought how cold it must be in New York. He was glad he lived in Texas, where it was cold enough as it was.

The aroma of brewed coffee managed to override the Blucher smell. Eben disconnected from the net and went to the kitchen. It was warming up so he turned off one of the stove's gas rings. He poured a mug of coffee and returned to his desk to plan his day.

He'd give it awhile before he braved the cold to do his chores. The animals needed tending, plus there was a patch of fence to mend, and later he might go to the feed store. He could pick up some chicken feed and find out if anyone saw him sneaking home on the back roads the night before.

He checked to make sure the chip from the camera was plugged firmly into his computer, then he clicked through to the video file. The raw footage began with a jerk. He settled back to watch.

Clunky sounds came through the laptop's speakers as the picture swung left and right. He'd had a bit of trouble mounting the camera on its tripod. The picture jittered, bounced, and then it settled on Leonard Coleridge,

research scientist. The man was about forty-five and thin. And duct taped to a chair in his laboratory.

Eben's contact had provided him with a timetable she said he could count on, so he arrived in Austin at sunset and parked a block away from the lab. When he was sure he was in the three-hour window between quitting time and the arrival of the cleaning crew, he walked briskly to the lab's back door. The keycard was where it was supposed to be. He slipped his ski mask on and ducked inside.

Coleridge was alone and working late, as expected. It was his company and he was a driven individual. Eben showed him his pistol and made him sit in a straight-backed metal chair. Once he'd bound the man's wrists together with a plastic pull-tie, he taped his mouth and then mummy wrapped him from shoulder to ankle. His hands were positioned so that one was left uncovered and palm up in his lap.

The video began at a point just after Eben secured Coleridge. He watched himself, in his baggy gray sweatsuit and black ski mask, enter the picture. He held a hypodermic in one of his latex-gloved hands and his pocketknife in the other. Coleridge had been compliant so far, but he squirmed when he saw the syringe. Eben told him to hold still so he wouldn't get cut, then he used the tip of the knife to pierce the tape and a shirtsleeve at one of the deltoids. He pulled the cap off the hypo's needle and jabbed.

Eben knew there wouldn't be any activity on the video for a while, so he let it run and went to change into his clothes. The bedroom was cold and he dressed fast. He put on thermal underwear, a flannel shirt and his overalls, but he didn't switch to his boots yet. His fuzzy slippers were nice and warm.

On his way back to the living room he made a stop at the toilet. Two minutes of squatting and shivering, then he hustled to the fireplace and warmed the seat of his overalls at the heater. Blucher opened an eye, sighed, and went back to sleep.

"Are you ready to talk?" Eben heard himself ask on the video. He stepped over to the desk so he could watch the action on the computer monitor. Or lack of action. He was standing in front of Coleridge and both were motionless. Coleridge couldn't answer Eben's question, because of his taped mouth, but he showed defiance by refusing to shake his head. The mix of sodium pentothal and LSD wasn't working yet.

Eben didn't know where the hypos came from. He received them in the mail. The packages had fake return addresses and always included latex gloves, to remind him not to leave fingerprints.

He leaned forward in the video and removed the tape from Coleridge's mouth. His own mouth was visible through the slit beneath the ski mask's eyeholes.

"You know who I am, right doc?"

After a long pause Coleridge said, "I've seen your videos on the internet."

"I thought you would have, you and your group."

Coleridge sneered. "You seem to think you know quite a lot about my 'group.'"

"Before we go any further, would you state, for the record, which group you mean?"

Suddenly Coleridge wasn't so talkative.

Eben shrugged. "You've seen the videos. You know it's just a matter of time before the drugs make you open up."

Coleridge didn't respond.

Eben goaded.

"What I like about you people is the way you always clean up after yourselves. When one of you blabs, the others make sure you don't hang around long enough to shoot your mouth off a second time."

Still no response from Coleridge.

Eben knew that nothing would be happening on the video for a couple of minutes, so he went to the kitchen. He poured himself a glass of tomato juice and studied the food in the refrigerator while he sipped. Normally he would have cooked something for breakfast, but he ate a bag of peanuts on the late drive home from Austin and wasn't hungry yet. But he would be by lunchtime. He sniffed some salami and poked at a half-eaten ring of gelatin. It was drying out and didn't have much wobble.

The ring was raspberry. He wasn't sure which flavor to use for his project that day, and he checked the pantry to see what he had. Cherry, watermelon, strawberry and peach. The peach made him think of his trip to Rockport six months before. His contact said that a preacher there was overzealous with his "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's" sermons. Eben knew that the ones who preached the Caesar stuff the loudest were usually government lackeys working to undermine church influence, and that was common enough nowadays, but the contact said the man in Rockport also used occult references in his sermons. So Eben drove down to the coast and paid the preacher's church a visit. He listened to a sermon, then he hung around that night and gave the man the treatment. And he turned out to be a true believer. Eben scanned him and the next day he used the scan to make what he called a peachy preacher parfait. A week later the preacher was found floating facedown in the Gulf of Mexico.

Eben grabbed the box of watermelon gelatin from the pantry and set it next to the stove. The kitchen was pretty warm now, so he turned off all the gas rings except for one and returned to the living room. He sat down at the desk just as the conversation began on the video.

"Let's try it again," his ski-masked self said. "Which group do I want you to talk about?"

"My support group for UFO abductees? We have a meeting every other full moon."

"Excellent," Eben said. "The drugs are beginning to loosen you up. And that was a good try, with the UFOs. You think that by tossing that out now it will discredit whatever you say later. But I'll be doing some editing, and if it's not in the final cut, it never happened."

Coleridge fidgeted. Eben nodded sympathetically.

"You're itching, right? That's from the drugs too. Some of the others have said it feels like bugs crawling on your skin. Next your mind will start to slip, so let's get this over with. You answer my questions and I'll cut you loose so you can curl up in a corner to ride it out. Or I can call EMS before I leave. Your choice. Now tell me about your group."

No response, but Coleridge had to struggle to hold his tongue.

Eben prodded.

"Why won't you talk about this? Are you ashamed of what you do?"

That brought a flash of anger.

"Let's discuss you," Coleridge hissed. "Your so-called science is ridiculous. That's not an electrophoresis unit you've got in the videos, and using jello is just...childish."

"Maybe so, but it adds a nice touch of color to the picture."

Coleridge looked at Eben as if he was surprised by his candor. Eben made a scissors gesture with his fingers.

"Editing. It doesn't matter what I say. I'll leave it to you to explain to your buddies how my science is faked. But after they see your video, I don't think they'll be in a mood to listen."

The pentothal caused Coleridge's eyelids to flutter. His cheek muscles slackened and his jaw dropped slightly. Eben was still standing in front of him. He moved closer.

"So tell me, doctor, aren't you ashamed of what you do?"

"Of course not. Why should I be?"

"Because you're destroying the world."

"And why would I do that?"

Coleridge looked and sounded dreamy, like he'd had one drink too many. But that wouldn't last. The LSD would perk him up before long.

"You're destroying the world," Eben said, "because you believe the wrong entity is on the throne of heaven."

Coleridge was having trouble focusing on him.

Eben went on.

"You believe the Bible's account of the battle between God and Lucifer, but you think Lucifer's going to win. And you view yourself as a soldier in his army."

"You're a smart man," Coleridge said, "for a Christian." He mouthed the last word like it was distasteful.

"I'm not a Christian."

"Then why do you make the videos?"

"To help expose you people. You're a menace to everyone, not just Christians. But I expect they're the group that your kind will eventually have to answer to. That's why we leave the videos up, you know, after you're gone. After your buddies pack you off to the Great Beyond, the confession you make tonight will still be floating around the internet. And someday, when we get enough of the videos out there, with hundreds of you people talking about what you're doing in the name of Lucifer, there'll be a backlash. And I wouldn't be surprised if Christians are leading the mobs. So how does that make you feel? And how do you think Lucifer feels, about all the negative PR you're generating?"

A change had come over Coleridge while Eben spoke. He didn't look dreamy anymore, he looked angry. It wouldn't take much more to push him over the edge.

"Personally," Eben said, pretending to examine a latex-covered fingernail, "I wonder if Lucifer even exists."

Coleridge popped. His face twisted into a red knot of rage and he screamed, "Oh he exists! Lucifer the light-bringer! The font of all knowledge!"

Eben boosted the computer's volume, grabbed his backpack and went to the kitchen. He listened to Coleridge on the way. "Lucifer was cast out of heaven just for disobeying! Do you think that's fair?!" He remembered shrugging in response to the question, and that had fueled the scientist's fury even more. He began spewing foul language that would have to be edited around or bleeped out later.

Eben placed his pack on the floor beside the kitchen table. He took out the camera and tripod and mounted the camera so that it was aimed at the stove. Then he got a saucepan and measuring cup from a cabinet. He measured a cup of tap water into the pan, put the pan over the flame on the stove, and returned to the living room for his laptop and mug.

Coleridge continued to vent as Eben carried the computer into the kitchen and set it on the table. He got a refill of hot coffee and sat down. Relocating done, he turned his full attention to the video.

Coleridge bitched and sputtered for another minute or so, then he sat breathing hard and staring at the floor of his lab.

"So, how'd you become a Luciferian?" Eben asked.

Coleridge looked at him. "I'd rather talk about you. You said you're not a Christian. Do you believe in God?"

His eyes narrowed. Eben had seen the cunning look before. They often tried to turn the tables on him. He always enjoyed this part.

"Yes, I believe in God."

"Why is that? You can't be sure He exists, so if He doesn't, then why does what I'm doing even matter?"

"Oh, He exists, all right. Thomas Aquinas. The First Cause."

Mention of the theologian and his proof for the existence of God was enough to derail Coleridge's plan to sew doubt in Eben's mind. Coleridge knew it too. His expression went from cunning to trapped. His face held the trapped look, held it, and then he burst into another rage.

"Aquinas lies! The Bible lies! It tells the opposite of the truth! It's the negative image of the picture!" He was bug-eyed from the LSD, and Eben supposed he was seeing some pretty wild things just then. Maybe demons and angels. One time a man thought that he, Eben, was one of Lucifer's minions, come to reward him. Eben played along and told him he would get his reward after he described his good deeds. By which he meant bad deeds.

That was a tricky edit, because the man was a Satanist in addition to being a Luciferian, and Eben didn't want to reinforce the common misconception that all Luciferians were Satanists. Satanists were usually pretty easy to spot, with their tattoos, piercings and gothic clothes. Plus they loved pain and death, and that showed in their faces. The one who catalogued his good deeds in Eben's video smiled malevolently as he described cattle mutilations and microwaved pets, then he broke down blubbing under the drugs and begged forgiveness for helping a little old lady at a laundromat. He met her when he went to wash sacrificial blood out of his velveteen cape.

So Satanists kind of stood out, and lots of Satanists were Luciferians. But very few Luciferians were Satanists. Luciferians thought in larger terms than spray-painted pentagrams, and they tried to blend in with those around them. Like the other scientist Eben had interviewed. The physicist. He was as normal looking as anyone you could ever meet, so

when he started talking even Eben was amazed at what was hidden beneath the bland exterior. He got some of his best footage ever during that session.

The man was ripped on LSD when he babbled about the bomb test at Alamogordo in 1945, history's first nuclear detonation. He said the blast of light must have been as beautiful as the face of His Infernal Majesty itself. He'd told Eben that half of the project's scientists thought setting off the bomb might start a chain reaction and destroy the planet, but the people in charge went through with the test anyway. And it failed, in the eyes of those in charge. The earth survived, and it continued to survive as bigger and bigger bombs were developed over the years. Even setting off strings of thermonuclear devices in the upper atmosphere couldn't destroy the world, so they moved on to other research and now there were high hopes for the hadron collider in Switzerland. With luck it would create a black hole that would suck the earth in on itself.

Eben had struck gold with that video. Sometimes the people in them made the point about wanting to destroy the world, and sometimes they didn't. But the physicist made the point in spades. It was a pity he passed out just after he mentioned the hadron collider. It would have been nice to get more on that.

Steam was rising from the pan on the stove. Eben took his ski mask and spare memory chip from his backpack, and he lowered the volume on the computer. Coleridge was still raving about how the Bible lied. When the sound was set at a barely articulate murmur, Eben got up and stepped around behind the tripod. He plugged the chip into the camera and looked through the viewfinder. He centered the shot on the stove, allowed for headroom, then clicked the camera on and pulled the ski mask over his face as he hurried to his mark beside the stove.

"Hello, there," he waved to the home audience. "This is your ol' buddy The Spectrogryph." He chuckled at the mention of the name, which he came up with after shooting one of his early question and answer sessions with a Luciferian. He knew he would be using several flavors of gelatin later in the video—for an ambitious rainbow salad with a spectrum of colors—and for some reason on the drive home that night he thought of the eagle-winged monsters that used to fascinate him when he was a child. Gryphons, they were called, and he decided to merge "gryphon" with "spectrum" to make his new internet handle. And he was glad he had. The Spectrogryph was a catchy name and had no doubt helped him build his sizable following.

"Today we're going to make watermelon gelatin with geneticist flavoring." He pointed to the steaming saucepan. "First we bring one cup of

water to a boil, which I've already done, and then we add the gelatin powder." He killed the flame beneath the pan, tore open the box and shook the pink crystals into the water. "Next we make sure the powder is completely dissolved." He used the spoon to stir, and as he did he leaned down and sniffed. "Ah, yes. You can smell the watermelon." He straightened up and smiled at the camera. "Fruit-flavored gelatins come in a variety of delicious flavors, and you can use them in an infinite number of ways. You may remember my key lime rabbi recipe, or my bananaberry banker. Search online for more 'Spectrograph' videos, and leave comments on combinations you think I should try."

Commercial over, he turned back to the stove and said, "Now that the powder is dissolved, we add one cup of cold water." He filled the measuring cup from the tap and stirred the water into the pan. "Mix well, and then let it sit for a couple of minutes."

Coleridge continued his murmuring rant as Eben stepped around behind the tripod and hit the camera's pause button. He turned the rig so it was aimed at the kitchen table. He centered the table in the viewfinder, allowed for headroom again, and when everything was just right he went to pull the cover off his battery charger.

The shoebox-sized charger sat in the middle of the table. It was surrounded by condiments, napkins, and a cookie jar shaped like a pig. Eben left the jar where it was but moved the rest of the clutter to the kitchen counter. As he worked he remembered coming across the charger at a garage sale. The guy selling it said it wouldn't juice up car batteries anymore but the lights on the front panel still worked. To demonstrate, he turned the thing on and clipped the positive and negative leads to his thumbs. The lights worked fine, but the man's expression didn't electrify until Eben shelled out three bucks. That produced a toothless grin and Eben walked away with what would become his "electrophoresis unit."

Coleridge broke off his yammering, so Eben knew the video was at the point where he'd taken his scanner from his backpack. He looked and saw the scientist gaping. He was staring at Eben, who was a foot beyond the edge of the shot but cast a long shadow into it. The shadow throbbed because he was cleaning the scanner's glass platen with a bandanna.

Coleridge began screaming that the device was a fake. "The scanner, the electrophoresis, all of it! It's not real!" He described the difference between actual electrophoresis and what Eben did, and it was obvious he knew what he was talking about, but like Eben had told him, the information would never make the final cut.

Eben plugged the battery charger in and thought about his scanner.

People had come to recognize it as his trademark. His gimmick. He and most of his confederates used gimmicks in their videos.

One man, somewhere in the Deep South, liked to use what he called a "salvational playbook." He targeted public servants, and once the LSD kicked in he would drop an enormous Bible in their laps and remind them how they swore an oath on it. And he always got a lively reaction. Eben remembered one judge who renounced his oath and then chattered for five minutes about how people are becoming animals. Legally. "The politicians and courts are changing the status of human beings," he said, his eyes wide and moist under the influence of the drugs. "Agricultural legislation is the main vehicle being used to accomplish the change." He explained how Congress and various states passed laws that used the phrase "man or other animals," and courts then upheld the laws. The equating of people with beasts was intended to strip humans of their souls. "And we do have souls," the judge said. "They're tangible things, and when they leave us at the moment of death our bodies grow lighter. The loss is barely perceptible, a feather's weight, but God notes it. And it must gall Him to no end that the crown jewel of His creation, mankind, created in His image, is so stupid that it would allow itself to be reclassified as an animal."

Coleridge went from lecturing to silent, drawing Eben's attention to the computer monitor. He saw the scientist sitting with his eyes closed and, he hadn't noticed before, moving his lips like he was talking to himself. He wondered if he was performing some kind of ritual invocation. Too late to ask now.

Eben took a shallow glass baking dish from a cabinet and set it on the kitchen table, then he unpaused his camera. He got the pan of gelatin from the stove and stepped to his mark beside the table.

"It's been a couple of minutes," he said, smiling at the camera through his ski mask, "but our mixture is still liquid." He gave it a stir. "Be sure your kitchen isn't too cold, because you don't want the gelatin to thicken ahead of schedule."

He poured the mixture into the baking dish.

"Look at that lovely pink color," he cooed in his best cooking show voice. "Watermelon pink. So pretty."

He set the pan aside and said, "Now we'll add the geneticist flavoring. For you newcomers out there, I should explain that I mean I'm going to add the aura of the geneticist you've been listening to. But first I guess I should show you how I collected my sample."

He turned the computer so its monitor was facing the camera, then he fast-forwarded the video. When he got to the part where he entered the

picture with his scanner, he slowed to normal speed again and watched himself approach Coleridge. He stopped a couple of feet away and lifted the scanner's lid. Coleridge strained against his cocoon of duct tape.

Eben paused the video. It was time to make the sale. He looked hard at the camera and began talking about auras. He described the history behind them, the science, and then he veered off into the mystical stuff. Auras were connected to souls and souls were connected to light. "And the light of the soul can be recorded," he said solemnly. He pointed to the computer monitor. "The device I've developed, ladies and gentlemen, the one I'm holding in that video, is capable of capturing auras. It's capable of capturing...souls."

Three breaths, four, while he kept his eyes locked on the camera, then he eased up and started the video again. Coleridge began to curse. Eben ran the sound all the way down.

"Maybe some of you will recognize the man in the video. I won't tell you who he is because I've misplaced the necessary waiver, but I'm sure some of you know him. And he asked me to give his fellow Luciferians a big Texas-sized howdy. I've got a list of names somewhere..." He patted the pockets of his coveralls, looked around, then he shrugged and said, "Oh, well, it'll turn up. Now back to business."

He looked at the computer monitor and saw that he was flapping the lid of the scanner at Coleridge, who sat still and transfixed. Under the LSD he probably thought a shark was coming at him, or a crocodile opening and closing its jaws. Eben flapped the lid—open and closed, open and closed—then he held the lid open and turned the scanner upside down.

He remembered that the computer's sound was off and he turned it up. Loud. He wanted the full impact of Coleridge's upcoming reaction to make it onto the new video.

Coleridge sat staring at the scanner. Eben hesitated, to let the man's doped mind imagine no telling what kind of monstrous things, and then he stepped forward and pressed the scanner into Coleridge's lap. As he did he made sure the platen covered the hand he'd left untaped and positioned palm up. Coleridge struggled helplessly. Eben hit the scanner's Start button. The scientist's lap bloomed with light and he let out a throat-ripping howl.

Eben paused the video again. He froze it on an image of Coleridge jerking his head sideways and flinging a string of saliva through the air.

"There. Now let's look at that scan."

He tapped the computer's keyboard and Coleridge's frothing image was replaced by the scan from the night before. The settings Eben used on the scanner had added a nimbus effect, so the hand glowed with an outline of

fluorescent purple.

"Look at that," he said, tingeing his voice with awe. "Isn't that amazing? The radiant glory of the soul. And now I'll transfer that radiance into the dish of gel on the table. Give me a minute here."

He opened the cookie jar he'd left by the battery charger, took out the charger's two leads and plugged them into the machine. Then he attached the leads' alligator clips to opposite ends of the glass dish. He made sure the clips' jaws reached to the bottom of the dish, so people would see their copper teeth making contact with the gelatin.

"There. Now we're ready to proceed."

He flipped a switch on the battery charger. It came alive with red, yellow and green lights, plus a blue one that looked especially scientific on the videos. He fiddled with dials and addressed his usual spiel to the camera. He knew it by rote.

"Electrophoresis is a process that's primarily used in working with particles of DNA, but I use it with particles of light. Photons. The process is the same for both. I feed the photons from the scan into a dish of gel, and as I do that I pass an electrical current from one end of the dish to the other. Laboratories normally use agar as the gelling agent, but I prefer fruit-flavored gelatin. It makes things more...fun." He laughed here in a gleefully sinister way, like some mad scientist in an old horror movie. He wouldn't have won an Oscar, but he sounded slightly unhinged, and that's what he was going for. "Wha..." He choked off his laughter and looked around. "Where am I?" He blinked at the battery charger. "Oh, right." He touched the glass dish. "The, uh, the electrical current disperses the photons, and when the gelatin sets, I've captured the aura of the scan. Pretty simple. And useful. After I've captured a piece of somebody's soul, I can work whatever dark magic I want with it."

Pure crap, but packaged as caviar. It was all in the packaging.

He turned his attention back to the battery charger, adjusted some knobs and said, "Okay. Now we're ready for the transference of the aura."

He took a red connector cable from the cookie jar. One end of the cable was adapted to plug into his computer, the other had an oversized alligator clip crimped onto it. He plugged the cable into the computer and then started to attach the clip to the side of the glass dish, but he backed off. He pretended to be nervous.

"This is the tricky part. Sometimes the power of Lucifer rejects the transfer. There were explosions in the early days of my experimentation, and disfigurement..." He touched one of his masked cheeks. "But I think I worked all those bugs out. Let's hope things go well today."

He made a show of holding his breath, pinched the alligator clip open, and attached it to the dish alongside one of the charger leads.

"There," he said with a sigh of relief. "The essence of the aura is now being transferred into the dish, and the electrical current is dispersing it evenly throughout the gel. The process will take awhile, so let's pass the time by watching some more video on the computer."

He switched from the scan of the hand back to Coleridge's saliva-flinging image, and he unpaused the video. The scanner finished scanning and Eben backed away. Coleridge's howl trailed off into a series of loud grunting noises as he jerked and thrashed.

Eben turned the computer's sound back down to a reasonable level as his video self said, "What's wrong? I thought you didn't believe in my electrophoresis. What'd you call it...ridiculous science?"

"It is! It's not real science!"

"And yours is?"

Coleridge quit struggling. He glared at Eben.

"Yes! I know you'll edit this out, but yes, mine is real!"

"What if I said I think your genetics research is just a scam to get government funding?"

"Oh, we get funding, all right. Lots of it. And we get results, too. You have no idea the kinds of things we're doing."

"Like fluoridating water supplies and spraying us with metals?"

Coleridge scoffed. "That's old news. People have been drinking fluoride for more than half a century now, and they still don't know it makes them docile and lowers their IQs. And our planes spray you with a lot more than just aluminum and barium. You sicken and die and never think to link your weakened condition to the spray patterns that are right above your heads."

Coleridge tittered giddily. Eben had known in the lab that the scientist was entering his most vulnerable few minutes, so he'd eased around behind the camera, to work the controls. He continued to talk while he began a slow zoom in on Coleridge's face.

"But you're doing that to yourself too, doc. The spraying. Maybe you can avoid things like fluoride in the public water supply, but you can't avoid breathing. Why would you people spray yourselves?"

"Because we're servants," Coleridge giggled, "willing servants, glad to sacrifice ourselves. It doesn't matter what happens to us as long as we advance the plan."

Coleridge's attention drifted, but Eben steered him back on course.

"Which plan are you advancing?"

"Why, Lucifer's plan."

Eben remembered feeling his pulse race at that point. He'd broken through to the core of things. He took a deep breath to calm himself, then asked, softly, "And what's your part in the plan? As a geneticist, I mean. What do you do?"

Coleridge answered like he was indulging a child. His face now filled the screen. "I foul God's handiwork at its most basic level. I scramble the building blocks of nature so completely that His ultimate creation, man, will no longer be able to reproduce. Do you know how much damage we're doing to the human body with genetically modified foods and vaccines? Just the Covid shots alone. Billions of people... Fertility is plummeting, cancer rates are exploding, dementia, debilitation. We're destroying humanity gene by gene." Coleridge smiled, drifting. "The destruction of the temple of the body... Serving our master... The lord of the dark light..."

More gold, like with the physicist talking about blowing up the planet. But with Coleridge the vein ran deeper, to a malignancy that was much, much darker. He was talking about destroying the world one painful death at a time.

"Interesting," Eben said, keeping his voice soft. "So that's your part in Lucifer's plan, but what's the entire plan? Do you know?"

Coleridge indulged again. "Of course I do. We're going to drive God to anger. That Old Testament temper of His will be His undoing, you know. Someday our efforts will push Him to the point of anger, and when He strikes out He'll be vulnerable. And that's when Lucifer will cut Him down and seize the throne that's rightfully his."

The mother lode. Eben couldn't recall another video where the person being questioned laid out the Luciferian strategy so clearly. Mankind and the planet were being destroyed by fanatics in order to provoke a reaction from God, and the fanatics didn't care if they died in the process. They expected to be resurrected and rewarded by Lucifer. The average person wouldn't believe that such thinking even existed, much less that it was a guiding force in world events. But now Eben had proof. He finally had video of a Luciferian detailing their master plan.

Coleridge was running down. He looked peaceful.

"Okay," Eben said to the camera in the kitchen, "let's pause this again." He froze the computer video on a shot of Coleridge smiling serenely. "Our guest star's aura has had time to disperse through the gelatin by now, so I'll turn this off." He killed the power to the battery charger and disconnected all the leads from the glass dish. "Now I'm going to try something different. Excuse me for a moment."

He went to the pantry for a can of dog food, and he grabbed the can opener and a fork on his way back to the table. When he was in position again he explained to the camera that his dog enjoyed a change of menu every once in a while. "So I thought I'd try mixing his food with this geneticist-flavored gelatin. I picked watermelon so the smell won't overwhelm the bouquet of pigs' lips and testicles, and as for the taste of the Luciferian, that should blend right in. My dog'll gobble it down and, well, tomorrow I'll scoop up a devilishly big pile of aura."

He opened the can and used the fork to dig out the gray glop. He mashed it into the gelatin while he suppressed a gag reflex.

"Voila," he said when the chunky mess was mixed and smoothed flat in the dish. He held the dish up to the camera and smiled. "Now we refrigerate until it's ready to serve."

He stepped around to the back of the camera and turned it off. He removed his ski mask and put the dish of gelatin in the refrigerator. After his trip to the feed store he'd scrape the stuff into Blucher's dish and get some footage of him wolfing it down, then he'd edit together a ten-minute video. Tomorrow he would drive to San Antonio and upload the piece anonymously at one of the libraries. And then he'd begin Coleridge's deathwatch. When his obituary showed up in the local news he would email the link around, and that would be that.

Blucher wandered into the kitchen. He must have heard the fork rattling the can of dog food. He toenail-ticked across the linoleum and looked down at his bowl. Still empty. He sighed.

Eben took a seat at the table and unfroze the video. Blucher limped up to him and he reached down to pat the old head while the end of the conversation with Coleridge played out.

"So, you're not a Christian?" Coleridge asked groggily.

"No. To be honest, I think Christians and Luciferians both have some really strange beliefs. But the Luciferian motto is 'Do what thou will,' and that's dangerous. Without moral restraints people harm each other. We need some kind of restraint, and Christianity provides it. Good restraint, too. Charitable."

Eben didn't know how much of his explanation Coleridge heard. By the time he finished talking the man's head was lolled over on a shoulder and he was asleep.

Eben shut off the video and put a finger under Blucher's chin. He lifted it so he could look into the bleary eyes.

"You ready to be a star, boy? You're going to be a big thing on the internet. But you know what? I think we should disguise you."

He slipped his ski mask over Blucher's head and smiled when an eye blinked at him through the mouth hole. Blucher studied him, then he lowered his chin to the floor and scraped the mask off with a forepaw. He turned and tick-ticked away, back to the living room.

Eben sniffed his hands and went to the sink. As he washed he heard the buzzard outside squawk. A hen crowed weakly in response.

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Frozen Lightning

I was in my shipping container, at my desk, with the doors and windows open. The afternoon was still, but then I heard a clank of metal. Or more of a clink. Something metallic, like the strike of a hammer. Whatever it was it sounded close, and that shouldn't have been. I own about forty acres and nobody should have been on the property. A few seconds after the first clink I heard another, so I decided to take a break and investigate.

As I set out on my walk I noted that the leaves on the mesquites had finished falling. It was close to Christmas and life should have been going into hibernation all around me, but I saw insects flitting through the grass and cactus. I even caught a whiff of flowers from somewhere. I wondered what would happen to the burgeoning life when the freezes hit.

The clinking sounds had come from a corner of my property that's up near the county road, so that's where I headed. I walked fifty yards or so along my rutted driveway and then took a game trail that snakes through the brush. When the power company's easement came into view I paused behind some chest-high prickly pear to look ahead.

Five poles carry power lines across my place. The poles are tall and spaced every couple hundred feet, and the ground beneath the lines is cleared of trees and brush. From my cover I saw somebody at the base of the pole nearest my gate. He seemed to be digging. He struck at the ground with what looked like a hammer and I heard another clink. I assumed he worked for the power company and I resumed my approach. I hadn't been off the property for more than a week, so it would be good to visit with someone.

When I was almost to the pole I saw that it was a woman and not a man working at it. She was on her hands and knees, but when she saw me walking toward her she settled back to sit on her heels.

I stopped a few feet away and nodded in greeting. Her straw sunhat

nodded in return. The hat covered short black hair, and she was dressed in jeans and an old T-shirt with PEARL BEER stretched tight across its well-filled chest. She was older, with sun-darkened leathery skin, but there was nothing old about her eyes. They were deep blue and danced like two pompoms at kickoff.

"I heard you up here," I said, and I gestured to the hammer and the long chisel in her lap. An old canvas bag was on the ground beside her.

"I didn't know anyone was here," she said. "I mean, on the property. It looks uninhabited." Her voice was thicker than I'd thought it would be, not soft and reedy but kind of sultry. "So I guess I'm trespassing," she said.

"Not at all. Or not much. But I don't think the power company will appreciate you digging up their pole."

She smiled, a curlicue pulling toward a dimple in one of her cheeks.

"Yeah." She held up the hammer and chisel. "I guess this looks strange, but I have an explanation. It has to do with copper."

"Copper?"

She pointed to the length of thick copper wire that was stapled to the side of the pole. It ran from below ground level up to the top of the pole and ended in a squiggle that stuck into the air.

"Isn't that for lightning?" I said. "To prevent surges?"

"Exactly. And I'm looking for frozen lightning."

"Oh, well, that explains everything."

She smiled again and said, "When lightning strikes the wire up there, it grounds down here and fuses the dirt into rock. Some people call the rocks frozen lightning, but 'fulgurite' is the technical term." She waved a hand and said, "This red soil is full of iron, so it should conduct electricity really well. I thought I might find some fulgurites around your poles."

She dug through her bag and produced a couple of rocks. They were about the size and shape of my thumb.

"I found these in the ground here."

She handed the rocks over and I examined them. They were fused dirt like she'd described, and one of them had some brittle roots sticking out of it. Both were red running to black and gave off a strong smell.

"Creosote?" I said.

"Yes. From the pole's treated wood."

I handed the rocks back and said, "Well, that's a new one...fulgurites. You learn something new every day."

She put the rocks and tools in her bag, stood up and brushed the dirt off her knees.

"I guess I'll be going now. Sorry I trespassed."

"But you're not finished. I mean, isn't this the first pole you've checked on my place? If you're working your way down the power lines, then you still have four to go."

"Well, yes, that was the plan. But that was before I knew I was disturbing you."

"You're not disturbing me. I needed to take a break."

"From what?"

"Writing, in my cabin down there. I ran out of words an hour ago, so you're not bothering me at all. Let me carry your bag to the next pole."

"What do you write?" she asked as we walked.

"Fiction. Political stories lately."

"Political thrillers?"

"No. Current events stuff. But I guess some of it's pretty thrilling, what with the explosion of leftist fascism this year."

"Sounds intense."

"Yeah. I try to lighten the stories where I can, but, you know, it's hard to write perky pieces about fascism."

"You said leftist fascism. Isn't that a right-wing ideology?"

"It's authoritarian, no matter who's doing it, and at the moment it's leftists that are storm trooping around America. I write about the phenomenon from a conservative point of view."

"Well, you're in the right place for that." She gestured to the cactus and mesquite we were walking past. "This part of Texas is the enlarged heart of conservatism. But aren't you afraid of the leftists? They destroy people for posting critical tweets, so if you're writing whole stories that criticize them... Well, aren't you concerned?"

"No. I'm just doing my civic duty. I'm sure the 'politically correct' goons will come after me someday, and when they do I want them to have something more than just a tweet to squall about. I don't want there to be any doubt that I disapprove of them, so I'm giving them hundreds of pages to criticize."

We reached the next pole and she took the chisel from her bag. I stood watching as she knelt down and began probing where the copper wire entered the ground. The dirt was soft and the chisel didn't encounter much resistance.

"I liked your 'enlarged heart of conservatism' line," I said. "I'll probably steal it."

"It's a gift. From Austin, the enlarged heart of liberalism."

"Austin. How's life there nowadays?"

"Crazy." She sat back on her heels and sighed. "I always thought I'd live

out my days there, but now I'm not so sure. Age and experience change a person. Nurses are supposed to be liberal and nurturing and all that, but I got tired of watching people take advantage."

"Take advantage of what?"

"Of others. It seems that half the people I treated either drank or drugged or ate to excess, then they wanted to be pitied when they got sick. But they didn't pity the taxpayers. They expected them to pay for the damage."

"Have you retired from nursing? You used the past tense."

"Yes, I'm retired, thank God. The only thing I nurse now is an occasional beer."

She went back to probing the ground and hit something solid with the chisel. She tapped with the hammer, to loosen the dirt around the object, then dug with a hand spade. And she turned up another fulgurite. It was a little larger than the others and she seemed pleased.

We continued down the line of poles and talked along the way. She said, "The world is a vast ball of electromagnetism, and fulgurites are the momentary manifestation of the flux. They freeze it for a nanosecond and in the process capture a bit of the planet's life." She told me there was a paying market for the rocks, but she used them in her work. She was a psychic. "I began tapping into the electrosphere about ten years ago, and now I use what I've learned to help others. I've adopted the name Xandra, but my clients call me Lady X."

"So you're a psychic, huh? Then you should know what I'm thinking right now."

"That's not how it works."

"Well, I'm thinking you look like somebody I used to know. Her name was Jan."

"Was she special to you?"

I started to answer but felt myself choking up, so I changed the subject.

"Tell me some more about the psychic stuff."

We stopped so she could dig at the next pole, and the next, then by the time we reached the last one she seemed a little tired. So I volunteered to do the chisel work. And I hit something about a foot down. After a couple minutes of digging I'd pulled up a fulgurite the size of a soccer ball.

"That's...that's incredible," Xandra said when I set it on the ground beside the hole. She knelt, sat back on her heels and gazed at the rock in awe.

It was just fused red sand, like the other fulgurites she'd shown me, but in addition to being so large this one was curved in the shape of the pole on

one side and had a groove from the copper wire inside the curve. The rock and the hole it came from gave off a strong smell of creosote.

Xandra stared at the fulgurite while I used the chisel to probe some more. I didn't find anything else and I filled in the hole. When I'd finished I saw Xandra watching me, waiting.

"How much do you want for it?" she asked.

"For the rock? Nothing. It's yours."

"Oh, no," she protested. "Fulgurites are...well, like I said, there's a paying market for them, and no telling how much this one is worth. The small ones I showed you might bring ten or twenty dollars online, but this one...it would bring a lot more."

"Without you it would have been in the ground forever. Take it."

Her pompom eyes danced with joy.

I told her I had an old towel she could wrap the rock in, then I carried it when we walked to my campsite. She checked out my cabin while I looked for the towel. The big doors on the end of the container were open and she saw my desk and computer setup inside.

"So what story are you working on now?" she asked. "What's it called?"

"The Spectrogyph."

"And it's about leftist fascism?"

"No. Luciferians. But most of the other pieces I've written this year are about fascism. Mainly I've focused on how our leaders are using Covid to reorganize American society. They want to shift us over to the Communist Chinese model of governance, and they're using big business to help bend us to their will."

"That's true," she said. "I've seen it with the Covid shots. The government would like to make everyone take them, but it can't, so private companies are helping. They're telling their employees to either take the shots or lose their jobs. And they say they won't serve unvaccinated customers."

"And if you challenge the companies about refusing service, they say they're private and can do what they want."

"But they're not private, are they? They issue publicly traded stock. And when they refuse to do business with someone, the loss of revenue hurts the stock's value. I'm surprised that shareholders in the companies don't sue the people in charge for that."

I paused in my search for the towel and said, "That's a very good point. What other insights do you feel like sharing?"

We talked some more, mainly about politics, and she surprised me by saying that Biden stole the presidential election from Trump. "But Trump

stole it from Clinton," she added, "and Obama stole it from Romney, and Bush stole it from Gore."

"I think you're right," I said. "They try to keep us divided as close to fifty-fifty as possible so they can shift votes one way or the other to pick our presidents."

"They," she said. I'd found the towel by then and was wrapping the fulgurite in it. Xandra looked around at the mesquite and cactus. There were some insect and bird sounds, but otherwise it was quiet. "They," she repeated, then said, "They seem so far away here. This is really peaceful. But it must get lonely."

"Yeah, sometimes. But it's good for writing. Not much else to do."

I put the rock in her bag and we headed up to where she said she was parked, near my gate. Along the way we chatted some more about Austin. I was sad to hear that most of my old stomping grounds had been demolished and/or paved over.

When we reached the gate I held it open and passed her the bag containing the rock. She passed me a business card.

"Call me the next time you come to Austin," she said. "I want to give you a free reading."

I looked at the card, and among all the lightning bolts I saw "Lady X—Fulguritic Insights."

"So you want to tell my fortune?" I said.

She smiled an enigmatic half-smile and said, "Come see me and find out."

She left and I filed her card in my pickup's ashtray, then I dug it out a couple of weeks later when I was driving to Austin to take care of some business. I gave her a call on my cell phone and she said she would be free later in the day if I wanted to stop by.

I went to see her after I had lunch. The address on the card was in South Austin. Lamar Avenue was sporting a shiny new makeover, but the flood of fresh money hadn't trickled very far down the streets that branched away from it. I bifurcated my way to a little cul de sac where all the houses needed paint and the trees begged for trimming. Xandra's place was distinguished by a sign in the yard that said "Lady X." The X was fashioned out of lightning bolts.

Xandra looked different than when I'd last seen her. She'd been in jeans and a T-shirt before, but at her door she was dressed in a long black skirt and a puffy purple blouse embroidered with colorful flowers. Her black hair, dark skin and blue eyes were striking. I gawked for a moment and then I said, "Excuse me, miss, is your mother home?" She snickered and invited

me in.

She asked if I'd like some coffee but I declined, and we went straight into what she called "the consultation room." It was a small bedroom made dark by black carpeting and black paint on the walls and ceiling. The window was blacked out too.

She flipped a switch and some directional lights mounted up high came to life. They threw yellow light on a mirror ball hung in the center of the ceiling. She flipped another switch and the ball began to turn. The slow swirl of glittery yellow made me think of fireflies.

Two bentwood chairs and a small round table were the only pieces of furniture in the room. They were in the middle of it, and a large lump covered with black cloth was on the table. I figured the lump was a crystal ball.

Xandra closed the door and gestured for me to sit. I took one of the chairs and she took the other. I looked around the room, at the black with the bits of light circling, and she said, "I know the surroundings seem strange, but they should help you enter a trancelike state. We'll be in it together, and I'll try to guide you."

"Guide me where?"

She lifted the cloth off the lump on the table, and instead of a crystal ball, I saw the big fulgurite from my place. She'd cleaned it up but it still smelled faintly of creosote.

"Your fulgurite has proven to be especially powerful," she said, dropping the cover to the floor. "I've had great success with it."

"Really? What kind of success?"

"You'll see."

She slid her hands across the table and I took them. She said, "People talk about everything being connected by spirit or atoms or DNA, but electricity is the strongest binding force of all. It links all things, spiritual and worldly. It binds time too. It connects what is, what was, and what will have been. Existence is one long electrical impulse, and if you learn how to navigate it, as I have, you can visit anyplace you want."

Her voice was soothing and I found myself growing relaxed. But at the same time she was very attractive, and we were holding hands, so I couldn't help having thoughts. Carnal thoughts. She squeezed my hands more firmly and I wondered if she was thinking along the same lines. I tried to read her face but couldn't because her eyelids were drooping slightly. She continued to talk and her words became a drone. Then her eyelids lifted and a speck of light flitted across her face. It caught an eye and the reflection caught me.

I tumbled into darkness, and then I was in a shower of sparks raining down from a power line onto a streetcar full of derbies. From there I shot upward and joined a web of veins at the top of a crackling thunderhead. I zipped through the synaptic network and then bolted down and buzzed through an electric razor while somebody screamed a watery curse in Italian. The scream ended with the snap of a breaker tripping, and out of darkness I shot to a glowing green sign in the shape of a Chinese pictograph. I bounced around the neon for a moment and then I was circling a terminal on a car battery. I spun faster and faster before bursting out through a dashboard.

I looked around and realized I was in South Austin, behind the wheel of my pickup, and I was driving north on Congress Avenue. There was a sense of *déjà vu* about the scene. I felt I'd made the drive not long before, and then I passed a sign that said "Merge left" and I knew where I was.

Strange as it seemed, I was in one of my short stories. Or one I'd partially plotted and then set aside to work on later. I thought I might call it "Merge Left," but other title possibilities were "Right Lane Closed" and "No Center Line." The piece would be about hardcore leftism taking over Austin.

In the story, an older man like myself had to go to a state office to take care of some business. I named the man Hank. He entered Austin from the west and then turned up Congress Avenue to drive to the cluster of office buildings around the red-domed capitol. The traffic was start-and-stop, and he passed a road sign that flashed whatever the title of the story would be. At one point he had to slam on the brakes, and the bale of hay in the bed of his pickup slid forward and thumped the back of the cab.

He noticed lots of blue bumper stickers as he drove. Everybody in his county had red Trump stickers on their pickups, but the little hybrid cars in Austin all bore Biden stickers. He thought back to when half the cars in Austin had stickers endorsing Ralph Nader or Willie Nelson for president.

When it became obvious to Hank that he wouldn't make it to his destination before things closed for lunch, he stopped at a restaurant to eat. He wanted a chicken fried steak, but the only steak on the menu was soy. He asked the Covid-masked waiter if he could get something made of real meat. The waiter said no and delivered a mean-eyed lecture about methane damaging the planet, so Hank ordered the fried veggie platter. He studied the other diners while he munched. He was the only one not wearing a mask. The others all lifted the masks to take bites of food, then lowered them again to chew. It looked like they were engaged in some kind of ritual.

Hank finished eating, and when he returned to his truck he found a yard sign stuck in his bale of hay. It was a Biden sign. He removed it and

went on his way.

He crossed the river, and traffic got thicker as he neared the capitol complex. Both vehicle traffic and pedestrian moved along at the same pace, then the vehicles dragged to a stop. But the pedestrian traffic continued. People streamed past his truck on foot, and many of them carried signs that said things like "Free Speech" and "Speech For All." He leaned out his window to ask a passing green-haired woman where everybody was going. She said, "To the free speech rally, ya freak!"

He sat stuck in traffic for ten minutes and then decided to pull over and abandon his truck. It would be quicker to walk. But disengaging from the traffic took awhile, and he got blasted with horn and verbal abuse as he nudged his way across three lanes of taillights. Finally he made it into an alley and parked by a dumpster.

That was as far as I'd gotten with the story idea in my notes, but in my fulguritic vision the main character took off walking. Or rather I did. I became Hank and joined the flow of people moving toward the capitol. I looked pretty rough in my denim work clothes and scuffed boots, and the fashionably dressed trendies sneered at me. Most of them were college age and I figured they went to the University of Texas. They all wore masks that either matched their clothes or made some kind of political statement. Many of the masks were miniature Chinese Communist flags.

The crowd carried me to the capitol building, where the grounds were swarming with people. I'd never seen so many tattoos and stylish body mutilations in one place. I remembered reading once that demons like to redecorate bodies after they take them over, and I felt a definite demonic vibe in the crowd. People flashed contorted hand signs and lifted their masks to flick studded tongues at one another. One woman with a picture of Lenin on her mask seemed to speak backwards when she hissed at me.

There was a general din surrounding me, with swells of chanting here and there. I got pushed from one chant to another. One group of Bernie Sanders supporters chanted, "Bern, baby, bern!" and a group of Black Lives Matter supporters chanted, "Kill the po-po! Kill the po-po!"

I moved through other chants, and then I came to a group that was shouting, "Fas-cists-fas-cists-fas-cists!" In the middle of the group, surrounded by it, I saw a couple dozen old people wearing red Trump caps. The chanting crowd was slapping the caps off their heads and hitting them with Freedom of Speech signs. Some of the old-timers were using walkers and canes, and the crowd took special delight in kicking those away and then pummeling the fallen. The most viscous pummeler wore a black pointed hood over his head and face. I tried to get to him, to stop him, but I was pushed away. But not before I saw a "KKKamala Kollection" label on the

back of the hood.

I was bounced around between other horrors for a while, and then I saw a placard that said "Love" sticking above the tumult. It seemed firm and unmoving. I tried to make my way to it but was pushed away, tried again, and again, and then finally the flow of the crowd turned in my favor. It thrust me toward the placard. The crush of bodies squeezed hard and I felt my feet leave the ground. We gained speed, the sign came closer, and then the crowd loosened its grip on me and I fell.

When I rose to my knees I saw that I was in a kind of island space, with people streaming past me and the woman holding the sign. The woman was looking down at me, and I realized it was Xandra, with blonde hair. She smiled a shower of sparks and then I was opening my eyes on her again. We were sitting at her table, still holding hands. The bits of yellow from the mirror ball still circled the black room.

I cleared my throat and said, "Well, that was...that was quite a ride. If it's over. Am I really back here now? In your house?"

"You're back. What'd you see?"

"You were a blonde."

"Jeez. That was a long time ago. We were in high school."

"Gimme a B."

"I outgrew my cheerleader's outfit."

"Nonsense. Gimme a badger bark."

"So is that when you liked me best, when I was a blonde in a skimpy cheerleader's outfit?"

"Maybe. But I liked it when you were a redhead too."

"That was after my first divorce. I wanted a change so I dyed my hair."

"And you called me. We lasted, what, about six months?"

"About. And less than that after my second divorce."

"You were auburn then."

"Starting to gray, though."

We were still holding hands.

"So what are you thinking, Jan?"

She didn't respond.

"Gimme a J."

A smile curled her lips toward the dimple.

"Come on, baby. Tell me what you're thinking."

"That we agreed never to do this again. We were too different. You were always so...sure about things. Or that's how it seemed."

"I've had my moments. But you seem pretty sure yourself nowadays. You've changed your views quite a bit. About politics, at least."

"Age and experience, like I said."

"So why'd you look me up? Do you think we can make it work now?"
A speck of mirrored light swept across her eyes and I saw tears forming.
I'd known the eyes the instant I saw them at the base of the power pole.
They were couched in weathered skin but still bore the look of longing that
had haunted me most of my life. And as I leaned forward at the table I saw
my own eyes reflecting the same longing.
I don't know how long we sat there, hands fused, staring.

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AFTERWORD

It was important to me that all of the stories in this collection be written in 2021. I wanted a snapshot of the year and blah blah blah—I explained this in the foreword. I hadn't planned on an afterword, but I want to mention some of the pieces that didn't make it into the collection. The year ended before I could write them.

From my notes:

In 2021 Texas banned abortion in cases where a child's heartbeat can be detected in the womb. That gave me the idea for "A Man's Right to Choose," a title suggested by the pro-abortion argument that women should have the right to choose what they do with their own bodies. The story would have taken place in a California clinic and opened with a woman being counseled about her pregnancy. The counselor encourages her to terminate, but the mother's reluctant. She's older and may never get another chance to have a baby. The big twist in the story is that California has gone so far down the path of birth control that in some cases it aborts the mother along with the child. Once I revealed that, I would have shifted attention to the man in the room, the baby's father. The counselor pushes him to authorize an "enhanced" abortion. It includes the parties at "both ends of the umbilical." The counselor points out to the father that if he agrees, he'll receive a tax credit for saving the state the cost of delivering the baby. He'll also earn some extra ESG points for removing two carbon footprints from the planet. And of course he'll be free to get married again, maybe to a younger woman. The wife is crying hysterically by now, and the husband looks at her puffy face and runny nose. Then he looks at an attractive young nurse who's walking past. That's as far as I got in my notes. I would have explained the ESG system during the course of the story, but since I didn't I suggest you look it up. You'll be shocked at what's being planned for you.

"Is There a Doctor in the House?" This story is about the current phenomenon of people self-identifying as a different gender, a different race and so on. The setting is a court trial, where the judge breaks down and admits that he's not really a judge. He's a diesel mechanic. And the two lawyers are a beautician and a busboy. Then there's a medical emergency and a tracheotomy is performed by Dr. Something-or-other, who's really a septic maintenance man. His tracheotomy misses the windpipe but gets

good suction on the stomach. I'm not sure where the story would have gone from there. We already have that level of absurdity in our court system.

"The Other Mike." There are stories about Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway in this collection, and I was hoping to do one featuring Philip K. Dick. He was a famously paranoid sci-fi writer. The story would have been built around masks, because of the Covid stuff, and the mask motif would have helped highlight Dick's paranoia. I would also have used the motif to address something that's troubling me personally at the moment. A man with my name (same name, exactly) has recently begun publishing novels on platforms that I've been using for years. It's like he just appeared out of nowhere wearing a mask with my face on it. Normally this wouldn't bother me, but the newcomer's writing is awful. It reads like pig latin translated by a dyslexic. I put a lot of effort into polishing my work, but the other Mike doesn't. And I worry that people will mistake his books for mine. So I tell P.K. Dick about this when I meet him in my story, and he asks what I write about. "Politics, lately. Anti-government stuff." "Then the other Mike is an agent," he says. "He's a G-man who's been assigned the task of discrediting you." He tells me we need to find the agent, and we set off through a Dickian world of swibble and flapples and autofacs. We question several of the masked inhabitants. None are who they claim to be, and quite a few are space aliens. Then we come across a downed surveillance drone. Dick prepares to stomp on it, but he withholds the boot when the drone tells us it has the information we've been seeking. It says that the other Mike is the product of an artificial intelligence program. The government is using A.I. to churn out bad writing in my name and the names of thousands of other dissidents. The aim is to discredit us, like Dick surmised. He contacts some friends in "the resistance" and they release an artificial stupidity program, to counteract the A.I. The A.S. finds its way onto government computers and goes to work writing stupid legislation, stupid presidential speeches and so forth. And, surprisingly, the work it puts out is more intelligent than anything coming from our actual leaders. Our society begins to heal. People toss their masks, bad politicians are driven from office, and the other Mike's books disappear. Then at the end of the story Dick revisits some of the shrinks who treated him for paranoia. He doesn't go for therapy, he just wants to say, "I told you so."

"The Groom." I hate the subject matter of this piece. It begins with a man admiring a flower girl at a wedding. She's seven or eight and cute as a button. The reader assumes that the man doing the admiring is the husband-to-be, but then I reveal that it's Joe Biden. And the word "groom" in the title refers to his history as a pedophilic child groomer. Search online

for video of him abusing children. He assaults them physically by invading their space (thrusts his face too close to theirs), and by touching them inappropriately. He violates them verbally too, by making inappropriate statements about sex. That's how pedophiles groom children; they start with little violations and work up to rape. Our overlords are forcing pedophilia on us. We've given them technology that they believe will allow them to live forever by merging with machines, and now they want to get rid of us. So they're reducing our numbers by steering us into unproductive sex. Sterilization, abortion, starvation and disease are also in their population reduction toolkit. Look up "transhumanism." The people who run the world really do plan to merge with machines. I don't know how "The Groom" would have ended, but to serve justice there would have been blood. Maybe an angry mob merges Joe Biden with a wheat threshing machine after he gropes a kid in Kansas.

I think "Out Among the English" would have been fun to write. The title comes from the Amish. When they have to leave their community of trusted friends to deal with outsiders, they're going "out among the English." And in my story two young brothers need to make their first trip to the Big City to take care of some business. They put on their Sunday suits, comb their beards, and set off as their elders admonish them to beware of the devil. After navigating through a suburb with its painted women and good soil going to waste growing carpet grass, they make it downtown and see a soda vending machine. They're flabbergasted that people would use such a thing, and they lecture a man who stops to buy a Coke. They tell him he shouldn't pay money for things he can obtain through honest labor. If he's thirsty he should dig a well so he can taste the sweetness of God's water. The man walks off belching and shaking his head, and the brothers walk off shaking theirs. They agree that nothing could be more outrageous than the soda machine, then they turn a corner and step into a BLM riot.

So those are the stories I didn't have time to write in 2021. I hope it was the craziest year I'll ever see, but I don't think it will be.

M. Sheedy
February, 2022

